Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

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BY You Fuguruma
ILLUST. Nama




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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 7 [Complete]

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Part 1: The Eastern Merchant

Chapter 1: Celestial Maiden from Another World

1

The soup simmered delightfully in its pot. It was a traditional dish well known in the Storydian north, and was filled with a variety of ingredients—freshly gathered late-autumn chestnut carrots; king onions, which were wonderfully sweet when heated; winter cabbage, which developed a scrumptious sweetness in the winter; and other winter vegetables including juicy snow turnips and jellyfish mushrooms. Topping it all off were slices of fresh Tris salmon, recommended by none other than Marius the grocer.

Once all the vegetables had softened, Shiori mixed in preserved butter and milk—both produced in Brovito Village—then added some salt, pepper, and herbs for flavor. A light dairy scent wafted into the air as the butter melted, adding a golden sheen to the milky surface of the soup.

Shiori stirred it all together, then put some of the soup in a small bowl and tasted it. The flavor of the swirl of nutrients slid over her tongue and down her throat, warming her entire body.

“Mm. Tasty,” said Shiori, giving the soup her own personal stamp of approval as she patted herself on the back.

Next, Shiori took a big round loaf of bread—standard whole grain—which she’d bought from the baker, Bertil Nilsson. As soon as she slid her knife into it, a flavorful, grainy aroma filled her nose. She just knew it would make a wonderful accompaniment to the soup once sliced and toasted.

Shiori put a lid on the soup pot, then draped her favorite tea towel over the bread basket.

“Just one more dish ought to do it,” muttered Shiori.

What she’d made would have been more than enough for her alone, but she

worried that it might not be quite enough for her lover and her ever-hungry slime.

“The question is...what?”

Shiori loved these moments. She enjoyed contemplating and agonizing over her menus. The act of crafting and cooking meals for what she now called her family—her beloved boyfriend and her priceless slime companion—was something very dear to her, and it brought her great happiness.

Shiori looked out the window at the western-style buildings that reflected the age of the times, and always struck Shiori as not unlike fifteenth-century Europe. The people walking the stone paths were dressed completely differently to anyone in modern Japan, and there were even armed knights and adventurers walking the streets. Among the horse carriages that passed by, there were even a few pulled along by exquisite unicorns and eight-legged sleipnirs.

Forget about Japan, Shiori thought, *this is a far cry from even fifteenth-century Europe.*

Shiori was a long, long way from the place that she had once called home—she now lived in an entirely different world.

Shiori Izumi worked as an adventurer in Torisval, the largest city in the furthest northern part of the kingdom of Storydia. She was a Japanese woman who had been teleported to another world when she was swallowed by an unforeseen time-space warp, and dropped into a world she knew nothing about.

Upon her arrival, she had been looked after by a man who looked straight out of a fantasy movie. To this day, Shiori had never forgotten the despair that she felt upon waking—she did not understand the language people spoke, and she was not at all familiar with the written word or any of the maps she was shown. After a few days, she realized that she had nothing with her that could prove who she was or where she’d come from.

She had to face facts—she was lost in another world.

It soon dawned upon Shiori that, given her circumstances, it was unrealistic to search for a way home, and so she worked to build a basic life foundation. She learned the language, helped out with trivial errands, and worked herself to the bone in order to build a place she could think of as home.

It was then that she was betrayed—by people she had placed her trust in, no less.

The “Akatsuki Incident,” as it came to be known, left Shiori without even a hint of self-confidence, and she shut the doors to her heart completely—she feared forming anything more than surface-level relationships, but acted like everything was fine so as not to burden the people who worried about her. However, the stress and loneliness of living in an entirely different world ate away at Shiori’s heart, and eventually she reached a breaking point—she was so tired, so very exhausted, that the smallest thing could have brought her life crashing down around her.

It was then that a man by the name of Alec Dia entered the picture. He saved Shiori. He was patient with her as he got to know her, he encouraged her with words of warmth and kindness, and he wrapped her in hugs that brimmed with his love for her. All of this was like sustenance for her withered heart.

Alec was now her lover and trusted partner, and together with Rurii—a slime who had rescued her from death’s door itself—they had moved in together at the start of the year. They were now a family of three, and Alec had told her that, one day, he wanted them to be a “real family.”

Alec had a complicated past, and he had thrown away his rank and title almost twenty years ago to become an adventurer. He had done this in order to escape a very trying and harmful time in his life, but he still carried regrets when it came to his younger half brother and the woman who had once been his lover, both of whom he had left behind when he ran away. The experience had been so harrowing, in fact, that Alec occasionally still suffered nightmares about it. He had not told Shiori the details, but he’d promised her that, when everything was settled, he would reveal to her who he was, and then make her his wife.

It was for this reason that Shiori, too, had decided to one day tell Alec the

truth about her own past. She would tell him that she was in fact not a person of this world, and that she had come from another one entirely, against her own wishes.

I'm still a bit scared to take that step, though...

Shiori was worried as to whether anyone would believe her—after all, hers was a truth that she had no way of proving. All the same, Alec seemed to understand Shiori's fears, and had already told her that he would accept her no matter who she was. "You are you, Shiori," he said, "and nothing can change that." It made Shiori realize that opening up about her past was, in the end, a matter of her building up the courage to do so.

However, here in her kitchen preparing lunch, Shiori believed that the issue of her identity and her past were things she would not have to address for some time. What she didn't know was that she would soon come to reveal the truth of everything—and far, far sooner than she'd ever thought.

Shiori looked up at the clock and saw that it was almost noon. Alec had taken Rurii out with him in the morning, and she expected them to be home soon. When they arrived, she would greet her lover with a hug and a kiss, and then they'd all have lunch.

Shiori giggled at the thought, then turned away from the window to prepare the rest of lunch. On the window sill was a bracelet that Alec had given her. It had a magic stone in it the same color as his eyes, and it glimmered in the dull sunlight.

2

Alec left the Enandel Trading Company just a few minutes before noon. The employee at the door saw him off with a practiced and refined elegance, and Alec rolled up his collar as snow fell upon the streets around him.

The roads of Tris's second district were lined with dignified mansions and luxury restaurants, and the tempting scent of food filled the air, heralding the coming of lunchtime. The nation was in a period of peace and affluence—the

quality of life in general and access to food had vastly improved, and for a long time now, most people could enjoy at least three meals a day.

“All right then,” said Alec, “let me buy you some food, as promised. You pick out whatever you like, whether it’s from the outdoor stalls or whatever else.”

The slime by his side, Rurii, wobbled happily in response. Alec had visited Enandel to have a present made for his half brother Olivier, and had brought Rurii along to help with the measurements. Olivier had requested a rucksack in which he could carry a slime, and there was almost no way to craft such a thing without the slime in question for reference. Fortunately, Olivier’s familiar—a slime by the name of Pel—was almost exactly the same size as Rurii. It was likely Olivier knew this, which was why he’d made the request.

“The look on the attendant’s face, though,” muttered Alec. “Priceless, that.”

Alec was a valued customer at Enandel for all the equipment he’d had made, but the attendant had clearly never imagined that Alec might one day ask for a rucksack fit for a slime, and upon receiving just such a request, had frozen up completely. Alec had then been asked—a whole three times, no less—to confirm that that was what he *really* wanted, the question always prefaced with a polite, “My humblest of apologies, but...”

Alec was nonetheless impressed that the attendant had not, at any point, shown a hint of contempt or astonishment, and instead, after a long pause of around five seconds, had simply said, “Well then, shall we jump straight into discussing definitive designs and materials?”

The attendant’s face *had*, however, been unusually tense—it seemed likely they were doing their utmost not to burst into laughter.

“They kept it in this time, but they might not be able to do the same when we try on the prototype,” said Alec.

Rurii wobbled in agreement, and Alec laughed. He was fairly certain that *he* would laugh too, when he saw himself—a tall man with a muscular build—hoisting a slime-rucksack on his back.

“All the same, I can’t wait to see the finished product. My brother will be pleased too, I’m sure of it.”

It would have been best for Olivier himself to actually try on the rucksack, but working out the kinks in the feel of the equipment had been left to Alec. That said, Olivier only wanted it for his scouting trips around the city, so he wasn't particularly fussy regarding the details. The rucksack was designed for an attendant of similar height and build to Olivier, and so Alec concerned himself more with the design of it and the materials to be used.

Rurii trembled once more, as if to say, *"It's going to be great!"*

Alec nodded. He took the slime to the city food stalls for it to pick something out as a reward, and then the two of them headed to the Adventurers' Guild so Alec could check on whether any letters had arrived—it was possible that Olivier's reply was already waiting for him.

Being that Olivier was the king of Storydia, any letters sent between them passed through many hands before finally arriving at their destination. Their correspondence took time. Still, Alec felt that perhaps, by now, Olivier's reply might still have arrived.

Alec Dia—full name Aleksey Frenvary Storydia—was, as his name hinted, a member of the Storydian royal family. His father had been the nation's king, and his mother a regional noble. When his mother passed away, Alec was brought into the royal family and raised by them. On the one hand, his father had worried about his son having to survive at an orphanage, but at the same time, out of the three Storydian princes at the time, two had suddenly passed away, one after the other. For this reason, many saw Alec as a "spare" because the royal family had suddenly found itself with but one heir. On top of that, because the identity of Alec's mother was kept strictly confidential, many were unkind to him, being that he was an illegitimate son of dubious background.

Fortunately, Alec's relationship with the royal family's established heir, Olivier, was good. This was in large part thanks to how kind and welcoming Olivier had been upon Alec's arrival. Thus Alec and Olivier supported one another through what was, for each of them, a most trying time filled with misfortune, and this built between them a bond of trust that could not be broken.

However, when the king fell ill and was on his deathbed, many of the established nobility frowned upon the brothers' relationship, while other ambitious nobles looked to establish a new puppet leader. This led to the fanning of flames in a battle of succession—where the palace nobles split themselves between supporting either Olivier or Alec as heir, ultimately threatening to break the bond between the brothers.

Alec and Olivier found themselves drawn into a whirlpool of young nobles who, bored with long years of peace, threw themselves into what they saw as a game of revolution. All the dissatisfaction, simmering discord, and desires swirling around the royal palace came together in the battle for succession before spreading across the nation.

Alec was just a teenager at the time, and he was not ready for the onslaught of grand ambitions and raw emotions that were constantly thrown at him over this period. It wore away at his mind and his body, and he came to see his very existence as little more than a ball and chain, weighing Olivier down and denying him his rightful place. As such, he made the decision to leave the royal family and as a result of his actions, the furor over who would succeed the throne cooled. Unfortunately, for the two brothers, who had grown as close as twins, it was a terrible decision to have to make.

Alec felt a deep regret about not being able to fulfill his duties as a member of the royal family, and this continued to eat at him for many long years. He felt terrible pushing the responsibilities of the nation onto his half brother, and also remorse for having abandoned the lover who had supported him for so long. These feelings were like deep wounds, and they refused to heal.

For twenty years, Alec had shouldered these regrets, and it was only now that he finally felt strong enough to face them head-on. At last, he wished to live a life of his own, together with the adventuring friends with whom he'd grown and changed, as well as the love of his life, Shiori.

It was for this reason that Alec had written a letter to Olivier about the fateful day on which he'd left the royal family, and how he was finally ready to discuss it.

Zack noticed Alec the moment he pushed open the door to the guild.

“Letters for you,” he said, taking out two envelopes.

The envelopes differed in terms of color and size. One of them was from Olivier.

“One of these is for Shiori. Give it to her, would you?”

“For Shiori?”

Shiori had only been in Storydia about five years, and letters addressed to her were rare. As far as Alec knew, Shiori only ever received letters from the Lovner family, and from a songstress in the royal capital.

Alec took a look at the name on the envelope—just as he thought, it had been sent by Annelie Lovner.

“Got it. I’ll pass it along,” said Alec.

“Thanks.”

Alec placed the letters in his coat pocket, and after a few words with Zack, went back outside. He could feel the heat of the food stall purchases in their paper bag, and knew that if they hurried, they could eat everything while it was still warm. Shiori would likely have prepared something for lunch—Alec knew her well enough to know this was a given—but anything they didn’t eat for lunch could be saved for dinner or to be used as snacks with drinks later in the evening.

“I never could have imagined this even half a year ago,” he muttered. “I guess you really never know where life will take you.”

Alec let these musings wander by as he smiled at the thought of his lover’s gentle smile. He had someone waiting for him at home, and that alone was so very precious to him. Rurii wobbled a comment: *“So much joy!”*

In just one month, Alec had already become completely accustomed to life with his lover and her ever-cheerful companion. Being together with them was just a part of everyday life now, but in order to protect this new life, Alec knew he still had to address his past. His friend Nils—a herbalist physician—had warned him not to take too much on at once, but as he felt the letters in his

pocket from the outside, Alec was ready to give this life his best.

So, as Rurii hurried him along with a few impatient wobbles, Alec headed off for his apartment, where Shiori was waiting.

"Welcome home," said Shiori, as they got in. "Lunch is just about ready. I made soup."

Alec gave Shiori a hug and a peck on the cheek, then held out the paper bag.

"I bought these while we were out," he said.

"Wow, thank you. Smells great, and looks delicious."

Alec took off his coat and his winter gear, and by the time he returned, the table was already set. There were bowls of creamy vegetable soup with slices of Tris salmon, fragrant toasted whole grain bread with butter and Shiori's special jam, and then the food Alec had bought at the food stalls—sausages and horned hare skewers. It was a veritable feast.

Though Alec still had his mind on the letters he'd brought back with him, he wasn't going to pass up the warm food set out on the table—he wanted to indulge in lunch while it was hot, and so he took a seat opposite Shiori.

"Itadakimasu," said the two of them in unison.

The word roughly translated to "thank you for the meal," and was apparently something Easterners said before they ate. Alec had come to remember the phrase since having moved in with Shiori.

Alec opted to start with the soup. It was hot, and filled with the flavors of the vegetables and the salmon. Having been outside in the snow for a while, it was perfect for warming him up.

"I dropped by the guild on the way home," said Alec. "There was a letter for you."

"There was?"

"It's from Annelie. I also received a letter from my brother."

"Oh. Then we'll have to read them as soon as we finish lunch."

“Yeah. By the way, how are things going with your Housekeeping Magic lecture?”

Thanks to Shiori’s recent efforts, there was a greater demand for Shiori’s unique job type on requests—the housekeeping mage—as well as an increase in the number of people wanting to learn the job themselves. With a little encouragement from her friends, Shiori was now in the process of organizing a lecture to teach her techniques. The lecture wasn’t to be for a month yet, but the conscientious Shiori was already busy with preparations.

“Erm... I’m a little worried, to be honest. The broad strokes are decided, so I think I just have to knuckle down and iron a few things out. I have to decide how long the lectures should be, where they should be held, and things like that.”

“Ah, I see. I’ll help out, of course, but how about asking Nadia and the others too? If you need them, I can talk to them for you.”

“Thanks.”

Alec enjoyed meals like this—Shiori’s soup, the whole grain bread with jam, the juicy meat of the sausages as the skin burst with each bite, and of course, the pleasant conversation in between. Rurii was right there with them at the table, absorbing the horned hare skewers into its body while it trembled with delight.

In this way, the two adventurers and their slime finished up their lunch, tidied the table, then quickly opened the envelopes containing their letters. Shiori opened the one addressed to her—from which a pleasant fragrance drifted—and began reading her letter, written in Annelie’s elegant handwriting. Alec, by her side, took a deep breath. Shiori noticed this, and smiled gently at him before giving him a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks,” he said, grateful.

“Sure.”

The tension in Alec’s shoulders eased, and he opened the envelope. The letter was written so none would know it came from the royal family. It started with a recent update and a few lines asking about Alec’s current well-being, and then

it got down to business:

I knew that you were worried about such things back then. And it is true that I did not want you to go. I wanted you to stay by my side, and to support me. However, at the same time, I felt nothing but sorry for the situation I put you in, and so I felt that I shouldn't put my feelings into words. After all, it was because of my ineptitude that your freedom was taken, and you were left bound to a place in which you felt nothing but suffocated. You were hurting, and because of me, you lost a place that you thought of as home. A place you thought of as safe. For the longest time, I have wanted to apologize for that.

We truly are brothers, aren't we? We have both been trapped by mutual feelings of worry and regret. What better opportunity for us to meet, and to talk, and to share the things we could not say at the time?

Though I want nothing more than to see you immediately, the earliest I can do such a thing will be in the summer. There is no need for you to come to visit me. I would prefer to go to you. Would you mind waiting until then?

I received a reply from Rebecca, who says she would like to meet you too. She says she wants to give you the apology she couldn't back then, and that she wants to give it to you directly. She wants to say sorry for hurting you with words she never should have spoken, and for not understanding the true responsibilities of the royal family... If it means the chance to apologize, and to speak of that day, and to tell you that she is doing fine, then she would love to meet.

However, Rebecca is also currently pregnant, and her husband asks that we take things slow. There is no need to rush, and we can settle on a date when she is in good health. This will likely mean you will be visiting her, and so an exact date still has yet to be decided. Please be patient on that account.

In any case, I'm so happy to have this opportunity to meet. Let's be sure to look after ourselves so we can meet in fine health. I can't wait! Please send my regards to Shiori and Rurii.

Alec read the letter, filled with his younger brother's thoughtfulness, through

a few times, and as the words sunk into his mind, Alec let out another sigh. He touched his brother's pen name with a finger, then silently put the letter back in its envelope and let out a little sigh of relief. That was when he noticed the gaze coming from his side, and also that of his lover, looking up at him with concern in her eyes.

"It's fine," he said. "The reply is exactly what I hoped for. They are both happy to meet with me."

Alec had never realized how much his brother, too, had worried about and regretted the night of their parting. Olivier had carried it with him this whole time, and had even felt as if he was at fault for Alec losing his place to call home.

Rebecca, too, had carried her own feelings of regret over the years since their parting. Even if the reasons for her marriage were not something she recalled with unreserved joy, all the same, she now passed the days in happiness. On top of that, she carried within her a new life.

"The exact dates haven't been decided," continued Alec, "but my brother said he may be able to meet me in the summer. My old lover said she would also be happy to meet and talk. It may take some time to sort out a schedule, but we'll make it happen."

Alec put a hand to his lover's smooth, porcelain cheek, and her face relaxed into a smile.

"I'm so glad," she said.

Alec did not know how things would go when they did meet and talk, but he was nonetheless grateful to both Olivier and Rebecca for being willing to make time for him. He leaned down and shared a few quiet kisses with Shiori, their tongues touching before he came to a certain realization and pulled away with a wry chuckle.

That Olivier... He knew everything this whole time.

Olivier had ended his letter with the words, *"Please send my regards to Shiori and Rurii."* Alec knew that Olivier knew Shiori's name because he'd mentioned it in his last letter. However, Alec had never once mentioned Rurii, and yet

Olivier knew the slime's name too.

This meant one thing—Alec would have to open up to Shiori about his identity, and about the fact that he was, to some extent, a person under observation. He would have to do so quite soon. He did not know how Shiori would take this, but he believed that, just like Annelie and Dennis had, the two of them would be able to rise above any difficulties.

With Shiori still in his arms, Alec leaned down and kissed her again, then let her go. He glanced at the letter she still clutched in her hand.

"Is Annelie doing well?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. The same as always. So bright and cheerful, I can practically hear her voice in her handwriting." Shiori's eyebrows drooped slightly as she went on. "However, she worked a little too hard and a little too enthusiastically, and at the start of the year, she was bedridden."

"I can see it so clearly..."

"Right?"

Annelie was filled with the lively exuberance of a young fledgling, and Alec could easily imagine her working herself to the point of mental exhaustion, catching a fever, and ending up in bed, where the exasperated Dennis would be left nursing her back to health.

Annelie was now fully recovered, according to her letter, but it was almost a certainty that the red-haired Dennis was keeping a tight watch on her actions. Her health, after all, was not just her own—as the lord of her domain, she was in many ways a mother to her subjects. Not only that, but at some point she would likely be a mother in the more literal sense, which meant taking care of herself was paramount.

That said, with someone like Dennis by her side, she could rest easier.

"She said that she's coming to Tris for business, and asked if we could meet."

"Oh. It hasn't been very long since the last time she was here. That's rather soon."

It was two days from the Lovner domain to Torisval by horse carriage—not

the kind of journey that one undertook casually. That meant that the talks she meant to attend were rather important—according to Annelie, she might be visiting Tris more often in the future.

Annelie was a talented and rising artist whose name was growing in renown. If she was here on business, it might be for portrait work. A new archbishop had recently been appointed, so perhaps it was related to that.

That was Alec's best guess, but as Shiori finished reading her letter from Annelie, she let out a little moan. Her features were suddenly very anxious.

"It seems that Annelie wants me to be a guide for her business partner. They want to meet me, apparently."

"You? But why...?"

Alec saw a wavering in Shiori's eyes.

"It's a merchant who deals in soy sauce," she said, "and they want to meet me because I'm such a valued customer. The merchant is an Easterner, and Annelie says they're curious about me."

Alec's eyes grew wide. An Easterner. A person from a distant eastern continent, where it was believed that Shiori herself hailed from.

3

During mid-February, dawn broke at around seven thirty. There was still lots of snow, but people's spirits were buoyed by the longer days, and that meant it was much more common to see kids running around and playing outside.

"It's so cold still, but the kids are so energetic," remarked Shiori.

"That they are. Certainly takes me back."

The children were running around and shouting until a woman—presumably their mother—scolded them all for their behavior. The children replied brightly, but showed no signs of halting their play, and the woman was left with her shoulders slumped in defeat. Shiori and Alec couldn't help but laugh at the sight, while Rurii, at the windowsill, trembled with a touch of envy.

Shiori continued to stare out the window, and Alec noticed a slight worry etched into her features. He assumed this was because a foreign guest was arriving to see her, and she'd never met the person before. From that point of view, it didn't really make a difference whether the person was from her home or not.

Home, huh?

Shiori was—judging by her features, at least—Eastern in appearance. That said, whether she herself actually *was* Eastern was another matter entirely. In the past, Shiori had said that her home was so far as to be unreachable. The nations of the east were indeed far, but they were not *that* far. The Eastern merchant that was visiting apparently visited Storydia once or twice a year—it was a long trip, but you could still get there if you really wanted to.

Shiori also said that she "fell" into Storydia. She might not even be Eastern at all...

When Shiori's own choice of words had been pointed out to her, she went pale and panicked.

She—a woman who knew what the world looked like from the throne of the gods themselves—had "fallen" into this place.

Was that what Shiori was afraid of? For it to be discovered that she was, in fact, *not* an Easterner? The thought of it felt trivial to Alec, and just as it crossed his mind, he heard the neighing of horses as a carriage stopped at the guild. He shook himself from his thoughts as excited voices whispered behind him.

There were two carriages in front of the guild. One bore no family crest, but nonetheless of exquisite design. The people within it, too, were clearly well-off. The other carriage was a wagon, larger and stocked with goods. The tarpaulin covering it all was decorated with a uniquely designed family crest—a large flower. Sitting in the coachman's position was a man in a strange, loose coat.

The man raised his head for a moment and met Alec's gaze. Under dark eyebrows were sharp, black eyes, and his thin lips were drawn together in such a way as to display a fierce determination. Compared to the people of Storydia, the man's features were softer and flatter, but his black eyes, his black hair, and his piercing expression cast shadows that gave Alec the overall impression that

the man knew how to handle himself.

He was an Easterner and, perhaps, the merchant they were scheduled to meet.

This was what Alec thought until he saw the sword hanging from the man's belt. Alec knew immediately that it was well-used—the weapon was no mere decoration, nor was it merely a tool for self-defense. The man also held himself and moved in such a way as to leave no defensive weaknesses—he struck Alec less as a merchant, and more as an experienced swordsman.

The man hopped down from the wagon, and at the same time another man, who gave off the same vibes as the driver, popped his head out from inside the wagon. With him were a few Storydians—most likely adventurers who were hired as protection. The men threw back the tarpaulin and began unloading the goods beneath. As they did so, the whispers and murmurs from within the guild grew louder. Everyone was excited by the prospect that they might be able to buy some rare imported goods.

On the day that Shiori was scheduled to meet the Eastern merchant, the Easterners had also arranged to set up a pop-up shop at the Adventurers' Guild—they had suggested it, saying they'd like to use the opportunity to sell adventuring items. Zack had been surprised by the unexpected suggestion, but had agreed to it, thinking it would be a nice change of pace for the crew.

"How about we take a look at what's for sale once we finish up our own meeting?" asked Alec.

"Hm? Oh, erm, yes, let's," muttered Shiori.

She was distracted, and Alec put a reassuring hand to her back as he looked once more out the window, just as the passengers were beginning to alight from the other carriage. The first person who stepped out was someone he recognized—a young man with red hair. Once outside, he politely took the hand of a young woman with platinum blonde hair.

It was Dennis and Annelie. Both were dressed in the attire of well-to-do merchants to avoid the troubles that might come as a result of revealing their actual identities. Though there was no hiding their refined elegance, their hairstyles and makeup did change their aura considerably—if you didn't know

their real identities, you would have been completely fooled.

Back on the trip to Silveria, Dennis wouldn't even let Annelie eat in the dining hall of our accommodations. Now they're out in public like this. People really do *change.*

Just as Alec was mulling over the thought, another person emerged from the carriage—an Easterner of fairly small stature.

"A boy...? Or wait...a girl?"

"Yes, a girl. She's dressed like a samurai, but it's a girl, I believe."

Alec did not know what Shiori meant by the word "samurai," but as an Easterner herself, she clearly knew better than he did.

The girl had a delicate frame, but her long and narrow eyes were sharp. A strong light shone from within them, and at a glance one might easily have assumed she was in fact a young boy. However, her clothing—a deep red, Eastern-style coat covered in large floral patterns, and a navy blue gown adorned with a flowery design at its hem—were unmistakably feminine. At the top of her head, where her long black hair was pulled into a single ponytail, was a decorative hair band designed with eastern-looking flowers. Even the sword by her side was decorated with a tassel braided in the shape of a flower.

She was, upon closer observation, an adult, though from a distance she could easily have been mistaken for someone much younger.

"Easterners truly are so very youthful..." remarked Nadia.

"Indeed," replied Clemens. "She looks no older than her twenties, but holds herself like someone who might be much older."

The Easterners were all small in stature, with round, flat faces. They all looked young, making it difficult to ascertain their actual ages. Even the driver of the wagon was surprisingly short—perhaps around 170 centimeters tall. Passersby looked on curiously as Dennis took the girl's hand and helped her alight onto the snowy stone pavement. The driver then took a knee and bowed his head. The gesture was one that looked perhaps overly extravagant for a master and her driver, but it was completely natural to the girl, who nodded and walked alongside Annelie.

“Perhaps she is the one who wants to meet me,” said Shiori.

“I’d guess so,” replied Alec. “She looks like their leader.”

She was a merchant who held herself like a warrior. Zack held the door open for the guests in a show of kindness and ushered them into the guild.

“Sir Zack, thank you ever so much for agreeing to this today.”

It was Annelie who spoke, this time under the name of Annie Lofven, who, according to her story, had once been saved by a party led by Alec. The man playing her husband, Dennis, stood by her side as he always did, a picture of calm. It was a surprise to find that both were such competent actors, but they were members of an esteemed family, and in the world of nobles, acting was sometimes a necessity for getting by. Perhaps it was something they were used to.

The Eastern merchant behind Annelie and Dennis was calm, if a touch fidgety, but her gaze fell upon a single individual of interest—Shiori. Her face was not exactly expressionless, but unreadable all the same. Shiori shrunk slightly under the girl’s gaze, but nodded politely. Alec put his hand to her shoulder and pulled her in close, rubbing her arm to soothe her. He felt the tension in her body ease.

The merchant saw this, and her black eyes narrowed as the hint of a smile touched her scarlet lips. Her displays of emotions were incredibly subtle, and in this way she reminded Alec very much of Shiori.

After exchanging some light pleasantries with Zack, Annelie turned and, with the merchant in tow, approached Shiori and wrapped her in a hug.

“It’s been so long, Shiori! I’m so glad to see you.”

“I’m glad to see the two of you looking so well too,” said Shiori. “Tell me, how is the third member of your trio?”

“Oh, you know him. Same as always. Oh, though he did say he’d love a few of your portable foods. Is that at all possible? He’d like them for late-night snacks.”

“Preferably something low in fat, if you don’t mind...” muttered Dennis.

“Oh, erm, then I’ll be sure to select something full of vegetables,” said Shiori.

Alec had to assume from their interactions that Walt—the “third member” of Annelie’s trio—was the same food-loving glutton he always was. He’d gotten along quite well with Rurii, and the slime wobbled happily to hear that he was doing well.

“Let me make the introductions,” said Annelie, once they’d finished briefly catching up. “This is the person I told you about, who wanted to meet you.”

The merchant shuffled forward, a foreign scent wafting in the air around her.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have traveled here from Mizuho. I am Yae Yamabuchi.”

She held out a hand, her skin a pale white under the deep purple of the forearm guard that covered the back of her hand. Shiori meekly reached out and shook Yae’s hand.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said. “I am Shiori Izumi. Erm...”

Yae seemed to notice Shiori’s worry and hesitation, and she smiled easily as she squeezed the mage’s hand.

“I know this may come as a surprise to you, but after hearing about you from Miss Annie, and learning that one of my own people was thriving so far from home, I wanted to meet you myself. And what a surprise to hear that you are a lover of soy sauce. When I heard that you use our nation’s sauce to create Eastern-inspired Storydian cuisine, I felt I simply had to find out more.”

“Yae would like to know more about your recipes, and how you utilize soy sauce,” said Annelie.

“I do not expect you to do such a thing free of charge,” added Yae. “I am of course prepared to pay for your instruction.”

Unlike liquor and ornamental items, which people easily took to, foreign seasonings and sauces were another matter. Soy sauce was frowned upon due to its strong aroma, and when Yae had learned that there were ways to make it more palatable to foreigners, she’d become intrigued.

“I also have one more humble request. I would like to ask for your company on a gathering expedition for a material that can only be found in an area near

here. It has become necessary that I visit the site myself, and I must admit to feeling some anxiety at the idea of camping in the snow—something I am not particularly accustomed to. When I heard that your supportive abilities as a housekeeping mage can make such trips bearable, I thought this to be a stroke of good fortune."

In other words, it was a request for housekeeping mage work.

"Oh, I see. If I can be of service, I'll gladly help," said Shiori, nodding.

It was not just curiosity that had brought the Easterner to Torisval, and in this Shiori felt some relief.

"Miss Shiori," said Yae, "might I ask for a moment of your time?"

There was something slightly stiff in her phrasing as Yae glanced at Annelie. Annelie nodded hesitantly, then gestured to Zack with her eyes. The guild master knew immediately that it was a private discussion they were after, so he ordered a clerk at the desk to watch over the remaining merchants, and ushered them towards the guild master's office.

A few adventurers glanced over at the group, but their curiosity was diverted just as soon as the merchants began unpacking their goods.

Clemens, who was catching up with the Lovners, saw what was happening and kindly went with Nadia to check out the merchant goods. Zack then ushered Yae, Shiori, Annelie, Dennis, and Alec into the guild master's office, where everyone took seats on the two sofas while Zack prepared tea and light snacks.

"Well then," said Zack, once everyone had a cup of tea, "what is it you'd like to discuss? As Shiori's older brother, I'd like to request that you don't push her too hard. I was of the understanding that this was to be a simple business meeting."

"Zack..." uttered Shiori with a slight cringe, scolding Zack for his controlling tone of voice.

But Alec sided with Zack. He'd seen the mental strain and anxiety that had weighed on Shiori these last few days. Even now, she did not reach for her cup of tea—it was easy to see she was still very anxious.

“I thought that this was purely business,” said Annelie, confused. “If any of this is going to cause trouble for a friend of mine, we’ll have to end this conversation immediately.”

In response, Yae smiled as her eyebrows drooped.

“There are a few points I would like to confirm with Shiori, as a fellow Easterner. I do not wish to make this discussion difficult, but I may need to ask her for some personal information. That is why I requested a chance to talk in private.”

With an elegant grace, Yae picked up her cup of tea and took a sip of it. She savored it a moment before speaking again.

“The goal of our organization, the Yobai Trading Company, is not purely trade. It is also our duty to ensure the protection and well-being of Easterners that have spread across the world over the last few decades.”

“Your duty? So you work under the order of the nation of Mizuho?” asked Alec.

“No. Though I admit that would be nice for the financial support it would provide, unfortunately, it is purely the work of our clan...excuse me, I mean to say *company*. On our travels, we have found that many of our people are experiencing great hardship. It all began when our predecessors started bringing such people back home.”

The nation of Mizuho and its neighboring countries had been long closed off from the rest of the world. Fearing foreign culture, religion, and invasion, international trade was strictly limited, and so the east had developed a unique culture all of its own. For the last few hundred years, there was very little record of travel between the eastern nations and the continents of the northwest.

However, Mizuho and its neighbors opened roughly twenty years ago with the coming of the modern age, and many Easterners now traveled the lands and left their nations for affluent foreign countries—Mizuho’s own citizens among them. Some left for trade, others for study, and others still to explore new lands.

Unfortunately, the eastern nations had been isolated for so long that its people knew next to nothing about the outside world. Only a very small percentage were successful in their endeavors abroad. The vast majority returned disheartened, while those who could not make it back struggled to do enough to feed themselves.

“Among foreign gentlemen, there are of course those who truly love the Eastern women they meet, but there are just as many who bring them home purely as curiosities. Unable to speak the language or understand cultural differences, these women are often thrown out, or meet with unfortunate treatment. We look after such victims, and find ways to bring them home.”

However, many women were essentially slaves who had been driven from their homes, and the Yobai trading company helped them find jobs in the nations they resided, or sometimes hired them.

“I see...” uttered Alec.

Yae had avoided saying so directly, but it was clear that she was talking about Eastern women taken away by traffickers or those with nefarious purposes in mind. In truth, Ranvald Lumbeck—who had put Shiori through hell—was one such man.

But what to make of Shiori’s position? Alec had heard of girls who, from as far back as they could remember, were slaves. Shiori had said that she’d “fallen” into this nation, but was it possible that she had simply lost her memory, and was in fact a girl that had left her own home at a young age? Alec knew at once that this didn’t make sense—Shiori had told him herself that she’d come from a warm and loving family.

He glanced at his lover, but could not read the feelings in her distant expression. She simply stared down at the business card that Yae had given her, which was now on the table in front of them.

“Miss Shiori,” said Yae. “Your name and appearance are those of the nation of Mizuho, so I will make the offer—if you so choose, we are prepared to take you back. I have heard that you miss your home.”

It was sometimes said that Shiori was from a now ruined nation, and though she never denied this outright, it had been implied when she’d talked about her

home with Annelie and Dennis on their trip to Silveria Tower.

The nation of Mizuho had splintered into a great number of domains after a period of internal strife when the country opened its borders, and some of its people and a portion of its privileged were missing. Was it possible Shiori was one such person?

But after a long silence, Shiori spoke up to deny this.

“No,” she said. “I was born in a country called Japan. I have memories of having lived there for twenty-seven years before arriving here, so I am sure of it. That, and this business card...”

Shiori flipped the card over. The back side of it depicted a unique script. It was the address of the trading company, written in the Mizuho language.

“I can’t read it...” she admitted. “It is similar to Japanese, but it is different. I am not a citizen of Mizuho.”

“Japan...” uttered Yae.

Her driver and bodyguard, Shonosuke Goto, also shook his head silently.

“There is no such place in Mizuho and, as far as I am aware, no neighboring countries by that name either. That is, unless the nation is especially small.”

“Shiori...” said Alec.

Shiori looked directly at Yae, but her fingertips quivered. Alec realized then, and with great clarity, that this was not something Shiori wanted to open up about. It was as if the truth was wrapped up in an even bigger secret...just like Alec’s own past.

If Yae felt that Shiori’s appearance matched that of Mizuho’s people, then it meant that Shiori shared their characteristics. However, Shiori herself denied this—she said she had been born in a nation that could not be found on any known map. Admitting this fact, and in the company of all these people, was something that required considerable courage. Shiori was with her lover, her brother, and her friends, and it was possible that not opening up about her identity could lead to a loss of trust. It could also lead to her losing that which she had always wanted...and that which she had finally earned.

A long silence settled over the room.

Shiori kept her gaze on Yae, while Alec silently pulled her in close. Rurii rubbed her legs, worried about her.

“I apologize,” Shiori said finally. “I know that I should talk about my home in greater detail, but I don’t even know how to explain it myself...”

“Shiori,” said Alec. “You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to. It doesn’t have to be now.”

Shiori looked resolute, but the color had drained from her face—the whole situation clearly pained her.

“I’m so sorry, Annie,” she said, forcing the words out. “I fear that by not opening up, I may have made you suspicious of me, and after we only just became friends. I’m sure it’s not good for someone of your rank and stature to concern yourself with a person of unknown origin.”

“It’s fine, really, I assure you,” replied Annelie. “Don’t worry. I love who you are, Shiori. Your origins have nothing to do with that. And look, even among the lords of the Lovner family, there are records of wandering artists marrying into the family whose birthplaces are completely unknown. Their blood runs through me. So please, Shiori, you never have to worry about any of that with me.”

“She’s right,” added Dennis. “I won’t say that the subject doesn’t raise some questions, but I’m no different—I know that my father’s great-grandmother was an Imperial, but past that, it’s all a blank. We’re practically the same in that sense.”

“Dennis...”

Alec was shocked. He’d had the thought before, but now it crossed his mind again—*people really can change*. Though it was all water under the bridge now, Dennis had once told Shiori—to her face, no less—that she was a shady foreigner. Alec had not expected him to go so far to support her.

That Dennis was so understanding was evidence of his good character. At the same time, it was Shiori’s own efforts to build relationships based on trust that were now coming back to support her.

“Miss Yae,” said Zack. “While I understand that it’s your goal to rescue your own people, Shiori herself has told you she is not one of them. I apologize, but as for your proposal...”

“I’m sorry,” said Shiori, bowing her head.

“No. It is I who should apologize. It was never my intention to force you to travel with us. And besides,” said Yae with a smile, “I can see that you are well cared for here. Were it your wish, we would have taken you with us, regardless of whether you are from Mizuho or not, but that said... I dare say you will do just fine without our assistance.”

She looked not unlike Shiori, and her smile was one of great beauty. Yae had clearly been worried about Shiori, who shared the same physical features as her people, but she was now relieved.

“No, I am so grateful for your kindness,” said Shiori, mustering a smile though her face was still very pale. “And I apologize that I could not give you a more appropriate explanation.”

In truth, there were still some pieces of the puzzle that didn’t quite fit, but the topic nonetheless came to a close for the time being.

“As an apology for causing such a bother, will you accept some Mizuho seasonings and condiments?” said Yae. “We have miso, brown sugar, sesame oil, wasabi powder, and also sea salt. I believe they are all rather valuable in these parts.”

Shiori’s eyes went wide as Yae listed off the items.

“Oh, erm... Are you quite sure? There’s no need to go to such lengths...”

“It is fine. I ask that you accept them as a token of my appreciation. I will prepare them for you in the coming days.”

Yae was insistent, and Shiori could not refuse. She nodded politely.

The business discussion proceeded smoothly, at least on the surface—Shiori maintained her ever-polite smile, but her face remained pale, and her body tense. Having watched over her for the last few months, Alec knew immediately

that Shiori was struggling to contain the emotions that threatened to wash her away completely. Behind her breezy smile lay a fierce internal storm.

However, it was her pale expression that stood out clearest to him, and so the business talks were kept short and sweet. The overnight gathering expedition would take place two days from today, with the cooking class set for three days after. Annelie also asked to join the cooking class, and though it was clear there was much catching up she wanted to do with Shiori, she too could see how her friend was feeling. She kindly elected to return to her lodgings early.

After Annelie and Dennis left, Yae and Shonosuke said a few words and followed suit, leaving to check on the pop-up sale next door. Silence returned to the guild master's office. The three people left inside—Zack, Alec, and Shiori—all listened to the excited voices of adventurers enjoying the pop-up sale. Shiori stared at the closed door for a time before finally speaking.

"I'm sorry. I really killed the atmosphere, didn't I?" she said.

"Don't sweat it," replied Zack, rubbing her head. "Everyone has some things they don't want to talk about, and parts of themselves they don't want others to know about."

Alec looked at Shiori—her glossy black hair stood in stark contrast to her pale expression.

"Shiori, are you okay?" he asked.

His question was the straw that broke the camel's back. She had fought so hard to maintain her composure, but now her face scrunched up, and tears flooded from her eyes like a dam that had burst.

"Shiori..." Alec said, wrapping her shivering body in his arms.

"It doesn't exist..." Shiori sobbed. "Japan, it doesn't exist. Somewhere inside of me, I'd hoped otherwise. I'd prayed that it was somewhere, even if it wasn't on any maps. Maybe I just didn't know, and maybe it really was somewhere out there. I wanted that so badly. And when I heard a place existed with a similar culture, I thought that maybe that was it. Maybe that was Japan, but...!"

Alec watched as, through the tears, a deep despair and a fierce sadness rose in Shiori's eyes.

“It doesn’t exist! Yae said as much herself. Japan is small, but it’s an affluent and wealthy place among the world’s leading nations. She couldn’t *not* know it! And now I know for certain. Now I know that this really is a different world!”

Alec’s heart ached to see the woman he loved so deeply weeping such painful, bitter tears. And yet, he could not help but be taken aback by the core of what she was saying, which hit him immediately.

“Shiori, you... You mean...”

He put a hand to her cheek and she looked up at him, her teary eyes wavering with fear.

“Alec, Zack, I’m so sorry I kept this from you for so long. I’m... I’m not from this world.”

Shiori’s last remaining secret had finally been revealed, and the office was plunged into a silence so deep it was as if time had stopped completely.

4

I’m not really from this world.

Alec and Zack were frozen in place. They could not simply process the meaning in Shiori’s words. The guild master’s office was so quiet that it was as if everyone inside had forgotten to even breathe. All that could be heard were the cheerful voices of the adventurers next door.

Some time passed—mere seconds, or perhaps minutes—, but eventually a carriage passed by the window, startling them out of stillness. Shiori raised her head—slowly, as if it were weighed down by the sheer mood of the room—and looked at the faces of her lover and her brother. In them, she saw confusion, caution, and concern.

It’s all over, isn’t it?

Shiori couldn’t bear how their gazes felt, and so she once more looked down at her feet. They might think her a liar, or insane. The trust that she had built, and the place where she now felt she belonged—perhaps that was gone too. Her lover, her brother... Would their hearts grow distant?

Shiori’s own heart filled with regret and despair. But the truth was, she had no choice but to let it out. The emotions had bubbled in her until they’d reached boiling point, and she simply could not hold them in any longer.

Her hope had been genuine. She had truly wished with everything she had that there was a connection between this world and her home. It was the faintest of hopes...the idea that she had perhaps fallen into an unrecorded era in time. Shiori had closed her eyes to the differences in maps of the world, and the existence of magic and magical beasts, and clung to that distant possibility.

But what little hope existed had now shattered before her eyes. This world was similar in a few ways to her own, but it was completely and also undeniably unique. Made to face that reality, it had all become too much for her—she could no longer hide how she felt.

And yet, as a result of her honesty, she might now have to say goodbye to the

life she had spent with the people she called her friends. As she stood there in Alec's arms, this thought dawned on her. He, however, did not move an inch.

Where will I go next?

Shiori had been blessed with many friends in Storydia, but she knew she would not be able to handle them now looking at her as though she were a stranger, an outsider.

Will Rurii come with me?

Her slime companion was not bound by any human sensibilities, and Shiori felt certain it would join her on her travels. Even now, it remained by her side, silently rubbing her leg.

So she would take her lapis-colored friend and they would go...where?

To the south, perhaps. Or perhaps they could take their chances and leave the country entirely. Apparently the neighboring countries spoke the same language, so there would be no issues communicating. On top of that, Shiori had already developed a wealth of skills and knowledge that she could put to use.

And, if she changed her mind, perhaps she could still go to Mizuho with Yae. It would perhaps be easier to live quietly among the Eastern communities because of how similar her appearance was. She would have to learn another language, but Yae or someone else might be willing to help her.

Oh, but...Alec and Zack, I'm certain that both are people of great import...

Or even royalty. Zack, who knew Alec's past, was most definitely more than just an ordinary citizen. Both he and Alec had come to Storydia keeping their identities hidden, and perhaps they would not simply stand by and let a suspicious woman walk free after she had cottoned on to their identities. Perhaps she would be erased. The mere notion of it made Shiori dizzy, and she shut her eyes to the thought.

Her mind froze up, and her body grew tense. A warm, large hand came to rest against her cold, tear-streaked face. The touch lifted her gaze, where she saw Alec's quiet, dark magenta eyes staring down at her. In them was no sense of distance, disdain, or hurt—it was the same gentle and warm gaze as always.

“I’m going to bet that, based on your near-death expression, that you have been thinking all sorts of wild things in these last few moments,” he said.

“Wild things...?” muttered Shiori, who had, admittedly, just imagined him cutting her down with his sword. “I thought that my life was over.”

Though the world was not as wild as it had been in the past, assassinations *did* still take place here. Even spies blending in as travelers or citizens were secretly dispatched. And if that were the case, then Shiori felt it would be all too easy for her, too, to be eliminated. She would be erased both from society and from life...and when she had the thought that, even after trying so hard to live a meaningful life, she might be slain in this way, she felt like a part of herself was already dead.

But there was no threat, and no hatred, in Alec’s expression. Zack still looked perplexed as he stood in place, but Alec flashed her a slightly awkward smile.

“I have a feeling I know exactly what you’ve been thinking,” he said. “Let me guess—you thought that we were either going to run you out of town, or kill you.”

“Erm, yes. I mean...”

She was not *just* a person of unknown origin—she also knew information that could cause an uproar if she let it slip. If her suspicions about Alec were correct, then she was in no position to be close to him. Whatever her original intentions, she felt that, under these circumstances, none would object to her being dispatched.

“Shiori,” said Alec, sighing as he gently rubbed her back. “I already told you. It doesn’t matter who you are. I accept you. I always will.”

He wiped away the tears on her cheeks with a finger before going on.

“We realized a while ago that you’re not just an ordinary person,” he said. “Right, Zack?”

Zack was a little shocked to suddenly be brought into the conversation, but after a moment he ruffled his head of red hair and spoke.

“We had our suspicions, and we put you under watch. In private, we called

you the ‘celestial maiden.’”

The term referred to a herald from the heavens spoken of in Eastern legend, and Zack explained that it was the term given to her as a subject of observation.

“Four years ago, you appeared before me, seemingly out of nowhere,” he said. “The air trembled something fierce when you did. On top of that, there wasn’t a single trace of anyone having come or gone in the area where you arrived.”

She was an Easterner that had arrived suddenly, and under very unusual conditions. Even if she hadn’t literally fallen from the skies, her arrival nonetheless defied explanation, and so Zack had adopted the name of the legend when describing her. The celestial maiden was one who descended from the skies—a messenger from the gods.

But to hear that she was under watch sent a sting of pain through Shiori’s heart.

“So...you were always suspicious of me,” she uttered.

In the beginning, it was clear—Zack had tried to dig into her past and her identity on a number of occasions. But that had vanished as soon as their relationship became one of siblings, and he had treated her as though she were his own sister. That was how Shiori had felt, at least. And to hear that her brother had always, somewhere in his heart, not completely trusted her, made Shiori sad, even though she knew she was in no position to take the high road.

“Well, I...” uttered Zack, unable to completely deny it. “I’ve always wondered who you are and where you came from. And then there’s the times we live in—neighboring countries are making moves in secret, and suddenly a mysterious woman appears out of nowhere in front of me, a man still connected to Storydia’s national defense. I couldn’t simply accept things as they were.”

“National defense... I see.”

Shiori’s head sank. She knew all her complicated, twisted feelings would show on her face, and so she looked down, tracing the floorboards with her gaze. The floor of the office was completely free of dust. Her brother appeared rough and perhaps a little wild, but he was in fact fond of orderliness. His office reflected

this—all his paperwork was neatly filed away on the shelves, and he was constantly dusting and organizing it himself. Shiori had long wondered where Zack—who had been an adventurer ever since he was a young man—had learned these habits of cleanliness, let alone his clerical skills.

Storydia was indeed a wealthy and affluent nation, but the general level of education was not particularly high—basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills were all that was expected of ordinary citizens. Even many children of the upper classes were not expected to undertake further education if they were not heirs, or otherwise set to work as aides or civil servants—the bulk of their education was instead spent on matters of etiquette and functioning in noble society. For ordinary citizens, the task of writing up reports was a very difficult one.

Zack, however, was well accustomed to it, and was also well versed when it came to interacting with the upper classes. Shiori had always suspected that he was from an upstanding family. Nonetheless, she had not imagined that he would be in a position where—by merely approaching his person—she'd put herself under watch. The fact that he also knew Alec's personal circumstances meant that he was perhaps allowed to enter the royal palace.

Shiori felt tears once more welling up in her eyes, and they spilled, running down her cheeks.

In other words, she was a security risk who had approached a person important to the nation of Storydia. Her relationship with Zack and Alec was not that of a woman with her sibling or with her lover, it was simply...

"Shiori," said Alec gently. "It's over now. Don't cry anymore. It's okay."

He wrapped her up in his arms once more, and shot Zack a glare.

"Would you spare my lover this treatment, Sir Bleyzac?" he asked.

Rurii, too, gave Zack's leg a firm slap. That was when Shiori realized that the slime was still its usual lapis blue. The fact that it hadn't turned red might have been a sign that there was no danger here. Clinging to that ray of hope, Shiori looked up at Zack, who ran a hand through his hair and cringed awkwardly.

"It was never my intent to push her around..." he muttered, putting a hand on

Shiori's head with his usual gentle gaze, "though I suppose that's how it ended up. My apologies, Your Highness."

His hand was warm and kind, and Shiori felt some relief in each of Zack's soothing pats. But then she blinked in surprise—she had not heard Zack and Alec refer to each other with such respectful titles before.

"Bleyzac?" she uttered. "Your Highness? But that means..."

"Yes, it does," said Alec, swatting away Zack's hand with an easy familiarity.

"Oh, come on..." muttered Zack, but Alec ignored him and turned his attention back to Shiori.

"I'm a member of the royal family," said Alec, "and the older brother of the current king. Though in truth, we have different mothers, and I am an illegitimate son."



“The king’s...brother...?”

“Yes. My real name is Aleksey Frenvary Storydia.”

His was the name of the nation itself, and it pointed to his place among Storydia’s royal family. It was also a name that Shiori had read about in a book—the name of the missing prince.

“But you already knew that, didn’t you?” said Alec. “You put it together around the time of the Nativity Festival.”

“Yes...”

Shiori had first started wondering about this on their expedition to Silveria Tower. Alec had told her fragments of his past, and later the Lovners had brought up the subject of the prince who had gone missing almost twenty years ago. She saw links between both stories, but the sheer idea of it had been so preposterous that she’d tried to put it out of her mind.

But then, on the night of the Nativity Festival, Alec had told her the meaning of his middle name—and in that tale had been a hint that he was in fact royalty.

“I read about it in books,” said Shiori. “One which detailed the naming traditions of the royal family, and another with information about the incident from eighteen years ago. When I put that together and calculated how many years it’d been, keeping your age in mind...it all fit.”

“So that’s how you figured things out,” uttered Alec.

But contrary to Alec’s muted reaction at having been found out, Zack was flabbergasted.

“Now hang on just a second now,” he said, exasperated. “Alec, you may as well have just given her the keys to the castle if you were going to tell her that much.”

“I thought it would be fine to trust her,” replied Alec. “And in my heart, I always intended to tell her everything anyway. But, uh...that said, she put it all together much quicker than I ever could have expected.”

“Well, we all know how good the girl is when it comes to making use of information.”

Zack was pointing out something very particular here—that the ability to

discern what was important from a sea of information and compare it with other sources to arrive at a conclusion was something that only the well-educated were capable of. In Shiori's home world, even children had access to a wide variety of information sources, but in Storydia, it was only recently that ordinary citizens could get their hands on books—critical thinking was by no means an ordinary skill.

"Look, I trust you and all," said Zack with a sigh, "but you *may* have to be a little more aware of who you're talking to in the future, Alec. Shiori, it's true that you were a subject of observation for a time. However, all our suspicions were wiped clean in about a year. We knew by then that you really were just someone who got lost and ended up here, and we knew that you were a hard, dedicated worker who didn't mean us any harm. I don't intend to do anything now that you've opened up to us, is what I'm saying."

Zack flashed her his usual, beaming smile, but when he spoke again, there was a seriousness in his tone.

"That said, now that we know you're no ordinary person, some things do have to change."

"Yes, but...does that mean...you believe me?"

Shiori was only too aware of how outlandish her revelation was. She wasn't even sure if she herself would have believed it, if she was in their shoes. She had to know what they really thought.

"To be honest, I think it's more accurate to say that I just don't know," said Alec softly, patting her back gently as he held her in his arms. "But your intelligence, your level of education, and your understanding of skills and technology—so much of that goes beyond our ability to explain. You could easily convince me that you've come from a place beyond current human understanding. And then there was that day..."

Alec paused for a moment and glanced at Zack, who, after a moment of thought, walked to the windows and closed the curtains, then locked the door to his office.

"The illusion that you showed everyone at the Nativity Festival, the view of the deities—will you show it to me?" asked Zack.

“Oh...erm, yes, okay.”

Shiori understood now why he had closed the curtains and locked the door. His actions had initially sent a flash of panic through her, and so she was somewhat relieved.

“Last time I did it, it was improvised, so I can’t guarantee I can do it exactly the same. Is that okay?” she said.

“Not a problem.”

Shiori wiped her eyes, and with Alec there as her support, she began to cast what the people here called her “narrated pictures.” The air wavered and turned white as an image of dawn came into view. The sky at daybreak was a stunning gradation of lavender to a dull rose red, and a single white bird flapped its wings gracefully. The bird soared over the lands, which were filled with young trees and flowers of all colors.

“My goodness...” Zack remarked, unable to hide his awe.

A scene of spring, as seen from the viewpoint of a bird in the sky. Nobody could have known such a sight unless they had been up that high and looked down upon the world themselves.

In Shiori’s home world, however, such a view was commonplace. Even when one had not experienced it personally, there were no shortage of ways to view such a thing. It was so ordinary to her, in fact, that she hadn’t thought twice about using it. The so-called view of the deities, however, had invited all kinds of speculation. The image had had such an impact that it left many considering whether Shiori was the celestial maiden given human form.

The rising sun took the dawn sky and painted over it with the beautiful blue of morning. Flying between the clouds, the white bird heralded the coming of spring as it gazed down upon the kingdom of Storydia. It flapped its wings, changed course, and flew off into a distance that felt like it stretched on for eternity.

The wondrous scenery of the kingdom grew distant, becoming little more than a mass of land upon sea—until they were looking down upon the world that Shiori had once called home. A home she often missed, and there, in a

small corner of it, the island nation she called home.

And then the illusion magic melted into the air, and silence once more filled the room.

“It’s truly...breathtaking,” uttered Alec, at last. “There’s simply no way any of us could possibly know what the world would look like from up there. When you showed that to everyone, I knew there was something special about you.”

Zack had watched the entire display with wide eyes, and now let out a great sigh of admiration.

“Astounding. Now I know why Kris and everyone at the Cathedral were so troubled by what might come from it.”

“Kris?” asked Shiori. She hadn’t heard the name before.

“Oh, the margrave,” replied Zack casually.

Shiori had heard that the margrave was a major client of the Adventurers’ Guild, but she’d never imagined that he and Zack would be on a first-name basis.

“He was a friend of mine when I worked at the royal palace,” explained Zack. “We got up to a lot of trouble together.”

“You worked...at the royal palace...?”

So Zack, like Alec, was a person of surprisingly high standing.

“My real name is Bleyzac Fauchelle,” Zack replied, nodding. “My ancestors separated from the royal family to form a branch family a few centuries ago. Anyway, because of our blood relations, I served for a time as aide to one of the royal princes—Alec’s second half brother.”

Shiori had tried to prepare herself for anything, but Zack’s former rank—that of heir to the duke—was so high that it made her dizzy. Regardless of the fact that they were both living among the common people, one was a member of the royal family, and the other belonged to a branch family. Was it even okay for an ordinary citizen—and one from another world, no less—to be in their company?

Once again, Shiori felt unable to even look the two men in the eyes, and her

gaze fell back to the floorboards. Then Alec wrapped her tight in his embrace, and in the warmth of his powerful arms, she felt the acceptance of her own existence.

“I told you,” Alec said. “My feelings for you won’t change. They still haven’t. I promised that no matter who you are, I will love you for the rest of our lives, and I still feel that way. You’re my celestial maiden. You’re...my everything.”

“That goes for me too,” added Zack. “I’m still a bit confused by it all, but you’ll always be my adorable little sister. That said, I’m going to have to inform Kris and His Majesty. Nothing bad is going to come of it, but we may need them to overlook a thing or two when it comes to your background. I’ll start by arranging a meeting with Kris. Do you mind?”

In other words, Shiori would still be able to live the way she always had. She nodded. She had no way of proving the truth of the revelation she had shared with them, and yet they believed her. On top of that, they’d promised that their relationships with her would remain unchanged. She couldn’t have asked for more. Rurii wobbled happily by her feet.

“If you’d told me you were from another world four years ago when you first arrived, I never would have believed you,” said Zack. “But I know you now, and I know who you are, and I couldn’t bear to just desert you.”

“We weren’t the ones who saved you,” said Alec. “You did that yourself, through your own efforts. So raise your head high and be proud. And if you’re still worried, let me make it crystal clear—you’re not some mysterious, otherworldly woman. You’re our friend, and our companion, and the Tris branch’s very own housekeeping mage.”

Their words sunk deep into Shiori’s heart. Even Rurii wobbled by her feet, as if agreeing with everything they’d said. She opened her mouth to say thank you, but her lips quivered. She wanted to raise her head, just like she’d been told, but instead kept it lowered to hide the tears she couldn’t stop.

“You’ve been carrying the world on your shoulders,” said Alec, tugging her head into his chest. “And you’ve been doing that for so, so long.”

She hadn’t been able to reveal her secret, and couldn’t even talk about it whenever she was asked. But there were people here who accepted her truth—

and in so doing they accepted her roots, and who she really was.

Her past had led her to her present, and now, the vague outline of her person was finally clear—this was the instant in which the Shiori of the past and the Shiori of the present were finally united. The moment left her weeping.

“I know I said you don’t need to cry,” said Alec, “but let it all out. Knowing you, you’ve been carrying far more on your shoulders than we could even imagine. So cry it all out. Let out everything you’ve been keeping locked up inside.”

His deep voice was comforting, kind, and full of warmth. Shiori felt her heart assaulted by conflicting feelings—on the one hand, the joy of being accepted, but on the other, the realization that she would never return to the world she’d once thought of as home.

Alec wrapped her in a tight embrace, as if to emphasize that she should use the moment to let out all her tears, and Rurii stayed close by her feet. Zack gave her a reassuring pat, then quietly left the room, locking it behind him as he went.

Shiori clung to her lover’s chest. She felt as though all she had done today was cry. But the moment she’d realized she didn’t have to hold it in—the moment she truly understood that—it was like the last wall around her heart had come crumbling to the ground.

Shiori let out a deep moan and cried, all the while knowing that the person who held her, and she herself, were real, and alive in this very moment. Eventually, the room grew dim as the sun sank behind the buildings outside, but her lover and her slime partner stayed with her, patiently, until all her tears were dry.

5

There was still a little light out as the sun set, and Zack walked among people hurrying home at the end of the day. A warm glow came from the houses, and the smell of dinner wafted through the air. It was a portrait of the end of another peaceful day.

Zack stopped at some food stalls selling sausages, skewered meats, and hot wine, and picked up some other bits and pieces that caught his eye. Once he'd paid for some freshly smoked meat and some berry jam toasted sandwiches, he took off walking again. He liked the sandwiches at Bertil's better, but unfortunately the baker's shop was in the opposite direction.

When he arrived at his destination—a familiar four-story apartment building—he noticed lights on in all the windows. It seemed like all the residents were home.

"Oh, Sir Zack. Here to check up on Miss Shiori?"

It was the landlord, Lache, who was just finishing up for the day.

"Yep," replied Zack.

Shiori had been utterly exhausted after their meeting, and so Alec had taken her home via one of the Guild's secret back entrances. He didn't think it was a good idea to drag her out in front of others with her eyes so swollen from all the crying.

Zack told Annelie and Yae that Shiori wasn't feeling well and had been sent home. They were both worried and, given what had been discussed during their meeting earlier, had an inkling of what had happened. Both of them told Zack to pass along their well-wishes before returning to their inns.

"Do tell her to take care," said Lache. "She's no longer alone, so I'm sure she'll be fine, but all the same..."

"Many thanks. I'll let her know," replied Zack.

Lache was observant, and he would most certainly have noticed Shiori's eyes, but he did not ask about it and simply saw Zack off with kind regards.

Zack walked up to the second floor of the apartment building and placed his hand upon the door.

"Oh, wait a sec," he said, suddenly remembering. "They moved upstairs. Phew. Dodged an arrow there."

He turned back to the stairs and walked up to the fourth floor. He heard two voices from within Alec and Shiori's home. He'd intended to leave the gifts he'd

brought and head home if Shiori was still asleep, but it seemed like she was up now. Zack knocked on the door.

“It’s me,” he said.

Rurii poked out from the gap beneath the door and trembled a greeting before sliding back under it. A moment later, the door opened. Alec was there with Rurii, and behind them was Shiori, sitting on the sofa.

“Hey,” said Zack. “I was wondering if I could ask you a thing or two... Do you mind?”

“Hello, brother. Yes, that’s fine—it’s not like I’m unwell.”

All the same, the droop of her eyebrows on her still slightly swollen face showed that Shiori nonetheless felt bad for worrying him. At the same time—and perhaps it was simply Zack’s imagination—she looked bright, as if a layer of gloom had lifted from her.

Until now, there had always been something fleeting and melancholy in Shiori’s smile, like a soft drizzle on a cloudy day. And even after she and Alec had professed their love to one another, that expression still sometimes flashed across her features—such was the weight of the secret she carried, and the burden it became.

Zack looked away from her gaze for a moment, collected himself, then smiled.

“I was just hoping you’d talk to me a little about everything,” he said. “No need to push yourself, and no need to be on guard—I don’t want this to be anything more than a chat.”

“Yes, okay.”

Shiori visibly relaxed at Zack’s assurances—he realized she was probably mentally preparing herself for an interrogation. Alec, too, who had at first looked protective of Shiori, seemed to agree that it would be best for Shiori to open up about what she was comfortable talking about.

Alec told Zack to have a seat and, after taking a quick look at the gifts Zack had brought, went to the kitchen. It seemed he wanted to spice things up a bit, and so after asking Shiori’s permission, he took a few bottled goods from the

shelves and cold storage and put their contents on a tray along with what had come from the food stalls. The mere act of adding pickled vegetables, mushroom salad, and mashed potato helped to dress up an otherwise plain meal of sausages and skewers, and gave everything a touch of elegance. A little hot water was all it took to ready some of Shiori's portable food—onion soup this time—and Alec added a little dried parsley to top it off.

"That portable food of yours is so incredibly handy," said Zack with a smile, further admitting that it was perfect for when he was feeling a little peckish.

Alec put the tray of food down on the table. The food stall fare was always delicious, but, in the guild master's eyes, adding a homemade touch really made it shine.

"And this is a feast considering it's all stuff that you had on hand," he went on. "I bet your diet these days is wonderfully fulfilling, right, Alec?"

"That it is. I'll never be able to go back to days of hard jerky and biscuits, washed down with ale. It's hard to believe that that was my everyday fare."

Zack knew that when you lived alone long enough, cooking was a chore, and even buying things from food stalls sometimes felt like far too much effort. On days like those—of which there were many—it was all too easy to just fall back on stockpiles of preserved food. But Alec was different now—he'd learned how to spruce up food stall goods with what was at hand.

Zack had to stifle a grin. *People really do change*, he thought. Living with the woman he loved had reshaped Alec. And though this side of the man was perhaps something that had always been there, Zack hadn't known Alec before he'd been brought into the royal family, so he couldn't make a judgment either way.

In any case... I'm just glad to see him happy.

It was easy for Zack to see that Alec was content, even just judging by the spread laid out before them. When Zack looked upon his two friends and their slime companion picking at food and chatting, they struck him as a portrait of tranquil and carefree joy.

Zack's meals at the orphanage had been along the lines of leftover rice in hot

water—a soup in name and name alone—with hard slices of moldy bread that had to be soaked before they were remotely edible. Those meals of his youth—of which there was only one a day, which he shoveled into his mouth as fast as he could—were stamped into Zack's memory even now, in his forties. But along with them were memories of warmer meals—those with his father, his stepmother, and his younger half brother.

There were many who despised Zack for being an illegitimate child, but when he had been brought into his father's family at six years of age, Zack felt nothing but loved by his new family. He had not lived with the duke for that long, but those ten years had sustained Zack's soul.

It was the same for Alec and Shiori too—warm meals in loving company were something both had once lost. Zack wanted nothing more than for the two of them to stay this way forevermore.

"Erm, brother?" asked Shiori hesitantly. "Where should I start?"

She took a sip from a glass of berry wine mixed with some water, and waited for Zack to answer.

"Well... For starters, would you tell me about your real home? You've already told me that it's a prosperous island nation, but what kind of country is it otherwise?"

"Well, in terms of wealth and abundance, it isn't so different from Storydia. It wasn't always prosperous, but over the last seventy years, it developed rapidly. Though, that said, it's been somewhat stagnant in this regard of late."

"So you mean to say that those ruling over it are outstanding, or people of great merit?"

"Erm... To be honest, I don't really understand the politics of the place. But after Japan lost a huge war, its citizens came together to take back their lives and make them even better. Their hard work is the reason Japan became what it is."

"Diligent, hardworking citizens..." muttered Alec. "I guess there *are* similarities between your home and this country."

Shiori smiled. In this way, they continued to eat and chat as Zack asked a few

more questions. It was as casual as “interrogations” ever got. As they delved deeper into the topic of Shiori’s home, Zack came to see that—outside of the fact that magic and magical beasts did not exist there—the areas of work and government were, broadly speaking, quite similar. Shiori said that this was the reason she had been able to adjust to life in Storydia so quickly, but to Zack it was clear that her efforts to do so had still been extraordinary.

Based on the general standard of living in Storydia, Shiori said that her own world was some hundred years further ahead in terms of development. But when Zack pondered on this thought, he was not at all certain that he could do as Shiori had done if he were to be randomly thrown a few hundred years into the kingdom’s past.

That was what it meant to have not even a single thread linking you to your past—to live in a place where your entire history until that point, and your roots, did not exist. The weight of such a thing defied the imagination.

“All right, well, I think I understand the broad strokes,” said Zack. “But is that kind of ‘world-crossing’ a common thing over there? Being transported to another world entirely—it’s crazy.”

“Erm... Unfortunately, I don’t really know...” replied Shiori. “There are stories of people visiting other worlds, but most don’t believe them because there’s no proof. I know there are people researching the idea of parallel worlds, but it’s all still theoretical, meaning it remains difficult to prove.”

“What are parallel worlds?”

“Oh, uh... I guess it’s easiest to think of it all as different versions of this world, existing in parallel. Imagine if, at certain points in time, the world splintered based on the path history took, creating separate worlds for each outcome. These worlds would diverge from each other, potentially resulting in vastly different places.”

“So the history of each world changes as a result?”

“Yes.”

Shiori couldn’t explain it in great detail because she was no expert herself, but she went on to say that she’d picked up most of her knowledge through her

older brother back home, who was interested in such stories.

“The history of the world is created through these countless branching paths, and we live in one such possible histories. For example...Storydia was once under the control of the Empire, but there may be a world where, for whatever reason, Storydia never falls under Imperial rule.”

“Ah...” murmured Alec, picturing it. “So you mean to say that there may be worlds where Storydia rules over the Empire instead, or where the Empire never even exists at all. Fascinating.”

“Yes, just like that,” replied Shiori.

“Which means that you came from one of those parallel worlds?” asked Zack.

“I can’t say for certain. It’s all just conjecture on my part. But in terms of general ecology, this world isn’t so different from my own. There’s the same sun and moon, and the position of the constellations is only a little different, so I started wondering if perhaps they were the same world.”

“I see. But magic doesn’t exist in your world, right? And you can use magic here. What do you make of that?”

“Well... This is another guess, but I think perhaps the people in my own world carry magical energy too, it’s just that we can’t make use of it because the essence that allows magic to be cast isn’t there. It’s a very rare occurrence in my home world, but you do sometimes hear about people displaying strange powers—now I wonder if those people were somehow able to tap into their stronger magical energies.”

Shiori had come to the following conclusion: without magical essence, magic could not be cast. In a place without magical essence, there’d be no way to access magic at all, but in a place with weak magical essence and low magical energies, magic might occur, albeit extremely rarely.

“So no magical essence, no magic,” muttered Zack. “I honestly can’t imagine it.”

“To be honest, I never imagined that I’d be able to use magic either,” said Shiori.

If parallel worlds did exist, Zack thought, then perhaps what separated this world from Shiori's was either the emergence of magical essence, or perhaps the extinguishing of it. In any case, one thing was clear to Zack—if people in Shiori's world were researching this theoretical phenomenon, and an ordinary citizen like Shiori could discuss it at this level, then the world she came from was vastly more developed than this one.

"Parallel worlds..." said Zack with a sigh.

It was beyond anything he could have expected from this conversation. The concept wasn't completely foreign in this world—it was fodder for stories and such in terms of thoughts regarding heaven and hell. All the same, it never left the realm of fiction. In all honesty, Zack still wasn't sure just how much of Shiori's story he could believe, but at any rate he did not think she was lying.

Zack had, on a few occasions this evening, reworded some of his questions to essentially repeat himself, but there was never any incongruence in Shiori's answers. She answered the questions the same way each time, and whenever she couldn't answer a question, it remained unanswered no matter how many times she was asked. If she had formed a fictional groundwork for her lies to sit upon, then at some point inconsistencies would have emerged. But there were none in what Shiori shared—no outright flaws, and no signs that she had gone too far in concocting mistruths.

Zack felt that Shiori was telling the truth. However, Zack was once a military officer to the royal family, and even now worked covertly in national defense. Being that there was no way to prove her statements, and that some of it still remained a mystery, he could not definitively declare that Shiori was telling the whole truth.

On a scale between two extremes of white and black, where white indicated absolute truth and black indicated abject lies, Shiori's story was, to him, as close to white as gray could get. That was his conclusion. He did not know how Olivier or Kristoffer would take his thoughts on the matter, but he had no choice but to tell them.

With all of his questions asked, Zack took a sip from his bowl of soup. It was delicious. The dish was heartfelt, and made by a living, breathing human. He

thought about Shiori's food and what it meant as Alec and Shiori continued to talk.

I never once questioned anything she ever cooked. I've just always trusted her. That's fine, ain't it?

The three adventurers continued to chat over their food. Eventually, the plates were almost completely empty, and a satisfied Rurii started doing its before-bed stretches.

"Thank you, both of you, for listening to me," said Shiori. "I know that maybe you can't believe everything, but...I'm happy that you accept me all the same. Now I can finally be myself. My true self."

She had memories of a different world, where she was born and raised, and now there were people who believed in those memories with her. She told Zack and Alec that this made her incredibly happy—there was nothing more lonely, and more painful, than your past being denied.

"I get it," said Alec. "I've been through something similar, and I really get it. When I lived in the castle, my past was kept strictly confidential. If my mother's identity were known, it could have caused further harm to her family, and so everything about her was concealed. It would have caused trouble, and there was also the chance that my mother's family may have made demands of their own. People called my mother a whore, and sometimes worse, and I couldn't say a thing in response. It really hurt."

"I went through very much the same thing as Alec," added Zack.

The truth would perhaps have changed people's impressions...but the truth was not allowed.

"But in my case," continued Zack, "and unlike Alec, I don't feel a thing for my real mother."

Alec refilled Zack's glass, and after taking a sip, Zack began to open up about his past. His mother simply wanted to avoid an engagement she had no interest in. And even when she realized that her partner in her one-night stand was the heir to the duke, she did not cling to him—she took a hefty payment to never speak a word of what happened, and disappeared.

Then, Zack's mother threw him away. Abortion medicines didn't work, and so when her son was born, she discarded him—she put him in the care of an orphanage of horrible repute, almost in the hopes that her newborn would die and erase the truth of her past. He never heard from her again—she went on as though that part of her life, her own son, had never even existed.

In this way, Zack's mother was able to avoid the engagement she never wanted, and marry a man more "suitable"—one she had secretly been seeing anyway. She lived a happy life surrounded by a kind husband and their adorable children. She never knew if her firstborn son died of starvation in that horrid orphanage, and never even made an effort to find out.

Had Zack's father not come to get him upon learning about his son's existence, Zack's life would have been a short one, drowned in misery and resentment. The orphanage was such a pitiful place that its staff had not even given him a proper name, referring to him only as "redhead."

Zack, of course, had some mixed feelings regarding his father, but the man's heart had shattered at the sight of his son, whose body had not developed properly due to malnourishment. Once he brought Zack into his family, he was like a man making up for lost time, and gave his son all the love he could. On top of that, he allowed Zack the chance to be properly educated, and Zack was nothing but grateful—not just to his father, but to his stepmother for accepting him as she would have a real son, and for the kindness of his half brother.

"That said, in the end I left to work as an adventurer, and I felt nothing but sorry about it."

"Brother..." said Shiori.

"Don't let it bother you," said Zack, smiling at his worried younger siblings. "You see, I was meant to be my father's heir, but some of the branch families were up in arms about that, saying that my half brother was the rightful heir. My parents were still set on having me inherit the family title, but I wasn't too bothered with family affairs. In my opinion, it was best to let Eddie—my little brother—inherit the duke's family, so I could focus on my duties as aide to Val."

"Val?" asked Shiori.

She hadn't heard the name before, and tilted her head curiously. Alec looked

a touch awkward—it was the name of his older brother, who had died before they ever had a chance to meet. His full name was Valentin Julius Storydia—Zack's lord and best friend.

"Your middle brother..." said Shiori.

"Yeah. When his older brother, Zeke, passed away, Val became next in line for the throne. It was a shock to all of us, but I was resolved to support Val as he rose into the position. But then...we lost him to an accident too... It all happened so fast."

The crown prince, Siegward—Zeke's full first name—had been sixteen at the time, and Valentin had been fifteen. They were Zack's friends, and he had been so sure that he would serve them into the future, but then the loss of them in such quick succession was enough to break the fifteen-year-old Zack. Then, to top things off, Valentin's bride-to-be—a girl that all three of the boys treated like their younger sister—disappeared during a civil war in her home country. Her status was completely unknown.

"Three of my closest friends, all gone, just like that," said Zack. "It just...well, it broke my heart into pieces."

"I never knew any of this," uttered Alec, shocked. "I mean, I'd heard how hard it was for you as an illegitimate child, but..."

"I just couldn't bring myself to say it," replied Zack, cringing. "I felt like a disgrace. You can't serve the royal family half-heartedly. You have to be all in. If anything happens to your lord, it's your job to take their place until things work out. But me, well... I simply broke down."

Valentin fell from his horse right before Zack's eyes, and then he died. They'd been heading back from a visit to Siegward's grave, and Valentin's thoughts had been elsewhere. He hadn't been ready for the bird that came flying and, unable to avoid it, he'd fallen from his horse and hit his head with enough force that he lost consciousness. He never regained it, and just like that, he was off to join his older brother in the afterlife.

Valentin had been well protected at the time, and none could believe that this was how he had passed. He was a warrior himself, and everyone thought that if he was going to die, it would be on the battlefield. But Zack learned that it is all

too easy for one to lose one's life. Rank, gender, and age sometimes play no part—a person's life can be taken for the most trivial of reasons.

When Zack lived in the orphanage, it was not uncommon for kids to die of hunger or illness. Death was something he had lived with, but he had forgotten the feeling—he had lost it while being protected by a loving family and his position as heir to the duke. He could not forgive himself for being so weak, and that was one of the reasons that he'd eventually opted for the dangerous life of an adventurer—he wanted to strengthen himself.

When Valentin died, half of the men who served under him became aides to Olivier, but the other half—much like Zack—chose instead to resign. For most, their feelings were the same as Zack's. While some inherited their family lands and worked to manage their domains, others found different ways to support their nation, and contribute to it.

"So that's why," uttered Alec.

Alec looked down at his feet, thinking about the confusion and panic that had gripped the royal family twenty years ago, and Shiori gently moved in closer to him.

All three of these adventurers had come to the job with their own individual circumstances weighing upon them, and had history gone even a little differently, they never would have met. It was through fate or chance that they now came to be sharing the same space. Zack did not know if this was mere coincidence or destiny, but he was quietly glad for this chance—for all of them to talk as siblings, and open up about their pasts.

He heard the wind as it blew by the window, and looked out at the snow being carried on the breeze. It looked cold out there, but here, in Alec and Shiori's apartment, there was a warmth around them like the sun on a spring day.

Chapter 2: New Bonds

1

It was the morning after Shiori and Alec had shared their deepest secrets with one another, and Shiori woke feeling refreshed. It was as if a weight had been taken off her heart, and the dim mist that had long veiled her entire world had finally dissipated.

She woke in Alec's arms, and they shared a few gentle kisses before preparing a warm breakfast and eating it together with Rurii. Even something as simple and mundane as breakfast felt suddenly new and refreshing.

The final wall between the two adventurers' hearts had been torn down, allowing them to connect in the truest sense of the word. Opening up to each other about their pasts marked the start of a new life together.

"I feel like I'm finally in touch with the real you," said Alec with a smile. "My title being what it is, I knew that I couldn't hide things from you forever, but I just... I couldn't muster the courage to open up completely. The best I could do was reveal mere slivers at a time, but I'm surprised how easy it was to simply let it all out, in the end."

Alec, too, had felt his own guilt about the burden of secrets that he carried with him.

"Me too..." said Shiori. "I was so scared that you might not accept me, and my fear kept me from opening up. But thank you, Alec, for doing so. I couldn't be happier."

"I owe you thanks too, Shiori. You see me for who I really am."

Shiori and Alec's feelings for each other had grown so deep in the six months since they'd met that both now felt that their respective massive secrets were almost trivial.

"There's still a lot we have to take care of," said Alec, "but I think we've made it over the biggest hurdle. That's why I believe that, no matter what happens,

we can find our way through it together.”

Alec took Shiori’s hand in his own large, callused one, and dropped a kiss on it, as if making her a pledge. And in truth, it *was* a pledge—in his gesture was his firm intent to stay with her, no matter what problems they encountered.

Shiori sensed his intentions, and it brought a smile to her face. A single tear ran down her cheek. Rurii bounced around at their feet happily.

In this way, the two adventurers spent the morning chatting. After lunch, they went out to shop for goods in preparation for the following day. It was a day just like any other—but one that had, nonetheless, brought them closer together—and it flowed along peacefully.

2

The following day, once Shiori and Alec had cleaned up after breakfast and gotten their equipment ready, Alec glanced at his watch.

“Well, we’ve still got some time before we’re set to meet the others,” he said, “but shall we head out anyway?”

It was the day of the expedition with the Yobai Trading Company—a request that involved a night of camping outdoors. There was still about forty minutes before the agreed-upon meeting time, and getting to the guild early would mean having to wait around for a while, but it was a nice place to relax, so they decided to leave anyway.

Not long after Shiori and Alec arrived at the guild, Clemens and Nadia showed up in full expedition gear. The two adventurers were set to join Shiori and Alec on their request—their destination was one where magical beasts were plentiful in the winter. More importantly, protection requests in the snowy seasons, particularly those that involved camping, brought a great many dangers. A full party was thus a necessity.

Hiring a full crew of experienced adventurers wasn’t cheap, but Yae had said she wasn’t bothered by the price. She didn’t believe in being stingy, and felt that cutting corners didn’t get you good results.

Zack's impression of the Yobai Trading Company still had a few gray areas, but all the same, he arranged a discount for Yae—for one thing, creating a business relationship with one of the East's biggest trading companies was very appealing. At the same time, he was also doing it for the sake of his younger sister, Shiori.

"The connections we make with others are important things," said Nadia. "Yes, they come with their own unique challenges, but even I have been aided on numerous occasions thanks to my ties with others."

Nadia spoke these words with her usual kind and open smile, but there was great weight in them—as a young woman, she had been driven from her home of Litoanya during a time of political upheaval. According to Nadia, it was in large part thanks to her connections that she was able to finally settle in Storydia.

"Oh, you're already here," said Yae.

While the adventurers were chatting among themselves, their clients arrived. Given what had happened just a few days earlier, Yae entered the guild somewhat hesitantly.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting," she said.

As promised, she had also brought various Eastern produce as an apology.

"Wow, all of this...?" uttered Shiori. "Are you quite sure it's okay for me to take *all* of it?"

The wooden box Yae presented her with—wrapped in a cloth stamped with the Yobai Trading Company insignia—was jam-packed with Mizuho's delicacies. There was fragrant miso, sesame oil, brown sugar that could well have been a candy all on its own, a refreshingly scented wasabi powder, yuzu pepper, plum salt, renowned shichimi pepper from a historical temple village, as well as kombu and dried bean curd from northern Mizuho. This box alone would have made for a fine gift to any person of great importance.

"Please, I insist. I'm sure the produce will be glad to have a worthy home," said Yae, who, with a little hesitation, went on to explain the circumstances. "All the goods are of the finest quality, but they did not sell as well as we had

hoped. We thus have no choice but to consume it ourselves. I would much prefer it to go into the hands of someone like you, who can respect its worth, rather than see it all go bad."

Hearing Yae's explanation made it a little easier for Shiori to accept such an abundance of treasures.

"Thank you so much," said Shiori. "It's priceless, and I'll make sure to put it all to good use."

"Think nothing of it," said Yae. "Oh, and about the soy sauce you use..."

"Erm, yes?"

"I have made arrangements to ensure that you will now be able to purchase it at the appropriate price. That, and I have prepared smaller-portioned bottles. It will not stay fresh if you buy it by the barrel."

The Mizuho soy sauce that Shiori so loved was stocked by the import goods shop Casero, in the Tris marketplace. The owner had actually told Shiori that he could not sell soy sauce by the bottle, and could *only* acquire it by the barrel.

"It would appear that Casero's owner thought that selling soy sauce by the barrel would help them avoid the hassle of constantly importing bottles," said Yae. "To make matters worse, you've also been buying it at a considerably higher price."

Yae had found out through discussions with Casero that there was an Easterner in Torisval who wanted to buy soy sauce regularly, and Yae had implored them to sell it by the bottle. However, having a hunch that Shiori would buy the soy sauce even at a higher price, Casero's owner had declined this request, claiming that his customer *wanted* to buy it by the barrel. As a result, Shiori had paid almost three times more than the regular price.

"Three times?!" Shiori stammered. "I *did* think it was quite expensive, but..."

Shiori had simply assumed that the price couldn't be helped—the soy sauce came from a nation that had no diplomatic ties with Storydia, and it came by way of the royal capital to boot. But even then, she'd never imagined that Casero would overcharge her by that much.

“The owner seemed so very kind,” said Shiori. “I was completely fooled.”

The bright and cheerful owner of Casero—a person of southern descent—had told Shiori that immigrants needed to stick together and help each other out, and he’d even given her a “discount.” However, given that the soy sauce was already well overpriced, that so-called discount still made Casero a great profit.

“I’ve bought soy sauce from them a number of times already,” said Shiori. “They’ve made a killing from me.”

“The next time you go to Casero, I’m coming along,” said Alec. “I insist.”

“Alec...”

There was a smile on Alec’s face, but one that was not reflected in his eyes. Meanwhile, Shiori put a gentle, placating hand to Rurii—she got the sense the slime might jump Casero’s owner in a dark alley—and thanked Yae for her kindness. The merchant smiled back, clearly sorry for the situation.

“I should apologize,” Yae said. “I had always intended to do a proper inspection of the shop, but put it off due to how far Casero is from the royal capital. I simply never thought they’d be so brazen. That soy sauce price was simply outrageous.”

Yae explained that these kinds of price hikes could impact Yobai’s reputation. This was not a situation that was limited to Casero, however, and Yae was now going to ensure that more inspections were carried out nationwide.

“It is possible that the demand for soy sauce may well grow in the future,” added Yae. “We are looking to expand our market at present, and that means we must avoid leaving a bad impression.”

“What do you mean, the demand might increase...?” asked Shiori.

Though it was true that more and more people were clamoring for Shiori’s cuisine and her portable foods, at present Shiori was the only one actually buying the sauce. She wanted to know how else the demand might increase.

“Just between us,” said Yae, “we’ve begun doing business with the Lovner family.”

At the Lovners’ annual New Year banquet, the dishes including soy sauce had

proved incredibly popular, and the Lovner family had brokered a deal with Yobai for a steady supply. With such a distinguished family serving these dishes, it was likely that they would filter down through the branch families to the domain's lower nobility, and then into the nation proper. That was simply how influential the Lovner family was.

"Wow..." uttered Shiori. "I can scarcely believe it."

It had all started with her serving a simple meal to her clients. Now it was snowballing into something much, much bigger.

"Aha, so that's why Annelie was holding business talks with an Eastern merchant," said Alec.

And it was during those talks that Shiori's existence had come up, leading Yae to express a desire to meet the housekeeping mage. Links and connections between people were something that came together in the strangest ways, but Shiori was glad to meet more people.

After the group finished talking, they prepared for their departure.

"Leave the box with me," said Zack. "I'll see that it gets to your apartment."

The box of Mizuho goods was quite a lot to have to carry on an expedition, so Shiori happily agreed to her brother's offer.

"Thanks," she replied. "I'll leave it in your capable hands, then."

I'll put it to use straightaway, at the cooking class.

Shiori knew that Yae would be thrilled at the prospect, and so she happily started putting the plan together in her head as they all boarded a carriage.

The party was heading towards the border, to the town of Dima, where Shiori had once gone to handle a carrion crawler suppression request. They'd take the carriage to town, then head to their destination—a nearby cavern—on foot.

"A cavern, huh?" muttered Alec. "I sure hope we don't run into anything weird again."

The adventurer flinched slightly as he recalled the brain suckers they'd fought on an expedition not so long ago. It had been quite the traumatizing experience.

“If anyone was traumatized, it was most certainly the brain suckers...” muttered Nadia under her breath.

In order to take out the brain suckers, Shiori had covered their sensitive skin in chili oil, rendering them completely immobile through sheer agony.

“Word is spreading around the guild,” added Clemens jokingly. “With all of your unprecedented and unique ways to take down monsters, people are saying that when the housekeeping mage sets her sights on a target, there’s no escape.”

“Oh no...” moaned Shiori. “That’s awful.”

Shiori looked down at her companion, Rurii, but got the distinct impression that the slime was avoiding her gaze. Clearly, it had its own opinions regarding Shiori’s methods. And to be fair, she *had* used her laundry magic to vanquish some beasts, and she *had* used her hair-drying magic to kill others. She had even drowned a magical beast in an impromptu hot bath. But was that really enough to kick-start such horrid rumors? Shiori wanted to think not.

Though even Shiori found herself questioning her own methods when she thought back to how she’d showered the brain suckers in chili oil...

Please don’t tell me that rumors are floating around between magical beasts too...

In truth, such rumors did indeed spread between beasts, but of course Shiori had no way of knowing this.

Yae watched the conversation curiously, while Shonosuke looked on somewhat suspiciously. Shiori tried to shrug it off with a smile, but her head slumped, and Alec was left sympathetically patting her shoulder.

Though the party’s journey had started with a slightly awkward atmosphere, conversation was bright and cheerful on the road to Dima, and the trip was peaceful. Yae was a skilled conversationalist, and her stories of her travels were especially enjoyable. Even Shonosuke was surprisingly expressive when he got to talking, and his knowledge of weaponry was of keen interest to both Alec and Clemens.

Everyone was on great terms and comfortable in one another’s company by

the time the carriage arrived at Dima. All hoped for a smooth expedition.

As soon as the guard at the gate—a knight with a head of silver hair—saw Shiori, Alec, and Rurii emerge from the carriage, she let out a gasp. It was Fanny Edin, the knight who had accompanied them on their carrion crawler suppression request. She ran up to them with a bright smile and shook their hands.

“Long time no see!” she said. “I’m glad you’re all looking well.”

“And you too,” said Alec.

“I’m so happy to see you again,” said Shiori.

Fanny had joined them for just a single request, but the experience had left them firm friends. They were all glad to be reunited.

“How’s the captain? Doing well?” asked Alec.

“Yes. Working his utmost, every day. He’s out meeting with the mayor at the moment. I have a feeling he’s going to come back with his arms full of local produce again,” said Fanny, her smile turning to one of gratitude. “Thanks to you, things in town are getting much better. We can’t thank you enough.”

When Shiori and Alec had first visited Dima, a wide gulf existed between the town’s citizens and its garrison knights. Many of the knights in the recently established garrison were young, and the townspeople were set in their ways and didn’t like outsiders trying to change things.

However, Dima was growing quickly thanks to its farming industry, and conflicts had broken out between entrenched families and newly arrived townsfolk, which left people even more cautious of outsiders. On top of that, the garrison knights’ captain had followed the rules to a fault and refused to show any flexibility, so friction had been a given. When carrion crawlers had started appearing more and more frequently in the nearby forest, however, Dima began to change.

Even now, the other knight on guard duty at the gates was chatting with a young man who appeared to be from the local vigilance committee, and the town emblem hung above the entrance to the garrison knight headquarters—a sign of their close relations.

There was still much work to be done, but it seemed that things were improving in the town.

“The way things are... This is all due to everyone’s hard work,” said Shiori.

“I’m so happy you feel that way,” replied Fanny bashfully.

The party received permission to continue on their journey and, with Fanny seeing them off, the carriage came to a stop in an area just outside of town, where new buildings were lined up—probably a new district built for new arrivals. The Yobai carriage would be left at one of the district’s inns until Yae and Shonosuke returned.

The Yobai carriage drew much attention thanks to the foreign nature of its family crest. People watched from afar, but when Yae announced that they’d be running outdoor stalls both today and tomorrow, a few cheers could be heard here and there—in places so far removed from the cities, visiting merchants were a great source of interest. The fact that Yobai dealt in rare and imported goods only further spurred the expectations of the townsfolk.

Villagers gathered around the carriage, and a few ran off to tell their friends and family of the merchant’s arrival.

“I had heard that this area is rather harsh on outsiders, but things look far better than I expected,” remarked Yae happily.

“Further in the town there are districts with many who have arrived from elsewhere. That may be part of it,” said Shiori, as she watched the gathering townsfolk with a smile. “But I think Fanny was right when she said that relationships within the town are changing for the better.”

Some things were naturally lost with the flow of time, but there were always other things that came along to replace them. This was true of new beginnings, just as it was true of the bonds between people.

3

The party used a room in the inn to prepare for the expedition, and by the time they left, the Yobai outdoor stall was already set up and open for business.

Though most people were only there to browse, it was still causing quite the stir. The party passed by the lively stall and back towards the Dima gates on foot, where they met Fanny, who was still on duty.

“Safe travels,” she said with a smile.

“Unlike Shonosuke, I am not particularly skilled at traversing outdoor environments,” said Yae. “I apologize in advance if I slow us down, but I beg your understanding.”

Until now, Yae had held herself with great confidence, but she now let a slight concern etch itself into her features, and bowed meekly in apology. Still, her good manners were appreciated by her company—she was showing great respect to the people she was trusting with her life, and the adventurers all stood up a little straighter.

“Looks like we’ll all be in sync for this job,” said Alec.

His reservations regarding Yae and Shonosuke had all but vanished. Shiori, too, was glad that the air was clear between them after the worry and confusion that had clouded their first meeting. She had even found herself growing closer to Yae—perhaps it was because, despite their slight differences, they were both, in a sense, Easterners.

“Shiori and I will lead the party,” said Alec. “Clemens and Rurii, you two are our rearguard. Miss Yae and Sir Shonosuke, you’ll be in the middle with Nadia. I trust you don’t mind?”

Yae showed no objections, and Shonosuke, too, nodded silently.

“While we’re out there, please do your best to follow our instructions,” continued Alec. “If anything catches your attention, please say something before you go touching anything. There are magical beasts in these parts that draw in their prey with parts of themselves that look like flowers or magical stones. The hunters here are used to them, but it’s very easy to be fooled if you don’t know what you’re looking at. Please be alert.”

“Though they’re very rare, some monsters even imitate humans,” added Nadia. “From a distance, you might think you’re looking at a young woman in a white dress.”

“Understood,” said Yae obediently, and then, muttering to herself, added, “So this nation, too, has its ayakashi.”

“They exist in Mizuho too?” asked Shiori.

Yae’s face scrunched up momentarily, as if the memory of past encounters still haunted her.

“One particular ayakashi has the face of an old man. It cries like a baby, but crushes and eats any who would take it in their arms. Some are known to take the appearance of beautiful women, and blind their prey with sand before sucking the blood from them while they are still living. Terrifying creatures.”

Both of the magical beasts Yae spoke of lived in the mountains. One was called the baby demon, and the other the woman of the sands. Some even believed the pair of ayakashi to be husband and wife. Shiori felt like she had heard the stories somewhere before, and suddenly felt uneasy—she wondered if other yokai-like beings, such as flying cotton cloth and walls with arms and legs, might also exist, but she realized that mentioning her thoughts would only complicate the situation, and elected not to.

The cavern the party was heading for was located about three hours into the broadleaf forest on the outskirts of Dima. The snow was deep because all the leaves had fallen from the trees, providing little cover, and walking proved anything but easy. The party slowed its pace for Yae, who wasn’t used to such environments, and progress took longer than expected.

“My humble apologies,” said Yae, taking a seat on the snow bench Shiori made for her. She caught her breath and rubbed her legs as she went on, “I made every attempt to be physically prepared, but... Shonosuke, how are you doing?”

“No issues to speak of.”

Contrary to his master, Shonosuke had yet to even break a sweat. This shocked Shiori, who was feeling a little out of breath herself. But she had already learned—through their encounters with magical beasts so far—that Shonosuke was no mere bodyguard. The way he held himself, and his swordsmanship, were that of a first-class warrior. It was possible that his

endurance surpassed even that of Alec and Clemens.

“We’ll have to up our games,” said Alec to Clemens.

Shiori’s shoulders slumped in defeat, and Alec cringed slightly as he turned to her.

“Comparing yourself to others will get you nowhere,” he said.

“I know, but...I just wish I was a little tougher, or had longer legs. Even just five centimeters...”

Adventurers always matched their pace to the slowest members of their party, but because Shiori and Yae were shorter in stature, they were always at a disadvantage, and had to walk more.

“Oh, well, I guess...” muttered Alec.

But he couldn’t find the words to make the situation better, and so, with an awkward look plastered across his face, he took to rubbing Shiori’s shoulder in silence to placate her. Rurii, too, reached out with a feeler and gave Shiori a few reassuring pats.

When their short break came to an end, and as Yae was about to rise to her feet, Shonosuke kneeled respectfully before her.

“Lady Yae,” he said. “If you will permit such an offer, allow me to carry you.”

Even Yae herself was astonished by an act of such loyalty.

“No,” she replied. “That kind of behavior...well, it is best reserved for your maiden, is it not?”

The moment the words reached his ears, a slight blush colored the face of the mostly expressionless swordsman. The words “your maiden,” too, likely referred to his lover, and now it was time for the adventurers to be astonished —all of them had assumed that his careful watch over Yae and his obvious loyalty were due to the fact that he held feelings for her. However, it seemed that what he felt for her was devotion, pure and simple. Shonosuke said that he owed her a great debt.

Finally, and after a few more short breaks, the party arrived at their destination. The entrance to the cavern was supported by wood, and there was

a path on the floor, paved in stone. It struck Shiori as more like an old ruin than a cavern. However, it seemed it had been a long time since any work had been done, and the cavern was in a state of disrepair. It had been used as an underground base in the times of the Empire, but it had been long abandoned since the battle for reclamation.

The cavern entrance was quite gloomy with all the tree cover, and the occasional winds that could be heard from within sounded like ghostly cries. It was for this reason that many of the local hunters kept their distance. As a man that ghosts often took a liking to, Alec shivered at the haunting sound. Shiori noticed it, as did Rurii, who gave Alec a few pokes in the leg.

Nonetheless, little else was haunted about it beyond its atmosphere, and there were no ghosts in sight. Many magical beasts, however, had taken up roost, and in addition to vampire roses and is grodas, there were also frost lizards and ghost mushrooms—both of which were very dangerous.

The cavern had no particular draw for adventurers, and as far as the Tris guild's records were concerned, nobody had visited in some seven years.

"So exactly what are we gathering here?" asked Alec. "You mentioned it was a rare flower?"

"I do not know what it is called," replied Yae, "but it is the color of red plums. We have a record of someone having gathered the flower in Storydia twelve years ago in mid-January. They apparently grew in abundance, so I did not think it was a rare species."

Now that they had finally arrived, Yae explained her request in more detail.

"In the past, the flower was used for the dying of silk textiles. Its color is truly stunning, and much loved back home, but because the exact raw materials are unknown, we have been unable to acquire it since. The daughter of one of our customers is to be wed, and they have requested a silken hair ornament."

In Mizuho, it was traditional for a hair ornament to be made in pure white and blossom red as a sign of respect to their goddess, and Yae's customer desperately wanted one such ornament for his daughter. However, he only had a small amount of embroidered fabric at hand, which was far from enough.

“The craftsman who is to do the work dyed the fabric with a flower he happened upon by chance, and he doesn’t know much about it. I had my people gather flowers from all across the area, but did not find the one we were looking for.”

As for the silk textiles in question, they’d been acquired when Yae’s parents had been in charge a decade ago, and Yae had only ever seen the raw materials in person once.

“And none of the flowers he found remain?” asked Shiori.

Yae shook her head, dejected.

“The craftsman kept some for a time, but after a few years, they crumbled away. They are no good to us.”

“Oh...”

Yae had had a sketch drawn based on the craftsman’s memory of the flower, and had researched flowers of a similar appearance, but had come up empty. A specialist had also been asked, but had not arrived at a clear answer. This left them with only one option—that Yae, who had once seen the flower in person, visit the site herself.

“The requests of VIP patrons are often a handful,” said Alec, with a wry grin.

“He is an old friend of my father’s. He wants nothing more than for us to fulfill his wish.”

Yae, too, had often played with her father’s friend, and as a “customer,” he had not been forceful in his request. However, Yae could sense their despondence, and so she and her father had agreed to do their utmost.

“That said, I never imagined that our search would take so long,” said Yae. “I thought it could be handled quickly, but it has been considerably more challenging than expected.”

Thinking the flower to be an exceedingly rare varietal, Yae was on the cusp of giving up entirely when a report came in of a similar flower, located in a cavern. The place was rarely visited by locals, and the party of adventurers who had wandered in by chance had brought back samples of the flower for reference.

They'd then passed them on to a traveler who had been entranced by them, and that traveler had in turn sold them to a textile craftsman who was also charmed by the color.

"Coincidences on top of coincidences," remarked Alec. "No wonder it's so hard to find."

"But you did an amazing job of finding a thread to follow," said Shiori. "We're talking about wandering adventurers and a passing traveler turning up a clue, right?"

"The traveler apparently likes this area, and set up a home recently in a nearby village. They somehow heard of our plight, and reached out to us. We're nothing but grateful."

Thanks to that traveler, Yae was able to learn that the adventurers had found the flower in a nameless cavern on the outskirts of Dima.

"I'd heard that the adventurers found the flower at the entrance, but I don't see any here," said Yae.

"The snow would have been piled up in mid-January, so they may be growing inside," said Alec.

"Quite possible," added Clemens.

The adventurers carefully worked their way around the rubble and descended into the cavern.

4

Perhaps due to the snow, the exterior of the cavern had been quiet, but inside, it was filled with the sounds of scuttling and strange presences.

"Hm... Feels like we've got a real mix of everything in here, big and small," reported Shiori, after doing a scan of the area with her search magic.

"I see," said Alec, cringing slightly.

The cavern was likely a perfect location for magical beasts looking for a home out of the snow. There were more of them present than any of the adventurers

had expected. Zack had been right when he recommended that they pull together a strong party for the expedition.

“There’s so many around, but none have tried heading to the town nearby. I guess that just shows how comfortable it is here,” said Nadia.

A buzzing sound filled the air like a moan as a winged insect—a magical beast, technically—flew towards them. Nadia turned it to ashes, then brushed the wings from her clothing like it was little more than a nuisance. The cave was dense with magical essence, which made it perfect for magical beasts.

“I’m sensing a few places with a strong magical essence. It’s either a single plant filled with a strong essence, or groups of plant-type magical beasts,” said Shiori.

“Let’s hope that’s where our flower is,” said Alec. “It’ll make things simpler.”

They turned to the Easterners, who were stunned by Shiori’s search magic, but after exchanging glances, Yae and Shonosuke shook their heads, uncertain of the details of the flower they were looking for.

“All we’ve ever seen is a sample,” said Yae. “Shonosuke, what do you think?”

“I did not think it was a plant of magical powers, but I cannot say for certain. It could be that the magic had drained from the sample.”

“Well, then...” said Alec, his eyebrows drooping with some disappointment, “seeing as we’re here, let’s check those places out while we search.”

“This is not...easy...” muttered Alec.

Within moments of stepping foot inside the cave, the party found themselves in battle with magical beasts. After that, they continued to find themselves slowed every five minutes or so by some magical beast or another, and their search was constantly being put on hold. Even Alec was getting fed up, and he let out some of his frustration on a frost lizard, cutting the monster clear in half. The beast was an A-rank monster, but that meant nothing to one as strong as Alec.

“It’s my first time here, but...I can certainly see why the location isn’t popular

with explorers," said Clemens.

"Indeed," agreed Nadia. "Though I suppose it would be a good place to gather beast materials for a little money."

Rurii was just as fed up as all the others, and though it had at first been excited to absorb the various creepy-crawlies in the cavern, it was now mostly ignoring them.

"Are you okay, Miss Yae? At this rate, it's going to take some time for us to proceed. Don't hesitate to say something if you're starting to feel worn out."

The monsters wouldn't wait for them to finish their breaks, so the adventurers would have to hammer in some barrier stakes whenever they decided to rest. That, of course, was still better than being exhausted to the point of collapsing.

"Thank you, but I can still keep going," said Yae. "Do you mind if we push on further?"

It had been six months since Yae had begun her search for the flower. If she were unable to get the fabrics back home soon, they might not make it in time for the wedding. Shiori could see that the woman wanted to hurry, and she and Alec exchanged a glance—it had been almost an hour since they entered the cavern, but they had seen far, far less than they'd hoped by this point.

"We're quite deep, but still no sign of the flowers..." said Shiori.

"It *was* twelve years ago..." replied Alec.

There wasn't a single trace of the flower anywhere near the entrance of the cavern. They had stopped by one of the spots Shiori had identified with her search magic, but all they'd found were wobbling packs of mushrooms. Yae had come on this expedition excited—having finally found a hint of the flower's location—but was now left with her shoulders slumped in near defeat.

"But if a specialist didn't know what it is, it might actually be a rare varietal," said Alec. "It might in fact be a variant."

Bug-type and plant-type magical beasts had shorter life spans, which meant for shorter generational turnover, and this raised the potential for the

emergence of variants. Some variants were locked to a single location, whereas others had a certain probability of propagating, like the carrion crawlers that Alec and Shiori had faced on their last visit to Dima. This would likely be the case for the flower Yae was looking for, if it did indeed grow in clusters as reported. And if that were the case, then there was still hope.

“It’s easy for plant life to change around magical beast habitats, so let’s be patient,” he said.

Yae nodded, but her smile was weak.

The endless and exhausting battles continued as the party slowly made its way into the cavern’s depths. Fortunately, they picked up some valuable beast materials and beautiful magic stones along the way, which buoyed Yae’s spirits. Unfortunately, there was still no sign of the flower they were looking for.

“There seem to be a lot of mushrooms,” remarked Shiori. “Why, you could make a whole encyclopedia based on all the mushrooms living here.”

Shiori’s use of the word “living” was perhaps a sign of how accustomed she had become to the world she now called her home.

“It’s possible that the reason there are so many magical beasts here is because of all the mushrooms,” said Alec. “There really are that many. Food is scarce in the winter, but you can eat to your heart’s content in a cavern like this.”

By his side, Rurii seemed to agree with the statement by plucking and absorbing as many mushrooms as it could.

“Look, these are marbled mushrooms,” said Shiori. “What a find. Let’s collect some.”

“What luck,” added Nadia. “Could you cook some for tonight’s dinner?”

“Absolutely. I’ll grill them with butter soy sauce.”

When marbled mushrooms were grilled, they had the taste and texture of marbled meat, and were a valuable and popular ingredient among food lovers. Selling them earned you considerable coin, but one of the perks of being an adventurer was being able to indulge in them fresh.

Yae and Shonosuke's interest piqued at the words "butter soy sauce."

"It's a great way to use soy sauce for mushroom dishes," explained Shiori. "You can try it tonight, and I'll teach you the recipe later during our cooking lesson."

Yae had been dejected, but her face now burst into a smile at the suggestion.

"Ah, the housekeeping mage's camping cuisine that I have heard so much about," she replied. "I will gladly partake of such a delicacy."

But just then, the adventurers all felt a slight change in the air, animosity and bloodlust winding its way around them—a magical beast was approaching. For barely an instant, the party shuddered in frustration at the prospect of yet another battle, but in the blink of an eye they were all ready for battle—this was not like the beasts they had faced until now. Shonosuke, too, made sure that Yae was behind him, and Shiori and Rurii were ready to play their support roles.

"It's about thirty meters away," said Shiori, "it's large, and ice-elemental. I think it may have a smaller magical beast as company."

"Another lizard?" muttered Clemens.

"Perhaps a snow bear," said Alec.

They could just faintly hear the beast breathing through its nose. It was no frost lizard, that was for sure. Eventually, the creature that emerged from the shadows was revealed to be a huge bear, with silvery-blue fur. But this was no snow bear—though the fur and the heft of the beast were similar, this one had brutish, chunky shoulders and a triangular head, which gave it a unique impression all of its own.

"Damn it—it's a frost grizzly," said Alec, his gaze sharpening when he saw the beast's head. "A parasite has gotten to it..."

Shiori noticed it too—its ear was twitching in a way that was almost comical. There was something unnatural about it. Upon closer inspection, she realized that it was not an ear at all—it was a large white mushroom that looked like a triangular umbrella. Shiori shivered—the mushroom was the smaller presence she'd picked up with her search magic.

The magical beast was called a dansande spore and, contrary to its adorable appearance, it was a horrifying parasite that got into its prey through their nose or ears and took control of their brain. Once the spore got to its host, it had complete control over them, and usually directed them to places where it could propagate more easily. Naturally, the host was then used as their seedbed.

Most immune systems could handle a small amount of the spores, but once the spores reached a tipping point, they would germinate. Even now, they would be multiplying within the grizzly's body, which meant that any shock could send more spores into the air—direct attacks were risky in this sense. The bear was no longer in control of itself—it was now at the parasite's whims.

"What a terrifying creature," uttered Yae, disgusted.

"If we get too close, we'll end up just like the grizzly," said Alec. "So let's start with that mushroom."

But the moment Alec spoke, the mushroom slid into the bear's ear—it had reacted the moment it felt a threat in the air.

"Damn it," Alec spat, gritting his teeth and readying his sword.

"What should we do, Alec?" asked Clemens, ready with his dual blades. "If the spores have gotten into the grizzly's body, we have to be careful about how we attack it."

Most direct attacks were useless against a creature that had become a host to a dansande spore—nobody wanted to become a host themselves, after all. The creature was, unsurprisingly, considered very difficult to handle.

"You're right. All we can do for now is avoid direct attacks until we can get a better grasp on the situation. Nadia, Shiori, back us up. Rurii, you stay with Miss Yae and Sir Shonosuke. The grizzly is faster than it looks, so be ready for it to charge!"

"Got it!" said Shiori. "Rurii! We're counting on you!"

The slime wobbled a reply, then moved next to Shonosuke to protect Yae as the trio backed away.

It was clear by the way he held himself that Shonosuke was experienced; no

doubt he was least A-rank by adventuring standards. Nonetheless, he held back from entering the fray and followed the rules which had been set by the adventurers—unless it was completely necessary, he was going to focus on protecting his master. Shiori and the other adventurers were glad for this—it meant they could focus their energies on the grizzly.

“Here it comes!” shouted Alec.

The grizzly let out a roar that sent tremors through the air. The creature oozed cold, and even its breath was enough to give them all chills. The beast had been sluggish in its movements, but with a shake of its body it now launched itself towards the adventurers.

“Get out of the way!”

Everyone leapt to safety at Alec’s call, and the grizzly collided with the cavern wall. The sound of the impact reverberated around them as the whole place shook. The grizzly had hit the wall so hard that a fracture ran through it.

The frost grizzly slowly turned back to face the adventurers, who quickly put some distance between themselves and their foe—the grizzly was *very* quick, and they needed room if they wanted to dodge another charge. Shonosuke had Yae clutched in his arm, ready to make a break for it at any time if the situation called for it.

“I thought I told you to save such behavior for your maiden,” muttered Yae, who, all the same, clung to her bodyguard as she watched the magical beast carefully.

“Get ready!” shouted Clemens.

“Ice Pillar, Is Pelare!” cried Nadia at the same time.

In the next instant, ice pillars burst up from the ground and surrounded the frost grizzly, stopping it from making a second charge. The grizzly let out an enraged roar and started to ram the ice cage it was stuck in.

“Based on how the beast is moving, the spores haven’t gotten to its body yet,” said Alec.

As the spores made their way further throughout their host’s body, the

damage they did to the muscular system made the host's movements sluggish. Given how agile the grizzly was on its feet, they could safely assume that the spores were still mostly in the beast's head.

"Shall we focus our attacks on the body, then?" asked Nadia.

Alec and Clemens looked a little hesitant, however—if the spores *had* spread to the body, their attacks would send those spores through the air around them, and Alec and Clemens would take the brunt of it. It would spell their doom.

Unfortunately, they couldn't use fire magic either, even though that would have been the most effective way to handle fungi. Some fire would be fine, but using too much of it against a magical beast so big might steal the oxygen from the cavern or potentially cause a gas explosion.

"Then perhaps I should use my magical sword to cauterize any wounds while I make them...?" muttered Alec.

With a mage as powerful as Nadia in their party, one option was to freeze the magical beast entirely and flee. However, this was not a good option for a high-ranking party, considering what would happen once the ice had melted.

"All right, we're going to lop that grizzly's head off," declared Alec. "I'm going to put all the fire magic I have into the strike to burn the wound."

The head was how the fungus was controlling the beast, so if they beheaded the grizzly, it would at least no longer be able to charge at them. However, this plan put them at considerable risk—Alec might breathe in the spores as he did so. The idea of dying to brain failure by brain sucker was a truly horrid thought, but so was the thought of ending up as a seedbed to a parasite.

"Here we go," said Alec. "Watch my back."

The only one who could possibly take off the grizzly's head while cauterizing its wound at the same time was Alec. First, he drank down an antidote potion to be on the safe side, then made sure his mouth and nose were tightly covered by his scarf.

"I'll burn the head once you've chopped it off," said Nadia. "Given its size, we can burn that much of it safely."

“I’ll cast a wind at your back to keep the spores from getting to you,” added Shiori.

“Let me cut the beast’s feet,” said Clemens. “We know that the spores haven’t reached that far because of how fast it can move.”

Rurii wobbled and took up a position in front of Yae and Shonosuke—it was ready to act as their barrier.

Every party member knew their specific role—it was party tactics 101—and Alec nodded.

“Let’s do this!” he said.

Alec and Clemens broke into dashes immediately. Shiori cast her protective wind, while Nadia readied a fire spell that she could launch at a moment’s notice. Clemens closed in on the caged beast quickly and sliced through the tendons in its legs with astonishing accuracy—the grizzly slumped in place with a thud. An instant later, Alec leapt through the air, his sword alight with red flame.

He put his whole weight into a single slice, and his sword plunged into and through the grizzly’s neck. The smell of grilled meat filled the air, followed quickly by the echoing sound of the beast’s head as it went flying.

Before the glazed eyes of the grizzly could even consider revenge, a pillar of fire lit it up completely. The sounds of crackling flames mixed with the high-pitched, metallic wail of the spore as it was turned to ashes. In an instant, however, the flames extinguished, leaving only a smoking grizzly skull.

There was a moment of silence, followed by relieved sighs.

“No movement at all from the body,” said Clemens, inspecting it as he covered his nose and mouth. “I’d say we ran into the grizzly not long after the spores got to it. There’s no sign of them having gotten any further than the head.”

Just to be on the safe side, Shiori cast boiling water over the grizzly’s corpse to disinfect it, then buried it in the cavern floor.

“Astonishing,” said Yae, her voice full of admiration. “Watching the four of

you fight was like watching a well-rehearsed performance. There was great skill at play, to be sure, but also tremendous mastery in your individual areas of expertise—such teamwork would not be possible for those who do not have such complete trust in one another."

Yae's slightly roundabout way of describing her feelings was common to Easterners, and though some of what she'd said was difficult to parse, it was clear that she was heaping the highest of praise upon them. Shiori knew this, as did the rest of her party, who looked suddenly bashful as they smiled at one another.

Alec slid over towards Shiori and put a hand to her shoulder. Together with their smiles, it was a small gesture for them to celebrate having conquered a challenge safely, and something that was almost a tradition now, together with Rurii wobbling happily at their feet.

"I was worried for nothing," whispered Yae. "In their company, she is safe."

The only one to hear her words was Shonosuke, by her side.

5

After the battle, the party decided to have a light meal before setting off again on their search. The break and the food appeared to be good for Yae, whose expression was noticeably brighter. Shonosuke, too, had taken a clear liking to Shiori's garlic toast, and the joy showed in the usually expressionless bodyguard's face—a look so adorable that Shiori giggled in secret.

"Well then, let's be off then, shall we?" said Alec, marking their next stint.

The search for Yae's flower continued. The party's improved attitude perhaps influenced their fortunes, because it wasn't long before they came across what appeared to be a flower garden.

"There's a gathering of plant life some thirty meters ahead," said Shiori.

Her search magic had sensed a gathering of creatures, but none of them were moving, indicating that they were likely plant-types or similar. The party cut its way through the vampire roses and is grodas that blocked their path, and eventually found themselves in a slightly open area of the cavern.

The space glowed dimly even without natural light, and this turned out to be the work of luminescent moss on the walls. The fact that the air in this part of the cavern was more refreshing, too, was thanks to the moss's air-purifying qualities.

"In the past, families would boil this moss into tea to treat their sick," said Alec. "Ingesting it has no positive effects to speak of, but many claim it makes them feel better. Makes you wonder."

"They say that illness starts with the mind," replied Shiori. "Perhaps it has a placebo effect."

As they talked, they looked out upon the opening, which was filled with various plant life. It was hard to believe they were even in a cavern at all. The space was filled with different varieties of moss and mushrooms, and strange flowers sprouted among them—all of them the color of red plums.

"Oh!" exclaimed Yae, who was just about to run straight over to them when

Shonosuke stopped her, bringing her back to her senses.

Alec and Clemens approached the flowers and confirmed that they weren't harmful. They gestured for the others to come closer. The flowers were similar to dahlias, but very peculiar in appearance—they had no leaves, and underneath their short stems were plump mushrooms. Shiori at first assumed they *were* mushrooms, but Alec explained that they were, in fact, flowers.

"The color, the shape... This is the flower I've been looking for," uttered Yae, unable to take her eyes off the flower she was touching.

"I see. So she was looking for a drommarblom variant," said Alec. "That explains why nobody knew about it when she asked."

"It's the first time I've seen one this color and shape," added Clemens.

"Drommarblom?" asked Shiori, hearing the word for the first time. She was beginning to think it was about time she bought herself a pocket botany encyclopedia as Nadia proceeded to explain.

"The name means 'dream flower.' They are parasites, but only for very particular mushrooms. Quite a unique flower, to be sure. Take a look for yourself—see how the flowers are different, but all of the mushrooms are the same?"

"Oh, you're right," uttered Shiori.

The blooms were all of different colors and shapes, but their hosts were all the same mushroom varietal. The flowers planted their roots in the soil-colored mushrooms and bloomed beautifully—the contrast between the two plants was unnatural, and a little unnerving.

"The mushrooms aren't very much to look at, but they're harmless. They have a slight aphrodisiacal effect."

"Aphrodisiacal... Do you mean like for love potions?"

"I suppose so, though they apparently do little more than 'put one in the mood,' so to speak. The scent isn't particularly strong."

Shiori brought her nose closer to one, knowing now that it was safe to do so, and caught only the faint scent of vanilla.

“Apparently it was when they were first discovered that they were labeled drommarblom, and some tried to develop proper aphrodisiacs from them. However, so few know about them these days that they’ve essentially become a nameless flower.”

Alec went on to explain that the drommarblom wasn’t particularly popular as far as flowers went—while the flower itself, with its glossy luster, was quite beautiful, there was the fact that it preferred dark and dank cave-like environments, and its lack of leaves and short stem gave it an imbalanced look.

“How very wondrous,” uttered Shonosuke, looking at one up close with an intense curiosity.

Contrary to his stoic appearance, Shonosuke was very intrigued by the unique and the unusual—it was the reason he enjoyed life away from his home, traveling foreign lands.

“The flowers are stunningly beautiful,” said Yae. “These petals are just like satin, don’t you think?”

Yae touched said petals with the tenderness of one finally meeting a long-lost lover. She asked for a little time and began picking the blossoms. Shiori didn’t know exactly how much Yae would need for the hair ornament, but Yae assured them that the flowers in this one area would be more than sufficient.

So, while Yae and Shonosuke went about picking their flowers, the adventurers took a short break, though they remained alert and on guard all the same. Nadia watched the two Easterners with a certain nostalgia in her gaze, perhaps thinking about her own home, which was known for its textile industry. When Shiori asked, Nadia said she was reminiscing about the villagers who made natural dyes from plants and vegetables.

“They liked to say that people would make colors unique to themselves,” she said. “It was customary in those parts for a woman to dye her wedding dress in that very color.”

Nadia had been raised in a wealthy family, and her fiancé had died before they were ever wed. It’d been her dream to wear a wedding dress of her own unique color, but that very dream had been crushed some twenty-five years ago.

Just then, a slight movement caught Nadia's attention, but before she even had a chance to turn towards it, a black-gloved hand had reached out and put a flower of pure white in her lustrous, strawberry-blonde hair. Nadia was taken by surprise—she put a hand softly to the flower, and a moment later, she was blushing.

Clemens had his back to Shiori, so she couldn't see his expression clearly, but she did spy the hint of a smile through the strands of his silver hair.

Wow... What a move...

Clemens was dizzyingly handsome, and seeing him do something to impress another was heart-stopping. Even Shiori, who was observing from a slight distance, felt her heart rate go up—it was like something out of a romantic movie, and she suddenly felt embarrassed for being there.

"He's still got it," muttered Alec with a grin.

Rurii, meanwhile, hoisted up a drommarblom in its feelers and danced around—apparently in celebration of the two adventurers and their budding relationship.

"My apologies for keeping you all waiting..." said Yae, before looking at the adventurers with a puzzled expression. "Oh? Is something the matter?"

Shonosuke, too, tilted his head in curiosity, though his face remained blank.

The request objective was accomplished, but it would be some time before Nadia's blush faded.

6

By the time the party left the cave, night had fallen. They found a clearing some thirty minutes from the cave entrance, and set up camp for the evening. Thanks to Shiori's hard work, Yae and Shonosuke's lodgings for the evening were surprisingly pleasant, and it was almost hard to believe that they were camping out amongst the snow. Neither of the Easterners could believe their eyes when Shiori pointed them towards the baths she had created, both so warm that they were steaming.

After a refreshingly hot bath, the two Easterners were served a warm meal which was at once new to them, and yet at the same time, somehow nostalgic. Shonosuke loved the rich flavor of the marbled mushrooms, and did not let even a single drop of its sauce go to waste—everyone took great pleasure in watching him finish it all off with the last of his rice.

This kind and considerate hospitality at the campsite definitely healed the weary Yae. After dinner, she took a seat on the ice chair that Shiori crafted for her, and she spent some time watching the housekeeping mage. It was clear to Yae that this hardworking and kindhearted woman was loved by her friends, as the warmth in the words they shared with one another was clear. This was particularly true of her lover, with his strong build and chestnut brown hair—his tender feelings for Shiori could be seen in his every gesture. The strange blue creature, too, bounced around happily at their feet.

Yae felt no walls between the adventurers. As far as she could see, their care for one another was entirely genuine.

It seems my fears truly were for nothing.

And with her long years of worry now washed away, Yae let out a relieved sigh.

In Storydia's far north, a lone Easterner lived among the people of Torisval.

This was what Yae had heard a few years ago—a rumor brought to her by a wandering, nomadic merchant. This Easterner had not a single possession of her own, and the circumstances of her arrival had been rather unusual. Her appearance and bearing were noble in impression, and the merchant wondered if perhaps she was in fact a woman of high standing. He had done some digging himself, actually, though nonetheless he'd brought the topic up as if it were merely a rumor.

However, though the woman's name did indeed sound like that of someone of the nation of Mizuho, they had no information on what she looked like. Had they been at home, Yae could have sent Shonosuke—a former spy—to investigate the woman in question, but it would have been difficult to construct a good disguise in the land of Storydia, even for him.

However, Yae also knew that the Eastern woman in question was suspected of being a spy, so she wanted to avoid making any obvious moves—she knew it could impact the inroads she had finally made regarding trade with the kingdom of Storydia. If they were to lose access to the kingdom, then they would also lose the means of visiting other parts of the greater continent, where yet more of their people were in need of help. Yae knew that it was her responsibility to meet Torisval's Eastern woman at some stage, but had been forced to wait until this latest opportunity presented itself.

However, while Yae had been at home to ask her father and her older brother for their guidance, a great and near unbearable suffering had befallen the woman. Yae was filled with such worry that she decided to leave as soon as possible, and when it was discovered through business discussions that the Lovner family were acquainted with the Easterner, Yae saw it as a godsend.

The interweaving web of human connections is such a strange and wonderful thing. Even the location of the flower was found through the strands of this very web.

Yae had been raised among brothers, but there was a girl she had grown close to and looked up to as a sister—the daughter of a head retainer. The girl had been blessed with exceptional beauty and intelligence, but these two traits would eventually lead to her ruin. She'd despaired of the idea that her fate was to simply marry into another family, and she longed to test her abilities on the world stage. When Mizuho opened its borders, she had been quick to flee, just as her wedding partner was to be chosen.

It was a time when many Mizuho women left for various nations across the world, but not all of them were looking to wed a man from a foreign country. Many had spent their lives in servitude, and upon learning that there was a way for women to study and earn their way to places of import, they headed out with hearts full of hopes and dreams.

However, in foreign lands, where the language and the customs were entirely different, important positions were the least of their concerns—merely finding work was all but impossible. Many were quickly tricked into handing over and promptly losing the entirety of their traveling money. The truth of the matter was, a great many women had little choice but to sell themselves—their dreams

crushed and, just as often, their lives forfeit.

The girl Yae had so revered was among these very women.

“I should have been more aware of what Shiho was going through.”

Shiho hadn’t wanted to be tied down to a life of simply serving her husband. She’d wanted to find a life where she could put her own abilities to use. She’d had a lover, a man who wanted this for her too, but her family believed it was in her best interests to marry into a family of higher standing. As a result, Shiho had fled. On their travels, her lover had passed away due to illness, and Shiho had followed soon after, at the age of just twenty-one.

It was easy to call her actions foolish, but that had been a time when many journeyed to new lands in the hopes of improving their own situations—Yae couldn’t stand the idea of placing the blame for such a thing entirely on Shiho herself. Yae’s father—the former leader of their family and clan—had taken it upon himself to work to save and support their countrymen in other nations, and Yae was proud of him for this. She, too, saw it as her responsibility to carry out this work in turn.

Yae looked down at the flower in her hand—it was the color of red plums, and had been picked recently. The head retainer—now retired from his position—had fallen into depression ever since the loss of his daughter, Shiho, and had become a collector of foreign antiquities. It was as if he were looking for traces of his daughter and her travels in each of the items he acquired. His youngest daughter was soon to be wed—to a partner of her own choosing.

The former head retainer had asked for two hair ornaments: one decorated with foreign embroidery, and another in a red-plum-colored silk fabric. Both were presents—one for his youngest daughter, to commemorate her joining a new family, and the other a parting gift for the daughter he had lost.

Yae felt for the man, who’d never had the opportunity to give Shiho a hair ornament for her own marriage, and she intended to help him make up for it. Now, she had finally found the flower that she’d sought, and on top of that, she had also met the woman she had been worried about for the last few years.

Though it seemed that Shiori’s situation was complicated, she was by no means unhappy. The smiles she shared with her lover were enough to warm

Yae's heart too.

There is no need for me to take her back home with us.

Even if Shiori was not a citizen of Mizuho, Yae had been prepared to accept her, if Shiori desired such a thing. However, Yae now realized this was unnecessary—she could feel the strong bonds that Shiori had built with those in her party.

It was here, as she lost herself in her own thoughts, that Yae suddenly became aware of Shonosuke kneeling in front of her.

"Lady Yae," he said. "I have a request."

Shiori and the adventurers were surprised by the man's unexpected actions, and watched him with curiosity in their eyes.

"I cannot get their brilliant combat skills out of my mind," Shonosuke continued. "Please, I ask your permission for a chance to spar."

The eyes of her bodyguard were colored with excitement and uncertainty, and the sense that he had met truly irreplaceable friends. When she recognized this sentiment in him, Yae nodded.

"Your question is best directed towards our fellow travelers," she said.

Her answer was indirect, but the meaning in it was clear—*You have my permission*. Shonosuke broke into a smile. The adventurers were stunned at first, but eventually they, too, smiled and nodded.

7

The space was open; it felt like it had been cut out of the forest proper, and it was painted in but three colors—the white of the snow, the black of the tree trunks, and the pale blue shadows that fell in the dim light. It was here that Alec and the Eastern swordsman, Shonosuke, stood facing one another.

Shonosuke was small in stature—perhaps around 170 centimeters tall. His uniquely Eastern loose-fitting garb hid the lines of his body, and gave the impression that he was of slim build.

From a distance, one would have thought him to be in his twenties. However, a closer look revealed a slight dullness to his skin, and shallow wrinkles etched into his face. The light in Shonosuke's eyes was heavy and sharp, not unlike his well-used blade. His was the gaze of an experienced hand. His bearing was not like that of a young man, much less that of a simple merchant.

Shonosuke gave a show of respect in the Eastern style, then removed his sword from its scabbard. Its blade cut only in a single direction, and was crafted with a metal that contained a thin layer of dark magic on its surface. Angetsuto, as the blade was called, seemed to waver as the dull light and dark sheen flowed across its blade.

With an easy motion, Shonosuke lowered his hips and settled into his stance, holding his sword so the blade pointed slightly upwards towards Alec. Alec, too, readied his own weapon and dropped into a fighting stance of his own.

"This...isn't going to be easy," he muttered to himself.

The sword in Shonosuke's hands was held straight out towards Alec, but with the way the narrow blade seemed to blend in with the many folds of his clothing, it was difficult for Alec to read its movements clearly. Furthermore, he began to feel a darkness emanating from Shonosuke's bearing.

It's like he's a completely different person from the man I just had dinner with.

Shonosuke had happily eaten the food he was served, right down to the sauce left over on his plate, and had smiled with great satisfaction when he was done. Now, however, it was as though he was another creature entirely. The scent of death drifted from him, but it was unusually faint, as though the man himself might disappear into the shadowy scenery around him.

He's used to battling human opponents. Perhaps he's a spy of sorts?

Alec couldn't help but think of the slight cringe he'd seen on Clemens's face as he'd spoken.

"I did the best I could, but..."

Unlike Alec and Zack, who'd done work in the shadows as part of the kingdom's intelligence division, Clemens had very little experience when it came to fighting and killing human opponents—he'd only ever faced bandits and

hoodlums. Alec had to assume that he'd never had to fight anyone who had experience striking from the shadows to eliminate their targets.

And perhaps the very reason that Clemens had shown a hint of hesitation the moment he'd faced Shonosuke was because he felt the darkness within the man. Shonosuke had, of course, fought fairly from start to finish, but his movements had perplexed Clemens and given him a hard time. It was a good battle, to be sure, but Clemens had lost.

That said, I'm not all that experienced fighting other humans myself...

Alec had been a part of the intelligence division for just a few years. In order to bring the Empire down from the inside, he had worked his way inside the manor of an Imperial arms merchant. The job had been a great burden for Alec to take on, as subterfuge was not his profession, but he had been selected due to his appearance, which matched that of a known Imperial collaborator.

Alec had taken on the role of the half-brother of Elector Ulanov—who had sided with the allied nations—and had participated in a plan that had him enter the manor as the Elector's recommended merchant. He had volunteered for the part himself, though perhaps "volunteered" was the wrong word. Rather, when Alec had heard from his brother that nobody in the intelligence division met their requirements—the operative needed to be tall, strong, and have dark magenta eyes—he had insisted he be given the job.

However, he had spent but a few years undercover—not long enough for it to be called a true career.

But could the same be said for Shonosuke?

Just then, Alec felt a slight tremor in the tense air between them.

Here he comes!

Shonosuke quickly closed in, still in his low stance, his Angetsuto slicing through the air like a black streak of lightning. Sparks flew and blades flashed as the two swords collided. Alec met Shonosuke's gaze, and saw the light and darkness that wavered in the Easterner's black eyes. But it was only for the briefest of moments, and the two men once again separated.

In terms of physical build, Alec and Shonosuke were vastly different—in a

contest of strength, Shonosuke would lose. However, the speed, parrying, and accuracy of the Easterner's swordsmanship surpassed Alec. After a few further clashes of their swords, one thing became clear to Alec—Shonosuke was aiming for his weak points, and in a battle of life and death, Alec did not fancy his chances.

Both men dropped into low stances and inched towards one another. Shonosuke's footwork ensured he was safe, and Alec could see that he was used to fighting in the snow.

He doesn't leave any openings either...

That was when he noticed it. For just an instant, Shonosuke let an expression rise to his face. It was somewhere between a grin and a grimace. But this was not because the man underestimated Alec—rather, the emotion was directed inwards.

Alec stepped in, moving instinctively as he sensed an opportunity had presented itself.

And his instincts proved right. Alec's sword came swinging downwards, and, though Shonosuke was able to defend against the strike, he was pushed off-balance by Alec's sheer strength. When Alec came back with a second blow, Shonosuke was not in a good position to defend against it—a sharp clang rang out as Shonosuke's Angetsuto flew through the air. He had been summarily caught out of position, and now had Alec's blade pointed directly at him.

"Damn it," he muttered, taking Alec's outstretched hand and climbing to his feet.

"If we'd been fighting for real, I'd be a dead man," said Alec. "But what happened? Why did you suddenly leave an opening?"

"It dawned on me that you'd read my person. Who I am. And when the thought hit me, I left myself open. I am frustrated that I could not fool you."

Shonosuke picked his sword up and inspected it briefly before returning it to its scabbard.

"I was once a man of the shadows," he said, with a slight grimace. "And yet my sparring opponent saw through me."

Alec did not know exactly what being a “man of the shadows” entailed, but he understood the gist of it, and nodded.

“Are you sure it’s okay to tell me? We’ve only just met,” he said.

“I do not mind. It is the matter of a nation far, far from this one, and the organization has long been disbanded. I was but an apprentice, and I have since returned to the sunlight.”

In other words, he had been released before the darkness could stain him too deeply. According to Shonosuke, he had spent more time in the sun than he had in the shadows, and yet the darkness he had grown used to in his youth would not let him go so easily. He had been let go before he’d learned how to completely conceal that aspect of himself, and as a result, those with sharper eyes saw through him. Thus, he considered himself far from the real deal.



“Aha, so that was why that part of you seemed to waver,” said Alec.

“Much as it did for you.”

Though the sounds of their conversation were absorbed by the snow, and their friends were watching from some distance away at the tents, Shonosuke nonetheless kept his voice low. His two black eyes observed Alec carefully, and Alec let out a small gasp. Clemens and Nadia had both sensed it in him, having known him for so long, but Alec had not expected a foreigner he’d just met to see the same thing. Perhaps he had let it show in ways he was not aware of.

“How to put it?” said Shonosuke. “I have no way of proving it, but it is like a scent—a part of you is in shadow.”

It was as if Shonosuke had read his very soul. What Alec had sensed from Shonosuke was exactly the same as what Shonosuke had felt from him. Though the Easterner proclaimed to be just an apprentice, he had nonetheless been a true spy, and when Alec realized that he could not hide his past from the man, he nodded. He had thought it but a small, ephemeral part of himself, but it seemed his time in the Empire had left its mark on him, and even now he could not completely escape it.

“It was a temporary thing, and a short period of my life,” said Alec. “Far from what I do for a living.”

“I see,” said Shonosuke. “So that was why that part of you seemed to waver.”

Alec could do little more than chuckle when he heard his own words repeated to him.

“I sensed in you a scent similar to my own,” continued Shonosuke. “That was why I was curious to talk to you.”

The Easterner’s gaze flowed towards Yae, who was watching them. It wavered for just an instant before he went on.

“Many kept their distance from me, as I was not a typical youth, and so I had no place to call home. No place where I belonged. When I thought that all was lost, Lady Yae took me in. In foreign countries, people might think I was odd, but they would not judge me or criticize me as my own people would. She also welcomed my unique abilities, and told me to use them to the fullest.”

“I see...”

It was a most surprising place for Shonosuke to be able to utilize his information-gathering skills as a “man of the shadows.” In other words, Yae had not brought him on to be just another bodyguard.

“Lady Yae did not look down on me when she brought me into her employ. All of us who work for her have our own unique backgrounds, and there is no need for any of us to dig into them—we are all simply comfortable to work for such a leader.”

“Ah... I dare say it is the same for me,” replied Alec.

Adventurers, too, came from a variety of different backgrounds. The Tris branch of the guild, located far from the royal capital and near the harsh conditions of the national border, was an especially clear example. Clemens and Nadia—both of whom revealed very little of their pasts—had perhaps put Alec’s own past together on their own, but they did not bring it up as a topic of discussion, and even now they remained his friends; at most, they sometimes uttered a few considerate words when such a thing was necessary.

Alec found himself looking over at his friends now, their arms crossed as they stood by the side of their tent. Clemens glanced over at them as he listened to and occasionally took part in the conversation between the rest of the party. His green eyes flickered—Alec knew that he was intentionally keeping his distance so as to give him and Shonosuke time to talk.

“You have good friends,” remarked Shonosuke.

“I’m not always the easiest man to get along with,” said Alec, “but he is good to me. He is one of the few who understands me, and one I can truly call a close friend.”

“One worth keeping.”

“Indeed.”

A silence fell between the two swordsmen. Perhaps because they were tired of waiting, the women broke off into a discussion of their own. Shiori wore a gentle smile as Nadia and Yae happily chatted to each other. Then, suddenly, laughter burst out from among them, and Clemens cringed in response while Rurii poked him in the leg—Nadia had made a joke at his expense, it seemed.

When Alec thought about it, he had known Nadia for a long time, and she, like him, was a person with a past she kept secret. She had been driven out of her own home country, and found herself here, in the resting place of her lost fiancé. Had Alec's older half-brother still been alive, she might well have become Alec's sister-in-law.

But had he lived, I might never have been brought to the castle in the first place.

And if that had happened, Alec would never have come to know Olivier, Zack, or Nadia at all. His father would have put him somewhere, without Alec ever learning the man's name, where he would have lived an entirely different life. Had things continued peacefully back then, he never would have encountered the three of them, and yet, through the death of his older half-brother, their lives had intertwined. The thought made Alec acutely aware of how fickle and strange a thing fate truly was.

"Do you not ever find it vexing?" asked Shonosuke in a low voice.

"What?" replied Alec, blinking at the sudden question.

"You gave your life for your country, and yet not only must you remain silent, you must also endure all the venom that others spit upon your efforts. I understand the logic of it, but nonetheless it vexes me."

Though Shonosuke had been but an apprentice, it was clear to Alec that even then, the man had blood on his hands. He had shrouded his identity, tricked people so as to gather intelligence, and fought and killed in secret for the sake of his country. That was what it meant to be a man of the shadows.

For the regular citizenry, it was seen as something to be detested, even though none of it was done for personal gain, but instead for the sake of the very nation itself. For Shonosuke, it was hard to accept the harsh words that people spoke of such actions.

Alec understood these feelings, and had heard one of his own comrades voice a similar complaint. This individual hadn't liked that people openly complained about those in his line of work, even though it was through their thankless work that those same people now lived in peace. Though Alec couldn't speak with the comrade too deeply on the topic—neither could reveal their true pasts—it

seemed that the criticism had come from his own brother, a knight. While the older brother wore a uniform and stood proudly before the eyes of the people, the younger brother had protected the nation from the shadows, so to speak. To hear his own brother speak critically of the intelligence division without even knowing his duties was something that inspired in Alec's comrade an indignant frustration.

"Fortunately, the people around me are more considerate and generous in their views, and so I feel no such frustrations," said Alec. After a moment of thought, he went on, "I was able to defend that which I most wanted to see protected, and for me, that was enough."

It was Olivier who'd ordered Alec to go to the Empire, and Olivier was the man Alec wanted to protect above all others. The reason Alec had been quick to accept the orders—indeed, the reason he'd proactively insisted on them—was because he saw them as a kind of penance for having abandoned Olivier to deal with the situation at the castle alone.

Olivier *was* Storydia. If working for him meant defending their home, then as Olivier's older brother—and as someone in the lowest position among the royal family—there was nothing that would make him gladder.

This, of course, he could not actually say to Shonosuke, however.

"But I am not trying to play down your feelings," said Alec. "I understand how frustrating it must be to conduct your work honorably, only to have it dismissed. However, is it not true to say that the people around you now all respect the person you are?"

"Sir Alec..." uttered Shonosuke.

His employer, Yae, and all the Easterners that made up the Yobai Trading Company's caravan were all at ease with Shonosuke. There was no sense that any of them despised him in any way—rather, they accepted him as one of their own. Shonosuke once more found his gaze drifting to Yae.

"I first met Lady Yae some time after I had been released from my position. Until then, I thought only of working to serve my country. However, well..." And here Shonosuke's features relaxed into a smile. "When I think that I now work for them—my companions and my lady—well, it seems a trivial matter."

Though some vexed thoughts still lingered within him, there was no echo of regret in Shonosuke's words. And as Alec looked upon the man's profile, with its shallow Eastern features, he allowed himself a smile as well. This, too, was yet another strange twist of fate—a sparring match with a man who shared a similar history to himself, followed by a conversation that made them feel like old friends reuniting.

When one door closed upon a relationship, another door opened with the opportunity for new connections. This chance meeting with the Easterners, too, would never have happened had Alec not met Shiori.

"She is your lover?" asked Shonosuke.

Alec looked at Shonosuke, taken aback by the sudden question, and at first unsure of its intent. A strange light seemed to waver in the Easterner's eyes as they reflected the nearby campfire.

"That she is," replied Alec. "And one day I intend to marry her. To be honest, I... I can no longer imagine a life without her. I will do whatever I must to ensure she remains by my side."

Their lives had never ever been meant to intertwine, and yet he and Shiori's connection was now one that surpassed even worlds. Alec once again pledged, in his own heart, that he would never let the bond between them break.

Shonosuke watched Alec carefully, then broke into a grin. He explained to Alec that there were not many who crossed from east to west and ended up happily married. Thus, to see the two of them so sincere with one another made him truly happy from the bottom of his heart, as a fellow countryman.

"Now that I know you, I believe you can overcome any difficulty," said Shonosuke. "You must call us when you get married."

Despite his age, Alec couldn't help but blush at the words. But even then, with thoughts of that day—perhaps not so far in the future—running through his mind, Alec nodded happily at his newfound friend.

And so it was that a peaceful evening fell upon a day that had been filled with new bonds.

Chapter 3: Open for Cooking Classes

1

The weather was bright and clear the following morning—the snow sparkled in the light of the sun, and smaller wildlife peeked their heads out of their homes as if beckoned outside by the warmth. Now that her mission was accomplished, there was a lightness to Yae's gait, and the party of adventurers arrived back at Dima earlier than expected.

"Welcome back!"

Fanny was once again waiting at the gates to greet them with a smile. When they gave her some of the marbled mushrooms they'd gathered from the cavern, the knight gasped.

"Wow, talk about a sumptuous find!" said the knight on guard duty with her. "So you can gather those mushrooms around here too, huh? Should we tell the others?"

The knights then launched into a discussion.

"I don't know," said one. "I hear they're in an area the hunters keep clear of."

"They're in the cave near Ahlen Pond, apparently. And rather deep into it."

"Oh—there? Nobody's going to venture that far without some knights or adventurers, so, uh...let's keep it a secret, yeah?"

After the marbled mushroom discussion wrapped up, the party made their way to the inn, where the Yobai Trading Company's merchants were waiting for them. Their stall was in the same place as it had been the previous day, and it was packed with shoppers. The glass balls and strips of cloth—both decorated in unique, Eastern colors—were especially popular with the people of Dima, and all the local housewives were snapping them up. Shiori couldn't believe it.

"The western nations have begun showing more interest in Eastern culture," explained Yae. "Perhaps these trinkets tickle something of a collector's itch, for these kinds of decorative items always sell especially well. Alas, miso and soy

sauce remain a challenge.”

The stock of everything at the stall was beginning to dwindle to some extent or another, except for the food products over in the corner.

“However, now I am beginning to understand that it all depends on how the products are cooked and served,” continued Yae. “So I am very much looking forward to tasting the dishes that the Lovner family lord raved about.”

Yae went on to explain that if Eastern seasoning and sauces were more widely distributed, they would provide a small source of comfort for her brethren living away from home. The comment reminded Shiori that Yae’s desire to support and protect her people was a passion that came from the heart.

“Oh my... Talk about pressure,” replied Shiori. Yet there was little in the way of worry in her eyes as she met the gaze of her Eastern client.

After all, Shiori now had a number of recipes on hand that both utilized Eastern seasoning and sauces, *and* were popular among Storydians. All of them had been highly praised at campsites during expeditions. She knew that even when flavors and scents were unique and uncommon, the food itself could make those aspects surprisingly palatable.

And yet, I never imagined that all the cooking I’ve done until now would ever be helpful in this particular way.

Shiori wanted to take the knowledge and experience she’d gained in her home world, and polish them here as she planted the roots of a new life. She would pass on her skills, where they would last long after her own life came to an end. In this way, she would leave proof of her existence, and the roads she had walked.

“Teaching others, and passing on techniques...” Shiori muttered to herself.

The image remained vague and unclear in Shiori’s mind, but she had a sense that she had caught a glimpse of her future.

2

It was early in the afternoon, two days after the successful expedition with

Yae and Shonosuke. Shiori was fully rested, and she was in high spirits as she headed to the Guild. Alec and Rurii were with her, as usual—both of them carrying the seasoning and ingredients Shiori intended to use—and Zack was at the Guild as always to greet them as they entered.

Shiori's cooking class was set to take place in the Adventurers' Guild cafeteria. The place had been cleaned after lunch and the staff dismissed, so by the time the clients were ushered in, they had the space entirely to themselves for the afternoon.

The so-called Lovfens—Annelie and Dennis—looked a little anxious as they entered the cafeteria, but upon seeing Shiori's bright and happy expression, both relaxed. Shiori realized then the extent to which she'd worried them, and her eyebrows drooped slightly as Annelie wrapped her in a hug.

"I'm just glad to see you looking well," said Annelie with a smile.

The two Easterners—Yae and Shonosuke—were greeted with firm handshakes and, once everyone was settled, the class began. The student, in this particular case, was Yae—her role was that of head manager for the Yobai Trading Company, but she also liked to cook herself.

"In the past I never imagined myself with a cleaver in hand, but once I actually tried it for myself, I found it quite enjoyable," she said.

Though she was the daughter of a former domain lord, she spoke these words with a carefree smile.

Annelie took her drawing utensils from her bag and began sketching the class in action while Alec and Shonosuke broke off and started a conversation of their own. They were joined by Clemens and Nadia, who were both free that afternoon, and the group swapped opinions on a number of complicated topics, including Eastern swordsmanship, party management, and politics. In the meantime, Nadia poured them all tea.

As expected, Dennis was practically glued to Shiori's side, obsessively scribbling the contents of the lecture into his trusty notebook. Rurii went back and forth freely between the two groups, wobbling as usual with joy and excitement.

“I brought a number of recipes for Storydian dishes that utilize soy sauce and miso,” said Shiori. “All the soy sauce recipes are favorites among adventurers, so I think it’s safe to say that people in other Storydian regions will also enjoy them. That said, I haven’t really served any of my miso recipes, so I want to get everyone’s opinions and further develop them.”

“Very good,” said Yae. “Miso is often criticized for being little more than rotten beans. At least with soy sauce, we’ve been able to secure buyers in fishing communities.”

In areas by the sea, where fish sauce was a part of the local culture, soy sauce had also been accepted without much resistance. However, people’s aversion to miso was a much higher wall to overcome.

“Fermented produce is often very polarizing,” said Shiori. “I love cheese and butter, but they weren’t around in my great-grandmother’s generation, and so she couldn’t get used to them. She said they tasted and felt like soap.”

Fermented produce was always regionally unique. When it came to the people who’d grown up with it, it was simply a part of them and their life—it was the food that made them. This was why Shiori was saddened by the thought of people criticizing such produce especially harshly.

“I understand why some might not enjoy such produce,” said Yae, “but it is not easy to endure the words they use to express their distaste.”

“I know the feeling,” said Dennis.

“It’s the worst,” added Shiori.

All three of them hailed from places with foreign cultures, and cringed together in shared sympathy at the thought.

“Well then,” said Shiori. “Shall we begin? We’ll start with a soy-sauce-based dish. I think it’s best to heat soy sauce together with butter or with wine—or both at the same time. Many people have an aversion to it when it’s used on its own.”

“Ah, yes,” remarked Dennis. “That combination of soy sauce with butter and wine was a hit at our banquet. Several people mentioned that if it hadn’t been a formal event, they would have eaten the last of the sauce with their bread.”

It made Shiori happy to hear that the soy sauce recipe hadn't detracted from the unique flavors of the game meat dish Dennis was talking about, and that even the fine-dining nobility had enjoyed it.

"The old man...er, the head chef couldn't believe such a sauce comprised just three ingredients. Of course, being that it was a banquet, he added his own little flourishes too."

Though Dennis was being particularly complimentary in his speech, it was nonetheless true to say that Shiori's sauce had received the recognition of the higher culinary world.

"By the way, what was the game meat you served?" asked Shiori.

"Venison and duck," replied Dennis. "The head chef said the sauce would go well with red meat."

"Ah, red meat..." said Yae, intrigued.

Hearing this, Shiori took out some thinly sliced red meat from the stock of ingredients she'd brought, and fried it lightly with some salt and pepper. She moved it to a plate once it was cooked and quickly simmered some red wine and soy sauce in the frying pan, still sizzling with fat from the meat. Finally, she added a little butter, to give the sauce both fragrance and gloss.

The aroma of soy sauce drifted through the cafeteria, and Alec and the chatting adventurers raised their heads as it reached their noses. The scent gripped them, whetting their appetites. Shiori intended to have them all taste test it later, but for the time being she went on with her explanation.

"In terms of ratios, I'd say you should use about one part soy sauce, three parts wine, and one part butter. That's the standard, but you can tinker with it to your liking."

Shiori poured some of the freshly made sauce over the red meat she'd brought, then offered it on a fork to Yae, who first brought her face close to take in the scent.

"My..." she uttered. "Such richness and depth..."

She took the fork and put the meat in her mouth.

“Oh... I see...” she said, chewing the meat thoroughly before swallowing it. “So it’s *not* a soy sauce soup, but it is similar. I have gotten used to foreign cuisine, but many of my traveling companions still don’t like the scent of foreign herbs and butter. This, however, is more subtle—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it tastes more like home.”

To put it another way, by mixing the soy sauce with Storydian ingredients and condiments, the unique flavors of the Mizuho ingredients could be made more palatable.

“A little soy sauce and butter, and perhaps some white wine, is good for simple seafood dishes,” said Shiori. “It’s not unlike a meunière sauce or a sake-steamed dish.”

In Torisval, the leading ingredient for fish cuisine was the Tris salmon. Shiori put a little salt, pepper, and flour over some slices of the fish, then fried it together with some fruit oil. She dropped some butter over the top and let it melt and then, to finish things off, she quickly poured soy sauce over it evenly.

“Butter and soy sauce char quite easily,” she explained, “so the key is to add them last. If you’re worried about your sauce ending up burned, you can take the fish out before you add the soy sauce. Then you can make the sauce with the leftover fat and pour it on once you’re done—this way, you’re less likely to ruin the whole dish.”

White wine could be used to steam clams and oysters, with soy sauce and butter to wrap things up. Yae found the idea very intriguing.

“I’d only been thinking about how to spread soy sauce throughout the lands of the kingdom, but this might also be a way to bring butter to the people of Mizuho,” she remarked.

It had been twenty years since Mizuho opened its borders, and many within it still lived as they always had. It was only the wealthy that were slowly getting used to foreign ingredients, condiments, and sauces. That said, it still wasn’t easy to introduce foreign recipes unaltered, and chefs were split about the idea of using foreign recipes and ingredients.

“In the past, my brother brought back some butter, and his chef placed the entire thing in a soup he was making, thinking it a kind of foreign tofu,” said

Yae. “Even now, that mess of a day still comes up as a topic of conversation.”

The chef had placed a whole stick of butter in the pot, turning his miso soup into a fatty and foul-smelling mess. It had been completely inedible, of course, and even cleaning the pot afterwards had been an ordeal in and of itself.

“Oh dear...” was all Shiori could utter in response.

And yet, she knew that if the chef had been more careful with the amount, that the butter miso soup would have been delicious—experience had taught her that butter and miso worked well together, and Shiori told Yae as such.

“Miso butter, you say?” asked Yae.

“Yes. A little butter in some miso soup gives it a rich depth and flavor. I recommend it for soups with root vegetables and meat. Just bear in mind that because the scent of the stock and the miso are particularly strong in miso soup, it puts some people off.”

In Shiori’s home world, the growing popularity of Japanese cuisine and healthy eating had brought with it an increase in the number of people who enjoyed miso soup worldwide. Here, however, it was still very much an unknown ingredient. Even Alec, who lived with Shiori and had grown accustomed to miso, still couldn’t finish a bowl of miso soup unless it had some butter in it.

As an experiment, Shiori made a little potato miso soup with some stock she had boiled and dried herself, and added to it a teaspoon of butter. The cafeteria filled with the rich scents of both ingredients.

“Miso-based hot pot cuisine is also very delicious with a little butter,” said Shiori.

“I see...” said Yae, tasting the soup and nodding to herself a few times. “It’s not bad when used as a little flavor enhancement. I like it.”

Dennis, however, wasn’t as enamored.

“Erm... This fishy, bean-like smell... The scent is very much that of fermented produce,” he said.

Shiori distributed some of the soup around to Alec and the other chatting

adventurers, and the opinions were evenly split. Alec, who was very used to Eastern cuisine, drank the whole thing down—he liked both miso soup and butter. Annelie and Shonosuke both took to the flavor, enjoying the unique mix of ingredients. On the other hand, Clemens and Nadia, like Dennis, didn't really enjoy it.

"As you can see, miso as a main ingredient is quite polarizing," said Shiori, "so using it as a minor flavor enhancement might be best. Personally, I like it as a dressing or a dip, but for Storydians, I recommend using it as flavoring in potage and stews."

In a clear soup, the muddy look of miso was off-putting for some, but in a thicker, potage-like soup, it was far less noticeable. To demonstrate, Shiori whipped up a quick potage—a go-to speedy dish for her—and used miso instead of salt to flavor it. The miso she used this time had been part of Yae's apology gift—it was a smooth white miso with a strong sweetness to it.

"This is...delicious," remarked Dennis, who initially approached the dish with some hesitation. "There's none of the strong scent from earlier, and there's such a depth of flavor."

"It's a foreign dish, and yet there's something of the flavor of home in it," said Yae. "This is the power of making a dish more palatable through the use of much-loved ingredients. I'm certain that other Easterners living across the kingdom would also enjoy dishes like this."

"You can also add a touch of yuzu salt and pepper to give a soup or a stew some extra flavor," said Shiori.

"Oh, I see. Like adding shichimi spices to miso soup. Interesting."

"I like adding it to skewered meats," said Shiori. "That's what I did back home, so I was so delighted to find it in the package you gave me."

"That makes me very happy. That alone makes it worth the effort... Hm. This is very good."

Dennis, next to Yae, also tasted some of the yuzu-salted soup and meat, and then dropped into thought.

"You can bet we're going to add *this* to our order list," he muttered as he

scribbled in his notebook.

“In Mizuho, we already use such flavoring for soups and meats, so perhaps this may even sell as it is,” said Yae.

“Yes,” said Shiori. “I already use chili powder quite freely, so yuzu...ah, yes. In Storydia, citrus fruits are quite a prized ingredient. With that in mind, the wealthier of the nation’s citizens will probably enjoy yuzu just as much.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” said Dennis, understanding finally what yuzu was. “We can only get things like coffee, chocolate, and citrus fruits from the south on rare occasions. Importing and exporting from the region is often quite troublesome, apparently. That, and there are only a few shops that stock such goods. I daresay that anything that uses citrus fruits as an ingredient will be quite valuable.”

Whenever a tea party or banquet featured orangettes—sugar-soaked slices of orange coated in chocolate—it was the talk of the noble social scene.

“It’s not like we live in the Age of Exploration anymore, where even black pepper was a rarity... I never imagined something like this could have such worth...”

Yuzu could not be produced in the same quantity as soy sauce and miso, so Yae believed it was necessary to think carefully about how best to sell it.

As Yae and Dennis talked about their homes and cultures, Shiori whipped up dishes based on what they were talking about. While Yae tried making a dish of her own with Shiori talking her through the process, Dennis scribbled silently in his notebook before letting out a long sigh.

“I must say...your depth of intelligence is truly remarkable,” he said. “You’re like a hardened war veteran when it comes to your experience and knowledge of recipes and ingredients. If you were to tell me that you’d traveled the world as a professional chef, I wouldn’t be in the least bit surprised.”

“Erm, a hardened war veteran...?”

Shiori wasn’t sure that such an intense and rough descriptor was befitting of a woman, so she had to chuckle.

“But you *are*,” implored Dennis. “There are vanishingly few who so fully understand the recipes of different locations. Until now, I’ve only seen chefs that cook one or the other—Storydian or Eastern cuisine. And yet you know even Imperial and far-southern recipes, no?”

“Oh, um...” muttered Shiori hesitantly. For a moment her lips pursed, but then she broke into a smile. “Where I lived, there was great interest in food, and there were restaurants from all across the world, which encouraged people to experiment. In that sense, I wasn’t very special at all.”

Japanese, Chinese, Italian, French—the list went on. Many could make dishes from three or four different cultures, even when they weren’t actually professional chefs themselves. And this repertoire of recipes was much more expansive for those with a keen interest in cooking.

Dennis’s eyes—the color of forget-me-nots—went wide with surprise at Shiori’s explanation.

“But you can’t make such things without access to the necessary ingredients, no? Why, if people could make foreign cuisine as though it were any other ordinary dish, that would mean that such ingredients were freely and easily available. It sounds like a kind of paradise.”

With just a tiny sliver of information, Dennis’s mind had quickly absorbed the finer details, leading him to this conclusion. Shiori was once again reminded of how careful she had to be. Perhaps Dennis’s reaction was par for the course for people like him, who worked as aides for well-established noble families.

“I suppose you’re right,” said Shiori. “It was a kind of food paradise. A multicultural paradise, I think you could call it. There were many foreigners who learned our language so they could read Japanese books.”

Dennis fell into a stunned, shocked silence, at the end of which he could only sigh.

“I would very much love for you to tell me all about it someday,” he said.

Though he was being indirect, Dennis’s question was clear—*will you tell me at some point?* Shiori looked down at her feet for the briefest of moments, then smiled up at him.

“And I will,” she replied. “I still need to get my own heart in order before I can open up about it, but...I’d like to tell you about it too.”

Shiori had no intention of opening up to the whole world about her past, and there was no need for her to do so either. But Dennis was among the people who had accepted her, and he was a friend who told her he trusted her, regardless of her past and true identity. Shiori wanted, someday, for such people to know who she was.

She turned at that moment, and caught Alec’s gaze as he looked over at her. In his dark magenta eyes was the same kindness that he always turned upon her.

3

Night began to fall over Torisval, and magical lanterns lit up as the cafeteria started to grow dim. Shiori’s dishes were on a table along with practice dishes made by her “students,” Yae and Dennis. From the glass window of the door to the cafeteria, several adventurers drawn over by the delicious scents were peeking in, gazing wistfully at the dishes.

“Well, we’ve certainly passed the aroma test,” said Yae with a satisfied grin. “But I must admit, you’re quite good with your hands, Dennis. I was surprised.”

The man himself had said that he wasn’t capable of much more than heating up canned food or otherwise simple stir-fry dishes, but he’d done a fine job with his practice dish. He’d been practicing campsite cuisine in his free time, which was likely a sign that he had simply always enjoyed cooking.

“Er, actually,” he said, his gaze growing distant, “my mother wasn’t much of a cook. When she followed the recipes for a simple soup it was fine, but she was the daughter of nobility, so outside of that, well...my father and I often helped her out. That said, it was always for simple meals.”

“Oh, erm, I see.”

The fact that he couldn’t even find the words to describe his own mother’s attempts at cooking meant that they could only imagine what it had been like. And perhaps those experiences had shaped the way he worked now.

Dennis had made stir-fried mussels with soy sauce and butter and a simple salad with a miso cream dip, both of which looked delicious. Alec and Shonosuke were both very fidgety, and clearly ready for the taste testing to start as soon as possible.

Around the time that all the food was prepared and readied, Zack joined them, having finished his work for the day. The cafeteria thus became not just a taste testing session, but an impromptu dinner party.

“Thank you for being so accommodating, Zack,” said Annelie, “though I apologize for taking up a space that your adventurers use to relax...”

Shiori would have been fine holding the class at her new home, but Annelie had politely declined—it felt to her like she would be barging into Shiori’s home with uninvited guests.

“Well...it’s just a half a day, so it ain’t a big deal,” said Zack with a grin. “And anyway, we can expect the margravine’s patronage in the future, yes?”

“Absolutely. We’ve already started working with the Lovner branch again, and we intend to work more closely with the Adventurers’ Guild from now on.”

In the past, rumors had been spread through noble circles about Dennis’s father—rumors that had destroyed his reputation. And not only had they been spread by a Lovner branch family, it was Dennis’s own grandfather behind it all. Annelie had been just a teenager, and far, far younger than the usual age of a family lord, and she had accepted the old man’s story without question—for many years, he had served the family well in his role as baron. This was a mistake on Annelie’s part and, as a result, the rumors had disseminated throughout the land as the truth.

Though in actuality, the story behind Dennis’s father’s death was a simple cliffside accident, as it traveled from person to person throughout the lands, it became that of a sordid affair with a local adventurer which led to a double suicide. Dennis was made to feel ashamed of his own father, and the local Adventurers’ Guild stopped receiving work from the Lovner family. Though the guild was supported by a customer base of renowned artists, completely losing contact with the Lovner family itself had been quite the blow. On top of that, the actual reason for the Lovner family’s decision was then hidden from the

guild by Dennis's grandfather.

"It was a family problem, but it caused a great nuisance for many outside of it. I've visited people as necessary to make apologies, but...I've been told to stay clear of social events for a time."

Dennis cringed a little as he explained this, softly patting his trusty notebook—evidence of a habit that his father had long ago recommended he take up. After the death of his father, and while believing the lies that had spread, Dennis's thinking had grown distorted by a hatred for adventurers and immigrants—as his father's supposed lover was said to be a woman from the southern regions—and on more than a few occasions, his attitude had disrupted Lovner family business meetings.

Fortunately, most accepted his apologies generously—accepting his attitude as an example of teenage folly—but others outright refused his attempts to make amends. When Dennis visited the home of a woman he had disrespected—who, by that time, had passed away—her husband had turned him away at the door, saying, "This is what it truly means to hurt someone. I trust you know better now, but rebuilding trust is far from an easy task. You must work very hard for it."

"The truth is, I can work as hard as I want and still never earn that trust back," said Dennis. "Words, once spoken, can echo for an eternity, and the things I said to that woman clearly remained with her like scars. All I can do now is ensure that I don't sully the Lovner name any further."

Dennis had even gone to the Lovner domain branch of the Adventurers' Guild to apologize in person. The old baron himself had already visited to apologize—by order of Annelie herself—and while the guild master was stunned to see Dennis, he nonetheless accepted the apology with good grace, even going so far as to treat Dennis as though he had been a victim in all of this.

"That said, I think a large part of the reason many have forgiven me is due to my position as Annie's fiancé. So I can't rest on my laurels... I have to work even harder."

"I see... Well, we're all rooting for you," said Shiori. "But don't let it weigh you down. Take your time."

As she spoke, her eyes flashed towards Alec, who looked confused by her attention.

“Why did you make a point of looking at me when you said that?” he asked.

“Because he’s not the only one I’m worried about.”

Everyone seemed to read the mood between the two of them, and wry grins filled the room.

“In any case, there’s a whole host of jobs that only adventurers are capable of,” said Annelie. “There are lots of art-specific requests that only the Lovner guild can handle, and when it comes to going somewhere dangerous like Silveria Tower, the Tris guild is who I’ll turn to—they’ve got the nation’s only housekeeping mage, after all. So I’ll be calling on you in the future, I’m sure of it.”

Annelie took Shiori’s hand, and Shiori nodded.

“Well then,” said Yae, seeing that the conversation was wrapping up, “let’s enjoy all this food before it gets cold, shall we?”

And so the taste-testing banquet began.

The soy-sauce-based dishes were all popular, but it seemed that the miso dishes would need a little more tinkering—while everyone welcomed the depth of flavor that miso brought to the potage soup and the stew, the unique flavors of the sauces, dips, and simmered miso were too much for some.

“This bean stuff,” said Zack. “It kind of lingers on the tongue, and the aftertaste is a bit much for me.”

“I like the texture and flavor of this dipping sauce,” remarked Nadia, “but not so much the simmered miso, which has a coarser texture.”

“I see,” said Shiori, thinking their opinions to be representative of ordinary Storydians. “I guess that for Storydian food, it’s probably best to crush the miso finely or strain it to remove the bean-like mouthfeel. Unfortunately, if people have to do that every time, they might think of foreign condiments as annoying to deal with.”

“I have to agree,” said Dennis. “I don’t mind it in the potage, but for sauces it

might be best to use a miso with a smoother mouthfeel. I want something as simple to use as the soy sauce."

"Hm... In which case, we'll put off trying to sell the western bean miso and the barley miso," said Yae. "Perhaps the white miso from the capital and Shinatobe's select sake will be a better match."

"I see where you're coming from," said Shiori. "Red miso is delicious, but it's also an acquired taste."

"I'm sorry, but it really doesn't work for me. The taste is so astringent, and it lingers on the tongue..." said Dennis.

"That astringent taste is why many like it, but admittedly, even in Mizuho, people are often split on it," acknowledged Yae.

While the three cooks talked about the food, Rurii whipped around and snapped up whatever people didn't want to eat—it seemed there was nothing the slime didn't like.

Once the official taste testing was done, everyone gravitated towards their preferred dishes. All the soy sauce cuisine was eaten at a healthy pace, but the miso cuisine ended up on fewer plates. Still, Shiori made a mental note to herself that all of it was still within the realm of being palatable at campsites.

"This meat and miso pâté is great," said Zack. "It'd go great with some liquor."

"Zack..." muttered Clemens. "Being a bit greedy, don't you think? Save some for the rest of us."

"That's rich coming from you, Clemens. I saw you with that yuzu salt and pepper. It's like you're not eating anything but the skewers."

"This miso cream pasta is delectable," said Annelie. "It's got depth and a firm saltiness. I never liked it very much in the past because the flavor ends up muddied, but I love this."

"Miso really does go well with cream and cheese," added Dennis. "Once they're properly mixed, you don't get any of the strong fermented aroma."

"Yes, that's why it works so well as flavoring," said Shiori. "I whipped up a cheesecake with some miso in it for dessert, so please give it a try."

“I can’t wait!” said Annelie.

“I can’t get enough of this garlic miso butter,” said Shonosuke. “Can I get you to put the leftovers in a bottle for me? I’m happy to pay for it.”

“You just can’t get enough of garlic and butter, can you?” said Yae.

“You’re like a completely different person when you eat, Shonosuke,” said Alec.

“Fry that garlic butter with some rice and it’ll be amazing. I could eat three bowls of just that.”

“Someone’s been having a luxurious couple of days, in terms of food...” muttered Yae.

Shiori enjoyed watching everyone having so much fun sharing opinions as they tried the different dishes. Friends eating delicious food, chatting, smiling, and laughing... It wasn’t anything particularly special, really, and yet when Shiori thought back to the days when even these moments had been lost to her, she realized that here, in this moment, she was happy.

Just two years ago, she had been treated as even less than a housekeeping mage. At first, her party members had enjoyed their meals just as everyone in the cooking class was doing now, but at some point, her days had begun to fill up with chores and errands for the others, and she had taken her meals while cleaning up after her teammates.

Those days, when even eating felt like it took effort, were now like distant memories. Shiori let her gaze wander to the street outside the window, busy with people walking by. She wondered if they, too, had families and warm meals waiting for them at home. Did they have friends they could enjoy their food with?

For a moment, the memory of a particular man flitted to the forefront of Shiori’s mind—the last remaining survivor of her former party. He was needy and always somewhat uneasy, and yet Shiori had thought of him as a little brother. These feelings, however, were hers alone, because he’d fallen for her. And though Shiori felt nothing more than familial towards the man, he’d treated her as though she were already his lover and, as a result, that was what

the rest of the party came to believe.

But in the end, Torre never tried to protect me...

He'd shown hesitation at the idea of abandoning Shiori, but in the end he'd done as he was told, and never tried to help her—her, the most vulnerable member of Akatsuki. He'd claimed to be her lover, and acted as though he was, but he'd stood by and watched silently as she was left to her own devices. He'd muttered only the quietest of apologies. And it was just that word, "sorry," that he'd uttered as he and the rest of the party abandoned her in those dark depths.

That was all he was. All he was capable of.

I wonder if he's eating properly...

Shiori had heard rumors that upon moving elsewhere, Torre had been expelled from the guild branch for some kind of trouble, and was now just barely scraping by. Still, Shiori did not wish death upon him. There had not been enough proof after the incident for Torre or any of the others to be taken in by the knights, but she wanted him to live an upright and honest life, wherever he ended up. It was enough for Shiori that she never, ever, saw Torre again.

All she knew when it came to Ranvald was that he had been fired from the guild and had returned home. She had been fearful that he might one day return with vengeance in mind, but Zack had assured her that she was safe, and that she would never see him ever again. Ranvald was a noble, and though he had escaped falling into the custody of the knights, his family name and reputation among the nobility had been tarnished.

"He got his due judgment in exchange for his freedom," Zack had said.

Shiori still couldn't forgive the man for all that he had done, but if Ranvald had received a harsh punishment to the extent that he would never commit the same crime again, then Shiori felt she could ask for no more. She prayed only that this would never again happen—that nobody would ever have to go through what she had in the past.

"Shiori. You okay?" asked Alec, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Shiori realized then that she'd stopped eating entirely.

“Oh, erm...just a little lost in thought,” she replied.

“Just a little?”

“Could you see it on my face?”

“Well, let’s just say I knew they weren’t pleasant thoughts,” he said, his gaze sympathetic. “If talking about it will help you feel better, I’m always here to listen. Don’t feel like you have to hold it in.”

“Thanks. But, um... I was also thinking about how happy I am. How lucky I am to be able to enjoy meals like this with everyone.”

A warm meal together with the people you held dear. Such a thing was so very priceless, and by no means something that was simple to acquire. Shiori had come to truly understand this over the last few years.

Her old partners and guild master had willingly abandoned this very thing for their crimes, perhaps believing that money and reputation were far greater prizes than such simple joys. Shiori told Alec this—she did not think that striving for such goals was a bad thing per se, but neither did she think that they should ever come at the cost of someone else’s happiness.

“Shiori...” Alec muttered, his face growing worried as he pulled her gently towards himself. “Money, reputation, fame... Many are enamored by such things. And I don’t think they’re necessarily bad either. But if you have to make sacrifices for them, those sacrifices should never affect anyone other than yourself. Whatever pride you feel after having sacrificed others in pursuit of your goals will always be hollow.”

“Yes...” Shiori replied quietly.

“You have worked so hard to raise yourself up, and that hard work taught you how very precious these moments of happiness are. That makes you priceless to me.”

“Alec...”

In this way, Alec and Shiori were alike. They knew the pain of losing that happiness, and so they understood what it truly meant to now have it—they had put in the work to regain it, and understood how invaluable it was.

“I never want to see Torre or Ranvald again,” said Shiori, “but I hope that perhaps, someday, both will understand the joy of having warm food in good company. That’s how I feel now.”

Alec was shocked. He thought to say something, but held back and instead looked around at their friends, then out the window. He let out a short sigh, and though he smiled, Shiori couldn’t help noticing that there was something pained in it.

“Yes,” he said simply, “let’s hope they do.”

Shiori couldn’t work out the meaning to Alec’s pained smile, but she knew from the warmth of his hand on her shoulder that the happiness they shared was genuine. The gaze from his dark magenta eyes was gentle, and there was depth to them as they narrowed into his smile.

I just...want to kiss him right now.

As soon as the thought hit her, Shiori became aware of Zack deliberately clearing his throat. She looked up and saw a subtle, almost unreadable expression on his face.

“We’ll continue this at home,” said Alec.

“Yes...” agreed Shiori.

The couple shared a chuckle just as Dennis peeked into the oven.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but I dare say this is about ready, no?”

“Oh, I almost forgot!” said Shiori.

The gratin she’d placed in the oven would burn if she didn’t see to it, so Shiori hurriedly ran over while Dennis watched on with a slightly worried grimace.

She opened the oven to reveal a deliciously toasted gratin, the sound of it bubbling a delight for the ears. The scent of white sauce and Tris salmon wafted through the air, and Dennis let out an awed sigh.

“Wow,” uttered Shiori. “It looks fantastic. Thanks for reminding me.”

“Er, actually, I just adore gratin,” admitted Dennis. “I haven’t been able to keep my mind off it.”

Shiori couldn't help but laugh. Dennis's reason for having called out to her surprised her.

"My father used to make it often," continued Dennis. "I doubt it was the proper way to make it, but I loved the way he always put something new in it."

A simple gratin was, even now, a popular homemade Storydian cuisine. Like local soups, it was something that reminded people of their mother's home-cooked meals. In Dennis's case, his adventurer father often liked to make it with mushrooms and game meat.

"I see," remarked Shiori. "In that case, I'll give you a *slightly* bigger portion. I'll do it very subtly."

"Oh my," replied Dennis. "I'd be indebted to you. And yes, your subtlety would be much appreciated."

The two of them giggled as they returned to the table with the plate of gratin, while everyone looked at it with great curiosity.

"I made this with our leftover ingredients," said Shiori. "It's a gratin with Tris salmon and mushrooms. For flavoring, I've used some miso."

Everyone brightened at the sight of the extra dish, and Shiori went about doling out servings. As promised, she safely—and subtly—delivered a slightly larger portion to Dennis.

The gratin was a mix of lightly salted meat and fish in white sauce, with onions fried in garlic butter. In Storydia, it was most common to make Tris salmon the main focus of a gratin, while in the Lovner domain, it was game meat. In the Enqvist domain, it was schoner clams, and in locations by the coast it was herring and sardines. It was a common meal that differed by locale, and fortunately it was one that Easterners enjoyed too.

"Hm..." murmured Shonosuke. "The garlic butter shines in this dish. Amazing."

"I can't help but think that you'll eat anything as long as it has those two ingredients in it..." sighed Yae, watching Shonosuke as he happily devoured his gratin.

Alec ate his portion slowly, and remarked, “This tastes slightly different from usual.”

“That’s probably because I used miso in place of salt,” said Shiori.

“So is that why the flavor feels more pronounced?”

“I think so. Salt is rather subtle, but miso has a stronger impact.”

“I see... I feel like this would go wonderfully with some white wine,” said Clemens, listening to their conversation.

He then took out some bottles of wine from his bag, while Alec, for some unknown reason, stared at him in shock.

“Clemens, don’t you dare tell me you brought what I think you did...” he uttered.

Clemens had apparently been known to indulge in liquor with names that Alec could only describe as cursed. Having almost been made to drink some of the cursed liquor himself, Alec was now on edge.

“All that’s behind me now,” said Clemens with a wry chuckle, going on to introduce what he’d brought. “This is Nordlander vanskap. I think it’s appropriate.”

Vanskap was a white wine made in the Nordlander region, and it had its own unique story. The Nordlander region once had its fields completely ruined by an outbreak of carrion crawlers, which had put not just its harvest but all of its wine production at risk. A rival region—which produced the same type of wine—had been generous enough to send them some seedlings. The harvest of grapes that resulted from this gift were made into a wine called “vanskap,” which meant “friendship.”



“My... What a wonderful gesture, Sir Clemens,” said Yae, who enjoyed the

wine’s sweet aroma with a smile.

Clemens was famous for his unrivaled love of alcohol, and was known to carry a few small bottles of different wines with him at all times. For jobs in which he accompanied the client, he would often bring a selection that encouraged conversation.

“All the same, I can’t believe you tried to serve me something so ominous and cursed...” muttered Alec under his breath.

A sly smile crept onto Clemens’s face in reply—it was clearly an in-joke for the two of them, and the two of them alone.

“Well, then, to friendship,” said Clemens, raising his glass.

Alec remained somewhat unconvinced, but took his own glass with a wry grin.

“The guy’s slick, I’ll give him that,” he said.

“To new connections, and the friendships they bring,” said Clemens. “Cheers.”

Everyone raised their glasses. It was cold outside, yet here in the guild cafeteria everyone was filled with the warmth of spring, and there were smiles all around. Shiori, too, took a sip from her glass of vanskap and prayed that the connections that produced these smiles would continue long, long into the future.

4

Everyone cleaned the dishes from the table, and dessert was served. While it was being placed in front of everyone, Nadia lifted her cup of tea and sipped it with an elegant grace.

“I see,” she said softly, picking up where their conversation had left off. “In which case, you and I are quite alike, Miss Yae.”

As the taste testing session had drawn to its conclusion, the conversation had shifted from food to topics more personal. Talk eventually turned to the nations of the East and the current state of Mizuho, and it was the session’s guest of honor, Yae, who did most of the talking. Everyone asked questions about what they were curious about, but all of them were careful not to say anything rude.

“Ah, you too, Miss Nadia?” replied Yae.

Yae had just explained to them all that she was born the daughter of a minor regional lord. However, when Mizuho opened its borders, its former class system had been abolished in favor of a new continental class system. As a result, many domains were broken up due to political reform, and a great number of families lost the lands they once governed—Yae’s among them.

“Had my family done nothing, I would have ended up as just another concubine for a nobleman. I would have spent my life giving birth to his heir, or otherwise living not unlike a beautiful, ornamental flower. When the old system was abolished to make way for a new one, my family lost both our domain and our rank—we had no choice but to scramble to find a new way of life. However, losing what authority we had also meant losing prospective marriage partners, and we were very much at our wit’s end...”

Fortunately, Yae’s father had a knack for business, and was able to form a trading company together with his retainers—his trading success in that venture had then paved the family’s path to the present day. Then, when Yae’s own language and negotiation skills were recognized, she had been awarded the responsibility of her present job.

“Until then, I had lived my life solely for the purposes of marrying and giving

birth to the next generation of our family. This new way of life was thus one of many surprises and new discoveries. It was often challenging, but I am proud of my work. It makes me feel alive. As for you and your place of birth, Miss Nadia...?"

"Well, where to start?" said Nadia, smiling, though the light of the magical lanterns reflected the slight hint of tears in her eyes. "I was born in the former kingdom of Litoanya, but an uprising transformed it into another place entirely. I, too, was a daughter of a modest noble family, but we lost everything."

Litoanya was once known for its textile craftsmanship, but it had been brought to its end by the failings of its tyrannical last king. It had been a peaceful place—the citizens lived by working the fertile lands and forests, raising produce and livestock and creating textiles. Their lifestyle was neither rich nor luxurious, but it was by no means one of poverty either.

Unfortunately, the king was not satisfied—he desired a strong and affluent state. He pushed policies that would grow Litoanya into a more powerful nation, including immediate military expansion and mandatory conscription, while gathering support through the promise of rank and riches. When he clamped down hard on freedom of speech, the situation only got worse. The citizens saw a second coming of the Dolgast Empire, and it did not take long before they rose up against their oppressor.

Unfortunately, the ire of the people was directed at *all* of its upper classes, and the entire nobility came under attack for siding with the oppressive king, even though many had not allied with him at all. The confused rage of the Litoanyan citizenry was proof of just how repressive and cruel their king had been—they were so blinded by their anger that they did not even realize the mistake they were making. In fact, it wasn't until several years after the uprising that the truth was revealed—the king had in fact forced his own retainers to follow his plans of reform by threatening the lives of their people.

In any case, the uprising resulted in a great many nobles losing their titles and land, and being forced out of Litoanya. Most had sensed the unease in the air and fled before the uprising, or at the very least sent their children to other nations under the cover of studying abroad or joining the families of their marriage partners. Unfortunately, neither of these were options for Nadia.

“I *did* have a fiancé outside the country, but he passed away before our engagement was officially announced. To make matters worse, the uprising began almost immediately after his passing. I wanted nothing more than to find a way out of Litoanya to take part in his funeral, but it was impossible. It was not until some ten years later that I could finally visit his grave.”

“Nadia...” uttered Shiori.

The former nation of Litoanya had come to its end around twenty-five years ago. At the time of the uprising, Nadia would have been in her early teens. Not only had she lost the one she’d pledged her future to at a most sensitive age, but just as suddenly, she’d lost her home entirely. The pain of it all must have been excruciating.

Alec, Clemens, and Zack had all known Nadia for years now, and clearly had a deeper understanding of what she had been through—Alec closed his eyes, while Zack and Clemens both looked down at the floor. Just like Shiori, Nadia had lost her home and could never return to it. Perhaps her deep kindness and care towards Shiori in the early days, and the loneliness that Shiori sometimes felt in her gaze, were because Nadia saw in Shiori an echo of her own past.

The world was in a time of upheaval. The agricultural revolutions that had started in the northern part of the Alphandis Continent brought with them great political and societal reform. Smaller, weaker nations were consumed by those more powerful, and the borders of nations around the world were constantly changing. Though Litoanya and Mizuho both still existed as nation-states, they and many countries like them could not avoid the grand reformation sweeping the world.

In other words, the circumstances that Nadia and Yae had found themselves in were by no means rare or unusual.

“There’s no need for such gloom,” said Nadia, sensing the heavy mood in the air, and flashing her bewitching smile. “I have been through my share of hardships, yes, but I am not at all unhappy with the life I live now. My magic allows me to work, and I do not struggle to get by. My former fiancé may be gone, but my friends from that time still remain. All of us made our way here to Storydia one way or another, so I still see them. I am fortunate to have many

wonderful friends.”

Though she spoke these words quite easily, Nadia’s path to her current life had been one of hills and valleys. Nevertheless, the smile on her face when she spoke of her happiness now was in every way genuine.

Clemens moved a hand quietly towards Nadia, who was sitting to his left, and though Shiori’s view of it was blocked by the table, she saw her older sister smile gently and glance in his direction—a sign that he had sent her a kindly message with his touch.

Perhaps it was just one friend supporting another, or perhaps there was something deeper to it—either way, there was an affectionate air between them.

As there is for us too.

Alec, too, moved subtly like Clemens had, and linked his hand with Shiori’s. As he squeezed, she felt his warmth, and this time, a blue feeler crept up to join their shared moment.

We’ve been through so much, but we’ve found our happiness.

Shiori had her dearest lover, her irreplaceable blue friend, a big brother she could always rely on, and the warm kindness of her friends. All of them were symbols of her happiness.

Within moments, a relaxed air returned to the cafeteria, which was filled with the sound of cutlery and tea cups. Zack looked down at his slice of cheesecake in wonder.

“You know, this ain’t half bad,” he said. He had never been much for sweets and desserts, but he seemed to like this. “The seasoning’s got just the right saltiness to it.”

Clemens, another who wasn’t particularly fond of sweets, felt the same.

Shiori had baked a cheesecake with a little miso for flavoring, and made vanilla ice cream with a soy-sugar syrup. The flavor highlight of both dishes was their slight saltiness.

Alec, who had always been a fan of sweets, adored both of them, and Shiori

couldn’t help but smile at how happy he looked indulging in them.

“If cake like this was put out together with tea, I’d happily eat it,” said Clemens. “Sometimes clients will put out sweets smothered with cream and jam, and it’s rude to just leave them untouched...”

“Yeah...” agreed Zack.

When noble and wealthy clientele put out tea and snacks, they were often sweet to the point of being sickly—serving especially sugary sweets to guests was a show of wealth that had begun when the country was not so affluent. It was still quite common among older clientele, and always something of an ordeal for Zack and Clemens.

“That said, there’s a strong trend among the elderly to avoid such sickly treats themselves,” said Annelie. “But you of course want to serve them something they’ll enjoy, in which case this ice cream and cake would be perfect for such a party. The flavors are rich, but not too heavy. Quite elegant, really.”

“I’ve written down all the recipes,” said Dennis. “I’ll pass them to the chef, and perhaps we can try serving them at our next tea party?”

“Oh, good idea. Please make preparations as soon as we’re home.”

“As you wish.”

Clearly, the Lovners were earnest in their decision to make Eastern ingredients a part of their lifestyle. However, it was a certainty that their own chef would tinker with and revise the recipes somewhat, and as an instructor, Shiori couldn’t help feeling a touch nervous about this.

Nevertheless, she enjoyed how lively Annelie and Dennis were as they tasted the two desserts. Yae and Shonosuke, too, wrote in their own notebooks in what must have been the Mizuho script and talked between themselves. They were both serious and excited—likely because they were discussing future sales plans. Just how big things would get, Shiori did not know, but she was happy and relieved to have been helpful.

“Turned out great, don’t you think?” whispered Alec.

“You really think so?”

“Yep. You intend to live here for the rest of your days, right?”

“Yes, that’s what I want. At least, if I am allowed to do so.”

Alec shot her a sympathetic smile. He knew that she was talking about obtaining the king’s permission, but all the same, he gave her a light pat on the back.

“Don’t you worry about that,” he said. “Nobody doubts that you’re very special, but your foreign status does come with a few disadvantages. That’s the very reason it’s a good idea to keep making inroads and connections with people who recognize your abilities. I know that fame and riches don’t really interest you, but there’s no harm in making yourself a base of powerful allies who can help you as necessary. That’s what you’re doing now.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Even if Shiori’s record of achievements as an adventurer was impressive, on the face of things, she was still an Easterner without any known relatives, and her place of origin was unknown. In this sense, her standing was vague and uncertain. Alec may have fled the royal family, but he was still officially a member of it, and Shiori knew that staying with him would be no simple task. She was certain that he had thought about their future already, but they had yet to discuss it in detail. All the same, she had hope for the future—he had promised to stay with her, protect her, and to one day make her his wife.

“Let’s talk soon,” he said, “about our future.”

“Okay.”

Shiori had made a decision—she would work hard to ensure that, no matter what future Alec wanted to pursue, she could be there by his side. It was her intent to carve a path in which she did not have to rely on him to live their life together.

“A base of support...” she muttered.

Until now, Shiori had simply thrown herself into her work as the sole housekeeping mage at the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. But in just four years, she’d made strong connections with wonderful people, and it was through those connections that new relationships had bloomed. Shiori’s web of connections

now stretched as far as the Eastern nations. She had been alone for so long, but finally she was reaching out and connecting with the wider world.

This is how people live and get by...

People connected with each other to carve out lives for themselves, and with this thought in mind, Shiori could understand the importance of creating a base of allies, as Alec had mentioned. This was what Alec and Zack had done upon leaving their homes. Nadia, too, had had to do the same when she wa driven from her home. And Shiori had to assume that things were no different for Clemens.

“I’ll do my best,” Shiori said.

“Little by little.”

The two adventurers shared a smile.

“I must say, this country is so very open-minded. This city in particular has been very welcoming.”

Yae spoke the words as she ate the last of her cheesecake, which she lovingly and slowly savored. She took a sip of her tea before going on.

“At our stall in Dima, none looked down on us for being foreigners. Rather, everyone was very kind. Then there’s the multicultural nature of this city in general—it allows people who have just met to spend time together like this, eating and chatting. It’s far from common.”

Yae had been around the world and seen much on her travels. As a woman, and as a person from a nation that had only recently opened its borders to the world, there was no doubt that she had experienced racial discrimination and other hardships.

“Well, these lands were once the domain of the Empire,” said Dennis, “and many here still have ties to that past. Both nobles and regular citizens alike have a connection to foreign nations, whether pronounced or subtle. Perhaps that’s part of the reason for it.”

“Tris is a city with a particularly large number of immigrants,” said Alec, “and the Adventurers’ Guild brings together a wide variety of people. Those who

know hard times themselves are more likely to be welcoming of others."

"You said it," added Zack. "We adventurers don't just accept anyone, mind you. But if you put your nose down and you work hard, you're one of us. We look after our friends, and we value them highly. When they're in trouble, we help them, and we don't hold back when someone harms one of our own. That's how we get by."

To protect and to be protected. It was this sense of mutual assurance that made the Tris Adventurers' Guild feel so safe. And it had been true when Shiori had endured the Akatsuki incident too. Everyone saw her as one of their own, and so they had acted to help free her once they became aware she was in trouble. They had tried to protect her the moment they'd realized something was amiss.

And that's why I don't want any of them to feel bad about it anymore.

All of her companions carried some guilt. They wished that they had realized sooner. But until recently, if she'd told them that she was grateful and that they didn't have to worry about her anymore, none of them would have believed her. Now, however, they'd know her feelings to be true. She had met the love of her life, Alec, and her joy meant that her friends could all smile from the bottom of their hearts.

And now, I can tell them all not to worry.

And she would. She would tell them that she was happy now thanks to them, and that she had learned how to live again thanks to their support. She would let them know that they were the reason she was here now.

5

Everyone who took part in the taste testing helped clean up, and by the time they finished, a curtain of night had fallen over Tris. They all went to the entrance of the guild, where a carriage was waiting for the clients. Before getting in, Yae took Shiori's hand.

"We've had a wonderful time. Truly priceless," she said with a smile. "You have my thanks, Shiori, along with my apologies."

“No, the pleasure was mine,” replied Shiori. “I learned so much. Thank you.”

Yae’s visit to Storydia had been an opportunity to form new bonds with new friends. Shonosuke, too, had promised to send Alec a textbook on Eastern swordsmanship—a gesture that symbolized the creation of yet more connections.

The Yobai Trading Company’s visit had also been a trigger of sorts—the visit had brought Shiori’s final secret to light, and at last, she had revealed her true identity to some of those who were closest to her. Alec and Zack had accepted her truth, and in doing so, their relationships had deepened even further.

They say you never know what fate’s going to throw at you, and boy, are they right...

Shiori smiled at the thought as she looked back on her recent memories, and then Annelie took her hands.

“Will you be staying in Tris for a little while?” asked Shiori.

“We’d love nothing more, but unfortunately we’re set to return to the Lovner domain the day after tomorrow.”

Annelie explained that with their business talks concluded, she and Dennis were scheduled to have dinner with the margrave. Shiori couldn’t help but be taken off guard when she heard the title of a man that she herself would soon have to meet. At the same time, she knew that the Lovners were on good terms with the margrave and his family, and that their dinner had nothing to do with her own personal circumstances.

“Oh, I just remembered,” said Annelie. “I do apologize for the timing, but I’d like you to keep what I’m about to tell you a secret. You see, my business talks here were with the archbishop. The Tris Cathedral asked me to do a new altar painting of their saint—the holy woman. I’d like to use you as my model.”

“WHA-HUH?!”

Shiori was so shocked by the request that she couldn’t even stop herself from sounding like a complete fool. She was taken so off guard, in fact, that the pitch of her voice almost went falsetto, causing the slime at her feet to shiver in surprise.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry it’s such a surprise,” said Annelie, who suddenly burst into laughter.

Annelie couldn’t help it, however—Shiori’s shock was so out of character.

“I say ‘model,’ but I won’t need you to visit our manor or anything like that,” explained Annelie. “The archbishop has told me what they’re looking for in their image, and I want to use you because you’re a perfect fit. That said, I won’t just draw you as you are—rather, I’ll take the feel of your person. All the same, I wanted to ask because some might still realize that you’re the model I used. I didn’t want to do it without your permission.”

“Oh... So that’s *what* you mean... I was so shocked,” uttered Shiori.

But there was still no getting around the fact that Annelie wanted to use her as a model for a painting commissioned by none other than the Tris Cathedral—a place well known all across the nation, and even outside of it. The painting was to be kept in the Cathedral’s house of worship and brought out only on special occasions, but it would nonetheless be seen by many and, as long as the Cathedral existed, it would be a part of its history in perpetuity. Shiori couldn’t help but be shocked by it all—she was just one of Tris’s commoners, and yet Annelie wanted to use her likeness in a way that anyone who knew her would likely know straightaway that she had been Annelie’s model.

“What an amazing opportunity,” said Alec, who—in contrast to Shiori—seemed very pleased. “You’re about to have your portrait drawn by a young artist at their peak. And in the likeness of the Cathedral’s saint, no less.”

“Come on now, Alec, no need to lay it on so thick...” muttered Zack.

Shiori wasn’t sure what to say—on the one hand was her strangely excited lover, and on the other was her older brother, looking more than a little exasperated. Alec pulled Shiori in close.

“Remember our talk of building up a base of support? Just think of it like that,” he whispered. “You’ve worked hard for yourself, and this is just one way for the results of that to manifest. Not so bad when you put it all in perspective. And she’s not going to draw you exactly as you are, anyway. No need to be overly cautious.”

“Yes. That’s true, isn’t it?”

“I do apologize if it’s all too much to take,” said Annelie.

“No, not at all,” replied Shiori.

Shiori knew it was a bad habit of hers to make everything more serious than it had to be, and she smiled apologetically at her friend.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t surprised, but...I’m also happy about it. Thank you, Annie.”

Annelie was extremely serious about her work, and so Shiori knew that Annelie would have come to the decision after considerable thought. If an artist with such high standards had selected her for such an important piece, it truly was something to be happy about.

“Oh, I’m so relieved,” said Annelie. “You’re exactly what they want, and I couldn’t get your image out of my head from the moment we talked about it. I’m so happy, Shiori. Thank you ever so much.”

“No, thank *you* for thinking of me.”

“I’ll come back to see you soon. You treated us to a true feast today, and it was so very delicious. I do hope that Eastern spices and sauces will be easier to come by in the future. I’ll do my utmost to support you.”

“Thanks. But it’s already easier now that I don’t have to buy soy sauce by the barrel. Thank you, Annie, and of course, you too, Yae—there’s so much I’m looking forward to cooking.”

The conversation was beginning to devolve into a back-and-forth of constant thanks, so Alec and Dennis kindly stepped in to bring things to a close. Annelie and Yae both boarded their carriage, and Shiori saw them off with Alec, Zack, and the others.

Everyone who gathered at the Guild had come to the city for their own unique reasons, and with their own unique pasts—they differed in terms of age, gender, rank, and country of birth. Shiori, who had come from an entirely different world, let her head fall onto Alec’s chest, glad for the miracle that had threaded through their individual fates and brought them all together.

“I hate to spoil the mood,” said Zack, once Clemens and Nadia had left, and Shiori and Alec were about to follow suit, “but I got word from the margrave. Said he wants to see you in the evening, three days from now.”

Shiori knew that the meeting was coming, but to have it confirmed still left her shivering with an anxiety she could not put into words.

The time has come.

As she stood there, tense with fear and worry, Alec pulled her close.

Part 2: The Coming of Spring

Chapter 1: A Prince in Prayer and a Healing Celestial Maiden

1

Passing travelers couldn't help but look at the carriage and its curious foreign emblem as it continued steadily over the snowy roads. The carriage had come from the distant lands of the east, and was emblazoned with the emblem of the Yobai Trading Company. Within the comfortable warmth of its interior, Yae let out a sigh, her face filled with awe and admiration.

"They are all truly people with good hearts," she said. "And here I was ready to whisk her away at a moment's notice."

"Our worries were for naught," said Shonosuke, who nodded before giving his honest impression. "But she is truly peculiar. Extremely humble, and yet...her knowledge and skills are extraordinary."

Though parts of her common heritage slipped through in her bearing, Shiori could have easily passed for a samurai's daughter with a little coaching. On top of that, though she claimed to be a girl of no particular rank at all, she was a woman of great intelligence and talent. Above all, her knowledge and skills in the realm of cuisine were prodigious.

"I can understand one being skilled in both the cuisines of Mizuho and Storydia, but all the same..." Shonosuke muttered.

Shiori had never left the lands of Storydia, but she was well versed in the cuisine of the continent's major nations, as well as that of the eastern nations and even southern Ishaan cuisine—the only word for this was astounding. Her understanding of the unique qualities of Storydian and Eastern cuisine allowed her to make suggestions on the fly for dishes that both nations' citizens would enjoy, and this alone was a skill far beyond that of any ordinary person. Even the members of the Yobai Trading Company, who had traveled the world trading at its various cities, were incapable of such a thing.

“She seems to know the tastes and flavors of the entire world,” he remarked. “She’s practically a celestial being.”

Shiori had prodigious talents and a charming beauty, but she wasn’t arrogant in the slightest. It was almost as if she were above such things. She did not strike one as a kidnapped and displaced nobleman’s daughter, but more like one that had arrived as if from the heavens themselves.

“A pity, in some ways,” said Yae with a slight grimace. “Perhaps we should have been more forceful about taking her with us.”

Yae knew that a woman like Shiori would work wonders for their trading company, and that, perhaps someday, she might even wed one of Yae’s still-single older brothers.

“No,” she said suddenly, reconsidering her words, “it would have been a worthless endeavor.”

“Lady Yae...” uttered Shonosuke.

He knew what his master was thinking, and lowered his gaze. Yae let out a wry chuckle.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said. “I am not going to be so foolish as to take her from a place of such peace. She has a good person by her side, does she not?”

Shiori and Alec were the very portrait of a loving couple. Alec looked upon Shiori with eyes that were passionate, caring, and kind. Such a gaze could not be faked—it was the gaze of a man who cared for his lover from the bottom of his heart.

“And he is powerful too.”

Shonosuke slid his sword about halfway from its scabbard. The blade was the color of evening shadows, and a small part of it had been chipped away. Alec had put his whole body into a strike that had come far faster than Shonosuke had expected. The blow had been like lightning, and Shonosuke had been unable to evade it. His only choice had been to defend head-on.

Alec had humbly said himself that in a battle of life and death, he would have

lost, but Shonosuke was not so certain. Alec had also said that he could not have won if he had not noticed the opening that Shonosuke left, but Shonosuke had never intended to let any weakness show. More to the point, no ordinary swordsman would have even noticed such a tiny, fleeting change in their opponent. That Alec *had* noticed was enough to assure Shonosuke that Alec was the more powerful of them.

"With a man like that by her side," said Shonosuke, "her safety is guaranteed."

It was exceedingly rare for people to travel to foreign countries and make strong bonds. Most fell ill as they tried to make a living in places they were unused to, or otherwise fell into poverty.

Since taking over from her brother, Yae had rescued more than fifty of her people. Shiori was supposed to have been one more, but she had been blessed with strong bonds and good people around her. In all likelihood, it was her strength of character and her extraordinary skills that had saved her.

"Perhaps when we next hear from them, it will be for their marriage."

"You believe so too?" asked Yae.

"I do."

Yae nodded, but she had a feeling that it would perhaps be some years before such a thing came to pass. It was clear in his actions that Alec wanted nothing more than to start a family, but Yae sensed that he was wrapped up in something rather large. She sensed the same from the celestial maiden, also. Nonetheless, she felt certain that they would find their way to a life together.

"We must keep in contact with them both," said Yae, "to ensure that we are invited to their wedding."

She did not like the idea of this being the end of their relationship. They had promised to meet again, and Yae intended to make good on her word.

Shonosuke rolled up the canvas of their carriage and peeked outside. It was almost entirely white from the falling snow, with only a few passing travelers and fences dotting the otherwise dark, black landscape. Far off, past the landscape of falling snow, however, Yae felt she could just make out the white

steeple of the Tris Cathedral.

2

Evening, that same night...

Just as the snowy landscape was being dyed in the deep blue of night, a single carriage arrived at the front gates of the margrave's residence. The knight on duty spoke a few words to the driver, then lifted the curtains covering the windows to confirm the identities of the passengers. With the check complete, he gave a salute and opened the gates.

The carriage passed smoothly along the road through the front gardens and came to a stop at the entrance to the margrave's home. Zack alighted first, then turned back and grimaced slightly at the sight of Shiori, still inside the carriage —for she was a portrait of anxiety.

With Alec and Rurii by her side, Shiori mustered up her courage and stepped out from the carriage. The margrave's old manor house was lit up by magic lanterns, and its ash-gray walls and thick watchtowers made her think of a fortress, as though the place had been designed specifically to keep invaders out.

While Shiori stood in awe of the pressure the margrave's home exuded, a butler came out to greet them with a gentle smile. It seemed he was already acquainted with Alec and Zack, and he invited them inside.

"His Excellency is waiting for you," he said.

The butler led them through quiet, empty halls—the residents of the manor were sleeping, and most of the servants had already retired to their rooms. Swords, spears, and shields adorned the walls, making for an intimidating sight —none of them were ornamental, and anyone could see from a glance that they had all been put to use in real battle. Zack explained that the manor acted as a weapon storehouse for the margrave's private forces. This was not uncommon among families with a respect for military tactics, and Zack's own family—also renowned for their valor in battle—decorated their home in a similar fashion.

"Oh... Is that so...?" uttered Shiori.

The interior was a mix of decoration and practicality that reflected a world in which weapons were far from simply ornamental—the sight impressed upon Shiori just how different this place was from the world in which she had been raised.

At the end of the corridor, the butler came to a stop in front of the door to a recreation room.

“Your guests have arrived,” he announced.

The butler did not state aloud exactly *who* had arrived, and this heightened the sense that the meeting they were about to have was confidential. A deep voice replied, asking the butler to show them in, and Zack reached out and opened the door without a hint of hesitation, as though he had done so a hundred times before.

The walls of the recreation room were adorned with items collected by the margrave’s family, and the stately shelving was home to a variety of different board games, masterfully assembled by craftsmen of renown. The room was a collection of the margrave’s hobbies and interests, and the Torisval Margrave himself—the gray-haired Kristoffer Osbring—was relaxed on the sofa in the center of the room. He put his glass on the table before him and stood to greet them with an outstretched hand.

“Thank you for coming,” he said in a friendly tone. “Come in, come in.”

Zack had been friends with the margrave since they were both young, and they spoke to each other with a familiar ease. They swapped pleasantries in such a way that Shiori could tell that they met fairly often. The margrave then turned his attention to Alec.

“It’s been a long time,” he said. “We couldn’t say much more than a few words to each other at the Nativity Festival, so...I’m very glad you’re here.”

The margrave’s voice was filled with warmth, care, and above all, concern for Alec. Alec replied with a bashful smile, and shook the margrave’s hand.

“Kris,” he said. “I am glad to see you looking well.”

Alec then seemed to notice something about the margrave, and let his gaze fall.

“Don’t say it,” said the margrave, cringing. “I’ve already heard more than enough from Bleyzac.”

Alec had always remembered Kristoffer as a muscular man without a hint of fat on him, but the margrave now showed hints of an expanding belly.

“I’m still training without fail,” Kristoffer said, “but I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Some of Kristoffer’s work had been taken up by his sons and, as a result, the margrave himself spent a considerable amount of his day doing desk work. He regretted the lack of exercise in his current schedule, and claimed to be watching his diet and attending fewer banquets. He also said that he was trying to do more exercise, but this was likely because he noticed Alec’s gaze hovering on the wine bottle sitting over on the table.

“Er, tonight’s a special occasion,” the margrave added. “It’s not often I get to catch up like this with old friends.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Alec. “For a moment there, I thought my gift would go to waste.”

He handed Kristoffer a bottle of wine, and the man let out a sigh of awe as he took in the bottle’s label.

“A ’94 Aoustrille,” he uttered. “An amazing find, I must say. I’ve heard there’s very little of it left now.”

“Apparently true only for the area around the royal capital,” said Alec. “Newer vintages are of course rare, but countryside cellars still stock bottles from ’95 and older. But I suppose that when the stage show hits the regional scene, it really will become a rare find.”

Last year, the romantic tale of a knight and a witch hit the stage to rave reviews among both the nobility and the common citizenry. The theme song was so popular that the songstress had even made it part of her setlist for the Nativity Festival performance. Aoustrille happened to be the drink of choice for the main character and his best friend in the story, and this had helped the brand surge in popularity. As a result, Aoustrille was now very difficult to find.

However, Alec had gotten hold of a banner year vintage thanks to the help of

Clemens, who'd taken Alec to one of his favorite haunts. When Alec mentioned that he was looking for a gift for a friend, the Aoustrille had been the recommendation. That the barkeep was willing to dig into his private stockpile was likely because Clemens was such a good customer, and the barkeep probably wanted things to stay that way.

"He must be one heck of a good customer..." Alec had told Shiori at the time.

Now, however, Alec was clearly a little awkward in the margrave's company. He'd made Kristoffer's acquaintance when he was still in his teens, and likely felt bad for how long it had been since he'd last seen the man.

"I'm sorry," Alec said. "I know I should have come to see you sooner, but..."

Kristoffer shook his head and smiled.

"Think nothing of it. I'm just glad to see you in good health. I don't need anything more. I heard that you fell ill in autumn, and I'm simply relieved to see you looking better than I expected."

"So you knew, then?"

Alec glanced to his side, and now it was Zack's turn to look a little awkward. Though he avoided Alec's gaze, Alec already knew that it was either him or one of Olivier's men who had informed Kristoffer of the incident.

"I was unwell, it's true, but thanks to the care I received, I was back to full health in just a few days."

"Miss Shiori, I presume?"

Having suddenly become the subject of conversation, Shiori felt quite nervous and fidgety. Kristoffer flashed her a warmhearted smile, but there was the slightest touch of caution and apprehension in his expression. This was, of course, to be expected—the margrave was tasked with the responsibility of national security—but the thought nonetheless frightened Shiori. She felt herself shrink at the idea that the smallest mistake here might result in her execution.

Shiori bowed meekly. She knew that there was most likely a more appropriate way to greet a person of such importance, but Alec had told her not to stand on

ceremony, and to act as she always did. He had told her that Kristoffer would understand, and that he wanted to see Shiori as she was.

“Thank you for coming,” said the margrave.

He took Shiori’s hand and placed the lightest of kisses on her fingers. Then he raised his head and looked a little worried at the expression he saw on Shiori’s face.

“Please don’t be frightened,” he said. “You look like you’re on death row.”

The words were meant to lighten the tension she felt, but Shiori had no idea how to respond to the margrave’s joke. Zack, unable to simply stand by and watch, opted to come to her rescue.

“Anyone’d be scared to have your mean mug looking down on them,” he said.

“What am I supposed to do? I was born with this face...” said Kristoffer.

Shiori could tell by their banter that the two men were close. Alec, on the other hand, was aloof in a manner she wasn’t used to. It seemed he saw Kristoffer as an older brother to whom he owed a great debt, and this kept him from feeling truly comfortable in the man’s company.

“I don’t care who I have to face down,” said Alec, whispering into Shiori’s ear. “I meant it when I said that I would always protect you. You can relax.”

His reassuring hand on her shoulder reinforced his message. He’d stayed close to her this entire time, and had only let her go for just a moment, when Kristoffer had taken her hand.

Kristoffer glanced at Alec, Shiori, and their slime companion, then relaxed into an easy smile and gestured to the sofas.

“Please, have a seat,” he said. “We all know I will have to ask some questions, given my rank and position, but I bear you no ill will, Shiori, and I don’t intend you any harm.”

Once everyone was seated, Kristoffer rang a bell on the table. A moment later, the butler appeared pushing an exquisitely designed tea cart. The rounded counter upon it had an elegant gold trim, and was decorated with delicately inlaid wild roses. The column connecting the counter to the shelves

below was carved with a vine-like design. A glance was enough to tell that it was a truly elegant piece of work.

Shiori couldn't help but think back to the small kitchen island she had once owned back in Japan. It was of a Swedish design that she had always been enamored by, and she loved simply looking at all her favorite dishes and sweets on its various levels.

I'd only just bought it before I came here...

Everything Shiori had once owned—old, new, and favorites alike—was gone, and she would not touch any of it again. And no matter how comfortable she ever became with this world, her memories of the past would also prickle at her heart. She knew that the sense of nostalgia would never leave her, but the pain of loss was softening as she slowly made the best of her life here.

That, Shiori felt, was the nature of memories.

"Rare, is it?" asked Kristoffer, once the butler had served everyone tea and put out drinks. It seemed he'd noticed Shiori's gaze lingering on the tea cart as the butler pushed it away.

"Oh, erm... It just reminded me of a similar cart I once owned at home. It made me a touch nostalgic."

"Home, you say," said Kristoffer. "You mean the place where you grew up?"

"Yes. Though it was just a mass-produced piece of kitchenware. Nothing as stunning or elegant as your tea cart."

"But you nonetheless felt something of an attachment to it. Did you live with your family?"

"No, I lived on my own. My place of work was located quite far from where my parents lived."

And so it began—an interrogation, under the guise of conversation.

"And if I remember correctly, your family included your two parents and...a sibling?" asked Kristoffer.

"Yes, my older brother. He's married now, and lives with his wife and child together with my parents."

“Ah, so your brother has a son...or is it a daughter? Oh, er, excuse me if I’m being rude. My wife is always on my back about how thoughtless I can be with these things.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I understand that for people in positions of authority, an heir is of great importance to the family... However, yes. It would be true to say that having a daughter put considerable strain on my sister-in-law. My parents were both overjoyed to have a granddaughter, and they dote on her, but there were indeed relatives and elderly friends who questioned the idea of my brother having only a daughter.”

“Children, whether boys or girls, are a gift and a blessing; they are not something we choose or craft.”

Kristoffer gestured for everyone to drink as they talked. Shiori turned down the offer of alcohol, and instead accepted a mix of fruit syrup and soda water. Kristoffer watched her as she drank, as though he were looking for something. Alec didn’t like this, but Shiori didn’t notice his expression as she sipped from her glass, which contained winter peach syrup from the margrave’s own garden.

“This is delicious,” she remarked, as the light scent of peaches filled her mouth.

Kristoffer couldn’t help but break into a smile.

“I am very glad to hear it,” he said. “It’s one of my wife’s favorites. She says it’s a symbol of first love.”

“First love...?”

“When she was single, my wife attended an evening ball. An heir from a distinguished and high-ranking family hounded her relentlessly with offers of wine, and when she couldn’t get rid of him, a certain young man swooped in to save her with the offer of something different—a glass of winter peach syrup.”

The man had not introduced himself to her at the time—as if deliberately electing not to—but it was clear by the way he held himself that he was a distinguished and powerful noble. Kristoffer’s wife was an illegitimate child, and she had not been dressed in a particularly expensive dress that night, and yet

the man had shown her a great kindness. It was only later that she realized that the young man was in fact the Torisval Margrave, visiting the ball as part of his inspection duties with the knight corps.

In other words, Kristoffer had just told Shiori the story of how he met his wife.

“How very romantic...” said Shiori, with a cordial smile.

Still, she had to wonder—was this an interrogation, or a chance for the margrave to sing his own praises?

Shiori looked to Alec and Zack for support, but the two men only sipped at their wine, cringing with exasperation. Rurii, meanwhile, poked at and ate the silver boar ham that had been put out, and trembled with supreme satisfaction.

“Kris,” muttered Zack, “you tell that story to anyone who will listen. Will you knock it off already? Nobody has the faintest idea how to respond to it.”

“Oh, come on now,” replied the margrave. “I’m merely reveling in memories of my youth.”

Shiori now understood—it really *was* a chance for the margrave to boast. More to the point, it seemed that he’d told the story so often that it was now essentially tradition. Alec sighed.

“Just sit tight and wait until it’s over,” he whispered.

“And so, that’s how this memorable winter peach syrup became my beloved wife’s drink of choice,” said Kristoffer.

The meeting of the young margrave and the knight’s daughter was a story the couple enjoyed telling even now, and so the margrave asked Shiori if it would be possible to recreate the scene with her illusion magic.

“It would be difficult to cast a full true-to-life recreation of the events, but if you have photographs of the two of you at that age, and some reference materials that will help me get a feel for the ball you attended, I may be able to help.”

“Photographs, you say,” uttered the margrave. “I could provide you with painted portraits, but nothing from when we were young. Photography is prohibited at evening balls and social events, you see.”

“Oh? Is that so?” asked Shiori.

The margrave’s words surprised her. She’d seen photo studios around town, and had assumed that photography was commonplace.

“Hm? Are things different in Japan?” asked Alec.

“What do you mean?” asked Shiori, unable to understand what he was getting at.

“It’s not customary to take pictures of royalty and the nobility,” he explained. “While some will take photographs as personal mementos, photographs clearly showing groups of the nobility are frowned upon. With a single photograph, one can understand everyone’s faces *and* get an accurate picture of where they are.”

“Oh, so it’s a matter of security,” said Shiori.

“That it is. Plus, not all photographers can be trusted to do the right thing.”

Photography was a foreign, imported technology, but reproductions—that is to say, the process of reprinting photographs—was already possible. For the ordinary populace, photographs were far cheaper and faster than portrait paintings, but for the nobility, who occupied positions of authority, hiring an artist for portraits was still far more common. This was largely a means for them to avoid photographs being used for such acts as kidnapping and assassinations. Though the number of such incidents had plummeted in recent times, since assassinations and kidnappings did still take place, such security measures were largely unavoidable.

Even quite recently, news had spread of a baron’s daughter who had been kidnapped in order to interfere with her marriage to a viscount. The girl was unharmed, but the kidnapping of an unmarried baron’s daughter was quite the scandal, and given that a photograph had been an important source of information for the kidnappers, it was no wonder they were considered dangerous.

“I see,” said Shiori. “Where I come from, it’s very common for people of high standing to be photographed. Their weddings are even broadcast live on television.”

“The tele-what?”

“Broadcast...live?”

None of the men could have possibly understood the meaning of the words, but Shiori had spoken them without thinking, perhaps because she felt a certain comfort in being around people who understood her circumstances. Unfortunately, it had only resulted in curious, incredulous gazes.

“Erm... In my world, there’s a technology that allows for objects to be shown in movement. Humans, animals, the wind through the grass, flowing streams or snowy landscapes—all of it can be filmed and recorded, and the technology that displays these moving images is called a television.”

Shiori left out mentioning other similar pieces of technology—smartphones, computers, and tablets, for example—because she didn’t want to overcomplicate her explanation. And besides, her explanation of the television alone was enough to leave the three men in complete shock, their eyes wide.

“Oh...” said Zack.

“Uh...” uttered the margrave.

“A television is capable of showing filmed events as they occur, even when those events are occurring far from the television itself. Well, there is a *slight* time lag, but it’s barely noticeable. This is called a live broadcast. A live broadcast allows for many people in lots of different places to watch the same thing at the same time, so the television is used to show big events as well as convey important information in times of emergency. Festivals, concerts, the weddings of royalty and the famous—these events have all been broadcast live in my home world.”

Knowing that her explanation alone would be difficult to understand, Shiori cast some illusion magic to visually demonstrate.

“Wow...” uttered Alec.

“So you can be at home...and a royal wedding can play out before your eyes...” muttered Kristoffer.

The three men leaned in to watch the illusion magic with keen interest. For a

time, none spoke.

“This technology is unbelievable. Am I right to think, then, that the sight you displayed on the night of the Nativity Festival performance was something you had seen through this same technology?” asked Kristoffer finally.

“Some of it, yes,” replied Shiori, nodding. “The view from above the clouds was something I had seen in a mode of transportation known as an airplane. Everything higher than that, however, was what I had seen on the television.”

“So that means that the space above the clouds was...filmed by somebody, yes? Does that mean that your home world has the means to reach such heights?”

“Yes. In my home world, humans have gone to the moon.”

All at once, the three men’s jaws dropped, and yet again, another silence fell across the room. After a time, Kristoffer looked at Shiori, as if prodding her for more, and so she cast an image of the moon, floating in empty space. It was a place without color, covered in gray and shadow, and past its rough and uneven horizon were the depths of space—a deep, unknowable darkness.

“This...is the moon?” uttered Kristoffer.

“I’d always thought it would be more beautiful...” said Alec.

“It’s a wasteland...” added Zack.

The men were confused, and Shiori could only nod at their responses. Astronomy here had not yet progressed to the level of Shiori’s home world. However, magical engineering had done incredible things in recent years, and Shiori thought that, in time, this world might even surpass her own in terms of what it could achieve.

“There is no air on the moon,” she explained. “The colder parts of it reach a low of more than minus one hundred degrees, and the hotter parts of it are more than a hundred degrees. It is an unforgiving environment, and no ordinary creature is capable of making the place home.”

The image Shiori cast of the moon was one of rocks, sand, and massive craters. But on its horizon, a blue planet began to appear. It was an image

filmed by one of Japan's orbiting lunar satellites, of the famed "Earthrise." There were deep seas of blue, forests of green which felt like the breath of life, and the white of clouds that brought with them the blessing of rain—it was Mother Earth, home to all variety of living creatures.

Alec, Zack, and Kristoffer all seemed to forget to breathe as they gazed in awe at the image. To some extent or another, all of them were having trouble comprehending everything they were being told—especially Kristoffer, who was talking to her properly for the very first time—but in the face of the Earthrise, they could do nothing but sigh in admiration.

"It's so...beautiful..." remarked Alec.

"Utterly breathtaking..." said Zack.

The earth was like a priceless jewel on a blanket of black velvet, and the three men were completely entranced by the sight. Rurii, who was of a similar color to the planet, seemed to have some thoughts of its own, which it expressed by wobbling to and fro.

"This is the earth, where we live," said Shiori.

It was a beautiful planet of blue with a belt of white clouds, and beneath those clouds, the shape of an island nation that was Shiori's home—a place that had been indelibly impressed upon her very soul.

"And this..." uttered Shiori, but she paused as she felt her voice tremble.

Alec, Zack, and Kristoffer all turned to her. She had promised herself she wouldn't cry, but she felt on the verge of losing control.

"This island nation," she said, swallowing her near-sobs, "is Japan. My home."

A home she was separated from by the distance of an entire world. A place that Shiori now knew did not exist anywhere in her new home. And yet it remained in her heart. She could do little more now than share it via illusion magic, but it existed. It, and the memories of her life there, were irreplaceable. With Alec's strong, comforting arm wrapped around her, Shiori continued to display an image of the world in which she had once lived.

It was a close-up image of the earth. The clouds passed by, night fell, and the

aurora wavered.

“Is our world as beautiful as this one?” Alec asked.

“I am sure of it,” replied Shiori.

She was certain that when technology developed to the point that the people of this world could reach the moon, they would find a similar beautiful blue sphere waiting for them. As long as it was the same planet, in a different world, there was no doubt.

“I’m certain it’s a beautiful planet, in the same blue as Rurii here,” said Shiori.

The slime trembled with a mixture of pride and joy. And as Shiori’s illusion magic dissipated into the air around them, the tears welling in her eyes began to roll down her cheeks. Nobody spoke. Everyone sat in silence and stared into space, as if wallowing in the remnants of Shiori’s magic.

“If our world, as seen from such astounding heights, is truly as beautiful as the one you have shown us...then it is our duty to ensure it is protected,” uttered Kristoffer.



He stared out the windows and up towards the night sky. The window offered

a view past the garden trees to the lights of Torisval, sparkling under the blue of evening.

“It is such a precious, priceless thing,” Kristoffer continued, “and I want nothing more than to protect it. Just as I want to ensure that you, Shiori, also receive the same protection.”

“Erm... Me?”

Shiori blinked in shock, and the margrave smiled.

“And not just because you are the love of the king’s elder brother,” he said, sipping at his wine. “In the future, we cannot rule out the possibility that some would want you for your technological know-how and your intelligence.”

Shiori was by no means a specialist—she was simply an office worker with an ordinary level of intelligence. She did not think she was in any way special, but the three men saw this sentiment on her face, and they shook their heads.

“Alec and I both know that you’re just an ordinary human being where you come from,” said Zack, “but people *are* going to turn up in the future who think of you as much, much greater than that.”

“He’s right,” said Alec. “Your ‘View of the Deities’ was enough for many to think of you as extraordinary.”

“Oh...”

Things had been peaceful for Shiori since the Nativity Festival, but many reporters had started digging around for more about her immediately after the event. Some of the Tris Cathedral’s own high-ranking officials were also of the opinion that she was a saint, and that she should be brought into the church.

“Then there’s your freeze-dried foods,” said the margrave. “Word is starting to spread among various knight corps stations. I’ve already heard from a number of squadrons that they want to make them a part of rations as soon as they hit the market. Though it may seem like a rather simple technology to you, your freeze-dried foods are going to be revolutionary. And when people discover that you are behind it, some are going to believe that you’re capable of much more too.”

And what would happen if the public were to discover that the “inventor” of freeze-dried food and the caster of the View of the Deities were the very same person? This was what Alec, Zack, and Kristoffer were worried about.

“I apologize for being a little heavy-handed, but I had some of my men watch over you as protection. Oh, and please rest easy—they did not interfere or spy on your private life. They were merely in place to ensure your protection. After the Nativity Festival, I also put some pressure on the newspapers to ensure that coverage was limited.”

Kristoffer had been working behind the scenes already, and it dawned on Shiori that had she not been close to Alec and Zack, she may well have already been kidnapped or taken hostage. The thought sent a shiver down her spine. It was just like in the past—Shiori had been approached by an unscrupulous business looking to draw customers in with an “Eastern princess,” but she’d had no way of knowing initially what their intentions were. Back then, it was Zack who had saved her. Shiori breathed a sigh of relief at the memory.

“Oh, I... I see,” said Shiori. “Thank you.”

Kristoffer’s expression changed very subtly at her reaction. Perhaps it was just her imagination, but he looked a touch embarrassed.

“It was the least I could do,” said the margrave. “After all, I owe you a debt of sorts.”

“Oh?”

“It’s nothing. Pay it no mind.”

“Um... Okay.”

Shiori was still curious, but Alec, who seemed to know the circumstances, told her not to worry about it.

“Speaking of,” said Kristoffer, “your freeze-dried foods are far too valuable to be confined to just the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. I’ve tried a few myself, and they’re better than just mere rations—I’d love some on hand as a midnight snack. Have you ever considered mass-producing them?”

“When the heck did you...?” uttered Alec.

It seemed that even Alec didn't know about this, which meant that there were some things that were hidden even from the king's elder brother.

"I prepare the freeze-dried foods on my own, and I'm only capable of making enough for my fellow adventurers once a week," said Shiori. "The magical machinery I use is only small-scale, but...the demand keeps increasing. I feel bad having to turn away adventurers that want them."

"Indeed," said Kristoffer, with a knowing smile. "How about this, then? We leave the mass production to a well-known and well-established producer, and obscure the details regarding the inventor?"

It was Kristoffer's opinion that, given the future Alec wanted, Shiori's talents be kept hidden until her position was more firmly established. Alec and Zack both agreed with this idea.

This had already been the case with the Nativity Festival. Thanks to the archbishop being a man of great kindness—and one who thought the idea of essentially taking Shiori hostage as an infringement of both basic morals and the Cathedral's teachings—she had been able to avoid public scrutiny. The Cathedral had done this by spreading the use of Shiori's narrated pictures throughout its staff and turning the View of the Deities into an annual event. This had the effect of making Shiori's actions appear far more ordinary.

"We're also getting inquiries at the guild from knights about your freeze-dried foods," said Zack. "Them *and* other guilds. Some of the Tris adventurers have been sharing the freeze-dried foods around, and that's only raised the demand."

"Oh... I had no idea," said Shiori. "What should we do? I'm happy that people like them, but..."

In the beginning, Shiori had only started making her freeze-dried foods to make her work easier and lessen the amount of things she had to carry. Selling them as portable foods had come as a result of her companions asking for them. Shiori only charged a small fee for the ingredients and the work.

"For now, it's just the adventurers and the knights who are talking about it, but if things keep up..." said Zack.

“Then sooner or later, merchants and wholesalers are going to start taking notice,” said Alec, finishing Zack’s sentence for him.

“Oh, my...” uttered Shiori. “And if a disreputable sort were to catch wind of things, it could mean trouble.”

“Exactly.”

Some people might want Shiori’s intelligence and technical know-how so badly they’d be willing to use more...forceful measures. The fact that she was a woman, and one without any family, made her an even easier mark. Everyone in the room felt they needed to take action before anything like that could happen.

“Keeping everyone quiet is far too difficult, but if the Tris Adventurers’ Guild is willing to help us out, then...that just means we need to find a manufacturer. Preferably a place that’s well known and doesn’t mind dealing with things of a confidential nature.”

But did such a manufacturer exist? Shiori was worried, but Alec and Zack already had something in mind.

“I know just the place,” said Zack.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Alec.

The two men nodded at one another.

“Enandel Trading Company,” said Alec.

Enandel was the forerunner in the field of adventuring goods, and they had a huge store in Torisval along with some twenty or thirty other outlets all across Storydia. It was an offshoot of Holewa and Co., which was the oldest merchant company in the entire nation, and had many clients among both royalty and the nobility.

“What?!” exclaimed Shiori.

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was one of the biggest names in the industry. Kristoffer, however, grinned—he already knew the particulars.

“That’s right. One of your associates has strong connections, doesn’t he?” he said.

“Yes. I’m sure we’ll still have to do some negotiating, but we can trust his family with this. Shiori’s already familiar with him too.”

“I am?” Shiori asked.

“Of course,” said Alec. “Clemens. His younger brother is Endandel Trading Company’s director. His family manages their parent company, Holewa and Co. Clemens’s own ancestors were the founders.”

“Whoa...”

Shiori had of course been shocked to learn of Alec and Zack’s true identities, but she was just as shocked now to realize that one of her own adventuring companions hailed from such an important family. The revelation gave her pause as she considered that Nadia, too, might be a person of importance, given that she’d previously been described as “a childhood friend of Zack’s from a good family.”

“It’s like it only gets more and more shocking...” Shiori uttered.

“Shiori? You okay?” asked Alec.

Shiori saw herself as just another ordinary citizen, and so she felt herself growing faint at the mere thought of the people she spent her time with, and their true identities. Alec panicked, trying to keep her upright while Rurii wobbled and patted her leg.

“Rurii,” she said, looking down at her friend with pleading in her eyes, “you’re not going to someday reveal to me that you’re actually the incarnation of a dragon or a great spirit or the earth goddess, are you?”

Rurii looked up at her—decidedly exasperated in shape—as if to say, *“Heck no. Just your run-of-the-mill slime right here!”* Kristoffer watched their interaction and burst into raucous laughter.

“You know, I felt a little tense about meeting the celestial maiden, given that you’d fallen from the heavens and knew the View of the Deities, but at heart you’re just an ordinary woman, aren’t you? I must admit I’m simply relieved that you’re so honest and commonplace in your bearing.”

“Erm...thank you... Oh, is that the correct response?” asked Shiori, unsure if

she was actually being praised or not.

Kristoffer nodded.

“You knew that you were under watch, didn’t you?” he said.

“Yes. Once I knew that Alec and Zack were people of such high stature, I assumed that was the case.”

“Hm. There’s a lot of confidential details I’m not at liberty to go into, but the sheer timing of your arrival and meeting with Zack was too much of a coincidence for us to just ignore. We put you under observation because we had to know whether you had a motive for getting close to him. However, each and every report I received said the same thing—that you were, in all respects, just an ordinary woman.”

Shiori had, at the time, worked with everything she had to avoid having to work at the red-light district, and to ensure that she could live independently. She acted the way that anyone like her would if they simply wanted to make the best of their situation. On top of that, as she began to build a life for herself, Shiori had distanced herself from Zack, her guarantor. This was of course partly due to the women that didn’t like her being close to him, but it was primarily because Shiori wasn’t comfortable relying on him for food, a place to live, and her everyday expenses.

The fact that Shiori did as much work as she could with trusted female adventurers like Nadia—in order to avoid getting caught up in any further issues related to love and romance—told her observers that she did not have any hidden motives.

“If you’d been stuck to my side and unwilling to leave me, that would’ve been a red flag,” said Zack. “But you did nothing of the sort. You worked hard for yourself, and you did your best to get along with the others.”

“Part of that was because I was bullied by some of the other female adventurers. They made it clear that they didn’t like me being around you and Clemens,” said Shiori. “I spent more time with Nadia because they stopped approaching me when I did.”

Zack grimaced and scratched the back of his red head of hair.

“Ah, well...actually, when Nadia first started teaming up with us, she copped her fair share of nasty comments too. Girls told her they thought it was disgusting for a rookie like her to be so attached to top-ranking adventurers.”

“They said *that*...to Nadia? But weren’t you friends from a long time ago?”

“That didn’t stop them in the slightest. Nadia said something like, ‘We’re just old friends, so there’s no need for hysterics. And besides, if you’ve got the time to whine to me, then how about using it to actually get into the good books of the men you so profess to admire?’ And she said it all with a smile, to boot.”

“Wow. That’s Nadia, all right,” said Shiori.

In the face of someone so beautiful and intimidating, the girls would have had little choice but to simply shut up.

“In any case, if you *did* have any ulterior motives, you would have drawn closer to me instead of pulling away,” said Zack. “But you started living on your own as soon as you could, and once you were working, you didn’t need to rely on me at all. If anything, you left me feeling kind of lonely.”

“Brother...” uttered Shiori.

Still, Zack’s eyes were a clear and bright blue, and filled with kindness. Shiori let out a sigh of relief and faced the margrave once more.

“My thinking was that if I was going to live here, I had to learn what ‘ordinary’ was, and as quickly as I could. My foreign appearance draws attention, and I worried that doing the wrong thing would leave me an outcast. So I didn’t want to stand out, and I didn’t want to draw any antipathy—I just wanted to live an ordinary, peaceful life. I was desperate to just be another part of the fabric of the nation, and I suppose, in a way...that saved me.”

It was Shiori’s hard work, after all, that had assured her observers that she was not a threat.

“If anything, it’s probably just part and parcel of who you are,” said Alec, patting down a loose strand of her hair. “You weren’t arrogant, and you never tried to force your way into things. Instead, you tried to learn the culture and customs here and become a part of it all. It’s admirable, and it’s clear in all the dishes you make too.”

“Oh? It is?”

“It is,” said Alec with a smile. “Your base is Eastern, but you’re good enough to know a number of different foreign dishes too. On expeditions, you almost always prepare Storydian fare. There’s something...yes, something like the taste of home in it. It feels nostalgic. You practiced a lot, didn’t you?”

“I...I did. I knew that everyone would be happy if I served something from home, so I learned recipes from the cafeteria staff and the owner of the general store, and I had them taste my attempts more times than I can count. For soups, I followed recipe books, but I had to be careful about the flavoring to ensure they didn’t turn into my own unique creations.”

Everyone told Shiori they enjoyed her own dishes—like her karaage and her shogayaki—but the soups and stews of home were something different; everyone loved them because they were comforting in the way they brought back the past.

“Your Eastern dishes are amazing, to be sure,” said Alec, “but there’s nothing quite like the food you grew up with. And there you were, a woman of foreign origin, cooking up the dishes of our youth. You were guaranteed to please anyone who still has a place for home in their heart.”

Alec went on to say that for many, food was the core of local culture. And for people who loved their home, there was no greater compliment than Shiori’s actions—she did not reject Storydian culture, but rather tried to accept it and abide by it in her cooking just as much as she did so in her bearing.

“Based on what you’ve told us of your country,” said Kristoffer, “your home is far more advanced than our own. But you don’t look down on us, and you’ve done your utmost to learn about our nation and make yourself a part of it. This is admirable, I think, even if the circumstances you found yourself in were beyond your control.”

The margrave topped up Shiori’s glass before going on.

“Though I must admit, there is still much I want to ask you. I hope you don’t mind.”

Shiori could tell by Alec’s countenance that he wanted Kristoffer to take

things slowly, but Shiori offered a gentle, polite smile.

“Erm, no,” she replied. “I’ll do my best to answer your questions.”

And so, her interrogation dressed up as a casual conversation continued.

I suppose this is how one uncovers things before the person being questioned even realizes it...

Even though he’d already likely gotten information from Alec and Zack, Kristoffer had spent almost no time with Shiori, and so there was likely much he was still skeptical of. What frightened Shiori most was that, even though he held himself in a friendly manner, she did not know what Kristoffer was thinking. Added to this was a layer of anxiety that came from the fact that Shiori had absolutely nothing she could point to as proof of the world she had once called home.

Though there really was no ill will in his questions, all the same, Shiori was very aware of the fact that their conversation was a way for the margrave to poke at the truth of her past. He was, after all, the margrave, a position which was essential to national defense. Each and every question scraped away at Shiori mentally.

He said he doesn’t mean me any harm, but...

Over and over, Shiori couldn’t stop a thought that itched away at the back of her mind—if the margrave held even a single strong suspicion about her, then perhaps she would be spirited away and executed without anyone knowing. Perhaps even Alec would be left completely unaware.

Kristoffer had earned the absolute trust of the royal family, and his character and military feats had made him a much-beloved lord of his people. However, even Shiori—just a regular office lady in her own home world—could feel that there was a near unfathomable colder and more merciless side to him, dedicated completely to the protection of the place he called home. He was not the kind of person you wanted to make your enemy.

When the pressure of it all began to make itself known in Shiori’s features, Alec cut in.

“I think it’s about time for a break...” he said.

“Ah, yes,” replied Kristoffer. “My apologies. This is all so interesting that I completely forgot about the time.”

He sat up from the sofa and leaned forwards, and glanced at Shiori for just a moment as he quietly thought to himself. Then he turned to Alec.

“Would you two mind giving Shiori and I a moment alone?” he asked.

“What?” said Alec.

“Why?” asked Zack, his brow furrowing.

Alec pulled Shiori tighter towards himself, a physical manifestation of his promise to protect her.

“I just have something I want to ask her,” replied the margrave.

“If it’s just a question, then you won’t mind us being here with her,” replied Alec.

“What I’m saying is that it’s a difficult question to ask with the two of you around,” said Kristoffer. “It’s a delicate topic, and look—I’m not telling you to leave the room entirely. All you need to do is stay out of earshot. That said, I don’t mind if Rurii stays here.”

Alec looked down at Shiori.

“It’s okay,” she said. “He said he didn’t mean me any harm, and...he said that to all of us. I’ll be okay.”

Alec hesitated for a moment, but eventually relented and let out a long sigh.

“If I notice *anything* out of sorts, I’m taking her straight home,” he said to Kristoffer.

“I told you, I’m not going to do anything,” said the margrave, who could only manage a wry grin at the realization that both Alec and Zack had sided with the celestial maiden. “Now leave us for a moment, would you?”

The two adventurers begrudgingly walked over to a spot over near the wall. Once he was sure they were out of earshot, Kristoffer cringed slightly at Rurii—the slime’s posture clearly said, *“One wrong move, and I’ll slime you, mister!”*—then looked once more at Shiori.

“I’m sorry, but there is one thing I must ask you, and you alone,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Alec hasn’t yet told me what he intends to do with his future. He hasn’t told you yet either, has he?”

“He hasn’t, no.”

“Now, if he at some point returns to the royal family, there *is* a chance that, depending on how things work out, the two of you might not be able to remain together. I know that Alec is steadfast and resolute in his feelings, but for people in our positions, there is much we face that is about more than just our emotions. You know this, I assume?”

Shiori bit her lip.

“I do, yes.”

“It’s possible that a change in the state of current affairs might result in Alec being made to marry a woman of high rank. It may simply be a noble in a position of authority, or it may be a woman from another nation, but it would not be a stranger who simply washed up on our shores. In order to protect his position, it may become necessary that the two of you separate. You understand that this would be unavoidable, yes?”

“I do.”

“If such a thing were to happen, what would you do? Your intelligence and technical know-how would, without a doubt, be of huge benefit to our nation. Even if you were to be separated from Alec, I’m certain that the king would ensure that you were not inconvenienced in any other way. Though you would no longer be able to spend your life with Alec, the royal family would most certainly be willing to bestow upon you a worthy rank, and introduce you to upstanding marriage partners. Or, if it were your preference, you could continue adventuring without issue. But could you accept such an outcome? And by that, what I mean to say, Shiori, is that you would have no other choice.”

Though Shiori could feel Kristoffer’s probing gaze, it was by no means cruel or uncaring. It was simply serious—in his eyes was the genuine concern he held for

Alec's person. Kristoffer was not worried about Alec in his role as the nation's margrave, but rather he was worried as one individual worries about another—he cared for Alec Dia, the man.

"I will answer you honestly," said Shiori, "but do not get mad at what I am about to say."

"As you wish," said Kristoffer with a nod.

Shiori's hands scrunched into fists as she began to speak.

"I... I have already entrusted Alec with my heart. When I hid myself in the depths of my own shell, it was Alec who saved me and brought me out into the light. He waited patiently by my side, and he stayed there until the walls of ice I'd built around my heart melted. He is very, very important to me, and the idea of having to part with him after giving him my heart, well...it's unbearable."

Shiori paused for a moment and dropped into silence. Kristoffer sat still, waiting for her to go on.

"Many of our fellow adventurers have supported us as we grew closer, and I'm sure they would be enraged on my behalf if Alec were to marry another woman. Some of them would even speak badly of him. But I wouldn't be able to bear such things. I don't want to hear any ire directed at a man so important to me. A man that...was my lover. Even now, there are those that don't look upon me kindly, and perhaps they would gloat and revel in my misfortune. Such a thing would break me, so...even if I was to continue adventuring, I would have to do it somewhere far from Torisval."

Kristoffer nodded.

"I'm sure that, with your skills, you would be successful wherever you went," he said.

"Thank you. But the truth is, I no longer have the energy for such a thing."

"Really? You overcame adversity to live as you do now. I am not lying when I say I've not met another as strong as you are. It is my belief that you are now capable of living on your own. You need not rely on any one man."

"You give me too much credit," said Shiori.

Her gaze dropped to the floor for an instant, but she knew that she was being tested here, and she didn't want to appear disrespectful, so she raised her head and sat upright before going on.

"Since arriving here, I've already had to start over twice," Shiori said. "In just four years, I've had to start from scratch on two separate occasions. The first time was when I arrived in this world—I knew nothing of where I was, and had no possessions. From there, I had to build a new life."

Her family and friends, her savings, her personal belongings—she'd left all of it behind in the world that she'd come from. And because she didn't even understand the local language, none of the knowledge and skills she'd accumulated in Japan did her any good. She was no more useful than a newborn baby. But as a twenty-seven-year-old woman at the time, Shiori would not be afforded the same considerations as a child, which left her scrambling to find a way to live as an adult. As such, she had worked herself to the bone to build a life for herself.

"I'm sure you already know about the second time," continued Shiori. "I was caught up in an incident within my party, an incident in which I lost everything."

At the uttering of the words "an incident," Kristoffer's hands twitched, and his expression twisted into a slight grimace. It was a look of sadness, stemming from feelings of pain and self reproach.

"I felt no different from a corpse, and yet I still lived. And that was where I started over from—crawling back from a place that felt like less than nothing. I was fortunate in that I could recover the earnings that I lost, which meant that I was not in any financial trouble, and yet...given the medical costs and my inability to work for a time, I had little more than a few months worth of security. So I did my best to recover, and my friends welcomed me back into the adventuring fold, but at the same time...after the incident, they all saw me as suddenly fragile—they were unsure how to approach me."

Shiori had not wanted to worry any of them any further. They had all been so good to her—an outsider no different from a newborn baby—and so she had done her utmost to try and convince them that she was okay, and that they no longer needed to worry. And so her friends approached her as they always

had...or at least, they tried to.

However, the incident had made it undeniably hard for them to get along without significant effort, and so their mutual attempts at consideration had only served to twist their relationships into something subtly unnatural. The one who'd repaired the state of these relationships was Alec, who had returned to Tris after a four-year absence.

"Starting over in an entirely foreign environment is a huge undertaking," Shiori said. "But in just two years, I was forced to do it all over again. I have given these last four years everything I have. And if, on top of that, I was to lose the one who saved me and then be told to start over yet again, I just... I could not bear it."

She squeezed the last words out, each one of them trembling. And yet Shiori did her utmost to hold back her tears as she held the margrave's gaze.

"So if, for whatever reason, I must give up on Alec, then I beg of you...please, kill me."

Kristoffer's eyes went wide with shock. Rurii, by Shiori's feet, flinched. But Shiori continued to speak, sharing with the two of them her most honest feelings.

"I will be glad so long as Alec is happy," she said. "But to see him happy with someone else...because I am just an ordinary commoner... I will never be able to rid myself of the thought that I was once his lover. If Alec returns to the royal family, the stories of his romance are sure to spread as rumors. It will be reported in the papers and, so long as I remain in Storydia, I will have to hear of his new life, his new joy, and his new love. But I no longer have the mental fortitude to start over somewhere else."

Kristoffer leaned forward and reached out a hand, but it was stopped in place by an outstretched feeler that said, *"It is not your place to do so."* Kristoffer thus backed down.

"I do not think I can bear that kind of suffering," Shiori said. "So I beg that you end my life in a way that is quiet and peaceful. Tell Alec and my brother, Zack, that I have left for Mizuho. Do that, and I am sure that it will take the weight from my soul, and allow it to return home."

And with those words, tears began to fall from the corners of Shiori's eyes. A moment later, Alec rushed over and pulled her into his arms. With Alec's sharp glare boring directly into him, Kristoffer let out a long and heavy sigh.

"As one of the men looking over and protecting Alec, I needed to know, and I needed to make sure, how you felt," he said. "To me, Alec is not a member of the royal family that I serve—he is a precious and dear friend. I think of him as my younger brother. I do not want to see him hurt again. You are by his side, and I felt it necessary to know exactly who you are. I needed to know and to hear your true feelings, from your own mouth."

Not long after his mother passed away, Alec had been brought into the royal family as an illegitimate son, then found himself embroiled in a battle for succession. During this time, his heart had been worn terribly thin, and then it was ripped to shreds by the woman he loved. In the aftermath of this, it had been Kristoffer who hid the young man so that he could rest and recover, and it was here that the margrave realized the depth of Alec's suffering. Over the course of a few months, Kristoffer had developed a deep affection for Alec.

The truth of the matter was, Kristoffer wanted Alec to be happy, and he did not want to see him put through such suffering again. He did not want to see Alec's heart broken a second time. This, Kristoffer confessed, was the reason he felt compelled to ask the question he did.

"I know how you feel about him, and I know that my question was an awful one for you to have to consider. You have my deepest apologies," he said.

"No... It's okay," replied Shiori, smiling softly as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "But please, keep my answer a secret from these two. I fear it would be...too much for them."

"You have my word," said Kristoffer with a resolute nod.

Alec and Zack, who had no idea what this meant, looked at Shiori and Kristoffer in confusion, but got no answers for their curiosity. Shiori had made this request of Kristoffer knowing that, even if he did not tell Alec and Zack, he would nonetheless report her answer to Alec's younger brother, the king. Shiori was fine with this—though she could never say the same thing in front of Alec or Zack, these were her honest feelings.

“Well then, I apologize for keeping you all so long,” said the margrave. “I hope tonight won’t discourage you from coming by again. I’d love to see you.”



He said the words jokingly as he took Shiori’s hand and helped her to her feet.

She at first thought his words a mere formality, but his gaze surprised her—his eyes were filled with genuine affection.

“I would be delighted if you were to invite me here again,” she replied.

“In which case, I’ll make sure my wife is here next time we meet. She’s aching to see your narrated pictures.”

“Then perhaps you could tell me what stories she enjoys most? I’ll make sure to practice.”

“Really? Well then, I’ll let you know in due time.”

They had spent hours together talking, and the curtain that fell on the evening’s meeting was one of friendship. The margrave most certainly still had his reservations about her, but he had nonetheless accepted Shiori—this was clear in his firm handshake when they parted, and the warmth of his gaze.

And if Kristoffer had accepted Shiori as she was, then she too wanted to provide him with her knowledge and skills if such things were requested of her. It was a way for her to protect herself, yes, but it was also a way for her to display her loyalty to the nation’s margrave.

However, the moment they entered the carriage to go home, it was as if the ropes of tension that bound Shiori had been cut, and she slumped into Alec’s arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, but I must admit I’m a little tired.”

“Just a little, huh?”

Alec knew just as well as Shiori did that she was utterly exhausted, and he let a somewhat troubled smile cross his face. Zack, meanwhile, had questions in his eyes, but he kept them to himself and merely reached out and gave her a gentle pat on the head.

“While I’d love to know what he asked you...you’re not going to tell us, are you?” he said.

“No,” Shiori replied. “It’s far too embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing... Well, that just makes me even more curious. Might have to interrogate Kris myself.”

“Don’t. He just asked about my feelings for Alec.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. And I told him that I love him so much, I couldn’t bear to live without him.”

“Oh. I see.”

In contrast to the blushing, bewildered Alec, Zack sat back and crossed his arms. He looked decidedly grumpy.

“Would you two save that kind of thing for home?” he said. “All these shameless public displays of affection, I tell ya...”

The man went on mumbling to himself while Rurii gave him a few comforting pokes. It was such a ridiculous sight that Alec and Shiori couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

Their carriage left the margrave’s residence and rumbled along quietly through the city. Under the lights of the beautiful streets, they saw a cheerful drunkard being scolded by a grimacing knight on patrol—it was the kind of scene one only saw in times of peace.

And Torisval was just that—a peaceful city. It was filled with kind and generous people, and protected by the margrave. That the margrave himself had accepted Shiori meant also that she was recognized as one of Torisval’s residents, and as the night grew darker still, Shiori quietly basked in the joy of that realization, wrapped in her lover’s arms.

3

Now alone in his recreation room, Kristoffer sipped at the last of his glass of Aoustrille—a wine made famous by the story of a cursed witch saved by her first love, a young knight. On the table in front of him was a glass still half-full of winter peach syrup.

“Alec’s lover...the celestial maiden...” he muttered.

He had known about Shiori from the reports about her. They all described her as intelligent, gentle, and above all, faithful to her lover. Now that he had met her and observed her with his own eyes, Kristoffer knew that those reports had been accurate.

However...

“What lies in the depths of her heart is a most powerful, fearsome thing.”

Kristoffer had described a potential future, and Shiori had shared with him how it made her feel. The fierce emotions that swelled behind her tranquil eyes in that moment were earnest and heartfelt. *Kill me*, she’d said. The words were daunting to even consider, but Shiori had spoken them with complete and utter sincerity. That she was able to maintain her composure while saying such a thing was a testament to her frightening strength of heart.

That calm and yet unyielding part of her was exactly like that of the royal family.

“Now I know why Alec is so attracted to her. She is a good match for him, and she shares some of his own traits.”

Kristoffer still did not know if all of what Shiori had told him could be believed. But after they’d spoken, his impression of her was that she was honest. Or at least, as close to honest as one could be without being able to present proof.

“But I just never imagined that the ideal woman for Alec would be a celestial maiden who arrived from another world entirely...”

The thought troubled Kristoffer’s mind, and he found himself thinking back to

a time almost two decades ago.

Alec had been secretly under the protection of the margrave for about four months after fleeing the royal family. His mind and body were broken, and he had at first spent much of his time in bed. However, the calmer, quieter environment of the margrave's home was good for him, and in time he became able to go riding on horseback. His youth and his strong constitution also aided his recovery.

The doctor had told Kristoffer that Alec should be careful not to overexert himself, but that going outside should be encouraged, if such a thing buoyed his spirits. This was why the two sometimes went horseback riding. When the mood struck, they set out and enjoyed the peaceful countryside scenery, took lunch outside, then returned to the villa before it got too dark. In many ways, these outings had the feel of schooltime excursions.

But on just one occasion, their usual routine was shattered for just a moment. Kristoffer and Alec had passed through a village in which there was a dilapidated old church, and Alec had asked if he could say a prayer. Though the young man was not religious, per se, he was by no means an ardent churchgoer either, and so his request took Kristoffer by surprise. Nevertheless, Kristoffer agreed, and he did not push Alec to explain himself. He assumed that perhaps it was natural for one to want to offer prayer in the aftermath of such physical and mental suffering.

Kristoffer had given the reverend in charge a donation in return for private use of the church, but even then, it was a battered old place in a very small village—it likely would have remained empty either way.

Alec then kneeled before the altar, and the words he spoke drifted to Kristoffer's ears and gripped his heart.

I am so sorry I hurt you.

I am so sorry I left you alone.

I am so sorry that I was not strong enough.

Alec's words were not prayers at all. They were words of repentance.

Kristoffer had assumed that Alec would detest the girl who had abandoned him, just as he assumed that Alec would hate the nobles who had forced him out of the place he'd thought of as home and separated him from his brother.

But in reality, the illegitimate prince blamed himself for what had happened.

Even now, the heartbreaking sight of Alec quietly and earnestly kneeling at that altar was still etched into Kristoffer's heart. Alec had always blamed himself, so even after many long years, his emotional wounds festered.

And the one who finally healed them was the celestial maiden, Shiori Izumi. She had told Kristoffer that Alec had saved her, but it was also true that she had healed his wounds in return. Kristoffer thought of Alec as his brother, and so he saw Shiori as a goddess for what she had achieved. To him, she was a celestial maiden of healing.

"I couldn't be happier for you, Alec," he whispered.

Kristoffer felt grateful for the miracle that was Shiori and Alec's meeting—the two of them would never have met under ordinary circumstances, after all—and congratulated them quietly with these words.

He poured himself another glass of Aoustrille—the beautiful scarlet wine which symbolized the celebration of realized love—and held it up to the nightscape of Torisval out the window.

"She is a truly marvelous woman," Kristoffer said with a smile. "Don't you dare let her go."

Chapter 2: The Coming of Spring

1

By the time the carriage arrived in front of Shiori and Alec's apartment building, it was already well past midnight. A dark curtain of night had fallen, and the lights in almost all the nearby houses were off. The city was wrapped in the quiet of slumber.

The two adventurers and their slime alighted from the carriage, and Zack told them to take the following day off. They bid him farewell, and returned to their home at the top floor of the apartment building. After hours of what had essentially been an interrogation, their home was exactly the warm welcome they needed.

Shiori took a seat on the sofa. She was completely and utterly exhausted. Not long afterwards, Alec passed her a cup of tea he'd just brewed.

"Thanks," she said.

Her expression brightened a little, but her voice still lacked energy. Rurii, who had already begun its pre-bed stretching routine, reached out with a feeler to give Shiori's leg a soothing rub.

"I'm sorry," said Alec. "That wasn't easy for you, wasn't it?"

He put a hand to her cheek. The tears she'd shed in front of Kristoffer were long gone, but a slight redness still lingered around her eyes.

"No, it's okay. I'm tired, but...it was unavoidable. I know how he must have felt. You're very, very important to him," Shiori said with a smile. "And if we stay together, we'll inevitably spend some time with the king, right? I knew Kristoffer would be worried about that, so I was ready for him to ask tough questions. Don't worry—I'm okay."

Shiori had heard about Alec's younger half brother, now the king, on a number of occasions. She knew that his relationship with Alec—between official heir and illegitimate son—was like one of close-knit twins, and that it was

important to him. Furthermore, she knew that they were still in touch, and she understood the risks an individual like her posed to his person.

“Kristoffer had to make sure. He had to be certain I wasn’t simply after your rank or hunting for a connection to the king. When someone tells you they came from another world, well...it’s only natural to be cautious and on guard.”

Shiori had come to this conclusion based on all the bits and pieces of information she’d gathered—what she had heard from Alec, what she had heard from her friends, and records of the royal family that she’d found in a bookshop.

“I can’t believe it. You knew that Kris was going to grill you, but you agreed to meet him anyway?”

Alec was not about to simply hand over the life of the woman he loved, but he knew that there had always been the slim possibility that the margrave would decide it best to dispose of Shiori. Shiori had known this too.

“To be honest, I was so scared,” said Shiori. “But there was no way to run, and besides, I didn’t want to. I thought my only chance was for Kristoffer to see me for who I really am—if he didn’t believe me, then I’d have to face what that meant. I know that being with one of the royal family is no simple thing. Even in my world, when a member of royalty weds a commoner, it is a matter handled very delicately.”

“I see... So your world is technologically advanced, but those kinds of problems still exist.”

“Things like rank and family history prove our lineage and traditions. But there’s also the fact that royalty and commoners think about things very differently, and over here, there is so much that the royal family must protect. I can understand the caution around whether to allow a commoner into a world of such responsibilities. But actually, I prepared myself for this long ago—I had a feeling that you and Zack were people of high standing, and so I assumed that if I ever revealed who I really was, there would be consequences.”

And Shiori knew that “consequences” might mean much more than them simply distancing themselves from her for telling such an outlandish story. She knew that what might have been overlooked if she were simply a commoner or

immigrant might not be viewed the same way if she told them she came from another world. That was why she'd waited until she'd had no choice before opening up.

Shiori knew that the moment she opened up to her lover about her history, she could not avoid revealing the truth about her real home. This would not just change her future as she knew it—it could also be a point at which her life itself might hang in the balance. It was this that Shiori had tried to prepare for, but in the end, she had revealed her past in a way that none of them could have ever expected—and in such a way that she hadn't even been able to consider whether Alec and Zack would accept it.

"I thought that if you didn't accept me, I might be killed," Shiori admitted. "Fortunately, both you and Zack accepted me and my history, but..."

...But she had prepared for the very worst upon opening up and unveiling her biggest secret.

Alec took the cup from Shiori's hand and pulled her in close. Her body was delicate and so very, very fragile in his embrace. She was incredibly strong, but not unconditionally, and Alec pulled her in tight.

"You could have kept quiet, and kept your secret," he said, "but you chose to open up to us. And that was something that you always intended to do, wasn't it? I am glad, so very happy, that you wanted to tell me who you were."

Alec would always accept Shiori, no matter who she really was. That was just how much he loved and cherished her. She was already a part of him, and he knew that he could no longer go on without her.

"Alec..." Shiori uttered, her fingers stretching out and clinging to his shirt. "Ever since I realized that you might be royalty, I've been so afraid. I'm from a different country, I'm a different race, I'm an immigrant, a commoner, and...above all, I'm from another world. It's ridiculous to think that a woman like that would be welcomed into the royal family. But when you promised to protect me, and when you promised to never let me go, I chose to believe in you. And if Kristoffer chose not to believe me, then all that mattered was that you and Zack did."

Shiori had gone into the meeting with a kind of grim resolve. She had known

that perhaps it might cost her her life, so she had thrown herself into living the best she could such that her death would not be meaningless. Realizing the sheer depth of his lover's resolve, Alec pulled her in even closer.

"If *anything* had gone wrong, or if our meeting with Kris had ended on bad terms, I was ready to take you and flee. It didn't matter if it was Mizuho or anywhere else—I was prepared to go anywhere, if it meant staying together."

Even for a member of royalty, and even as the king's older brother, Alec knew that not everything would go his way, and so he had resolved himself as well. He had bet on the fact that Kristoffer would not make any rash decisions—the man was worried for him not just as royalty, but as a friend. He had also talked to Zack before their meeting to ensure that Kristoffer wasn't going to do anything untoward. However, he also knew that Kristoffer could be merciless at times—a necessary trait for the man who was the bedrock of the nation's defense—and that if he smelled something foul afoot, there was a slim chance he'd simply opt to have Shiori dealt with.

So Alec had made up his mind. He was well aware of just how difficult a task escaping both the margrave and the king would be—especially if those two were determined to do something—but Shiori mattered more to him than anything else in the world.

"I now have the power and smarts to protect what is important to me," said Alec. "I do not want to make the same mistake twice."

At the age of sixteen, he'd wanted nothing more than to do what was required of him to perfection, but instead he'd had to throw it all away and run. He'd been unable to protect anything that was dear to him—he couldn't even help himself—and, bedridden as he recovered, he'd cursed himself for many long days. He would not let that happen again.

Though he'd been unable to properly contribute to society as a member of the royal family, Alec had spent the years since helping and supporting his home in other ways. Feeling compelled to repay the generosity shown to him at the castle, he'd donated to numerous locations anonymously. At Kristoffer's request, he'd also aided the knights on several occasions. Then, years later, upon completing his duties in the Empire, Alec finally felt as though he had

repaid his debts.

“I refuse to be held down any longer,” Alec said. “The life I live from here on out, I live for nobody but me. I have decided to live together with you, my other half, and I will always protect you.”

“Alec...”

Tears formed like fragments of light at the corners of Shiori’s eyes, and slid down her cheeks. Her eyes looked as if they were lit up by stars, and in them Alec saw his own reflection. And as those beautiful tears flowed, Shiori’s lips curled into a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s because you feel that way that I’ve made up my mind. I’m ready.”

“You’re ready?”

“Yes. I’m ready to be with you forever. To love you for all time.”

No matter what path it was that Alec chose to walk into the future, nobody would ever shake these feelings within her. And as this understanding washed over Alec, he felt a warmth pulse through his heart. Her resolve was not something he could simply accept unreservedly—not when she was willing to stake her own life on it—but to know the extent of her love filled Alec with joy. He took her feelings in, so precious as to be irreplaceable, and looked her in the eyes.

“Thank you, Shiori,” he said. “Your resolve has found a permanent home in my heart. You understand my position and its challenges to an extent I never could have expected, but still you choose to devote yourself to me. I promise you—I will not let your love go to waste.”

Alec took Shiori’s hands and held them tight. There was a strong warmth between them.

“Once, I gave it all up and fled,” said Alec. “But all I found at the end of that road was regret. I don’t want to feel that again, so I’ve made up my mind too.”

He brought Shiori’s hands up to his lips and kissed her delicate fingers, his eyes never leaving her own.

“I gave up on so much, thinking I had no other choice, but I refuse to live like that any longer. From now on, I want to be greedy. I want to live a life I am satisfied with.”

“Greedy...” said Shiori. “That’s quite the decision.”

“It is.”

Alec smiled. His face was refreshing like early summer, and his eyes were filled with the warm light of the sun shining in the sky.

“I intend to reach out and take all of that which I once gave up on,” he said.

By that, he meant returning publicly to the royal family, and playing his part in it. Naturally, his return would first have to be approved by his younger half brother, the king, but if he was allowed to return, then Alec intended to fulfill his role in the royal family his own way—he would not take orders from others, but rather find a way of operating that best fit his personality.

And through it all, he wanted Shiori at his side.

Now in his late thirties, Alec knew that his work in the royal family would not be that of directing the nation on the public stage. He was prepared for this. For him, returning officially to the royal family was a chance to settle things.

“I promised to protect you,” said Alec. “And that promise remains true. No matter what anyone tries to do, you will always be by my side. You will never be alone. My heart will always be yours.”

Shiori gasped as Alec revealed his feelings, honestly and openly. Her eyes once again started to well with tears, and they streamed down her face like a river.

“Thank you, Alec,” she said. “And I want to help you. I, too, want to repay all the people who accepted and believed in me. I don’t know how I’m going to do that yet, but...when I taught Yae my recipes, I caught a glimpse of a path for myself. And if it’s something I can do while I live by your side...that would make me so very happy.”

“Shiori...”

“I love you, Alec. You have my heart too. You’re so precious to me...”

But Shiori's sentence was cut short as Alec covered her lips with his own. He did not start with gentle pecks, but instead launched into a deep and passionate kiss. In an instant, Shiori's body relaxed into his embrace. Her thin arms circled around to his back and Alec pulled her in tight. He pushed her down onto the sofa, and they lay there kissing, over and over.

"I love you," he said. "My celestial maiden. My one and only. I love you...all of you."

"Don't let me go..."

Shiori's words came out in sensual sighs and heated breaths, and Alec inhaled them through their kisses. He took all of her inside himself.

And so, under the watchful gaze of a slime the color of the beautiful planet they called home, Alec and Shiori indulged in their love for one another.

2

The next day opened to clear blue skies. It was a rejuvenating morning, the air was fresh, and people were excited—so much so that the streets outside were lively even before the sun was out.

The dawning sky shifted in color from the dark magenta of snow violets to a pale and light purple, as the sky to the east slowly turned a beautiful crimson. The snow, once covered in navy shadows, slowly turned ivory and, as the morning sun rose into the sky, it sparkled like pearls.

Shiori woke around twilight, wrapped in Alec's arms. She reached out with a hand to shift the curtains slightly and stared out at the beauty of the Torisval dawn.

It's beautiful...

The city, built from brick and stone, was completely different from the home she had once known. But the white of the snow, the refreshing morning air, and the beautiful dawn sky were exactly the same.

In the past, she'd spent many days looking for traces of the world she missed in the skies above, having been essentially exiled to another world entirely.

Even now that she had attained a new happiness, Shiori felt certain that the skies would forever make her think of her first home.

But she lived a different life now, and her days were no longer filled with despair and defeat. She could now greet the refreshing morning air with her beloved and her adorable slime, and it would be more heartwarming than ever before. Shiori felt that she had now found a true second home, and so she looked down quietly from the window to the people in the streets below.

There's still one more person I have to talk to, but...

Shiori knew that convincing Alec's younger half brother, Storydia's king, might not be easy. Still, she felt strength in Alec's promise to her—he said that he would always be with her, no matter what happened, and that he would protect her. Because of that, Shiori was no longer lonely. She was no longer alone.

Alec shuffled in bed and slowly opened his eyes, and Shiori saw herself in that clear, dark magenta gaze. He was lost for a moment as he came to his senses, blinking a few times and then smiling.

"Good morning, Shiori," he said finally.

His voice was low and still slightly raspy, and it tickled gently at her ears. Even just a few simple words like this were so very precious to her.

"Good morning, Alec," she replied.

Shiori smiled back at her lover and placed a soft kiss on his lips. The hint of a chuckle escaped their warmth, and he pulled her in close to cover her in kisses. They pecked at each other softly and gently like birds greeting each other in the morning.

"Shall we get up, then?" Alec asked.

"Yes, let's."

Alec rose first, then helped Shiori to sit up. They shared another light kiss, then stood from bed. Rurii was already up and doing its morning stretches, and waved to them with a feeler.

"Morning, Rurii," said Shiori.

“Energetic as always, I see,” said Alec.

Rurii responded with a vigorous wobble, then returned to its stretching. The casual and easygoing nature of the slime brought a smile to Shiori’s face, who got dressed, then headed out to the living room. She opened the curtains to let the light in, washed her face in the bathroom, then went to the kitchen.

She chatted with Alec about nothing in particular and quietly went about preparing breakfast. Shiori loved this moment for the simple and easy joy it brought her, but today it felt even more warm and priceless. Her brother in this world and her lover had accepted her past, and so had the margrave, the person who watched over the region. This was a huge relief for Shiori, and it was as though the mist that once hung over her world had lifted, painting the scenery around her in vibrant colors.

Accepting yourself, and being accepted by others... Just this alone has the power to change the way you see the world.

Shiori let out a deep sigh as a hand touched her cheek, lifting her chin up into a gentle kiss.

“You’re lost in thought. Something wrong? Still sleepy?” asked Alec.

“Just thinking.”

“Just thinking, huh?” said Alec, his eyebrows drooping with concern.

“I’m not worried about anything,” said Shiori with a smile. “I was actually thinking about how happy I am.”

Shiori and Alec were together, and they accepted one another. They would continue to walk into the future, hand in hand. Shiori told Alec that she was just letting herself enjoy that realization. Alec smiled and kissed her again, and the two of them pecked at one another’s lips, quietly confirming their love for one another until the slime by their feet poked them gently in the legs. *“Hate to intrude, but can a slime get some breakfast around here?”* it seemed to say, and both Shiori and Alec burst into laughter.

“Coming right up,” said Shiori.

Shiori put grilled bacon and boiled eggs on her favorite wooden plates, along

with snow lettuce that was growing on the windowsill and pickles she'd prepared earlier. Meanwhile, Alec mixed some berry syrup in hot water, and sliced some whole grain bread. Finally, they put out butter, homemade jam, and various bottles of preserved foods. Rurii quickly and excitedly jumped up onto its chair.

"Sorry for the wait," said Shiori. "Let's eat!"

Rurii wobbled happily. Alec put his hands together and bowed his head slightly.

"Itadakimasu," he said.

"Itadakimasu," repeated Shiori after him.

Since living together, he'd gotten completely used to this pre-meal Japanese custom. The two of them took their cutlery in hand, and the three of them started their breakfast. Since moving in with Alec, this was now just a part of their life together, and Shiori prayed that this precious everyday practice—all of them laughing and chatting as they enjoyed a good meal—would stay with them forever.

To get to that point, however, there were still a few trials that needed to be overcome. But even then, Shiori believed that as long as she was with Alec, they could manage it. She had built connections with those around her—first Zack, but then her fellow adventurers, her friends, and then her beloved, and they had supported her when she had felt most alone. So long as these links still remained, Shiori would never truly be alone. She would also keep building more of them as she lived her life—both here in Storydia, and also across the world.

"Oh, by the way," started Alec.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to send my brother a letter today. I'm going to tell him about you."

"Erm...okay."

In other words, he would be informing his brother, the king, of her greatest secret.

"Of course, Kris will report to him as well, but I think it's best if he also hears

about it from me directly."

"Yes, of course. And...I'm sorry. I'm causing so much hassle..."

Shiori's origins were anything but ordinary, and it was making things harder for everyone. Shiori felt bad about it, but Alec told her not to worry.

"I mean, soon enough I'm going to be causing just as much trouble, if not more. I'm much more worried about that."

Alec had decided on the path he wanted to take in the future, and there was much he had to do in the way of preparations and groundwork. Shiori of course intended to support him to the very best of her abilities, but she also had work to do herself—including creating a support network around her while preparing for their future. There was so much she had to remember and keep in mind.

Shiori thought about the road ahead—one she knew was not going to be entirely smooth sailing—and it made her nervous. Alec saw this, and he reached across the table to gently take her hand.

"Don't let it weigh on you too heavily," he said. "We don't have to rush. If anything, we've both been working too hard. From here on out, let's take things slow and steady."

"You're right. Thanks, Alec."

He was always there to encourage her. He was there when she was worried or anxious, and he told her what she needed to hear. She could feel that he really had brought his heart in line with her own, and it brightened her spirits.

"Zack and I will handle anything involving the royal family, so don't you worry about a thing. All I'm doing is sending a letter updating my brother on our situation, so you can rest easy, okay?"

"Okay. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Alec thought about the question for a moment, then nodded.

"There is, actually. Let's both keep up adventuring for the time being. Making a name for ourselves as adventurers is one way for you to secure your position here. We've both already done a lot in that regard, but we've still got a ways to go until we're really secure. But that doesn't mean we need to hurry. Rushing

might only help us dig our own graves, so to speak."

"Got it."

"Fortunately, I'm going to look into a promotion to S-rank. I've turned it down until now because of my circumstances, but next time I get asked about it, I'm going to go for it. That said, and this is just my personal opinion, I don't think I've got the record worthy of an S-rank promotion. That doesn't mean we'll have to start taking on dangerous requests all of a sudden, but...we don't have to rush that either."

"Okay, but..." started Shiori, curious about something, "what are the conditions for S-rank promotion? It's not just a matter of having completed a certain number of requests or suppression tasks?"

"You know, I'm not actually sure *what* the exact conditions are, come to think of it. If they've been asking me to take the test for it, then perhaps I've already met the conditions..." Alec sipped at his cup of tea and pondered on it for a time, then continued. "I've almost always worked with Clemens, but he's never been approached about S-rank promotion. That means I might have met the conditions due to a request that I did on my own."

There was a rumor that one condition for S-rank was the suppression of a special S-rank magical beast, such as a dragon or wyvern. And in fact, all the adventurers that had achieved S-rank to date had experience with such requests. However, Clemens and Nadia also had experience in this area, but had never been approached about S-rank promotion. Alec's best guess, then, was that one had to resolve a magical beast problem that was causing a great deal of trouble somewhere.

"They don't make those conditions public, do they?" said Shiori. "I remember thinking about it back when I was promoted to B-rank."

"There are many who criticize the lack of transparency. They think that if the conditions aren't made public, then promotions are up to the guild master, which is unfair. But at the same time...there's not much else that can be done about it."

"Right..."

If adventurers knew the conditions for ranking up, many would prefer requests that would help them gain a promotion. On top of that, if any one particular quest would have a large impact on an adventurer's standing in terms of promotion, it would cause arguments and fights. Truth be told, many ambitious adventurers came together in the royal capital because there were a large number of quests for nobles in positions of authority, and there was more infighting there than at any other guild branch.

"Hm... But based on what you've said," said Shiori, "S-rank promotion is impossible for support classes. Even back at Silveria, when I felled the mythical beast, a large part of my rank promotion came from the fact that the rest of you essentially gave me the lion's share of experience."

"I guess that's just a weak point of the current system..." said Alec with a grimace, his face growing a touch more serious. "However, requests like that aren't very common, and there's a certain amount of luck involved too, when you consider whether an adventurer is available or not. With trust and experience come more private requests. You don't have to be a high-ranking adventurer to be specified for a request, but being picked out shows that you're highly valued in the area."

The way Alec saw it, drawing good fortune to you was in itself a kind of skill. Crafting strong relationships with those around you resulted in more connections, and it was those connections that brought good luck—in the form of lucrative requests.

"You had no connection whatsoever to the Lovner family, but the people you knew were what put you on their map. The same is true of the request from the Tris Cathedral—you're selected for requests because of your hard work and your character."

Shiori's web of connections was sure to grow larger from here on out. Those connections would establish her reputation in Torisval, which would in turn help her secure her position.

"Now you have the Lovner family, the Tris Cathedral, and the margrave supporting you. Then there's the Enqvist family, who are the reason you met Annelie in the first place. Those alone are a strong foundation, but let's not

forget Yae and the Yobai Trading Company—they may well play an important role in Storydia in the coming years. At this rate, you're well on your way to building yourself a solid position in this country, and a place to undeniably call home. So there's no need to feel anxious or worried—just keep on working the way you have been."

"Alec..."

Alec did not want to rely purely on his position within the royal family. He was going to build a reputation and rank of his own, with his own hands, and that would be the foothold he'd use to reclaim his spot within the family itself. This was what Shiori would have to do too. She was still a foreigner with no known relations, and it was important that she made herself the kind of person that people would acknowledge as suitable for the king's older brother. Naturally, there would be those who did not approve of her, but it was nonetheless important for her to be thoroughly prepared.

"Compared to those who have spent decades, if not centuries, supporting the royal family and our nation, my record is practically nothing," said Alec. "It's conceited to even call them achievements. However, even then, I want to stand at my brother Olivier's side. I want to be able to hold my head high and call him my brother. I want to find my own way to fulfill my duty as one of the royal family."

Alec had chosen adventuring as a profession because he'd hoped that, in some small way, he might be of use to the nation's citizens. At the same time, as a mostly powerless youth, it was the one avenue open to him through which he could keep his identity secret. Assisting those the nation could not otherwise help was something he'd come to see as his duty. This was how he'd followed Zack into adventuring.

"I'm sure it's because you know what it's like to live like a common person too," said Shiori.

"Hm?" asked Alec, tilting his head.

"Perhaps I'm being unfair, but I think a noble-born person might not even realize that there are people the nation can't care for or help. I don't mean that in a bad way, and sometimes to protect something big, you have to overlook

smaller problems or otherwise cut them loose, but...I think it's amazing that you felt the way you did. It reminds me of what you said, all that time ago. Do you remember?"

People are not expendable tools created for the use of the nobility.

This was what Alec had said to one of the Enqvist family's attendants, who'd looked to force an exhausted Shiori to save his master. The attendant had said, *"This is no time for such carefree words! What if the worst should happen to our young master?"* And though their concern had been justified, Shiori had been barely able to stand, and Alec's words—his feelings—had made her happy.

That attendant's point of view was an important one when it came to governing a nation. And for the royal family, which was tasked with that heavy responsibility, it was an incredibly difficult challenge. Shiori believed that it was Alec's perspective—after all, he had spent his life among the common citizenry before being brought into the royal family—that motivated his actions.

"Shiori..." Alec uttered, his eyes wide.

He dropped into a long moment of thought, then nodded to himself, as if deciding on something.

"To be honest, I've been wondering what I should do in my role as the king's older brother, but it's still unclear to me. I knew that I wanted to do something for Olivier, and for the nation, but...yes, I think I've got it," he said, looking Shiori in the eyes. "You and I, we know a lot about the weaker, lower classes of Storydia. I think it would be worth doing something to help those people."

"Yes. I've also spent a lot of time laboring over how to best contribute to the city with my housekeeping magic and my cooking knowledge, but people keep telling me they want to learn and know more about it, and...recently, I've come to think that may be how I can be most useful to people."

Dennis had taught their family chef about soy sauce, and his reaction had brought them into contact with Yae. When Shiori saw how passionate Yae and her merchants were when it came to marketing their produce based on Shiori's knowledge and ideas, she started to realize that perhaps teaching was a way to give back to those who had helped her.

“Ah, I see,” said Alec. “So if your upcoming housekeeping magic lecture goes well, then...how about considering a textbook? We could announce it through the guild’s communication channels. And it doesn’t seem to me like you struggle much with writing.”

“Erm... Wow, that’s... Oh, um...”

Shiori was flabbergasted by the idea, but as she considered it more deeply, she nodded.

“I don’t think it’s something I can just jump into, but...yes, I’ll certainly keep it in mind.”

Shiori knew that, considering her age and physical health, she had ten years left of adventuring at best. Most adventurers usually moved on to other things at around the age of forty. No matter how much you trained, you could not stop the physical decline that came with age. Forty also happened to be the age where the mistakes and injuries of your twenties would come back to haunt you. Adventuring was a very physical job, and many moved on before this physical decline set in—they changed jobs entirely, moved back home, got desk jobs, or went into teaching.

Shiori, too, had put thought into what she could do upon her retirement from adventuring, and what she could do to support Alec in his duties. At present, she wasn’t capable of much, but that just meant she would have to put what skills she did have to use, and maximize them.

“Teaching knowledge and skills...” muttered Shiori.

Once more, she caught a glimpse of the vague future which lay before her.

“Shiori,” said Alec, standing from his chair and moving around to embrace Shiori from behind. “There’s no rush. We’ll walk into the future...together.”

His voice was low, warm, and kind as he held her.

“Don’t forget me!” wobbled Rurii by her side.

“Of course,” Shiori said.

The future she was set to walk—together with her kind and dependable lover, and her cute slime—was still one veiled in mist, but Shiori nonetheless got the

sense that warmth awaited them down the road. And in order to make that road a sure and definite thing, they had to keep working.

Shiori placed her hand over Alec's as he kissed her over her shoulder, and smiled.

3

It was late in the evening on the last day of February, in the royal capital of Storid. Olivier had been working since the morning without rest, reviewing reports. He had separated them into piles for disposal and for keeping, punched holes in those that would be kept, wrapped them in a thick leather cover, and tied them with string. He was now, finally, down to the last set of documents.

“Ah, at long last,” he muttered.

Olivier had told Pel to go to bed hours ago, but the slime had insisted on staying with him, and was now spread out on the floor by his feet, sound asleep. As the king of Storydia, Olivier was the highest authority in the nation, and as such, he had to look over an overwhelming amount of documentation. He of course did his clerical duties daily to avoid overloading himself, but over the last few years his duties had expanded to include the state of the Empire, and going through reports at the end of the month had become a long and arduous task that took all day and all night.

Though it wasn’t necessary for the king to look at *everything* himself, these reports had the power to shift the state of not just national politics, but the standing of the nation itself. As such, being the head of state, Olivier made it a point to look over all the reports at the end of the month to ensure there were no errors—a custom that had started when he was appointed king at just sixteen years of age.

Olivier had sent his secretary home two hours earlier, telling the man that he could handle what remained on his own. This was a lie, but the man’s wife had just given birth to their third child, and though he had servants and nurses to watch over his family, Olivier knew that his wife would be all the more comfortable with her husband at home.

Olivier thought back to the joy in his secretary’s face when he had announced the birth of his long-awaited daughter—it reminded Olivier of his own similar experiences. He smiled at the thought and let his gaze fall once more to his paperwork. He took a breath and readied himself—just a little more, and all the

clerical work would be done.

Fortunately, tomorrow was the weekend, and a day off—Olivier would have at least one day to rest. Outside of public holidays, Storydia did not have any clearly defined holidays, but Olivier's grandfather had made it compulsory for everyone to have at least one day off per week. Olivier was grateful for this.

As he took the last of his papers in hand, there came a knock at the door. When Olivier bid them to enter, one of his personal guards peeked in while a woman entered without so much as a sound, her brown hair tied in a neat and relaxed ponytail. It was Olivier's wife, Cecilia, visiting to check up on him. He always told her to sleep early, knowing that he'd be working until late, but sometimes she insisted on seeing him. She was always careful not to disturb him while he worked, and sometimes when she did not visit herself, she sent food and snacks in her place.

"Cessie," he said, calling her by her pet name.

She replied with a charming smile, then put the tray of tea she was carrying on the table and walked over to him.

"This is all that's left," he said. "I'll be done soon."

"Perfect timing," said Cecilia. "In that case, I'll put on some tea and wait until you're done."

Olivier craned his neck around towards her with a pleading look, and Cecilia planted a light kiss on his lips before heading back to the table. The pleasant sound of tea being poured into cups filled the room, and it was followed by a blissfully sweet and fruity aroma. It was Olivier's favorite medicinal tea—Cecilia wasn't serving black tea because it was so close to bedtime. And so, surrounded by this wonderful scent, Olivier finished the last of his paperwork and heaved a relieved sigh.

"It's been a long day," said Cecilia, as Olivier filed the last of his reports and put his royal seal in its box.

She placed a cup of hot tea before him as he sat at the table, along with a few sweets, and he was glad for her generosity.

"Thank you," he said. "Please, sit with me."

“Of course.”

Cecilia borrowed the secretary’s chair and took a seat. The two sipped their tea in the kind of wonderful, comforting silence that only comes to those who have shared many long years together. When Olivier had finished about half of his tea, he finally spoke.

“And the children?” he asked.

“They’re in bed. Bern wanted to stay up all night reading, but I told him to save it for tomorrow and put him to sleep.”

A day off each week was invaluable—it was a chance to stretch out and enjoy life without any duties or staff getting in the way. Though a portion of the castle staff and the knights would not be enjoying the same luxury at the same time, they were at least afforded time off on different days of the week. Tomorrow, royal prince Bernhard would be free of his duties and his training, and he could spend the whole day reading if he so desired.

“Is it the novel with the illustrations by Annelie Lovner?” asked Olivier. “She’s so very popular at the moment. Perhaps I’ll borrow it from him when he’s done.”

The novel had been written with a younger audience in mind, but the lively illustrations leapt from the page and enamored readers of all ages, male and female alike. Though some claimed the book was popular purely *because* of its illustrations, the story itself was, in fact, highly praised. A new volume was scheduled for release in early spring, which meant there was still plenty of time to catch up on the current volume.

“It’s incredible,” said Cecilia. “Why, the ending was so moving I was brought to tears.”

“What? But how did you find the time to...?”

Olivier’s brow furrowed—it vexed him somewhat to discover that his own wife had beaten him to the punch. Cecilia was always busy with her duties as queen, and he couldn’t believe she’d have the time to read for pleasure. Cecilia’s playful smile eventually coaxed him out of his faint irritation, and the couple relaxed once more in the quiet.

“I hope that the end of the year will be as peaceful as this for all of us,” Cecilia said.

“Indeed.”

Even just passing the time before bed like this, in silent comfort, was very dear to the two of them. And yet, when Olivier thought of the knights stationed at the border in the frigid cold, his expression grew a touch grim. The knight corps was currently engaged in a secret task on a nationwide scale, and Olivier felt a certain guilt at the fact that he was safe, warm, and indulging in a hot cup of tea. Edvard, however, had told him not to worry.

“Don’t feel like you have to be frugal or nothing, just keep on doing as you always do. That’s all you have to do—just live your normal life. Show the men that you trust them by the way you hold yourself. And when they return, give them the praise they deserve. That’s what’ll make them the most happy.”

Some might have called Edvard’s words mere sophistry, but those words came from the heir to the duke, a man who had hidden his identity and climbed to the rank of vice-captain of the knight corps on his own merits alone. Any opinion he gave about the front lines was undoubtedly a reflection of how the knights there really felt. Olivier had decided to do as he had been advised.

When Olivier’s brothers had perished one after the other, and his father had fallen terminally ill, the inaction of the upper nobility had caused the economy to slow, and it was Edvard who informed Olivier of the impact on the lives of the common citizenry. Edvard knew this because—influenced by the carefree nature of his older half brother—he sometimes spent time among the local populace, where he had seen the situation with his own eyes.

This had taught Olivier something important—that he could not understand the true state of the common people unless he saw the world as they did. So, in order to better understand the reality of the nation he was to govern, Olivier had endeavored to see it with his own eyes. Edvard himself could never even have imagined—and still had no idea—that it was his own words that had resulted in Olivier being criticized as a “runaway king.”

Olivier couldn’t help but smile as he thought of his childhood friend Edvard, who could be rather uncouth with his words. Even now, the man was hard at

work at the knight corps headquarters.

“Thanks to the Elector’s efforts, the allied forces do not even need to move in directly. This means we may be able to withdraw our forces by the summer.”

The Dolgast Empire’s southern area was governed by Elector Ulanov, who had secretly organized a rebel army and, after gathering the support of the citizenry and many lower nobles, was able to grow his power and influence over a very short period of time. They had taken down the Empire’s major cities one after another, and were able to take the imperial capital in just three months. The emperor’s own forces had been wiped out in the opening battle.

The emperor had long rested on his laurels, getting by on the echoes of former glories, but the siege on the imperial capital, protected by a grand wall, had ended in just a few weeks. All of it showed just how dissatisfied the Empire’s citizens were. Even many of the emperor’s upper nobility had betrayed him, and within six months of the uprising having started, the Empire was under new control.

“The fact that the emperor turned out to be a fraud also played a large part, I imagine,” said Cecilia, her voice now harder and more serious.

As a former knight herself, she likely had her own opinions about the entire situation. She always spoke in this tone when her emotions bubbled to the surface.

“Who could have imagined that the emperor’s direct lineage had ended some twenty years ago?” she continued, “Or that a branch family would move in and take the place of those very descendants?”

Fearing assassination and claiming absolute sanctity, the emperor had rarely appeared in person before his own retainers. For official meetings, he sat behind a blind, and very few were allowed to see his face—only a handful knew what the man even looked like.

However, this fierce secrecy was the very reason that, when the true emperor was assassinated, none realized that another had replaced him. When this truth eventually came to light, the vast number of nobles who had supported the new emperor promptly deserted him. The only people who had known the truth all along were the imperial chancellor and a select number of the upper

nobility. Anyone else who got too close was eliminated. Somewhere else this might have been suspicious, but it was by no means a rare occurrence for the emperor to dispose of followers or mistresses on a whim. The fact that this was seen as customary within the Empire was yet another reason that the facade lasted as long as it did.

"And to think that the one who was truly in power was the chancellor himself, who made a court jester play the role of the emperor," said Cecilia. "He turned the position into a laughingstock. Nothing could have been more humiliating for the imperial nobility, with their fierce and arrogant pride."

The imperial army believed in protecting the emperor as a matter of pride. To them, the emperor was considered holy. Discovering that their leader was a fake had been a huge blow to their morale.

"Things will be mostly settled before the end of the year," said Olivier. "And finally...the Empire will be little more than a bad dream that Alphandis no longer needs to suffer from. The Empire spent several decades controlling the continent, and even now, in its weakened state, it continues to taint the lands like a smoldering fire. But soon...we will be free of it."

Freedom from the Empire. The dream of Olivier's ancestors would soon be coming to fruition. He drank the last of his tea, and a silence once more settled over the room.

"And speaking of being free," said Olivier, who poured Cecilia a second cup of tea that he this time brewed himself, "Alec might soon find a freedom of his own."

"You mean your older brother?"

Cecilia looked shocked. She had of course been told the truth of the third prince's disappearance, and had even met him on a few occasions. Their conversations were stilted and awkward, but as fellow swordsmen, they'd had something in common, and had even sparred when they first met.

"Whatever do you mean?" prodded Cecilia.

"He has found a woman he is most serious about. Though that said, he has yet to tell me about her himself. Nonetheless, it would seem he really is very

serious about her. I think perhaps it is proof that he is ready to let go of the past—to be free of it and move on."

"I... I see. That would be for the best, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. And also, the Lindvalls are expecting. They tell me that their little one is coming in the summer."

The former Count Lindvall had contributed much to Storydia's agricultural development, and his second wife worked for him as his research assistant. Her maiden name was Rebecca Hallonsten—she was the first woman Aleksey had ever truly fallen in love with.

Cecilia was not sure what to say, but eventually replied with a slightly bitter and pained smile.

"She's the same age as me, I believe. Thirty-six...no, thirty-seven. A tough age for your first childbirth, but...a blessing, nonetheless. Will you send them a gift?"

"But of course. I was hoping you might help me select it," replied Olivier, who added with a slight cringe, "I have some...complicated feelings about it all, to be sure. It is of course news worth celebrating, but to be honest, I'm conflicted. I don't like that she found her happiness before Alec did his. I know it isn't very good of a king to feel this way about such an event, but still..."

"It cannot be helped," said Cecilia, a stern expression on her face. "I know that the responsibility of what happened cannot be placed solely on her shoulders alone, but her behavior was indefensible. The state of the royal palace was terribly unstable at the time."

Around twenty years ago, two of the royal princes had died, and the queen had passed away soon after due to illness. To make matters worse, the king fell terminally ill, plunging the nation into a state of disarray it had not experienced since the battle for reclamation. The so-called battle for succession that followed caused severe political conflict, and was only made worse by the young nobles hungry for excitement after the boredom of many long years of peace. The economy plummeted, and Storydia found itself on the brink of invasion by foreign countries.

“It was a national crisis,” said Cecilia. “It is the duty of the nobility to work for Storydia, but they thought only of their own gains. And to call the prince useless in the midst of that—a prince doing his utmost to maintain the stability of the country, no less—was nigh unforgivable.”

It was Cecilia’s job, as the Storydia’s queen, to work in place of her husband when the situation called for it. She was stern with her words because she was once a knight, and the daughter of the Cederberg Margrave, who protected Storydia’s southern region.

During the battle for succession, many young women came to the castle ready to devote themselves to the country and work by the side of the new young king. Many of these girls were very ambitious, and even now they put their unique skills to work in their individual areas of expertise. Rebecca, on the other hand, was a private maid, and she hadn’t known anything of what it meant to serve the royal family, or the responsibility that came with marrying into it. She was the third prince’s lover, and yet she refused to educate herself on these matters—she wanted to be queen, but did not want to put in the effort required of such a title. What occurred as a result was something that, even now, still weighed on Olivier’s mind.

“Those who will simply sit upon their throne and do nothing do not deserve a spot among the royal family,” said Cecilia. “It is of the utmost importance that you are able to think for yourself, and act upon your own power. I have heard that she was a mild-mannered and gentle girl at heart, but she simply did not have the qualities expected of the position she so desired. That’s all there is to it. I take no issue with the things you did.”

“Cessie...” uttered Olivier.

Cecilia took her official duties very seriously, and her strength was resolute. In this, Olivier felt she was perfect in her position as queen. She was even capable of defending herself in battle should the need arise. These were the reasons he was so strongly drawn to her. *With Cecilia by my side, we can defend our nation and support one another,* he had thought.

Olivier stood from his chair and leaned over towards his wife. Just as he was about to place a kiss on her smooth, glossy lips, she gracefully stopped him by

placing a finger to his own. There was a great love in her eyes, but also something of a slight rebuttal.

“However, I have thoughts on the matter as a woman myself, and I want you to listen just a little longer,” she said, the powerful strength of her gaze wavering ever so slightly. “I want nothing more than to be with my love, no matter what should happen. And I want us to be able to discuss anything and everything. We share our worries and concerns, and together we reach a place of agreement. Male arrogance is insisting that you decide on every important matter alone.”

Her finger still pressed against Olivier’s lips, Cecilia went on.

“So I want for your brother to be sure this time. It is imperative that he talk to his lover, face-to-face, and ensure that what they want is in alignment. Their feelings and intentions have to be on the same page, or they will never truly understand one another.”

“That’s rather harsh,” remarked Olivier.

“Does it remind you of anyone?”

“Hm. I can’t say for certain that it doesn’t. I suppose I should say that it probably...definitely...does.”

Cecilia giggled as she looked up at her husband, the so-called runaway king.

“I know that as the ruler of our nation, I cannot expect you to talk to me about everything, but I hope you will, at least to the extent that you can.”

“I will. You have my word.”

Cecilia lifted her finger from Olivier’s lips, and they shared a quiet kiss, draped in the tranquil atmosphere of the late night.

Had it been a more peaceful time back then, Aleksey and Rebecca would now be living as part of the royal family. But the disorder that forced Aleksey to flee had also given him the chance to meet Shiori. It was easy to brush such things off as the will of the stars, and yet Olivier did not want to—people encountered various crossroads in their lives, and at each of them they made decisions.

He is open and honest with Shiori, and it is because of his past regrets, I am

sure of it.

Olivier did not expect Aleksey to make the same mistake again. But as his younger brother, he had only one simple wish.

Aleksey, find happiness.

Olivier and Cecilia continued to chat even as the hour grew later, and then a sudden correspondence arrived. Upon it was the Osbring family seal, indicating it was from the Torisval Margrave. The messenger—in charge of delivering the letter by way of the Fauchelle family—passed along a message from the current family lord, Edvard.

"It's good news. Read it immediately."

"I'll head back to our room," said Cecilia.

Sensing that the letter was a private matter, the queen began to put the teacups back on their tray and tidy the table as Olivier silently opened the envelope. Within it were two letters. One from the margrave, and one from his brother.

"How strange," remarked Olivier. "It's not like Alec to send me another letter so soon."

Aleksey had written Olivier a month ago, and Olivier had only just recently replied. If Alec had rushed to write him again, it was likely a matter of importance.

Olivier first opened the letter from Kristoffer, as Pel trembled happily by his side, lost in the midst of a pleasant dream of some kind. The contents—which began with a simple but affectionate greeting—gave Olivier pause. He dropped into thought, then read its key statement a second time.

The celestial maiden came to our lands, lost and confused, from another world entirely.

Olivier usually would have brushed such a statement off as nonsense or an otherwise confusing complaint, but Kristoffer was a sincere and straightforward military man. He was fond of the odd joke, yes, but he was not the sort of man

who would send a confidential letter to the king in jest.

The margrave had met the celestial maiden face-to-face, and she had told him that she had come to Storydia from a completely different world, through means she could not explain or prove. More to the point, Kristoffer believed her to be telling the truth. The term “celestial maiden” was no longer a mere nickname—Kristoffer’s letter detailed that Shiori came from a world that far surpassed their own in terms of both education and technology. Her world was one that had traveled to space and the stars above. Just as the words “celestial maiden” indicated, Shiori was, quite literally, not of this world.

Naturally, because she had no proof of her claims, her story could not be proven beyond a doubt, but Kristoffer had interrogated her thoroughly and believed her story to be as true as was possible given the lack of evidence. Bleyzac had already made a similar report, but to have Kristoffer himself come to the same conclusion left little room for doubt.

“She is extremely intelligent and wise,” said Olivier, reading aloud, “and she is not the sort of person to be carried away by an overactive imagination. Her ability to show the world from above the clouds with her illusion magic is simply breathtaking.”

In December of the previous year, Shiori had unveiled a sight that people now called “the View of the Deities.” The story had been somewhat eclipsed by the attempted murder of a songstress (along with the reveal that her earnings had been embezzled) and an attempted poisoning to boot. As a result, the news of “the coming of the celestial maiden” barely made headlines, but was nonetheless the topic of rumor for a short time.

The news stories were not the only reason that Shiori’s display went mostly under the radar—Kristoffer and the archbishop had both worked behind the scenes to ensure that the event remained largely unreported.

The archbishop, Oskar, was well known as the center of the Reformist faction of the church, and was reportedly a man who was both passionately faithful and realistic in his approach to his work. Clearly, Shiori’s display of illusion magic was something that both he and the margrave deemed potentially problematic.

Shiori was a unique individual, to be sure, and when Kristoffer had posed to her the question of what she would do if she could no longer remain by Aleksey's side, she had told the margrave to take her life. She had lost everything, and worked to the bone to earn a new happiness, and the idea of giving Aleksey up to another woman for the sake of the nation was simply far too much for her heart to take. And so in response to such a potential reality, she had given the margrave her honest feelings.

Kristoffer's question was one that, at some point or another, had to be asked. Nothing could move forward until the resolve of Aleksey's potential life partner had been made clear. Even in the case that Aleksey were to leave the family entirely, the question would still have been asked—if only for Aleksey himself, who had been hurt so badly in his youth.

"Kris asked the question on my behalf, so I wouldn't have to. He knew that the question would draw ire, if not from the celestial maiden herself, then most definitely from Alec."

Shiori had been in tears as she'd told Kristoffer that she would "leave" for home, holding in her heart her steadfast feelings for Aleksey. She made it clear that she would give her heart to no other man, and that if she could not be with Aleksey, she would nevertheless always have him in her heart. This was the woman that Olivier's brother now loved—the woman he had decided to spend the rest of his life with.

"I will have to rearrange my schedule, so that I can meet them both posthaste," muttered Olivier as he took in hand the letter that Aleksey had sent.

The opening lines were written in the man's confident script, and his opening greetings said a lot about his personality. He mentioned Shiori's true identity, but also that he still intended to be with her regardless. Olivier smiled as he always did when reading a letter from his brother, but upon reaching the letter's final lines, a change came over him. Cecilia was quick to notice and looked over, but Olivier was far too concerned with the letter to worry about her.

He read the lines over and over, and as the meaning of them settled in his mind, his heartbeat quickened and his breathing grew ragged. His heart filled

with such joy he thought it might burst. He was so happy that it hurt.

"Olivier?" asked Cecilia. "Are you in pain?"

The king put a hand to his mouth to stop his raw emotions from escaping in a cry, and Cecilia ran over to him—he was not acting like himself. Even Pel awoke at the commotion, and rubbed Olivier's leg as if to say, *"Everything okay?"*

"I'm sorry if I worried you," Olivier said. "I'm fine. Just shocked, is all."

"So you aren't feeling unwell?"

"No, it's just that Alec..."

Olivier tried to speak the words, but they trailed off into a sob.

"Your brother?"

Cecilia placed her fingers on Olivier's back to calm him down, and he took a few deep breaths. When he spoke next, it was calmly and clearly.

"Alec said...he intends to return to the family...officially."

"Oh my..."

Cecilia was so surprised by the news herself that these two words were all she could muster.

Upon Aleksey's return from his mission in the Empire, he had returned to Tris within the space of a month. It was all too clear to see that he wanted to make his time at the castle as brief as possible. Aleksey had vanished from the public eye. And if he returned, then no matter where he was placed—and no matter how comfortable a post he was given—the castle and the royal palace would always be filled with painful memories.

There was no doubt that Aleksey knew of the uncertainty of his current position within the royal family, and at the time he'd been there after his mission, he showed no signs of wanting to return. When he'd enjoyed a few drinks with Olivier, and the alcohol had taken effect, he'd uttered with the utmost sincerity, "I have no right to call myself the older brother of the king."

But in just a few short months, he'd made up his mind to return. And there was no doubt in Olivier's mind that the key reason for this change of heart was

his meeting the celestial maiden.

“She healed the wounds of his heart, and somehow led him to a place of clearer thought. That much is simply undeniable.”

Aleksey was Olivier’s only remaining brother. Shiori had nursed his battered and seemingly broken heart back to health, and she had empowered him to return to the place where he truly belonged. For Olivier, it was no exaggeration to say that both he and Aleksey were indebted to her.

Such kindness had to be rewarded and cherished. Hers was a life that had to be treasured.

“You’ll accept her,” said Cecilia, as if reading his feelings on his face.

“As king, I will make my final judgment upon meeting her in person, but as an individual—as *me*—I have already made up my mind.”

Shiori Izumi had put her roots down in this land. She was a citizen of Storydia, and she was worthy of its protection. He wrapped an arm around Cecilia’s shoulder, and took Pel’s feeler gently in his other hand as he looked out the window.

Storydia was home to a long winter, and the snow would continue to fall for some time yet. However, the ice that had long kept Aleksey a prisoner inside himself was melting, and Olivier could feel the coming of spring. He smiled with a true, undeniable joy. Tears welled in his dark magenta eyes, and dripped down his cheeks, and only Cecilia and Pel were aware of them.

Out past the window was the nightscape of the royal capital—quietly beautiful against the view of the lake. But past the royal capital, and past the forests and various rivers and marshes that filled the lands, was the city of Torisval. Olivier imagined that it, too, was wrapped in the same dark magenta sky.

4

“Something on your mind?”

Alec placed a hand to Shiori’s cheek as she stared up at the night sky through

a thin gap in the curtains. They'd spent the evening until now indulging deeply in one another, and the warmth of his hand, damp with sweat, told her that she existed, right here, in this moment. She nuzzled her cheek into his palm as he lovingly touched her.

"The stars are so beautiful," she said, her voice a little husky and dry from their lovemaking.

The nights of Torisval were bright thanks to the magic lanterns, but come midnight, most of them, save for those that were essential, would go out. Here in Storydia, there were no skyscrapers with blinking neon lights, and nothing to block the view of the night sky above, with its stars glittering like countless jewels. They were so vivid she could almost hear them sparkling, and so beautiful that she had to sigh.

"Indeed they are," said Alec. "When I was a boy, I really believed that the stars were jewels, and I tried to reach up and take some of them."

"I did the same. I said I was going to make them my treasure and I did my best to jump up and catch them but only ended up falling on my butt. My brother had a great laugh at that."

"Oh yeah? I'm a bit surprised," said Alec with a chuckle. "Olivier, my younger brother, told me that he once believed the moon was made of cheesecake, and that the stars were sugared candies. It was his dream to one day eat his fill of them. He had a picture book about it that he loved. It was very beautiful, and foil-stamped, and we sometimes read it and talked of our dreams, and fell asleep together."

Whenever Alec spoke of his younger brother, his eyes were gentler than usual. Shiori was sure that the memory was warm and nostalgic for him. Alec's life in the castle had more than its share of sadness and suffering, but that was not to say he didn't have a few memories he could still cherish.

"In Japan," said Shiori, "we have sugared sweets called kohakuto. They're so beautiful—they look just like jewels or star fragments. My brother once bought some for me as a souvenir when he was traveling on business, and it felt like such a waste to eat them that I limited myself to just one per day. But they were so beautiful that any child could be fooled into thinking they're actual

stars.”

“Perhaps they’re like something out of a dream.”

“Yes, kohakuto have a long past, and they might even be available in Mizuho somewhere. I’ll have to ask Yae some time.”

“Indeed,” said Alec with a grin. “And if they do exist somewhere, we’ll have to send them with some of that miso cheesecake to Olivier. Perhaps we can make his childhood dream come true.”

“Oh...yes, that’s a great idea. I’m sure he’d love it.”

The two of them enjoyed making plans for the future, and they giggled together until their lips met, and they kissed. Alec’s hand traced the outline of Shiori’s body, rubbing her smooth skin.

“Again?” Shiori asked.

“Just a little more,” he said. “Or no?”

“Alec...”

Clearly he had not yet had his fill, and though he’d promised her that they would not go “all the way” until everything was settled, that did not stop him from using his lips and his hands to express the sheer depth of his love for her.

Tomorrow was a holiday, and Alec would spend the rest of the night filling her heart with all the love he had. It was only kissing and touching, but in their lovemaking was the heat of their shared passions, and it filled their hearts to the brim.

In response to Alec’s passionate embrace, Shiori felt her body warming, and she smiled as she glanced up again at the night sky through the curtains. It was a different world, with all-new scenery and completely different creatures, but the sky above and the stars that filled it were the same as they were in her home world, and it showed her traces of the home she had left behind.

The dark magenta skies looked quietly down on all of them from high above—the two lovers, the city they lived in, and all the lives that existed upon the world Shiori now called home.



Interlude 1: A Fork in the Road

Tris, the capital of the Torisval domain, was a city of immigrants. Once occupied by the Dolgast Empire, the blood of both the Empire and its allied nation-states ran through a great number of the population. There were many who immigrated specifically because of this multiculturalism, and over many long years a variety of different cuisines had become mainstays throughout the city, contributing to its food culture. It was for this very reason that Tris was considered a food capital in the region.

Among the many red-brick shops that lined the city's third district was the import goods shop, Casero. Named after its owner, Casero stocked foreign goods with a focus on the continent's southern regions. Today, like most days, the shop was packed with shoppers, most of them immigrants—this was, after all, where many of them gathered in search of the nostalgic flavors of home.

"Another wonderful day!" muttered a satisfied Casero Franco, the owner of Casero.

Franco had gotten his start peddling goods, but his business had since grown considerably. Born to a couple who ran a general goods store, Franco was the youngest of six children. When his parents passed away, it was Franco's eldest brother who inherited the business, while his siblings left for different locations to start trades of their own.

Franco was eleven at the time, and found himself in the care of a merchant's family. However, the shop had been a stifling environment for the young man and, at just sixteen years of age, he left the nation he'd called home.

In this way, Franco traveled from country to country, finally arriving in Tris some fifteen years ago. The northern continent of Alphandis was a region known for its heavy snowfall—and it was a far cry from the weather Franco was accustomed to—but its large immigrant population made the place generous and temperate in a way that made Franco feel at home.

He sold a great deal of foreign spices and general goods to immigrants pining for home, and was able to amass a small fortune for himself through both a

keen eye and the connections he had made during his days as a wandering merchant. Ten years ago, he had rented this shop in the third district, which was also his residence. He'd become an influential man among the immigrants from the south, and it was his ambition to someday buy the building he did his business in.

"Mister Franco, I hope you'll accept this small token of appreciation. Enjoy them with your wife."

One of Franco's regulars passed him a bag filled with peach-colored mushrooms. Franco smiled at the sight. The large rosa apricos mushrooms could not be cultivated artificially, and were only found in the wild. This made them very valuable.

"Ah, a very rare mushroom indeed," said Franco. "Are you sure it's okay for me to accept such a luxury?"

"Take 'em, please. You're always so good to us, Mister Franco."

"Thank you, Lope. I'll cook them up this evening."

Franco was a good salesman with a bright and bubbly personality, and many immigrants were drawn to him and became regulars. Lope was one of many, and when he'd just moved to Tris, Franco had let him buy goods at a discount. Lope had never forgotten this act of kindness.

"Immigrants have to help each other out." That was Franco's ideology in a single phrase, and many an immigrant had been saved by it. A great deal of Franco's regulars had bought goods from him at a discount until such a time as they could afford to shop at the standard prices. They'd shared these stories with others, and this drew more immigrants to Casero—not just the poor, but the wealthy too.

Franco looked around the store, and his gaze came to fall upon a selection of Eastern products in a corner. They had all come from one of the leading merchants in that region. The selection of fine cloth and small antiques were a hit with housewives, but the food products were another story, and there weren't many who purchased any foodstuffs. However, in the last two or three years, there was *one* customer who came periodically for spices and condiments.

Said customer was the only Easterner in Torisval—at least, outside of the royal capital—and she paid the asking price for items that were already quite expensive. She was rather plain in terms of appearance, but quite the spender nonetheless. Thinking that she could make quite a valuable customer, Franco had made his move on the woman's third visit. She had come asking whether it would be possible to buy soy sauce regularly, and Franco had quoted her a number three times that of the usual asking price.

In response, the Eastern woman—who'd introduced herself as Shiori—had labored over the decision, but knew she couldn't buy the product anywhere else. Franco had worried that he'd gone too high with his price, but to his surprise and delight, the woman had bought a barrel of the stuff.

Shiori had come from afar, and though she had money to spend, it seemed clear that she was not used to life in Storydia and thus was somewhat ignorant to the ways of the world. On top of that, there was nobody else who knew the market value for Eastern goods, meaning nobody could possibly know that Franco was hiking up the price. This made Shiori the perfect customer.

Take a little extra from the rich, and sell cheap to the poor. We immigrants have to help each other, after all.

This was how Franco thought of his business—he *borrowed* extra from his wealthier clientele, who *shouldered* the discounts he gave his more impoverished shoppers. Then, he took a small cut for himself—he thought of this as a kind of mediation fee for the transactions. He knew that what he was doing wasn't exactly honest, but he got away with it because he was working with less educated immigrants who didn't always know how things worked. Customers like Shiori, then, who lacked a community of their fellow people, were the perfect mark.

Franco was considering this as the bell at the door rang, and a man that he'd never seen before walked in. The man was tall, with chestnut-brown hair. Based on his neat and tidy appearance, Franco assumed that he was a born and bred Storydian. He was well built, dressed in a refined manner, and there was a warm, kind smile on his handsome face that spread to his dark magenta eyes. All in all, he gave the impression of a rather gentle individual.

And to Franco's mind, the man looked both good-natured and, more importantly, rich. He kept on talking politely with his regular customers, but all the while he kept his eyes on the man with the chestnut-brown hair. The man looked around the shop, then dropped his gaze down to the piece of paper in his hand before heading deeper inside. It seemed he was out shopping for somebody else. He stopped at a shelf filled with spices from northern Ishaan, then compared the label on a bottle with what was on his piece of paper. Once he'd confirmed they were the same, he took a few bottles.

He was a handsome man with a gentle smile and a mild demeanor. His expression was that of a person who had never had to doubt another human in their life. Together with the man's refined bearing, Franco pegged him as a married man from a good family, who had never known a day of struggle in his life.

He's a Storydian, but one who will be easy to trick...

Franco didn't much want to run his usual "mediating" shtick on a man who was not an immigrant, but this was far too good an opportunity to pass up.

The man slowly made his way to the counter, but stopped at the shelves filled with Eastern goods. He looked at them closely for a little while, perhaps taken by their rarity, then continued on towards the counter, where he placed the spice bottles.

"Could you ring those up for me, please?" he asked.

The man's tone of voice was just as gentle as his appearance.

"Welcome!" said Franco. "It is your first time here, yes?"

"Indeed it is. My wife asked me to stop by. She's rather busy today, so I'm here in her stead."

"Ah, then you are the husband of a regular here?"

"I don't know if she's a regular yet. She's come maybe once or twice."

This likely meant that she had not visited enough for Franco to ask her name. He ran through the faces of his female clientele as he told the man the price. The man then opened his wallet and took out a gold coin.

“I apologize, but I don’t have anything smaller on me. Do you have enough change for this?”

“But of course. Just a moment, please.”

The spices were not particularly expensive, and yet the man had brought forth a gold coin without a hint of hesitation. Franco’s keen eye also noticed other gold coins in the wallet—this was a man who was used to carrying large sums of money.

And what a fine customer he may well make.

If the man’s wife had already visited on a few occasions, then it was likely that she would be back again.

“Is your wife a Storydian?” asked Franco. “Everything you’ve purchased is from northern Ishaan. Do you know how to use these products?”

“My wife’s heritage stretches back to Ishaan. Her father hails from the region.”

“I see, I see. Then your father-in-law is an employee for a company in Ishaan?”

“Well, it’s more accurate to say he was a sailor than an employee. He passed away a few years ago, so the rest of the family returned to my mother-in-law’s home.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Franco subtly pulled information from the man while he wrapped the bottles. He found out that the man was a scholar from a wealthy Storydian family, and he made a living from the papers he wrote. His wife had left Tris at the age of nine, and now that she was back with her mother-in-law, she was still coming to grips with life in the city. The man, too, was so busy with his writing that he barely had the chance to leave his manor.

Smart, but not street-smart. Not bad for me.

Franco immediately placed the man on his internal list of VIP customers.

“The wine over there,” said the man, pointing at the Eastern goods. “It’s Eastern, is it not? Oh, I mean the bottle with the gold string tied around it. How

much is that?”

“Oh, that? That’s actually a seasoning, not a wine.”

“Really now? I received some from a fellow scholar a while back, and it was quite delicious. My wife enjoyed it too. Seeing it here feels...fortuitous.”

Not so long ago, a woman from the Yobai Trading Company had come to Casero to do an inspection. The bottles were of a seasoning called mirin, which the woman said Shiori would be coming to purchase. She’d also taken the opportunity to remind Franco that he should sell her the items at their correct prices. He didn’t know how the woman had found out, but she somehow knew that he’d been overpricing certain items.

Not that it mattered to him—he’d brushed the woman off and was intent on doing things the way he always had. After all, there was nowhere else to buy Eastern goods but Casero. Nobody would complain about paying a little more when he explained the import costs. Yes, at the time he’d shrunk considerably under Yae’s withering gaze, but that didn’t extinguish the self-conceit he felt as a self-made man who’d succeeded as a merchant in a foreign market.

Shiori had been easy to convince, and this man before him was exactly the same sort of person. Franco smiled at how fortunate he was that the man was fascinated by the Eastern goods, and told the man it cost double what it actually did. He was a man with money who clearly seemed to love his wife, and Franco was certain he wouldn’t mind paying a higher rate for her.

The man was surprised by the price, but nonetheless casually reached into his pocket for his wallet.

“That’s certainly higher than I was expecting,” he said.

“Well, yes, it’s more expensive than if you were to buy it in the capital. Getting it here incurs a few extra fees and such.”

“Yes, I understand. By the way, I can’t help wondering about that barrel. What is it? It seems very much like a northern Ishaan sauce my wife uses. I’d like to purchase it.”

Franco’s confidence soared. He had been “mediating” deals for many years now, and he’d never once been caught, but in this moment he forgot that

overconfidence invites one to lower their guard. Had he known better, he never would have tried to pull such a con over a Storydian citizen. Unfortunately for him, however, he had so completely underestimated who he was talking to that his greed took over, and when it did, Franco really put his foot in it.

"Oh, that. That there is two gold coins. Usually it's more expensive, but you're buying so much, I'm happy to discount it for you."

"Oh, what a surprise," said the man.

The moment Franco voiced the price of the barrel, the man's tone of voice changed instantly. Franco's eyes went wide, and he looked at the man more closely. There were no longer any traces of the meek and mild scholar from earlier. The man standing before him had a gaze so sharp it could likely murder someone, and his bearing was like that of a blade unsheathed—this was no scholar at all. This was a seasoned veteran of the battlefield.

"You're lying to me," the man said.

There was no kindness in his voice now—only the freezing cold of a coming blizzard.

"Even including travel expenses, this shouldn't be any more than a single gold coin, from what I hear," continued the man. "And from what Yae has told me herself, there should be bottles of soy sauce for sale too. And yet I don't see any on those shelves."

"Er..."

The man knew Yae, *and* he knew how much the Eastern goods cost. That meant that he was either working for Yobai in some way, or he was an inspector with the knights who had come due to some kind of report. Franco said nothing, choosing instead to watch the man carefully.

"Given your performance, I'd say you're used to doing this sort of thing," said the man. "And that would mean it's more than just Shiori you're hiking your prices up for."

He knew Shiori too! That meant he had to be her acquaintance. Or perhaps her lover. Or perhaps she was his mistress. The man *had* said that he was married, after all.

Franco laughed. Now that the man was here, everything fit into place for Franco. He knew why Shiori could pay the rates he asked—she was the mistress of a wealthy man, and that man gave her quite the sum of pocket money.

She looked so prim and proper to me, but in the end she'll resort to what she has to, huh?

Though Franco did admittedly feel like he was going to be crushed beneath the man's pressure, he stood tall. Yes, he wasn't exactly honest in his dealings, but he had not broken any laws. He had given his customers a price, and they had agreed to that price when they paid for their items. That was the long and short of it.

"I have tricked nobody," said Franco. "Yes, the prices may be higher than those in the royal capital. But these are the prices that I have set. Shiori accepted that. She accepted the prices and she paid them. Is that not a fair trade?"

The customers in the shop seemed to have caught wind that something was going on, and they began looking at Franco and the man at the counter. All of them were regulars, which meant they were all on Franco's side. If he made a commotion and told them all he was being falsely accused, he was confident that they'd jump in to protect him. Buoyed by this thought, Franco opened his mouth to speak, but was promptly cut off.

"If you raise your voice here," said the man in a low voice, "it will not end well for you."

"Why not?"

"Firstly, the mirin. That's already being sold at a bar in Tris, and at less than *half* what you charge. More and more people are buying it, and surely a merchant like you knows what that means?"

Franco was shocked, but he quickly got his regular customers to stand down by explaining that he was in the middle of a business discussion. He then invited the man behind the counter.

"Now, the other place stocks a lot more than you do, so that accounts for a difference in prices," continued the man. "But even then, your price is way too

high. Shiori's friends frequent that establishment, and sooner or later word would have gotten to her. She would have found out."

When the man told Franco the name of the bar, Franco realized that he knew it. The shop stocked liquor from all across the world, and was growing in popularity among the local citizenry. It was located in a popular spot near the edge of the second district, and word was that even wealthy nobles liked to visit. That bar was selling mirin at half the price that Franco was charging for it. There were a number of people who bought the product, and it was all too clear to Franco how they would feel if they found out about the difference in price—they'd think he was cheating them for being immigrants who didn't know any better. His reputation among the southerners, and as a merchant, would plummet.

"The Yobai Trading Company is growing its customer base beyond what you can imagine. Their clientele now includes esteemed noble families too. I can't tell you who, but I *can* tell you that they curry the favor of the margrave himself. They're also on good terms with Shiori and me. And not in the underhanded way that you're probably thinking of. I'm talking firm, friendly relationships."

"But that..."

Franco was no fool—he understood the meaning in each of the man's words. Franco had not committed any crimes while doing business. However, that did not mean it could be called fair or legitimate either. One small misstep, and he'd be committing fraud. If that happened, he'd be kicked out of the Merchant's Guild. Worse still, if the domain lord got involved, he might even be kicked out of the city. And the domain lord was no countryside noble—he was the Torisval Margrave, a man with the same authority as the duke.

Realizing what it would mean if word of his "mediations" leaked to the city's powerful, Franco shivered.

"Do not *ever* underestimate a person's connections. You have no idea how people are connected."

Franco had looked down on Shiori as a lonely immigrant who didn't know any better, but now he knew that she had friends in very high places. She was

connected to nobles who held sway over his very existence in this place.

“I can see that everyone here looks up to you. Your business is clearly thriving. You don’t have to resort to price hikes or dirty tricks—you’ve already carved out a place for yourself here.”

The man’s voice softened somewhat—he was no longer intending to criticize Franco.

“Or do you need a hit to your sparkling ‘kindly merchant of the people’ image before you’ll turn over a new leaf?”

Franco shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Enough is enough.”

He had always known that if he continued for long enough, the truth would come to light. He had started small, thinking of his price hikes as loans without interest, but then, little by little, the prices had grown. He could not stop himself, and as a result, this man had seen right through him. No—the man had known, right from the start, what Franco was up to.

“Are you going to take me in, then? I will not run, and I will not hide. I have my pride.”

Franco knew that things would not simply be swept under the rug—not with the amount of money that he had accumulated. He’d saved enough that he really could start considering whether to buy the building his shop was in. Now he would have to pay back all the extra that he had taken.

To Franco’s surprise, however, the man shook his head.

“If you promise to never do this again, then I won’t pursue things any further. Shiori said she doesn’t want things blowing up, anyway.”

“Oh, but...”

“Look, she has her own thoughts on the matter, but in the end it all comes down to you and what you do about the people that you’ve duped.”

Franco hadn’t started out like this. He wasn’t a bad person at heart, and so he made up his mind. He knew he was being given an opportunity here—the man had kept his voice low so as not to let their conversation reach the ears of the

other customers, Shiori wanted things kept quiet, and so Franco's business would not be the subject of investigation. For Franco, there was no other choice left—he would live his life from here on out with honesty and integrity.

"I will apologize to everyone," he said. "Some people have passed away, and some I can no longer contact, but I'll do my utmost. If not the person themselves, then at the very least their families."

And however they responded to his apologies, Franco would simply have to shoulder it. The man at his shop had been considerate, but the regulars would talk and rumors would spread. Franco knew he would have to take it all on the chin.

"This will put great strain on my family..." muttered Franco.

"Well, that can't be helped. That, too, comes down to you."

Franco knew that his actions might cause discomfort or even harm to those closest to him. But when you lived a life connected to others, that was the price you paid when you dirtied your hands with such deeds. And yet, Franco was fortunate to have realized that at this point in his life. Later, he would look back at this time and be grateful that he had come to this realization and been able to survive without losing too much.

If Franco did not mend his ways now, then it would be exactly as the man said—word of his price hikes would eventually reach the bar. And it was not just Shiori's friend who frequented that particular bar, but also some of Casero's regular customers. They weren't directly connected to Franco, but they knew of him as influential in his sphere of sales. The bar and Casero shared a similar customer base, and Casero was now big enough that it was often the subject of conversation among the bar's clientele.

Franco was astonished to later find out that one of his regular customers had, in fact, tasted mirin. It came up in passing, and it turned Franco pale. He realized then that if the man had not come to his store, he could have gone on believing he was the only seller of it. He knew that he would have charged Shiori even more than he did for the soy sauce. But at some point she would have found out, and the stark difference in prices surely would have led to her talking to her friends about it. What was once a problem between just two

individuals would have suddenly turned into something many knew about—many influential types visited that bar, as did Franco's own friends in the Merchant's Guild.

This man's visit to Casero, then, was for Franco—and more importantly, his life—a true fork in the road. He took a deep breath, got his bearing, and looked at the man with chestnut-brown hair. The man had handsome features, a sharp gaze, and eyes of a unique dark magenta.

"Who *are* you?" asked Franco. "You're no ordinary scholar, that's for sure."

The man laughed.

"I'm an adventurer, and Shiori's partner. And one day, I'm going to make her my wife."

"One day...? But you told me you're married."

"All part of the act. As was everything else I told you. The only one for me is Shiori."

In other words, the man was no scholar, and he had lied about having a wife from northern Ishaan. Franco could do little more than let out a defeated chuckle.

"You got me hook, line, and sinker."

"Make sure you don't repeat your past mistakes. You're essentially getting off scot-free now. Live yourself a good, honest life."

"I will."

The man then left with a wave, and Franco watched him go. A few regulars approached with some apprehension to ask what had happened, but Franco merely chuckled.

"It was a complaint, and I was in the wrong," he said. "He forgave me this time around, so now it's up to me to make sure it doesn't happen again."

On that day, Casero Franco began life anew, and was reborn as a truly honest merchant. His business expanded to the point that he had several stores across the kingdom of Storydia. In his later years, he would make the following

statement during a newspaper interview.

“One must never make light of an individual’s connections. Even those who may at first appear to be alone almost always have friends. And should you choose to make light of such people and their relationships, you will one day pay for it. That much is a certainty.”

Even when one appeared to be the most insignificant of individuals, they could one day become your customer. They could even be someone important to one of your customers. And though such people might have no direct dealings with you personally, the words they speak could nonetheless sway the fortunes of your business.

“Connections with others beget further connections, and from these, strong bonds and relationships are formed.”

The saying was something Franco repeated often, sometimes as a cautionary tale—he himself had once not paid his customers enough respect, and for his lack of care, he had lost both friends and a good chunk of the reputation he had struggled to build.

“Once—and this is a true story—I looked down upon a customer who was in fact a person of great importance. I did not realize just how important she was until much, much later, but it turned out she was the lover of a most extraordinary individual, and she later became his wife. Just thinking about it makes my blood run cold. But that same customer? Well, I am glad to say that I still do business with her.”

And it was here, as Franco reveled in the past, that his interview came to an end.

Interlude 2: The Diary of Pel, the Familiar

■ January XX

It’s been two months since I came to the castle. I’ve made so many friends, learned so many things, and every day is a blast!

I even learned how to read some human letters. Back at the Blue Forest, we’d

go and play at the human village, and I always liked looking at the signs and the newspapers that people had dropped on the ground. Looking at all the letters was fun. When you can't communicate long-range the way we slimes do, being able to contact people far away with letters and words sure is important.

Recently I've been reading picture books with Kjerstin, Olivier's daughter and the youngest of his children. I really like it. Kjerstin told me she can already write some letters. I wonder if I could learn to write them too?

■ January XX

Today was a free day for me, so I went for a wander around the castle. I decided to go visit a knight that I became friends with recently. When I got to him, he was already talking to another knight on patrol. I didn't want to get in the way, so I was happy just to listen.

"And the ri-dick-ulous crime?"

"Oh, the indecent exposure? No objections. He came along nice and quiet."

I wasn't sure what they were on about, but it turned out they were talking about the guy whose clothes I'd melted. That's called indecent exposure. The knights at the jail, they like to call it the "ri-dick-ulous crime." I don't really get it, but it sure has a funny ring to it!

"Gotta say, though, I feel really sorry for the guy. Not easy going through something so traumadick—excuse me, traumat*ic*, *and* having your daughter hate your guts."

"Yeah. The naked guy who tried to assault the king. He's the talk of the town."

"And talk spreads *fast*."

Looks like the stories of my first good deed are focused on a detail I hadn't expected. Then again, it seems like the guy is nice and placid now—he listens to the people who visit from the Cathedral, and he spends most of his time reading.

Seems like he's learned his lesson, but he better not do anything bad again!

■ January XX

Today, Edvard had a request for me.

“Look, it’s about your ri-dick-ulous...ugh, I mean, the way you’re handling intruders. Could you *not* melt their clothes? I mean, it’s still freezing out there, and I mean...it’s such a wretched way to go down, you know?”

Apparently, nakedness isn’t something you just bust out and show people—it’s a private thing. No matter how bad a person is, we still owe them a little dignity. Well, that’s what Edvard said.

But depending on what’s going on, and if things look tough, I might still bust out the melting for *half* a person’s clothing!

“I get the strong sense my message hasn’t gotten through to you...” muttered Edvard.

But he didn’t know what he was talking about. I understood just fine!

■ January XX

A letter came from Olivier’s brother, Alec. Olivier read the whole thing in silence, then he pulled this strange face filled with a quiet joy. Alec said he wants to talk things through with Olivier, and some woman that he used to be very close to. I don’t know the details, but things were really hard for Alec, and he never got to talk to them properly before he left, and that’s been weighing on his mind ever since.

“Back then, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him how I really felt either,” Olivier said. “I thought that if I did, I would only have made him feel worse. It really was a chaotic time, and all of us were carrying much more than anyone could handle. But to think that he has let this plague him for all this time... I’ve always wished that I’d been more open with him. If only I’d told him how I felt, and encouraged him in his decision...”

Rurii tells me that humans are complicated creatures. Couldn’t agree more! Compared to slimes, human thoughts are really complex. So complex that sometimes they don’t always understand each other.

Boy, I sure hope that they can have a great big talk, feel better, and then be happy!

■ February ⅩⅩ

Cecilia gave me some snacks. They were specialty familiar treats made by some place called the Enandel Trading Company. They're the snacks that Rurii says are awesome. And Rurii was right—I couldn't believe how tasty they were! They were sweet and full of flower nectar, but they also had a rich and dense texture. Delicious!

Apparently there's even stuff like smoked Alphan bison meat and horned hare bone, and Cecilia said that if I'm a good slime, she'll give me more!

I. Am. *So.* Excited!

I am going to be the *best* slime!

■ February ⅩⅩ

Today was a day off from work. I went to the sewers to visit The Madam, and there was this green slime with her whom I'd never met. It was a bit different from the slimes in the Blue Forest. The green slime is one of the sewer slimes, and it spends its days traveling the lands and teaching its kin about what it sees and hears on its journeys.

The wandering slime taught me all sorts of things. It told me about the delicious food it ate on its travels, the beautiful things it saw, and the fun it had. Like I said, all sorts of stuff!

The wandering slime knows Rurii too! They ate a snow bear together. That sounds so awesome. I've eaten snow bear once before and it was so good—the meat is rich and packed with flavor. The green slime said that snow jellyfish aren't tasty at all. We don't have those in the Blue Forest, so I was pretty intrigued.

After we talked for a while, the wandering slime set off on another journey. It said it's going to the sea this time, where there are lots of delicious fish and rare magical beasts. Sometimes they serve seafood at the castle and it's really tasty

—it even smells a bit like the ocean. Olivier is planning a visit to a fishing port, so I hope we get to eat some seafood!

■ February ⅩⅩ

Today was a day where all the castle's important people get together to discuss matters of state, and Olivier watches over it.

"Today the focus is on the younger civil servants, so I'm looking forward to hearing what kind of new and refreshing ideas they might bring up," he said.

Olivier said that the castle is full of people stuck in the past and people focused only on their own personal success. He said it's important to listen to what young people have to say so you don't get stuck in your ways.

Super interesting!

As Olivier's familiar and his protection, I attended the meeting with him. A few of the attendees were shocked to see me, but they had nothing to be worried about—it wasn't like I was going to butt in to say something!

But the discussion itself? Wow, it was pretty hard to follow.

"Let us *comenzar* our meeting. First, I'd like to *determinar* the *articulos importante* on our agenda," said one.

"In regards to this *proyecto particular*, each division will have to *adaptarse a la situacion*, and ensure a *consenso* is reached for each *articulo* as it arises..." said another.

"Following this *documento*, we need to *clarificar* the *evidencia* and *verificar* each *sistema*..." interjected another.

I, uh...I didn't have the faintest idea what any of them said. Olivier is never one to let his feelings show on his face while at work, but he looked especially exhausted. Perhaps work has been too hectic for him of late?

"It's all the rage these days to add some foreign-language flair into conversation," he said. "Yes, it certainly adds some color, but it's not especially easy to understand, and I wish they'd hold back a little during meetings like this. Sometimes they don't even use the words correctly, and it's utterly unbearable.

What makes it worse is that many of them have very good ideas...”

Some of the younger civil servants went out of their way to choose especially difficult words to look intelligent. But if you ask me, it doesn’t make any sense if nobody knows what you’re even saying. Even Edvard sometimes barks at the people working with him, and he’s all like, “Just report it to me straight, as concisely as you can!”

■ February XX

Today was the last day of the month, and Olivier was *busy*. I tried to stay up until he finished, but at some point I must have dozed off. I had this awesome dream about playing tag with all the people in the castle, but then I got woken up by all this commotion around me.

It was another letter from Alec, and Olivier was so happy that his heart hurt just reading it. Boy oh boy, I was so glad it wasn’t some kind of strange sickness, but how do you even feel joy to the point that your heart hurts, anyway?

“Alec wants to return to the family in an official capacity,” Olivier said. “And he’s serious. He said that once he’s ready, he’ll take Shiori as his wife, and go by his proper name.”

Alec has been through all sorts of trials and tribulations, and so he’s had to hide his name and identity for a long time. But he said that when he gets clear of what’s holding him back, he’ll quit hiding and return to where he belongs.

Wow. I know that Alec and Shiori are Rurii’s really important friends, and when friends of my friends are happy, I’m happy too. And seeing my best friend Olivier so happy filled me with joy!

Oh yeah, I also heard from the slimes in the Blue Forest that the snow wolves gave birth to their pups safely. There’s just *so* much to enjoy and be happy for! It really is wonderful!

Interlude 2: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ February XX

I went to see Nils's familiar, Eir. That Alraune was as lazy as ever. But Eir said that it's making more friends and enjoying itself a lot. Even bragged to me that girls were calling it adorable. They say that Eir is a bit creepy, but its human gestures are just too cute.

Nils gave me some food at snack time. They were cookies sold near the Cathedral and stamped with the saint's seal. They were so good—all packed with butter and honey. They were delicious like Shiori's cookies, and really tasty. It was bliss. Thanks, Nils!

Eir can't eat snacks. It can drink, but it can't eat. I don't really get it.

"You can't eat with those feelers of yours?" I asked.

"I'm not a slime. Quit asking the impossible," Eir said.

As for that mouthlike thing it makes sounds with, Eir said it's simply an organ that produces sound.

Well, uh...the more you know, huh?

■ February XX

Today, Alec asked me to go with him to the Enandel Trading Company. He told me he wants to get a present made for his younger brother—a knapsack that can fit a Blue Forest slime in it. So like an exclusive slime knapsack!

I figured that, given the inspiration, a slime-patterned knapsack might work, but Alec wanted to make one from proper magical beast hide.

The shop assistant couldn't believe what Alec was asking him. He actually had to make Alec clarify a few times because he thought he'd misheard the request. It was pretty funny. Sometimes people make small bags for their familiars, but this was the first time that anyone had asked for a slime knapsack.

After they measured my body, I got some snacks—some Enandel baked treats! I just can't get enough of them, no matter how many I eat! Pel likes them too. I wonder if I can bring some of them back with me next time I visit the Blue Forest. I'm going to ask Shiori about it!

Once we were done at Enandel, Alec told me he'd buy me whatever I wanted

as a reward. He said *anything*, so it was a really hard decision. I mean there was the Enandel treats, the other familiar foods, and then the food stall fare... I wobbled with such indecision that Alec couldn't help but laugh at me.

In the end, I went with some Enandel familiar juice, and then some skewered Alphan bison meat from a food stall. It was all so good!

Thanks, Alec!

■ February XX

Letters arrived for Alec and Shiori. Alec's was from his brother, and Shiori's was from Annelie. Alec had written to his brother saying he wanted to talk to both his brother and a woman he'd broken up with long ago. The letter was a reply, and Alec was pretty nervous about it, but fortunately it was good news. Yay!

As for Annelie's letter, she said she would be visiting Torisval again. She'd met someone through work of some kind, and that person wants to meet Shiori. Apparently they're Eastern, just like Shiori, but Shiori looked really anxious about it all.

Shiori, are you okay?

■ February XX

So I got really curious about why Pel's friend wanted to carry Pel around in a knapsack, so I sent a message to them through my kin at the Blue Forest. I thought it was all about playing hide-and-seek, but turns out I was wrong. Pel's friend is the king, and he sometimes goes out all stealth-like. If he's got Pel walking alongside him when he goes out like that, they're going to stand out! There's no other blond-haired man walking around with a peach-colored slime but the king, you see. So, he wants a knapsack.

I guess it ain't easy having powerful friends.

■ February XX Noon

Annelie and Dennis came to Tris. I was glad to see them both looking so well. They were with the Easterner. I was a bit surprised by the Easterner's unique clothing, but what surprised me even more was how much her bearing reminded me of Shiori. Her skin and hair color were the same too.

The Easterner's name is Yae, and she was curious as to whether or not Shiori was an Easterner, because Shiori's appearance and name are very much like those in Mizuho, Yae's home country. But according to Shiori, she's from somewhere else entirely.

Which makes sense, I guess. Shiori *did* say she was from another world. I mean, I don't really care where she comes from, but I don't know about everyone else. Maybe it would be a big shock for them. I guess that's what Shiori is most worried about.

Yae invited Shiori to come back with her to Mizuho. One of her jobs is traveling the world and helping out fellow Easterners in need of help. She was really worried about Shiori. She's good people, as they say. But something was off about Shiori, and had been all day. It was so worrying that everyone finished their meeting early to give her some space.

I was wondering if she'd be okay, but actually she wasn't okay at all. Meeting Yae made it crystal clear to her that she really wasn't from this world after all, and the shock of it all brought her to tears. That's been weighing on her really heavily for the longest time. She was always worried that if she ever told Alec and Zack the truth, that they'd come to hate her.

When Shiori is sad, that makes me sad too, but everything worked out okay. Zack and Alec were shocked, sure, but they didn't hate her. And like I give a damn where she comes from, anyway! It's all going to be okay, Shiori! Don't cry!

Then Alec told Shiori to just let it all out, and cry a river if she wanted.

And now I get it. When humans are sad, they're the type of creature to hold it in. Old gramps in the sewers told me that it's actually better for their bodies if humans cry when things are really bad. And Shiori had been holding a *lot* in, so I hope all that crying makes her feel better.

But I tell you, that Alec? Talk about a trustworthy, stand-up guy. He knows

exactly what Shiori needs to hear. I guess that's because of how closely he watches her.

■ February XX Evening

Zack came to the apartment tonight. He said he wanted to hear more about Shiori's past. I mean, she cried and she *did* look like she was feeling better, but I was pretty worried, to be honest. Alec was the same. But I think we both knew that Zack wasn't going to go hard on Shiori, and anyway, Zack believes her.

They all talked a lot over dinner, and I got to hear about Alec and Zack's past too. Everyone's been through so much. I mean me, as a slime, things have been free and easy my whole life, and I've never had to go through any really hard times. Listening to Shiori and the others reminded me of just how hard humans have it sometimes. Come to think of it, the snow wolves said that they group together and live in packs because it increases their chances of survival, but boy, do they have to deal with all sorts of annoying relationship stuff because of it.

After everything that Alec, Shiori, and Zack have been through, I hope lots of really good things are in store for them from here on out.

■ February XX

Today we went on an expedition with the two Easterners from Mizuho. Yae was looking for a particular flower that apparently grows in a cave near Dima. She's been looking for it for ages. But she really, really wants it, and she can't stand the idea of not finding it, so she hired a bunch of adventurers to help her out. That's why Nadia and Clemens came with us. We're so strong, not even a dragon could stop us!

When we got to Dima we saw the knight Fanny again. She came with us to take down some carrion crawlers before, and it was awesome to see her looking brighter than last time we met.

But I tell you, that cavern? That was rough. It was like magical beasts jumped out at us every couple of steps, and I got totally sick of eating bugs. That said, I did like all the different mushrooms. Delicious!

Well, except for the mushroom that was growing from that bear's head. That was disgusting. I wonder what it feels like when a mushroom parasite gets a hold of you and controls you? The adventurers said that the mushroom gets inside of its host and makes it grow more mushrooms. Talk about freaky. So freaky that, once they killed the bear, Shiori was really careful about sterilizing it and burying it super deep in the ground.

So the caverns were a hard time for all of us, but it was all worth it in the end—Yae found her flower, and we gathered some delicious mushrooms. Everyone was happy on the way home. Yeah, it was hard, but I think we all came out of it better for the experience.

But hey, want to hear something interesting? Recently, rumors have been spreading about Shiori. One of the is grodas was all like, "Washing and boiling a magical beast is one thing, but chili oil? That's on another level..."

I understand what it was trying to say...and I tried to tell it that we were in a do-or-die situation...but I hope they can all forgive her...

■ February XX

Today, everyone got together for a cooking class for Yae. She said she wanted Shiori to teach her some recipes because she wants to know more about Shiori's cooking. Shiori uses Eastern spices and sauces in meals that Storydians really enjoy.

Everything they made was totally delicious. They used some ingredients that were a bit unique so not everyone liked everything, but Shiori was happy anyway because it gave her great feedback for the future. That makes sense to me. I mean, you need lots of opinions if you want to make even more delicious dishes, I guess. I wish I could speak so I could have shared my opinion, but to me it was *all* good, so my opinion probably wouldn't have been very helpful...

But apparently, a merchant has been selling Shiori overpriced soy sauce and totally ripping her off, and I will not let that stand. I was shocked. He didn't look like a bad guy when I met him. I was going to give him a nice black bug present the next time I saw him. Humans hate them, so I was sure it would give him a good fright. I was even going to pick a really big one straight from the sewers

too.

Unfortunately, old gramps told me to knock it off. He said that it's bad news when people find bugs in shops that sell food. On the bright side, Alec went to visit the guy to "have a little chat." I don't know what they chatted about, but the guy apparently turned over a new leaf, so I guess it's a happy ending?

Anyway, back to the cooking class. Shonosuke totally looks like a completely different person when he eats. He's always got this expression that's a bit hard to read, but whenever he's eating, he's all smiles. And he smiled even more when he got to bring some of the food home with him, and you could see his topknot wagging almost like a happy little puppy dog. But why does the guy always smell like butter and garlic? Yae says it's because he likes it so much, but he must *love* it if the scent is drifting from him.

■ February XX

Today I had a special request to handle from the Tris Orphanage. It was a bug extermination request. There aren't as many of them in the winter, but they're still around. The kids hate them, and they let out screams and run for their lives as soon as they spot a bug.

Toby always says, "They're just bugs!" That's everyone's big brother for you. Strong and reliable, and everybody likes him. He left the orphanage last month because he's an adventurer now, but he sometimes still visits. The kids love it when he does, which is awesome!

I went through the kitchen, the bath, and the bedrooms, and for all my hard work, Jens invited me to a tea party with all the kids. I got to play with all of them and eat delicious snacks made at the monastery, and I had a great time.

On my way out, Jens told me that he wished he had a slime like me at the orphanage. He said that the more shy and apprehensive kids smile more when I'm around. In other countries there's a thing called pet therapy, and it's been getting some attention even in Storydia. They say that when people spend time with a cute animal or magical beast, it's soothing and healing for their bodies and minds.

And you know, the orphanage is full of kids that come from complicated

circumstances. Maybe I should talk to the slimes back home and see if anyone wants to help out. I've heard that more of them are getting curious about living with humans because of the stories they hear from Pel and me. And all the slimes love it when fun and happiness is involved!

"If you could introduce me to a fellow slime, I'd be most indebted," Jens said.

Leave it to me! I'll ask around!

■ February ⅩⅩ

Today, Shiori was called to meet with the margrave. He's Zack's friend, and he's also friends with Pel's friend, the king. All the same, Alec isn't super comfortable around him—he said he owes the guy a great debt, so it's hard to face him. That surprised me—I didn't expect that from Alec.

"You were just thinking something rude right now, weren't you?" Alec said.

Nope, I wobbled. *Just your imagination.*

Kristoffer—that's the margrave's name—wanted to hear more about the world that Shiori came from. He didn't strike me as a bad guy, but I felt like he wasn't the sort of person to underestimate either. He wanted to make sure that it was okay for Alec to be with Shiori.

They talked a lot, and Shiori showed a whole bunch of different illusions. She showed her home, and the foods there, and it was so much fun seeing all the different creatures. There's all these buildings and things you can ride and food I've never seen before! It's a world where you can do all sorts of things that aren't possible in this one, and Shiori said people have even been to the moon! And in her world, they even went to really faraway planets—but it wasn't people, it was just ships. What the heck? That's awesome! Shiori showed us the moon and the stars and the planet she lived on, and it was really quiet and beautiful. It looked great. I'd really like to visit someday!

Kristoffer watched Shiori very closely while they talked, but in the end he accepted her. Putting aside whether he believed her or not, I got the sense that he didn't think she was lying. The reaction was a bit complicated for me to understand, but at least he accepted her, right?

At the end, Kristoffer wanted to talk to Shiori alone. He told Alec and Zack that he didn't want them listening in, and they weren't too happy about it. But they didn't have to worry—I was ready to protect Shiori if anything happened! Kristoffer looked super strong, so I don't know if I would have won, but if it came down to it, I'd whip out the Pel special and hit Kristoffer with the ri-dick-ulous crime, as it's called.

Kristoffer asked Shiori a really tough question, but he said he had to—Alec is like a little brother to him, and he doesn't want to see the guy hurt again. I can relate to that. Nobody wants to see the people they care about suffer. But I think he was also testing Shiori's resolve, and Shiori knew it, so she answered him truthfully. I was so shocked, though—Shiori said that if she can't be mates with Alec, then she wants Kristoffer to find a peaceful way to kill her. She said she'll keep Alec in her heart always, and her soul will return home.

I was just... I was so sad when I heard that. But I think I'd have to go with her if she left. Humans have all sorts of complicated circumstances to deal with, and I've learned that sometimes there's so much they're powerless to stop. So if something like that happened to Shiori, I'd want to be there with her.

Kristoffer was just as shocked as I was. Alec and Zack saw Shiori crying, and they quickly ran over. But it seemed like Shiori's answer was the right one. I'm really glad to see her keep making new allies. If Alec and Shiori are surrounded by trustworthy people, they'll be able to become mates, and then they'll be really happy all the time. Even now when they cuddle they look really happy. My friends are happy, and seeing them happy makes me happy.

We slimes love having fun and happy times, so it'll be a real feast for me!

Part 3: The Brothers Holewa

1

“Oh, Yae said she’d help us out,” said Shiori. “I’m so relieved.”

The envelope in Shiori’s hand smelled faintly of plums, and Shiori let out a sigh as she read aloud the letter from Yae.

“That’s good news,” replied Alec with a smile, reading over her shoulder. “That means we’ll be able to say your invention came by way of an eastern nation.”

“Yep.”

Now that she had decided to mass-produce her freeze-dried portable foods, there was no way for Shiori to avoid questions regarding where the technology had originated. More importantly, Shiori didn’t think it was wise to keep this information from the Enandel Trading Company, who were proposing a partnership. Upon discussing things with the margrave, Shiori had started reading everything she could about current advancements in preserved foods. Then she’d discovered something similar to freeze-dried shimi-dofu in the apology package that Yae had given her. Though the process was slightly different from Shiori’s own, this made her wonder if perhaps similar methods existed in Storydia.

Fortunately for her, they did. Through her research, Shiori discovered that a fishing village in the Storydian south had a traditional preserved food which, it turned out, had been invented by a lazy mage. The village had used to freeze fish slowly during the coldest part of the winter, but this particular mage—who was assisting with the preparations—decided that the old way was far too troublesome, and ended up freezing the fish in an instant with his magic. The fishermen had at first been enraged by the haphazard treatment of their produce, but upon thawing the result, had discovered that the new method resulted in fresher and better-tasting produce.

Even with the existence of magic and a different ecosystem, people in this

world still went about their lives in a way not dissimilar from the way people lived in Shiori's own home world—so here, too, a sort of precursor to freeze-dried foods existed. If Shiori were to explain that her own freeze-dried foods were inspired by these forerunners—and originated in Eastern processing methods—then it would no longer strike anyone as a mysterious and unknown technology.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Shiori had written to Yae asking for her help, and sent it via express post. She explained that, due to her unique circumstances, she wanted to give the impression that the technology she had devised was of Eastern origin. Yae had agreed after setting a few simple conditions. Shiori could not yet make a decision about everything herself, but Alec assured her it was just a matter of negotiation.

"Are you feeling a little better?" he asked.

"Yes. I think things will...*probably*...be fine."

"Great, then we can settle everything else when we talk to the Enandel Trading Company. Let's ask Clemens about it."

Clemens Theydon—real name Clemens Holewa—was a member of the family that managed one of the royal capital's most storied trading companies, Holewa and Co. The Enandel Trading Company was an offshoot of the main brand, and was currently managed by Clemens's younger brother. Knowing how complicated Shiori's circumstances were, Clemens had offered to make contact with his brother on her behalf.

Shiori had next to no experience in trade and bargaining, and she was no good as a deal maker. If she was honest with herself, actually, she was awful at it. But this was exactly why Alec and Clemens were going with her—their role was to make up for her weaknesses. And thanks to a recommendation from none other than the Torisval Margrave Kristoffer Osbring himself, both men believed that the contract would come together easily and that their meeting with Enandel would be more or less a formality.

All of that said, Holewa was nonetheless one of—if not *the*—leading trading companies in all of Storydia, and the people who ran it were born merchants. Alec thus took it upon himself to handle the more minute negotiations so as to

ensure that Shiori was not taken advantage of. All Shiori had to do, then, was prepare any necessary documentation.

“I feel awful that you’re helping me out so much...” Shiori muttered.

Alec pulled the worried Shiori in close and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“Don’t worry about a thing. You help us out just as much in so many other ways. It’s all just give and take.”

All the same, Shiori let out a pained sigh. She just couldn’t help feeling that what she did on an everyday basis and what Alec and Clemens were doing for her were two very different things.

“When Zack first introduced you to me, he said that you were the reason that the Tris Adventurers’ Guild had such a high success rate when it came to especially difficult requests,” said Alec, looking straight into Shiori’s eyes. “Even now, you can look at the guild records and see that that’s still true.”

“Alec...”

“People like Clemens and me, we fight on the front lines, but we can do that because you and the other support classes back us up. And it’s thanks to having a housekeeping mage that we can fight at full power, and use all of our abilities to ensure that we return home safely.”

Until Shiori had come along, the idea of making an expedition comfortable had been a secondary priority for adventurers. The long-standing belief had been that adventurers should have the stamina to carry enough food and water for the whole time they’d be away. But the concept of the housekeeping mage had turned this idea on its head. Nobody could believe that success rates would change so drastically when adventurers were provided with clean clothes, regular nutritional meals, and a decent place to sleep. But there was no denying that, with such creature comforts, adventuring parties were able to go further and fighter harder. Alec firmly believed that Shiori’s work in the guild was the reason it had such a sterling record.

“People are seeing our work and success in Tris, and they want to become housekeeping mages themselves. There are even those who can’t fight due to injuries but see a path back into the fold through learning the ways of the

housekeeping mage. You worked yourself to the bone to develop your skills, and now you want to share those skills with people. Do that, and the success rates of Adventurers' Guilds everywhere will rise even further. You've done so much already, but you're going to do so much more. So you don't have to worry about Clemens and me helping you out with something like this. Don't you worry about a thing."

"Thank you, Alec. I'm grateful for your help."

Alec smiled down at Shiori, and gently kissed her eyelid.

2

The Tris branch of the Enandel Trading Company, located in the Second District, was a huge building that boasted five stories and a basement level. It was fully equipped with a circuit for carriages, parking, and a stable so that customers could take test rides. The basement was used as a storehouse, while the first to third floors acted as a storefront. The fourth floor was an office complete with meeting rooms, and the fifth floor contained living spaces for the manager and employees.

Given the sheer amount of adventuring equipment on offer, it was no surprise to see well-equipped adventurers coming and going often, but all the same, Shiori was tense with nerves as she arrived at the fourth floor—a place which was usually off-limits to walk-in customers.

The fourth floor was noticeably different from the three below it. The interior decoration had an elegance to it that made one think of a noble manor, and the private staircase that led up to it—which could not be accessed from the lower floors—made it clear that it was designed for a different class of patron.

Alec wasn't bothered by any of this in the slightest; he was clearly used to it. Naturally, this was also the case for Clemens, and—though this probably went without saying—Rurii as well. The whole place made Shiori acutely aware that she was just a simple commoner, and she wondered if she would ever get used to such environments. As a member of the royal family, Alec was more than accustomed to this type of extravagance, even though he'd lived the majority of

his life as a commoner and was more in tune with that lifestyle than any other. When she brought this up with him, he told her that it was just a matter of experiencing such places more often.

After B-rank, there's more work with the upper classes, so I guess this isn't anything special if I think of it like that.

In any case, as Clemens opened a set of thick doors and gestured for her to enter, that was what Shiori told herself to keep from feeling completely overwhelmed.

The doors opened to an antechamber that also acted as a gallery, decorated with paintings by famous artists, an elegant sofa, and evenly spaced potted plants. It felt especially designed to welcome those in the upper classes.

Inside was a man with a head of silver hair, who flashed a welcoming smile as he walked over to greet them. This had to be Clemens's younger brother—though the color of their skin and eyes differed, their hair and the shapes of their faces were alike. Clemens's skin differed from his brother's in that he was more tanned, but it seemed he'd inherited the darker skin of his great-grandmother, the daughter of a merchant from a southern nation. His great-grandmother, too, had been a woman of striking beauty.

"Long time no see, Clem," said the man.

"I'm glad to see you looking well, Paul."

"Thank you. It's been a while, Alec. How long, do you think? Four, five years?"

Paul and Alec shared a firm handshake and a smile.

"I think the last time we met was about five years ago," replied Alec. "Time flies."

"That it does. These days I fear even the arrival of my own birthday. Oh, by the way, we've finished the test stitching on the item you requested. Would you like to try it on after our meeting?"

"Wow, that was quick. Yes, definitely."

Clemens and Paul met once or twice a year, and were on good terms. As for Alec, he had known Paul since Enandel's establishment, and so the two were

close acquaintances. Alec hadn't told either of them that he was a member of the royal family, and they'd never met at the castle. That said, Alec had told Shiori that Clemens already knew—he simply remained silent out of kindness.

"He and Zack have been with me ever since I started as an adventurer," Alec had said. "Clemens has long known about Zack's ties to the royal family, and even though Clemens and I were introduced a while after I fled, Clemens had to have realized—I was a chestnut-haired boy with dark magenta eyes, introduced by way of Zack, after all."

Alec had chuckled at the thought. After all, Clemens had never said a thing about Alec's past, and had gone on treating him like an ordinary friend. It was a sign of the trust between them—theirs was a bond that surpassed the need for such revelations.

"And you must be today's guest of honor..." said Paul, turning to Shiori with a smile.

Paul's smile was not breathtaking like his brother's, but bright and cordial. Though Paul and Clemens shared the same features, the impression they gave was quite different. When they were together you could see they were related, but if you met them apart, you might never have thought the two men were brothers.

"I am Shiori Izumi. Thank you ever so much for making time for me today."

"I'm Paul Holewa, the director of Enandel Trading Company. And really, I should be the one thanking you—when I heard what you wanted to discuss, I rushed here from the royal capital as quickly as I could."

He put his hand out and Shiori shook it.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Paul said.

He made the handshake feel like the most natural thing in the world, but the gesture was also a statement—he was not treating her like a lady, but rather as an equal. This brought a smile to Shiori's face.

"This is our director of development, Knut," Paul continued, gesturing to a man with pale blond hair.

The man wore glasses and looked a touch neurotic, but he tried his best to smile and nodded politely.

“I am Knut Ahlqvist,” he said. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The man looked rather awkward and self-conscious, which left Shiori blinking in surprise. With a slightly pained smile, he reached out politely for a handshake.

“Please be at ease,” he added. “I don’t mean this to be rude, but I’m relieved to see that we’re of the same stock, so to speak. I’ve been called to business meetings countless times, and I’m rather uncomfortable talking to many of our more esteemed clientele.”

Born and raised as a commoner, Knut had originally run his own magical goods shop, but afterwards Enandel had snapped him up at the time of its establishment. He proceeded to admit sheepishly that he much preferred researching and developing ideas with his coworkers than talking with the company’s customers and clients.

Knut’s introduction helped Shiori to relax, and they all made their way to a conference room with a venetian-red floor and an elegant wallpaper decorated with designs of plant life. All the furniture was upholstered in a way that was warm and in sync with the room, making it feel as comfortable as one’s living room.

“This room was once the salon for a wealthy man’s wife,” said Paul, making small talk.

He went on to explain that the top floors of the building, which were the most difficult to get to, were originally reserved for the servants, but the lady of the house had wanted a room with a view, and this had come to be her favorite place.

They sat down on comfortable sofas, and tea and sweets were served without so much as a sound. When the servants had all left, Paul gestured for them all to help themselves to the tea, then got down to business.

“Well then, I hope you don’t mind me getting straight to it—our trading company would be delighted to accept your freeze-dried foods as part of our

product line. The samples you sent before this meeting were truly intriguing. Why, they're so well made that it's hard to believe they're preserved foods at all. If we start stocking these, it will truly expand the food options available to adventurers across the country."

Shiori had sent some samples of her portable foods prior to this meeting, and they'd been met with high praise. There were still a few hurdles to clear before the product could be brought to market, but everyone at Enandel wanted to move forward.

"However, you also mentioned that, as a condition of sharing your freeze-dried methods, you wish to make the information open to the public after a year of exclusivity. Should I assume that your thoughts regarding this remain unchanged?"

"Yes."

"This is a groundbreaking technology. If you were to maintain exclusive rights to it, you'd be guaranteed quite the profit. Should you agree to such a thing, this would be a deal unlike any our company has ever seen, and it would of course benefit you, the inventor, just as much. I don't mean this to be rude, but I know that life is often very difficult for immigrants like yourself. Have you considered this as a secure, stable source of income?"

What Paul was saying, in essence, was that Enandel wanted to apply for long-term exclusivity. This was not unlike a patent—while one could ordinarily apply for exclusivity rights through institutions related to the Merchants' Guild, many mages and magical engineers could do the paperwork through the Adventurers' Guilds to which they were registered. This gave them certain rights over their inventions. The exact extent of these rights varied depending on the invention, but for a set price—a very high one, naturally—a business could pay for exclusive rights to an inventor's product for up to fifty years after their death.

In her own paperwork, Shiori had opted for the shortest exclusivity term available—one year after the product went to market. Enandel, however, wanted a longer deal. Paul looked serious. That said, though he had mentioned Shiori being an immigrant, he had not done so in a way that belittled her, and she appreciated his honesty.

Alec and Clemens both glanced at Shiori to let her know that if she needed them, they were ready to jump in. However, Shiori returned the glance as if to say she could handle this on her own, and shared with Paul her honest thoughts.

“A stable income is, of course, very appealing, but I was not the one who invented freeze-dried foods. I have merely reproduced the processing techniques developed by someone from my home. I feel uncomfortable claiming such an accomplishment as my own.”

For Shiori, this was a matter of self-respect. Though she’d had to go through much in the way of trial and error to recreate the freeze-dried process with magic, she had not done so for riches. Her biggest reason for doing it had been to make her job simpler and earn some pocket money. All she’d wanted to begin with was to be able to eat something delicious while out in the field, and feed her friends the same meal.

It was not an understatement to say that the existence of freeze-dried foods would vastly improve the state of food and nutrition for adventurers, and Shiori wanted to ensure that the correct respect and gratitude were shown to the nameless developers of that very technology.

“Also, when it comes to the actual machinery, I am little more than an amateur. I could only recreate but a sliver of the true freeze-drying process in my own portable foods. In that sense, the product is still incomplete. Proper freeze-drying is a much more complicated process, and so I believe that the path to mass production will be a very difficult one. You may want my advice for these problems, but I fear that I will be unable to help you.”

If that happened, it would be silly for Shiori to call herself the inventor, no matter how convenient the title was. She was very limited in terms of what she could do before Enandel jumped into the process.

“I see,” said Paul. “In other words, you don’t understand the technology completely, and you see your own knowledge and machinery as mere steps for how to get there. Hints, as it were.”

Shiori nodded.

“There’s barely anything for me to give you in terms of helpful information,

and I feel bad for leaving so much of the work in your hands. However, I do want to provide my food to the adventurers who have requested it, and I want to pay everyone back for accepting me as one of their own. The adventurers, yes, but also Tris and all the people of Storydia."

"So in essence, making the technology public is a way of giving back."

"Yes."

Of course, this was only part of the reason. One of Shiori's ulterior motives was to obscure exactly where the technology had come from in order to avoid people looking for her, seeking to profit off her know-how. She couldn't say as much directly to Paul, but thankfully, she'd been able to bring an Eastern product into her story of how the technology had been developed and acquire the Yobai Trading Company as a collaborative founding partner. This would mean that information about how the product had come about would list the Yobai Trading Company's name as a founding partner in place of Shiori's own.

In her reply to Shiori's letter, Yae had written that she did not require any of the profits that came from sales of the freeze-dried food. She only wanted for the name of her company to spread along with them. The Yobai Trading Company was aiming to expand its market in Storydia, and freeze-dried foods were an opportunity for the company to make it clear that they had connections with one of the kingdom's oldest and most famous merchants. Such chances did not present themselves often.

Yae and Shiori had thus concocted the following origin story—a similar processing technology did once exist in Mizuho, but upon opening its borders, the family that knew it had separated, and the knowledge had all but evaporated since.

When Shiori shared this with Paul, he could do nothing but let out a long sigh.

"Well, our hands truly are tied," he said with a grimace. "Especially now that His Excellency the Torisval Margrave also wants to see the product brought to market. It's not a good look for us to push this issue any further."

The Torisval wanted to see freeze-dried food implemented for use on the battlefield and as relief rations in the case of natural disasters. He had thus put pressure on Enandel to abide by Shiori's wishes. This was, without a doubt, a

big reason that Paul refrained from pushing the subject of an exclusivity deal any further. Shiori had only met the margrave recently, and already he was helping her. She couldn't have been more grateful.

"We've heard good things about the Yobai Trading Company, even in the royal capital," remarked Paul. "They handle a vast array of rare but high-quality merchandise, and are already currying favor with a growing number of noble families. The Merchants' Guild was abuzz with news that they even made a deal with the Lovner family not so long ago. Any company that earns the trust of the Lovner family is a company we here want to start dealing with too."

Knut, who had been listening intently in silence until now, chose this as a chance to speak up.

"Their nation, Mizuho," he said. "It would seem it is home to many magical tools based on ideas and designs never considered here in Storydia. I spent a veritable fortune to get my hands on a karakuri puppet, and I must say, it is truly a marvelous piece of work. Our development team would welcome with open arms a chance for collaboration."

"Thank you for sharing your circumstances with us," said Paul, bringing them back on track. "I completely understand your position, and there's nothing for you to worry about. There are a great many who contribute and invent, but who do not want their names known. Isn't that right, Clem?"

"Oh?"

Shiori was startled at the sudden mention of Clemens's name. Clemens, for his part, could do little more than cringe and shrug. Paul chuckled at the sight.

"It always bothered Clem that he was forced to abandon the family business, but was allowed to live a life of freedom. He wanted to make up for what he felt was something of an unfair situation, and so he gave us a great deal of information regarding the needs of adventurers that we never could have discovered on our own. Realizing that there was a market for such products led to the establishment of Enandel. We owe that largely to Clem. I always thought that *he* should have been the director, not me."

"I wouldn't have given that position to a guy who'd caused a scandal in his teens," replied Clemens. "Would you?"

“Well, there you go again...”

Clemens was not at fault for the scandal he’d found himself at the center of, but unfortunately, he’d trusted someone he ultimately shouldn’t have. Many felt sympathy for him at the time, but rumors were quickly spread by competitors who saw an opportunity to topple the Holewa family, and to avoid such an outcome, Clemens had ended up leaving the family entirely.

“Because of the circumstances, Clem kept his connections to the Holewa family tightly confidential. But our founding of an apparel brand for adventurers was his idea, actually. As far as the paperwork is concerned, however, it was my idea.”

“Oh, I see,” said Shiori.

“With all of that said, we can promise not to reveal your name to the public, just as we have done for Clem,” said Paul. “However, you will of course receive the share of the profits that you are entitled to.”

“Thank you so much,” said Shiori with a relieved sigh.

Paul smiled.

“Now, in return for all the conditions we’ve taken on, I do hope you’ll help us regarding what ingredients work best in freeze-dried foods, and any recipes you’d recommend.”

A year after freeze-dried foods hit the market, the processing know-how would be made public. However, that would only encompass the technological side of things. In order to help Enandel stand apart from its competitors, Shiori would give them everything she knew. How they used that information, of course, was up to them, but Enandel had grown into a giant of the merchant world in the last ten years. Shiori was certain they would put the information to good use.

Shiori passed over the documents she had prepared, and Paul looked them over.

“Now, I understand that you don’t want exclusive rights to the production machinery, but where do we stand in terms of the tools themselves? Is it possible that the shop where you bought them will leak any information?”

“I don’t expect that to be a problem,” replied Shiori. “It’s a trustworthy shop, and I merely made a few tweaks to preexisting tools.”

Shiori had actually wanted to combine two functions into one piece of magical machinery, but her lack of experience had made such a thing impossible. Instead, she’d bought a preexisting freezer and a vacuum dryer for medicines, and had the shop boost the functions to their upper limits. The magical crystals and materials that formed the machines’ cases were also readily available to the public.

“I see. In which case we should be fine. Though to be on the safe side, I’d recommend registering the concept, as it affords some protection for the inventor.”

Forcing someone who had registered their invention to share their technology came with much harsher punishment than ordinary intimidation or blackmail charges. This included fines, time in prison, and a ban on contracts with Adventurers’ Guild branches. In the case of a guild member, their rights would be entirely revoked for a set time, and their address and name would also be made public.

All of this was because during the time of the industrial revolution, many inventors of new technologies were kidnapped or coerced into sharing their discoveries. As a result, many ended up keeping their inventions to themselves. All of this slowed the rate of technological progress, so the laws had been improved to afford them better protections.

“As long as you don’t mind, I’m happy to do that for you upon my return to the royal capital,” offered Paul.

“Oh, if it wouldn’t be a bother, that would be very much appreciated.”

At this point, Knut let out a surprised gasp.

“I simply can’t believe that you do this with preexisting machinery,” he uttered.

“Yes—all I do is combine two machines with boosted output, so to speak. However, with the machinery I have on hand, I’m limited in terms of exactly what and how much I can make. Depending on the season, the freezing and the

drying can both take quite some time, and occasionally the results are not at all fit for sale."

"And I get the sense from your explanation that merely buying bigger versions of what you already use would not help to solve these problems," said Paul.

"That's right. Freeze-dried foods are incredibly susceptible to humidity, so if the storage method is wrong, it's all too easy to ruin the product. Great care must be taken when wrapping it too. That's why I wanted to leave my product in the hands of a place I could trust wholeheartedly in regard to hygiene and safety."

Paul smiled.

"So it wasn't just our fame that brought you here," he said with a certain satisfaction. "You can't buy trust, that much I know all too well. It's truly an honor for me that you would praise our company in such a way."

Paul held out his hand and Shiori shook it. It was their second handshake, and this time she felt a deeper connection between them in it. Alec and Clemens both smiled at the sight, while Rurii wobbled happily.

"Very well, then, let's get into more detailed talks regarding the contract," said Paul. "We can return to the particulars of the machinery once we're done."

Alec and Clemens did all the contractual confirmation and negotiation on Shiori's behalf, as promised, and they were careful to explain to her anything that she was unsure about or had trouble following. All she had to do was agree to and answer what was asked of her.

In the end, it was decided that Shiori should continue producing her own portable foods for the time being—if she stopped entirely and without word, it would draw suspicion. She agreed to limit sales exclusively to the adventurers registered to the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild. In the case that any other businesses approached Shiori asking about her freeze-dried foods, they would be directed towards the Tris branch's guild master and the Yobai Trading Company. Zack and Yae had already been informed and had agreed to this. Shiori had already prepared an explanation as to why she had not applied for longer exclusive rights, and why she could not guarantee quality upon mass

production, but she knew that such reasons might not be enough for those who were more doggedly pursuing her technology, so she was glad for the help that Zack and Yae would provide.

When the talk of contracts finally concluded, the group once again returned to discussing the machinery and the processes. In this area, Alec, Clemens, and Paul listened while Shiori summarized the whole process for Knut, who stopped her every now and again with questions so as to better understand how the portable foods were made.

"I see," uttered Knut. "So anything with a high fat content doesn't work well with the freeze-drying process."

"Yes. I think because it's so difficult to freeze. With my current machinery, the end result is usually a disappointment when the ingredients are too oily. Even when the process itself is a 'success,' so to speak, the quality is questionable at best."

"I daresay that might be an area worth exploring further. We'll want to try as much as we can to increase our range of ingredients and recipes. Fortunately for us, Storydia is snow country, and it won't be a problem for us to get a hold of powerful magical stones with freezing capabilities."

"Also, because freeze-dried foods work by adding hot water, anything fried or crunchy can't be reproduced with the process. That said, you *can* technically freeze-dry fried food if you lower the amount of oil and batter."

"Aha, so that's why your recipes are so often soups and risottos, then?"

"Yes, there are some who want a little crunch, so they deliberately eat the foods without the water, but honestly I don't think it's a great idea. They're very dry that way, and the flavor is too strong because you're eating the part of it with all the water removed. I don't think it's very healthy. Perhaps if it wasn't a meal, and it was just an ingredient, it might be different."

"You make a good point. It can't be a good idea, harming your own digestive system while out on an expedition."

"Exactly."

"But I must say, a quick freeze followed by sublimation... They're used for

frozen goods and medicinal products, but the idea of combining them for food processing... I'm simply astonished. And to think it's an Eastern technique, to boot."

Both Clemens and Paul were listening very intently, but Alec was having a harder time keeping up with the complicated explanations and terminology, and at some point there was little more on his face than a vacant, empty gaze. In the end, he opted to play with Rurii, who, it seemed, had also grown tired of all the in-depth discussion.

It was almost noon by the time the talks finally came to a close. Clemens opted to stay to speak with Paul in private, and Alec decided to pop out for lunch before coming back to try on the knapsack he'd ordered for his brother. He of course wanted Rurii to come with him, and so he invited Shiori to join them for the fitting. Shiori nodded happily—she didn't have any plans for the rest of the day anyway.

"I can't thank you enough for everything today," said Shiori. "I look forward to seeing how things develop."

Shiori had gotten essentially everything she wanted. Her job now was simply to go along with things and answer questions as necessary. There had been a few bumps along the way, but everyone looked satisfied with the result, so Shiori decided to be grateful for the time being and make things up to people later.

"No—thank *you*," replied Paul. "This meeting has been incredibly useful. It's been a good chance to consider the idea that we can find further uses for preexisting machinery. You must visit our head office in the royal capital some time. We'll welcome you with open arms."

Shiori shared firm handshakes with both Paul and Knut, and the two men saw her and Alec off when they left.

3

Though Paul had wanted more time alone with Clemens, he unfortunately already had plans in the afternoon. Though it was no exaggeration to say that

his sole purpose for coming to Tris had been his business meeting with Shiori, he was already scheduled to leave for the royal capital the following morning. It was for this reason that they couldn't dine out leisurely, and instead sat in the trading company conference room, where steaming food had been laid out, delivered from one of Clemens's favorite restaurants.

"Share the pie and the stew with the others," said Clemens to the employee that had acted as their server.

The man thanked him and left, and Clemens turned back to his brother. Paul shared the same silver hair and features as Clemens, but their colors of their skin and expressions made it difficult to recognize them as brothers. This had thankfully kept many from realizing the true relationship between them, and even the employee that had brought them their food didn't suspect a thing. It was likely that everyone in the company simply assumed the director was dining with a most valued client.

"Ah, yes, this is the stuff," said Paul as he happily ate his stew. "Horned hare is at its finest here in the Torisval region."

Before their lunch, Paul had requested something "local, homemade, and easy on the stomach." Clemens had been a little surprised, but Paul was a bit more considerate of his body these days, and was dining on healthier and more easily digestible options. His job came with a lot of business dinners, and he admitted with some chagrin that it wasn't easy on his stomach when most of the clientele at the royal capital were also fans of fine dining.

"The horned hare is fatter and oilier in the capital," continued Paul. "I still remember how shocked I was to try this here for the first time. I was delighted to find it so much lighter, and far less pungent."

"Apparently the horned hare doesn't have any natural predators around the royal capital, so their eating habits are quite different. Probably why they're more plump. That said, some see that as the more luxurious option."

"If you ask me, the whole selling point is that the meat is easy to eat. According to our great uncle, the horned hare in the royal capital once had very high-quality meat."

"Well, things have changed a lot since then. The number of towns and villages

has grown in the area, and the number of predators has decreased. You have to assume that's had a negative effect on things."

Paul took his time with his stew, chewing the meat slowly as he indulged in conversation with his brother. Clemens got the sense that Paul really was trying to look after himself. In the past, he'd had a near endless appetite, but he was also turning thirty-five this year. When he smiled, one saw the hint of wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, and his silver hair was becoming a touch dull as he aged.

Almost twenty years had passed since the three Holewa brothers had talked about the future of the family business over food. Clemens's eldest brother was at the age where he now had grandchildren, and Clemens and Paul were both nearing their forties. They were all getting older.

"Clem, you still don't want to come home?" asked Paul rather suddenly. "Most adventurers start thinking about retirement or a career change when they get to their late thirties. You've made quite the name for yourself as an adventurer, and I can ensure that you get a worthy position at the company. I suppose I'm just wondering if you've any interest in that?"

Paul knew that they had many acquaintances in the royal capital, and that it might not be comfortable for Clemens where so many still remembered his past scandal. So, he offered Clemens a position as director for the planned Enandel Trading Company's international branch headquarters. Though even as he spoke, he did not have particularly high hopes.

Clemens and Paul were born a year apart, and they had been raised not unlike twins. Paul knew his brother well, and so he knew what Clemens would say before the man even answered. Still, while there was even a modicum of hope, he felt like he had to at least ask. In truth, Paul simply wanted Clemens to return home. As young men, they had talked on countless occasions of their dreams for the company and how they would lead it into the future. Back then, that future had been, of course, one that they shared.

When I left, it was Paul who did his utmost, right until the end, to stop me from going.

It was a childhood friend—a young woman—whose "sudden impulses" had

tarnished the Holewa family name, and Paul did not think it was Clemens's responsibility to take the blame for them both. Instead, he'd said they should break off all trading with her family—and this had stemmed from the enraged desire for justice which was unique to the young. He was usually so calm, but Clemens knew that Paul's fierce anger reflected the disappointment he felt in a girl that he had always loved.

It was greed for love, money, and reputation that motivated people to action. It reminded Clemens of famous words that went something to the extent of, "If such greed did not exist, then perhaps the world would be free of crime too."

She was a smart, intelligent young woman, and yet her passion and her greed had pushed her to act in a way that none could have seen coming.

Had the incident never occurred, Clemens would have proceeded towards marriage with the lower-class noble he'd been romancing in secret, and Paul would have married their childhood friend.

However, Paul had told the young woman that he would not force her into marriage if it was not something she wanted. Even then, he could sense that her heart lay with someone else. She was born of a merchant family that had strong ties to their own, and they'd grown up together—Paul knew that it was not he, but his brother, with whom she was in love. The parents of both families understood the young woman's feelings and had already agreed to put them first, as opposed to pushing ahead with a forced marriage.

But the young woman had wanted to have her cake and eat it too. She was in love with Clemens, but Clemens was already in a relationship. His lover's parents were of good reputation, and talks of marriage had begun. There was no way for the young woman to insert herself into the picture, and yet she did not want to give up and simply abandon the idea of marriage into the Holewa family, which managed the most esteemed company in Storydia.

If Clemens is going to spend his life with anyone, surely he'd be better off with a fellow commoner he grew up with, like me, rather than some nobleman's daughter.

Perhaps it was a sense of panic, or perhaps passion and greed had clouded the young woman's judgment—either way, she felt that the time to take action

was upon her, and so she'd acted.

Clemens himself had been caught off guard. He was careless. For one thing, he'd grown up with the girl, and because it was at his own family's ball, he didn't suspect a thing when she'd passed him the drink. It shouldn't have been particularly strong, but it quickly got him very drunk. Then she'd told people she was taking care of him as she carried him off to a room and had him drink something she said was meant to "sober him up."

His memories of the days following were hazy. He retained vague flashes of memories. He remembered struggling against a surging feeling of euphoria and rapturous intoxication; he remembered his childhood friend clawing at him indecently as she implored him, "Choose *me*, Clem. I have *always* loved you." And he heard the voices of adults saying "Thank goodness he held on!" and "It's okay, they're both still clothed, so they haven't...well, you know!"

In the end, the girl had not married either Holewa brother, and her family had been expelled from their social circle. The reason she had not been charged with any crime was because the aphrodisiac she'd fed Clemens was a legal infertility medicine—though that said, it had no actual effectiveness in that role, and was little more than a sexual stimulant designed to speed up the process, so to speak.

Still, the fact that she had intentionally given him a strong dose without his consent could not be overlooked—at extreme levels, the aphrodisiac was in fact toxic. At the time, many young upper-class nobles peddled this "legal infertility medicine" and used it for indecent purposes, and this made it extremely problematic at the time. A year before Clemens's incident, the drug had been used on the missing third prince. This sort of thing was a big problem in society. In Clemens's case, his memories were a mess, he was stuck in bed, and he suffered from severe headaches and nausea. In the wake of his incident, laws around use of the drug were tightened.

Though the young woman at the heart of it all was not charged with anything, the loss of her status within society was a befitting punishment. By the time the whole affair began to die down and vanish from the common consciousness, she had married into a different merchant family—one located a great distance from the royal capital. Though she had likely been reluctant to do so, she'd had

no other options—she had sullied the reputation of her own family name and that of the Holewas, who had given her permission to attend the social event. For a time after the incident, the families could not rid themselves of the rumors that some among them were sleeping their way into favorable positions.

Similar malicious rumors affected Clemens himself, claiming that the devilishly handsome young man preyed on his clientele and fellow merchants. He wasn't even twenty years of age at the time, and it was far more than he could take. It was not long before it got so bad that he felt that his only option was to erase himself from the public eye, and leave the family entirely.

"Over here, Clem."

He no longer remembered the young woman who'd called him by that name. Not her voice, or her face. Fortunately, he had found for himself a different kind of happiness. Time heals all wounds, as they say, and Clemens's own were now little more than scars.

"I'm sorry," said Clemens, "but I can't. I know I've caused our family trouble, and I know that I picked adventuring on something of a whim, but I love it. The city of Tris is a good fit for me. As long as my strength holds out, I want to keep on doing what I'm doing."

As a boy, he'd looked up to his redheaded adventurer friend, and so he had set out on that path himself.

"It just so happens I'm training up someone about your age. Want me to introduce you two?"

That had been his invitation, and the boy with the chestnut hair that he'd met upon agreeing had become a lifelong friend. And the black-haired girl he'd fallen in love with was now like a sister to him.

And then there was the mage with the strawberry-blonde hair...

"I've built relationships here, and I don't want to let them go," continued Clemens. "I can't."

The words shocked Paul at first, and his blue eyes went wide with surprise

before he relaxed into a gentle smile.

“This place is your home now, isn’t it? And now that I know, well, I won’t push you any further,” said Paul, and though there was a loneliness in his smile, he understood how his brother felt. “But in return, I’d like it if you could still keep me up to date on any news and discoveries you come across. It’s thanks to you that we’ve gotten a hold of a new and unique technology, and found inroads to a connection with an established Eastern merchant company. Not to mention that enigmatic beauty—we’d very much like to call upon her for modeling work in the future.”

In the past, and on just one occasion, Nadia had modeled for a brand that Enandel stocked. That was how Paul had come to make her acquaintance.

“Ah, you mean Nadia,” said Clemens, finishing what remained of his glass of wine with a light chuckle. “I’d much prefer to keep her away from the public eye like that, personally.”

“What are you on about?”

Paul looked a little irritated at first. After all, Nadia herself had seemed to enjoy the work immensely. But then the truth began to dawn on him, and a grin spread across his face.

“Clem, don’t tell me...”

“I won’t deny it, I’ll say that much.”

Clemens simply felt she was a wonderful woman. She was good-natured like a big sister, and her positivity never wavered. She was a little flippant in terms of how she spoke and dressed herself, but her good upbringing and elegant composure were ever present, and it only made her stand out even more. She was quick to notice the subtleties of emotion, and so she was good at looking after others.

Many looked up to her, and many a man had fallen for her. Clemens had tried to chat her up when they were both younger, and though he’d felt a mutual attraction, he’d also recognized her noble upbringing and stepped back. And so the two had fallen into a simple friendship.

And perhaps she had reservations of her own... Debts of a sort.

He sometimes noticed Nadia looking at him. She would sometimes remark that he reminded her of someone she'd once known, a man of great strength. However, she only ever talked about him in the past tense. And it wasn't until he'd talked to Zack about her past that the meaning of her gaze became clear.



“She was betrothed to one of my closest friends, before he passed away.”

There were only two men that Zack ever spoke of as close friends who had passed away, and that was how Clemens had come to understand who Nadia really was. She was the daughter of the former kingdom of Litoanya's marquis, and she had been engaged to the second prince of the Storydian royal family.

Nadia, too, felt something like a regret for her past. And if she saw in Clemens something of her former fiancé, then those feelings still lingered with her. The two of them had been too young and immature, and unable to see who the other really was through the trappings of their past and circumstance, and so the flicker of romance softly alight between them was, for a time, extinguished.

But now things were different. Clemens had experienced much, and he was more confident—he was ready to take her hand, and to accept her. Though once they had cut the threads of a possible romance between them, if he were given a second chance, then this time he vowed to see it through.

"I see, I see," said Paul, nodding thoughtfully before holding a bottle of wine out towards Clemens. "I'll admit that I've been worried, especially given what happened in the past. But I'm glad for you. I really am."

"It took me a while to find my resolve, so to speak. And to be honest, I still haven't told her how I feel. Just last year, I had my heart broken by another."

Paul was shocked, but then he let out a chuckle.

"Not that it matters," he said. "I at least know there are people you want to spend the rest of your life with, and that's what I'll toast to."

Clemens let his brother fill his glass, and then the two men clinked their glasses together. It was a hope for warm futures—both for the brothers themselves, and for the people around them. The wine in their glasses swirled as if filled with their prayers, and a rich aroma drifted up from them. That sweet and slightly bitter scent filled the air along with the Holewa brother's laughter, and lingered in the air for a time before dissipating completely.

4

Siegfried Hertzberg silently watched the VIP client sitting on the long sofa in front of him. His name was Alec Dia, and he was at this very moment inspecting the sample knapsack that had been stitched up for him. His glossy, chestnut-brown hair wavered as he moved, bringing into focus the beautiful color of his dark magenta eyes, but in just an instant they were once again hidden by his bangs.

Siegfried thought this a pity. Alec's clothing was earthy in color, and his eyes were perhaps the one part of his person that could have been called brilliant. They were eyes that made one think of a clear night sky, and they were beautiful like a polished amethyst crystal. They were, in fact, not unlike the eyes of those in the royal family. Siegfried had, admittedly, never met any of the royal family in person, but their eyes were apparently as beautiful as the highest-quality amethyst.

The missing prince...though I suppose now he'd simply be the king's older brother. People say that he, too, had the same dark magenta eyes.

The kingdom of Storydia was full of men with chestnut-colored hair and dark magenta eyes. The name Alec, too, was a staple in the region—in fact, there must have been easily over a hundred of them listed in the nobility almanac. Siegfried thus never once suspected that the man before him here in Torisval, so far from the capital, was the missing prince. He merely mused on the fact that the prince would have been around the same age.

Truthfully, his first impression of Alec was that of a man who was, all things considered, rather plain. Alec seemed to insist on wearing shades of brown—"frugal" was perhaps the word for his manner of dress—and even for an adventurer, his style struck Siegfried as particularly uninteresting. The one part of him that could have been called vibrant were his eyes, but even those were partially hidden by his hair, and so in many ways he failed to stand out at all.

Alec's associates—Zack Ciel and Clemens Theydon—both wore darker-colored clothing due to the nature of their job, but even then, there was a certain

charm to their bearing. It was not something that came purely from their looks either—it was a kind of luminescence. A sense of presence.

But when it came to Alec, well...he was tall and well-built, and upon closer inspection he had very handsome features. His gaze was always sharp, but it sometimes softened with his smile, filled with a certain wild charm. If he tidied his hair and took a little more pride in his appearance, he'd be drawing eyes from all around.

And yet, the man insisted on simplicity, as though intentionally avoiding such attention. It was said that Alec sometimes dressed up when the occasion called for it, but even then, his selection of outfits remained on the less remarkable side. It could have been a matter of taste, but it could just as easily have been an intentional choice.

Being boring was, in its own way, a kind of protection. It did not take Siegfried very long to realize that this was a man who did not want to stand out—after all, he dealt with such customers often through his work. As a member of the Holewa & Co. direct sales staff, Siegfried spent a great deal of time with the upper classes. He had developed a knack for working out a person's position from their manner of speaking and the way they carried themselves.

Siegfried was currently employed at the Enandel Trading Company, a specialty adventuring goods store that was the first in not just the kingdom, but the entire continent. Naturally, the vast majority of customers were those who adventured for a living, but many of those adventurers were in fact nobles, or otherwise born into wealth. Each had some reason or another for leaving their former life—younger siblings who were barred from becoming the family heir, women with no marriage prospects, illegitimate children, and so on.

Alec had been a valued customer since Enandel's establishment, and the refined manner he occasionally revealed pointed to an upbringing among the upper classes. His bearing was not that of someone who had learned such etiquette on the fly, but rather someone who had spent quite a few years in such an environment.

He was also extremely knowledgeable when it came to matters of the kingdom and its surrounding nations—certainly more than one would expect

for someone who'd grown up in a regional area. He had an intelligent reply for any conversational topic, and this showed him to be a man who stayed up to date and well informed. Siegfried got the sense that he was, as a total package, too refined and knowledgeable to be a simple adventurer. For this reason, he suspected that Alec was either the runaway son of a foreign diplomat, or a noble who had cut ties with his family. Alec's insistence on remaining unremarkable, then, perhaps pointed at him being an illegitimate child of suspect origins.

Siegfried knew all too well that he was letting his imagination get the better of him. But if he let himself go just a touch further, he couldn't help wondering if Alec's dark magenta eyes were proof that the family he'd run from had ties with Storydian royalty. In truth, there were many noble families that had, at some point or another, linked themselves to the royal family through marriage, and it was for this reason that dark magenta eyes were not entirely uncommon among the nobility. A certain number of these nobles—runaway children with no chance to become heirs and illegitimate children—sometimes left their family registers and entered the general public, whereupon the royal bloodline had dispersed further.

Over a long enough timeline, that was what happened to so-called precious bloodlines, Siegfried thought. However, there was no derision in this sentiment—rather, he understood this to be a mark of the long and storied history of the nation.

This was what was passing through Siegfried's mind when he noticed movement from a lapis-colored shape. He turned to it and found a slime, which had previously been staring at the patterned wallpaper. Now, however, it was by his feet, and he could see the core that floated within its clear spherical body, which made him think of lake water. The core felt like a giant eyeball, and Siegfried had to force himself not to gasp.

But the slime seemed to mock Siegfried's attempt to maintain his composure by bouncing and wobbling to its own unique rhythm.

Wobble, wobble, wob-wob-wobble.

Wobble, wobble, wob-wob-wobble.

The tailor standing nearby began to tremble, and Siegfried shot him with a quiet but strict glance—*you will hold in your laughter*. Any rudeness to the client was completely out of the question, and that was true even for clients who brought with them strange creatures. The tailor managed to control himself—he was in the presence of an adventurer rumored to be on the cusp of S-rank, and was perhaps too intimidated. But then, as for Siegfried himself, laughter began to bubble up from within.

Siegfried's biggest concern was that he would erupt into laughter over something that could only be called trifling, but perhaps there was simply no helping it. After all, here was a VIP client who had asked them, in all seriousness, to make him "a knapsack in which I could carry a slime." He had also brought a slime with him that indulged in the most perplexing of dances. The ridiculousness of it all had only been further heightened when Alec had told them that money was not an issue, and that the knapsack should be in line with the styles of a dignified, upper-class gentleman.

In the past, clients had ordered such items as tailor-made baskets and carriages for their beloved pets, but none had ever ordered anything for a slime, nor anything slime-related at all, for an upper-class noble gentleman.

Nonetheless, Siegfried was a proud man and an employee of the kingdom's most well-known merchant company, and he would never allow himself to be so rude as to laugh in the face of his client. Still, it had been a monumental struggle for him to maintain his composure when the request had been explained to him, and so, to hold in his laughter, he had deadened his expression entirely. On top of that, he'd had to repeat the request several times, certain that he'd misheard it entirely.

Alec had seemed to understand that it was something of an unusual request, and had let Siegfried's small slips go unnoticed—he had likely expected this much confusion in advance. But Siegfried did not want to allow himself to make another such mistake. So, in order to avoid bursting into laughter at the sight of this VIP client carefully inspecting his "slime backpack," Siegfried kept half of his attention on Alec himself, and the other half on matters entirely unrelated. However, he now felt his resolve being tested by this slime with its curious

dance.

Wobble, wobble, wob-wob-wobble.

Wobble, wobble, wob-wobob-wob-wobble.

Siegfried could practically *see* the musical notes floating above the slime's head as it juked and jived, and it was pushing him and his tailor to the very brink of their self-control. His stomach muscles were tense, strained, and trembling, and at any moment he felt he might explode.

I can't do it... I can't hold on...

But at the last moment, a savior swooped in to rescue the two men. It was the black-haired woman, the owner of the slime. She'd been studying the knapsack in Alec's hands quite intently, but now raised her head and winced slightly at the sight of her slime and its mischief.

"Rurii," she said. "No teasing the staff, please."

She scolded the slime in a gentle, kind voice, and with a little tremble, the slime returned to its half-spherical shape.

Thank the heavens!

"I apologize," Shiori said, looking at Siegfried. "Rurii seems to like it here very much."

She went on to explain that the pale green trees that adorned the wallpaper probably reminded the slime of its home. She bowed apologetically, and Siegfried hurriedly waved it off.

"Please, there's no need for apologies. It is an honor to know that your slime thinks so highly of our decor."

The Eastern woman was a regular customer at the parts of the store open to the general public, and she had developed something akin to fame amongst the Enandel staff. She was the only Easterner in the Torisval region, and she traveled with a slime. Rumor had it that although she was small in stature and gentle in bearing, she was a capable adventurer in her own right—so much so that she was nearing A-rank. These facts alone made her stand out, but it was also a surprise to learn that she was Alec's lover. The man had never seemed to

show any interest whatsoever in women.

It was at this point that Alec raised his head, and his stern features softened into a smile. It seemed that he approved of the knapsack so far, and now called over the slime for his final check.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Rurii. Would you do me a favor and jump inside?”

The slime waved a feeler as if to say *“At your service!”* and slid inside the knapsack, moving around until its “head” poked back out of the top of it. Then Alec hoisted the knapsack onto his back and stood to his feet. For a time, Alec asked the slime how it felt about parts of the experience, and the slime wobbled and trembled its various responses. Finally, he nodded happily and let out a relieved sigh.

“I thought I was asking you guys the impossible, but you really came through,” Alec said. “It’s a slender-looking design, but there’s a lot of room inside the knapsack. It’s also flexible, and the feel of the duck feathers gives it a real touch of elegance. It’s going to look wonderful on my brother. I can’t wait for it to be done.”

Siegfried and the tailor bowed humbly in response. The coloring and the feel of it were the result of the Enandel atelier’s special processing techniques. Naturally, they had come prepared with a variety of different designs.

In the past, adventuring equipment was focused on durability and practicality. Designs had therefore been rough and rather plain. However, for the portion of adventurers that hailed from the upper classes or otherwise made homes in fancier city districts, work and fashion went hand in hand. Enandel had emerged to cater to this market, and though this venture had begun as something of an experiment, word of their products spread in an instant—customers praised the blend of practicality and style, and the slick designs which put equal focus on durability. These items grew so popular, in fact, that demand spread—nobles wanted clothes for expeditions and camping trips, and knights wanted things for when they were off work.

“It means the world to us that you’re happy with it,” said Siegfried. “In which case, shall we proceed along these lines and make you the final knapsack?”

“Yes, please. How long do you expect it to take?”

“Around a month.”

Alec nodded warmly, and then he left, his arm draped across the shoulder of his lover, with their slime by their feet.

When they were finally gone, the two Enandel employees let out deep sighs, and the tension in the room finally relaxed.

“I really didn’t know what we were going to do when he came in here asking about a knapsack for a slime,” said the tailor, turning to Siegfried with an awkward grin. “But we got through it, didn’t we? How weird, though, taking a slime as a familiar...”

Siegfried wondered to himself: when the man said “we got through it,” did he mean completing the design of the knapsack, or the two of them keeping their laughter under control? He wasn’t sure, but he nodded all the same.

When it came to familiars, it was more common for people to choose creatures that were visually appealing. Siegfried had never heard of a slime familiar outside of those that cleaned the sewers, but he knew that it was a wide world that they lived in, filled with all sorts of characters.

“Word around town is that the king himself recently got himself a slime familiar,” said the tailor. “Maybe it’s a trend we still haven’t heard about?”

There was no doubting that the blue slime they’d met was intelligent. It didn’t seem to have a face, so to speak—in appearance, it looked simply like a blob of gelatin with a core floating inside of it—but it made up for a lack of speech with a variety of subtle, humanlike gestures. Siegfried had seen it himself—the slime understood human expressions and language, and it gave clear “replies,” if you could call them that. Its gestures were so easy to read, in fact, that during the fitting stages, Alec had barely needed to translate for it.

The slime was smart, and frightfully so. And perhaps there were people out there who wanted a partner that was both smart and good-natured.

“That customer said that his little brother wants the knapsack because his slime is the same color as the king’s, and people sometimes get him mixed up with His Highness himself.”

The tailor looked down at the knapsack in his hands for a moment, with its

graceful design and its elegant feel. He knew it was going to look just great on a nobleman like Alec's younger brother. But one thing still gnawed at him.

"Pretty scary to imagine slimes being so popular that they fill the streets, huh?" he muttered.

Siegfried nodded meekly.

Neither man knew then that such a reality was already coming to pass.

5

The following morning was gloomy, but in Storydia the carriages still ran even during snowstorms. In fact, on the main roads from the royal capital to each city, snowbreak forests and fences were set up along with signs to ensure safe travel, even in the event of whiteout conditions. Furthermore, some areas were equipped with magic fire stones that acted as snow-thawing equipment. All of this was to allow for the smooth transportation of goods and people regardless of the weather.

So, except for there being fewer carriages than usual, people could travel without issue, and Paul Holewa could take his scheduled carriage back to the capital. The only noticeable impact of the weather was the number of empty seats. Clemens had come to see his brother off, and gave him a package to take home with him—specially produced wine and smoked meats, and some digestive medicine readied by his acquaintance, Nils.

"Thank you, Clem. Give my regards to the others."

"I will. Stay healthy, and say hello to the family for me."

"Of course. I'll be back, but I'd love it if you could visit some time."

It had been about three years since Clemens had last gone home. He was doing so much more than he used to, but it still wasn't enough for his brothers. Whenever Paul came to Tris for business meetings or inspections, he always made time for them to meet, no matter how busy his schedule was.

"I'll see what I can do," replied Clemens.

Paul could do little more than chuckle at the noncommittal reply. The driver

of the carriage then gave the signal to let everyone know it was time to depart.

“Until next time,” said Paul, a defeated smile on his face as he boarded the carriage.

The driver whipped the reins and the grand, four-horse carriage pulled away as Paul waved from the window. Clemens waved back, and stood in place, watching the carriage until it disappeared into the snow.

“I suppose I should try to make it back at least once a year...” Clemens muttered.

A good amount of time had passed since the incident, and by now it was barely a distant memory in the minds of most. Besides, a life of adventuring had changed Clemens greatly. Where once he had been thin, he was now thick with muscle, and his piercing but also slightly feminine good looks now carried a more masculine edge. The people he’d known as a boy weren’t likely to recognize the man that he’d become.

Then there were his parents, who weren’t getting any younger. How many more times would he be able to see them? He did not know, and with that in mind, he felt it was the right thing to do, as their son, to visit while they were still healthy.

Things were changing. The two friends he’d most worried about, Shiori and Alec, had fallen in love and overcome their pasts, and now looked towards a shared future. He, too, was now ready to start over with Nadia. And wherever they all went, Clemens knew that Zack would always be there watching over them.

What point was there in worrying about and regretting the distant past, now that the complicated web of lingering emotions around it had dissipated? Humans were given but one life, and the greatest shame was to not make the most of it, Clemens thought with a smile. It was a smile with such charm that it bewitched man and woman alike, and as it drifted to his lips, he turned and headed for the Adventurers’ Guild, where he knew he’d find his friends.

The door opened with a creak as Clemens entered the ever-familiar Tris branch of the Adventurers’ Guild. Rurii must have been off work today, because

the slime was bouncing on the counter, lost in a puzzling dance, as Clemens waved to it. But just then, Clemens felt that something was amiss, and stopped in place.

He looked carefully at Rurii, who poked out a feeler and waved like always. Nothing out of the ordinary, and yet Clemens's feeling that something wasn't right refused to leave. Perhaps it was just his imagination, but he felt an unusual buzz in the air.

What in the world...?

Clemens casually but carefully looked around the room. At a glance, everything was as it always was—some adventurers were at the request board looking for work, some were engaged in banter with friends, and others were showing each other new equipment. The room was filled with chatter and discussion, but Clemens also caught stifled laughter among it. But it wasn't like the laughter of ridicule or mockery—rather, it was as if everyone was trying to hold it in. Was it just his imagination?

He looked around the room again and saw Nadia with her face down on the table. His brow furrowed—her shoulders were shaking.

She's not...crying, is she?

For a moment he wondered if the laughter was directed at her, and so he made to pass by the dancing Rurii, but was once again hit by that same sense of incongruence and spun around. Perhaps it was the light, but as Rurii danced upon the counter, it looked a little different in color. The usually deep lapis blue of its body was now the vibrant blue of an early summer sky.

Is that *what feels off...?*

Clemens tilted his head, confused, just as he spotted a familiar trio out the window—a woman in a pointy hat, a man with chestnut hair, and a lapis-blue slime bouncing around at their feet. Clemens's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He spun to look at the counter, then spun back to the window, and then repeated these actions all over again. And then he did it one more time for good measure.

Every time he looked, however, he saw *two* slimes. Which meant there was a

slime he didn’t know, of a different color. In other words, it was another slime entirely.

“Wait, huh, what?” he uttered, incredulous.

Shiori and Alec, who had just entered with Rurii in tow, chuckled at the sight of their confused friend. Rurii didn’t have a face or voice to laugh with, but its aura and wobbling clearly gave off the impression that it, too, was laughing.

“I’m sorry. I suppose we startled you,” said Shiori. “Some people have been asking for slime familiars of their own, so Rurii called a few friends.”

Some magical beasts could transfer information between themselves over remarkably long distances. Shiori explained to Clemens that this included slimes—Rurii had been in Tris, but it had sent word to its fellow slime kin in the Blue Forest.

“We actually just came back from delivering one to the orphanage,” continued Shiori. “Jens wanted one to help look after the children, and also for something he called ‘pet therapy.’”

Alec helped Shiori fill in the details, and Clemens responded with an awkward and troubled nod. He wasn’t sure if you could even call a slime a pet, but the reverend and his children were apparently ecstatic at the arrival of their new friend.

Originally, there were two people who had requested slimes. Rurii had sent word for two of its friends, and they’d come to Tris, but one of them had really taken to the knight on duty at the western gate, and an impromptu familiar contract was signed. This left Rurii hurriedly calling for one more.

“I, uh... I see,” said Clemens, offering a twitchy smile.

It was as though the city had suddenly filled with an extra three happy-go-lucky slimes, and it made him want to wince. But actually, if you included the slimes that worked to process the sewer water, Tris was home to a bevy of slimes numbering somewhere in the teens. For the sake of his sanity, Clemens opted not to count them.

“In which case,” he said, “who does this slime on the counter belong to?”

The sky-blue slime on the counter danced even more fervently at being mentioned, and pointed a feeler just as Zack appeared at the door. The paper bag in his arms likely meant he'd just been shopping, but it turned out the man had also sent off a few urgent letters.

"Kept you waiting, didn't I? Sorry about that," he said, waving to the slime on the counter. "Oh, you guys are back too, huh?"

From his paper bag he pulled out some specially crafted Enandel familiar snacks and gave them to the sky-blue slime. Clemens couldn't believe how natural the gesture was, and when he saw the bandage wrapped around Zack's finger, he was even more astonished.

A bandaged finger... Blood... A familiar contract...

"Zack," Clemens uttered, "you didn't..."

"Huh?" Zack turned to Clemens as he passed some snacks to Rurii too, then flashed a bashful grin. "Well, you know how it is. Seemed like a good chance, you know? The timing was good, so I figured I'd get myself my own familiar."

Zack was an S-rank adventurer who'd more or less retired from active adventuring, and he'd decided to take up a slime as a familiar? He said it was a "good chance" and that "the timing was good," but his true motivations clearly lay elsewhere, and Clemens knew it. Not just Clemens either—everyone in the guild did.

That was the reason for the strange atmosphere that drifted through the guild.

The quiet chatter and stifled laughter began to grow louder, but it was pierced through by one person's especially high-pitched laughter. It was Nadia, who slowly lifted herself from where she'd been slumped over the table. Her face was twisted with laughter she could no longer control, and tears streamed from her eyes. She hadn't been shaking with sadness or tears at all—she'd been trying to hold in her mirth.



“Oh, Zack,” she said, cackling, “I just...oh my, you really...”

“Are you *still* laughing?!”

Nadia was clutching her stomach, and Zack looked as awkward as he did exasperated.

“But really...you were so serious when you said, ‘I think I’m going to get a familiar,’ and then this...!”

When someone reached S-rank, they generally went for rarer and more distinguished magical beasts, like fairies or small dragons, or perhaps magical beasts above A-rank, like ice-types. But when Zack had turned up with a prancing, dancing, and ever-wobbly slime and declared, “This is my new partner,” Nadia had summarily burst into laughter.

“And you were so quick to agree to a contract that stipulated insect extermination, weren’t you?” said the mage, patting Zack’s new friend as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I love looking for bugs!” the slime wobbled in reply, raising its feelers in a gesture just like Rurii.

“The Blue Forest slimes have heard all sorts of stories from Rurii, and these gestures are all the rage with them,” commented Shiori.

Clemens imagined the scene, and it left him very troubled, but he managed to keep it from showing on his face in front of Shiori, the leading expert on all things slime-related.

In any case, the Tris branch of the Adventurers’ Guild was likely to grow livelier with the arrival of its new friend. Being the Guild Master’s own familiar meant that the slime would also call the guild its home base. It would become a kind of poster girl—poster slime?—welcoming visiting adventurers with its lively, if curious, dancing. And, being that it was a friend of the ever-kindhearted Rurii, it would likely be a soothing presence for exhausted adventurers.

And, of course, the slime would also be an active bug hunter.

Well, a lively and boisterous guild is a good guild, I guess.

Clemens grinned at the energy in the room.

“And what’s it called?” he asked.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to call it ‘himmelsbla’ because it’s the color of the sky,” said Alec jokingly.

Zack’s shoulders twitched awkwardly. Shiori had named Rurii after the word for its color in her own language, and recently, rumors had spread that Storydia’s own king had named his slime Pel after its peach color. The names were simple and easy to understand, sure, but even then, they were...a touch lazy. Clemens could understand Alec’s concern.

Zack, however, wasn’t sure how to answer, and avoided meeting the men’s eyes. Finally, however, he spoke.

“Well, I thought about it a lot,” said Zack, bashfully scratching his head of red hair, “but I figured simple is best, you know? I decided to call it Bla. I mean, it reflects the slime’s origins too.”

For its part, Bla raised two feelers in the air and wobbled in a dance-like manner, as if shouting *“Woo-hoo!”* The slime seemed brighter in mood and more energetic than Rurii, and its naivete was admittedly charming. In response, Rurii and the other familiars in the guild joined in on the dance, and the room filled with laughter.

It was a day in which Clemens shrugged his shoulders, then shrugged off his unease and confusion too, and welcomed a new friend into the fold.

Interlude 1: The Diary of Bla, the Familiar

■ February XX

Fun! Fun! Every day is so much fun!

■ February XX

I was walking the snow plains and I found a great white phasmid! It was big and tall and it was like the size of one of those human henhouses. It was *so* big and totally amazing!

I always wondered if it was boring for them, you know, just standing out there in the snow staying perfectly still, but actually it turns out that they *like* doing that. The phasmid said that when they stand still they just look like an oddly shaped tree, so none of their enemies can find them.

But then I thought, like, because you're the only oddly shaped tree, wouldn't that be a dead giveaway? But the phasmid said that everyone knows it's not going to do anything, so even when they spot it, they leave it alone. Ah, I see! I see!

But once, when the phasmid was younger, some traveler saw it and was all like, "Now *there's* the perfect clothesline!" and hung their washing on it. That was like, totes awkward.

■ February XX

Some other slimes invited me to go visit the new man-made hot spring at the nearby village. It's called a footbath because you only soak your feet in it. It sounded totes interesting. But we all knew we'd be in mad trouble if we got caught, so we went there all sneaky-like in the middle of the night.

But man! The bath was mega warm and it felt *so* good! I was like, so comfortable I practically melted. None of us realized that we were dozing and then we heard the birds crying out in the morning. We were all like, "Oh man, oh jeez, it's morning already!" and we freaked out and ran home, but even that

was mega fun!

■ February XX

I went on a trip all the way into the depths of the forest, and I ran into a snowfield mantis pack. The mantis have this really fun way of running—it's all like *chaka-chaka chaka-chaka* and just watching them is super fun. When they take a pose to intimidate their enemies, it kind of looks like they're all raising their arms and being like, "Huzzah!" so I copied it, but they got real mad at me. I guess that's off-limits. Oh well.

■ February XX

The lapis-colored slimes got word from Rurii. Some acquaintances of Rurii's friend are looking for slimes to be their familiars. They're looking for a slime that likes to play with kids and likes to catch bugs! They live pretty close to the forest too, so it would be easy to visit home, so I really want to check it out.

A group of us slimes were super keen, but Rurii only needed two. We played a game of hide-and-seek to decide who got to go.

They found me. Dang it...

■ February XX

A green slime and a sunset-colored slime left for the human city, and they looked *so* happy. I totes wish it was me. I'm like, so interested in how humans live. It looks super fun.

So I thought, like, maybe I'll do what Pel did and go search for a friend on my own? But then we heard word that Rurii was looking for another slime! It needed a bug-catching slime! It turns out that the sunset-colored slime entered a familiar contract with a different human. This other person, a guard at the gates, and the sunset-colored slime, they were like totally on the same wavelength. I was like, whoa. But also it's like totally cool that they found someone they like so much!

The other slimes let me go. They were all like, if you want to go *that* much, be

our guest!

Woo-hoo! Fun times ahead!

■ February XX

I said goodbye to my friends and I went to the massive city of Tris, where Rurii lives with its friend. When I got to the city gates, the sunset-colored slime was there to greet me, together with its human partner.

“Are you one of Solne’s friends?” the guard asked.

Oh, wow! “Solne” from *solnedgang*, which means “sunset”! That’s its new name! That’s *so* cool! I wonder what the green slime’s name is? I’ll have to ask.

But Solne and its friend really get along. There were sparks the moment they met, apparently. They say it sometimes happens when magical beasts meet people, and I guess that’s what it was? I’ve never met anyone that gives me sparks yet. Then again, it’s only been ten years since the slime mitosis that I came from, so maybe if I live for a really long time it’ll happen?

Anyway, Rurii came to meet me and we went to a place called the Adventurers’ Guild. It’s where the guy looking for a familiar works. Rurii introduced me. He has red hair and eyes that are the same color as my body, and he looks all sorts of strong and kind. I didn’t get any sparks, but I did get a lot of warmth. Yep, I think we’ll get along great! Fun times ahead!

The human’s name is Zack, and he’s like one of the strongest ever, but his one weakness is bugs. Rurii told me he wants a familiar to protect him from them! I’m cool with that! I love catching bugs! And whatever I can’t catch, I’ll send far, far away!

Zack gave me a name! Oh jeez, I’m going to explode with joy! He called me “Bla” because of my color and where I’m from. Bla! That’s my name! Ugh, I’m so happy I could burst!

Woo-hoo! Yeehaw!

I was dancing like a mad slime and Rurii was all like “Chill,” but the Bla train wasn’t going to stop, and eventually Rurii started dancing too. All the humans

laughed. But I was just mega happy. Magical beasts aren't in the habit of naming one another, so this is awesome—it's like really rare *and* super interesting.

We're going to be awesome together, Zack!

■ February XX

During the day, I go with Zack to the guild for work, and at night we go back home to Zack's place to eat and take a bath. Zack usually buys stuff from the outdoor food stalls, but sometimes Rurii's friend—Zack's sister, Shiori—will make something for him. It's all delicious, so I'm super happy. Cooking is something only humans do, and it's all sorts of fun.

I like cheese and butter. It's a bit savory and kind of dense, and the flavor is all weird—I love it! I'd eaten stuff that the humans dropped or threw away back at the village near the Blue Forest, but that was totes rare, so it felt super special. But how's this? When you live with humans, you can eat that stuff *whenever you want*. When I realized that, it was like joy overload.

Zack likes cheese too, so he always keeps some on the shelves. And then when he found out that I liked cheese, he started stocking *extra*. "Whenever you're peckish, eat your fill," he said!

Woo-hoo! Thanks, Zack!

And man, toasted and melted cheese is like totally amazing!

Wait a sec. Oh yeah. I'm supposed to do the bug-catching thing on the down low. A little while ago I got this *massive* spider, so naturally I was so happy that I just *had* to show it to Zack, but he went totally pale and I thought he was going to faint. He like, *really* hates bugs and stuff. So now I'm quieter about my work.

He won't notice a thing.

■ February XX

So much fun! So much fun! Every day is so much fun! I'm learning all sorts of stuff from everyone and it's all so interesting! I'm learning about delicious

foods, fun games, wonderful music and beautiful scenery—it's all so much fun!

Zack said that when we're at the guild, it's okay for me to go for walks as long as I don't go too far, so I've been going on mini expeditions and it's awesome. Zack is teaching me stuff too. Today he showed me this thing called a picture book, and I just love looking through it and trying to remember all the new magical beasts and plants in it.

Before bed, Zack told me about his family too. They live in a place called the royal capital. That's where Pel lives. Wow, I sure hope I can go visit someday! Zack said he's going to see his family in spring or summer, and I'm already totes excited for it!

Interlude 2: The Diary of Fyrklover, the Familiar

■ February ⅩⅩ

My oh my. It would seem that this winter brings with it many newborns all across the forest. Oh, you're all so adorable. You all grow up to be upstanding winter magical beasts, you hear?

■ February ⅩⅩ

I was on a walk through the forest when I encountered a small pack of snow wolf pups. They're all white and fluffy and they waddle when they walk. So very adorable. They were all covered in snow violet petals which made their fur look like it was polka-dotted.

My oh my, so very, very cute.

But the heartwarming sight lasted only until they tried to eat me. They left holes in me. I mean, yes, I mend rather quickly, but...well, let me give you a rundown of my internal monologue at the time.

Oh my, wait! Stop that! I said wait! I'm inedible! Inedible, I say! I'm going to rip! I'm going to rip!

Look, I'm very glad that they're all boisterous pups, but they've got mean streaks, I tell you. I can't help but forgive them, though—they're just so adorable.

■ February ⅩⅩ

A beautiful day, and so I napped. As I did, a passing human said I looked like a dirty puddle of water.

How very rude!

Later, as I was walking through the marshlands, I met some baby is grodas.

They were so very adorable, all of them like little tadpoles with legs, their movements all stilted and awkward...

But then they tried to jump *into* me!

I'm a slime, not a pond!

■ February XX

Word arrived from Rurii, who lives among the humans. They're looking for slimes that like to play with kids and like to catch bugs. I felt I'd found my calling —I am so *very* interested in human children.

However, so many slimes volunteered that we had to play a game of hide-and-seek to decide on which two slimes would go. But I'm one of the best there is, and I was ready to prove it!

WOO-HOO! HELLS YEAH! I WON I BEAT YOU ALL! I DID IT I REALLY DID IT! I—

Ahem. It would seem that in the ecstasy of victory, I got a little *too* excited.

■ February XX

Today I left for Tris. I said farewell to my fellow slimes and headed off in high spirits with my companion, a sunset-colored slime. We were so excited that we arrived much, much sooner than scheduled. There was nothing else to do but waste time exploring around the city gates. And my oh my, so many humans pass through those gates. I am so looking forward to my future here.

However, as we were looking around, the sunset-colored slime met a guard on duty and the two quickly became inseparable. That wasn't at all part of the plan, but the slime explained that there were sparks, so what else was there to do? They say that sparks are only for the truly special ones, so clearly it was fateful. The slime was named Solne, which means "sunset." What an elegant name. I am so very jealous.

Solne's new friend has lots of children, and even a newborn, so he needs to keep his house very clean. Solne is a highly renowned bug catcher, so I don't doubt they'll be an excellent exterminator.

■ February XX

However, with Solne gone, we needed to call for another slime. So along came a sky-blue comrade.

My oh my, that sky-blue one is so young and yet *already* an experienced bug catcher. I'm certain they'll make an excellent partner. However, I dare say they'd best put those snow field mantis children elsewhere, preferably far away...

■ February XX

Rurii and its friend came to meet us, and we all entered Tris.

WHOA YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE HOW MANY PEOPLE THERE ARE AND IT'S FULL OF BUILDINGS! IT'S AMAZING! HEAPS OF KIDS TOO IT LOOKS LIKE SO MUCH FUN AND MY OH MY THE SMELL OF THE FOOD IT'S JUST OUT OF THIS WORLD...

Ahem. My oh my.

The sky-blue slime is going to become the familiar of the Adventurers' Guild's boss. He's said to be extremely strong among humans, but he is unfortunately cursed with an extreme fear of bugs. So it makes sense that he wants a familiar to protect him from them.

My oh my, I suppose everyone has their weak points, don't they?

I am told that I will be making a home of a place called the Tris Orphanage. I am to work with its manager and mingle with the orphanage's children. I was taken to the orphanage where I met Jens, who is the very picture of a kindhearted person. However, he is also principled, and I sense this gives him great strength. Just as with magical beasts and animals, one should never underestimate that which seems soft on the outside and yet exudes a strange sense of power.

As it so happens, Jens told me that he has been at the orphanage for some fifteen years, acting as a parent to children who have lost their own. There are a

few others who help him, but all the same, looking after such a big family must surely be difficult and challenging work.

“You’re my new assistant, and I’ll be counting on you,” he said.

My oh my—assistant, you say? I am more than ready!

The kids chose my name for me. I’m green, you see, and so they named me Fyrklover, which means “four-leaf clover.”

WOOOOOOO-HOOOOOO YOU COULD NOT HAVE GIVEN ME A BETTER NAME THIS IS SO INCREDIBLE I AM OVER THE MOON WITH SHEER JOY I—

Ahem. In my reverie, I noticed a slight doubt in Jens’s eyes, but I don’t think it was anything to be concerned about. What’s more concerning to me is how pale Jens is—time to put the kids to bed early so I can make sure my new friend gets a good night’s sleep.

■ February ╳╳

It turns out that many of the children at the orphanage have, shall we say, complicated pasts. They are not blissfully ignorant and innocent in the way of young magical beasts, and the gloom I feel drifting from some of them is rather concerning.

Though I lack the organs through which to speak, Jens said that thoughtful and generous words are his job. My job, he says, is to get closer to the children. I wondered if mere proximity would be enough, but Jens tells me that my color is “that of healing.” He said that sometimes simply being in good company is in itself enough.

I see. It makes sense. And it would seem that there is something meaningful in the actions of the children who climb on my body but still refuse to open their hearts to human adults. Perhaps they need time to reveal what is in their hearts.

“It is like ice,” said Jens. “Breaking it in half is one thing, but there is far less pressure in the act of warming it slowly until it melts.”

Jens truly understands, as one would expect from a man who has spent so

many years with children. In which case, I, too, will not rush things.

Except for Jens himself. Be sure to get to bed early, reverend!

■ February XX

Today we received seven new children at the orphanage. They came from the village near the Blue Forest. All the business with the snow wolf has made it difficult on their families, and so their parents have left the children in the care of the orphanage while they leave for seasonal work elsewhere.

Well, well... The snow wolves sacrificed much during the incident, but it seems that the humans have also suffered. Both humans and magical beasts have been forced into hardship by the foolish actions of a few. Are such things the inevitable plight of all living creatures?

Regardless, I will do my utmost as Jens's assistant.

As for you, Jens, it's time for bed.

■ February XX

I don't know the exact details, but some people came saying they were here for some children, made a racket, and punched Jens! So I slimed them. I was very tempted just to absorb them all on the spot, but I will abide by the ways of the humans so long as I live among them. Instead of melting them, I restrained them. I've heard from Rurii and Pel that melting a human's clothes is the simplest way of rendering them powerless, so I may well try that next time.

The knights were called and they took the people away, and it was revealed that they were carrying weapons.

"You saved my life," said Jens, wearing his usual smile.

But Jens really held his own. His words were calm and polite, but the air around him was cold and electric, and there was a force of determination to him that was frightful. Parents protecting their children are a force to be reckoned with, and so I imagine that Jens did his part as these children's acting father.

However, the whole incident took its toll on the man, and he was rather exhausted after it. Bedtime, reverend, on the double!

■ February XX

Your paperwork isn't going anywhere, Jens! Leave it for tomorrow and go to bed!

And no! We do not hide under our blankets and do our paperwork in secret!

■ February XX

Finally! It all makes sense!

The biggest problem child in this orphanage is none other than Jens himself!

Oh yes, I understand that you've been busy recently, but you won't get anything done without a good night's sleep! If you're going to resist, then I'm just going to have to put you to sleep the way I have many magical beasts when I need to rid them of their fleas!

"What? Fyr? Wait, stop, don't do this, Fyr, don't..."

Jens was out in under three minutes. It didn't please me very much to do it, but at least Jens was sound asleep, so I'll call it a win.

■ February XX

Jens seemed utterly exhausted, and he returned to his room looking rather unsteady on his feet. I had a right mind to go and pick some evernight grass—they say it's wonderful for slumber—and force-feed it to him, but then I noticed Oskar waiting in front of his room. He's the most important person in the Tris Cathedral, and apparently inseparably bound to Jens.

At a glance, there seems to be something cunning about Oskar, but he's not a bad sort at heart. He was even aware of how busy Jens is, and brought him a gift. Oskar and Jens talked, and the tension lifted from Jens's shoulders when he realized he'd be getting more staff to help at the orphanage.

Well, that made things clear to me. Oskar is a true friend. How very

heartwarming. Words truly are a balm for humans, aren't they? I can't speak any myself, but nonetheless Jens tells me I'm "a most dear friend." He says he's glad for someone to look out for him and scold him when necessary. That makes coming here that much more worthwhile.

Today Jens went to bed early like a good boy. He was asleep in moments, perhaps thanks to the herbal tea that Oskar gave him.

I must admit, all the kids at the orphanage are a handful, but they're all so adorable. I enjoy playing with the children and making sure my friend gets the sleep he needs.

Let's make the future a good one, Jens.

Side Story: A Most Troubling Character Trait

Tris was located at latitude fifty-nine degrees north, and daylight hours during the winter were extremely short. At the beginning of the year, there were about six hours of sunlight each day, but the days got longer around the middle of March.

Longer days made for more active people, and Alec woke with the rising of the sun, a little before seven. There was a hint of spring in the air, and so after breakfast he and Shiori went for a walk around the city.

With Rurii bouncing around happily in the lead, the trio strolled around town without a particular destination in mind. They enjoyed this because it brought unexpected discoveries—magical ore traders with magic stones in odd shapes and rare colors, imported goods shops in which the owner displayed premium goods from across the world, magical tool shops with all manner of curious inventions, and delicious restaurants hidden in surprising locations.

But spring wasn't the only reason that the two had more time to wander, explore, and turn their eyes towards the new and unexpected. The bigger reason was the change in their hearts and minds—since revealing their biggest secrets to one another, there were no longer any walls separating them. The ones that had stood in the past had since been brought down, and now they really knew each other, which in turn made the world more vibrant and alive.

"I've lived in Tris a long time, and it's surprising to think there's still so much to discover," remarked Alec.

"I feel the same. I would have bought all of my equipment from that shop over there if I'd known about it earlier."

The two adventurers chatted about this and that as they walked back to their apartment with their newly bought items in hand, and the caretaker Lache was there to greet them.

"Welcome home," he said. "A package has arrived for the two of you."

He presented them with a wooden box from behind the counter. It was very

sturdy-looking, and stamped with the seal of the Yobai Trading Company. Yae had sent it.

“A courier from the guild brought it,” explained Lache. “Said it was best delivered quickly.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Shiori.

Shiori handed over some baked goods they’d bought as a gift for the caretaker, and took the box off his hands. Then they walked the steps up to their apartment. It had only been two months since they’d moved in together, but it already felt like home for the two of them.

“I wonder what it is?” asked Shiori, once they were inside.

“Indeed. Certainly much too big a box for just the swordsmanship textbook Shonosuke said he’d send me.”

Rurii was peeking curiously at the box, which Shiori opened right away. Inside were three packages of different sizes as well as a letter. The packages were of Eastern clothes, two books bound with string, and a small box of sweets. Shiori read the letter from Yae and a troubled smile drifted to her face.

“She said this is a package to say thank you,” said Shiori. “The books are for you. The sweets are for all of us. This is all far too much... The request rates we were paid were more than enough. We’ll have to send her back a thank-you package of our own. Or is it weird to send a thank-you package for a thank-you package?”

The box of sweets contained bright sugar candies in the shape of trees, and were a delight for the eyes.

“My goodness, she sent us higashi sweets,” remarked Shiori. “How very nostalgic.”

“Wow, they’re so pretty,” said Alec. “I bet this would be a hit with noblewomen.”

“Yes, they’re made here, not in Mizuho, so perhaps they’re being sold in the royal capital. Let’s save them for later.”

Shiori took a single candy and gave it to Rurii before turning her attention to

the clothing Yae had sent. The slime happily took the candy with a feeler and began absorbing it slowly, to savor the taste. Next to them, Alec flipped through the books he'd received, which seemed to have been bound in the traditional Eastern style—they were the books that Shonosuke had promised. Alec told Shiori that both had been translated into the continent's most common language, and since publication, they'd become must-have books for any respectable Eastern swordsman.

"Incredible," said Alec. "I can see why they're both bestsellers."

One book was full of detailed information on the ways of Eastern swordsmanship, but the other was an illustrated guide to weaponry, and it too was very intriguing. Alec was completely lost in the books until he suddenly became aware of an unfamiliar fragrance in the air. He lifted his head and was immediately shocked to find Shiori wrapped in the Eastern clothing Yae had sent. Whenever she moved, an aroma drifted up from the small scented bag at her belt.

"Shiori..."

The material was blue with large white lilies adorning it, and it was a wondrous match for Shiori's pearl-like skin. It also served to accentuate her reserved and elegant beauty. The accompanying hairpin, which was also decorated with flowers, lifted Shiori's black hair up and revealed the nape of her neck through strands of loose hair—it was like a flash of sensuality among the elegance.

In the face of such charm, Alec could do little more than let out a gasp.

"What do you think...?" Shiori asked hesitantly. "Does it look okay?"

She looked up at him timidly as she asked, and it was a look that very well could have destroyed him. There was a blend of purity and innocence with beauty and bewitching charm, and it shook Alec's self-control to its very limits.

"It's called a yukata," Shiori explained. "They're being sold in the royal capital as bathrobes, but...erm, Alec?"

"You're stunning," he uttered, his voice husky with passion. "You look amazing. I never imagined that Eastern garments would look so good on you."

This was not to say that he felt her ordinary Storydian garb was odd, but rather that Eastern clothes sat on her in a way that felt entirely natural. That was the extent to which the kimono fit Shiori, highlighting both her appearance and the way she held herself.

"I can't take it," Alec said, pulling Shiori close and whispering heatedly in her ear. "You're so beautiful I just want to stare at you forever, but I'm also compelled to tear your clothes off immediately. I can't believe that you're fully clothed and I'm still losing my mind. How does such a garment even exist?"

"Alec..." uttered Shiori bashfully, her face flushing red.

But her blushing only served to further drive his lust.

"You, me, right now...okay?"

Just as Alec was about to pull Shiori into the bedroom, he felt something poking at his leg. It was Rurii. The slime looked up at him with a half-absorbed snack in its hand as if to say, *"If you're going to do that thing where you spend hours and hours together, how about feeding your buddy first?"*

Shiori burst into laughter and Alec's shoulders slumped, the moment now lost.

"Okay, I'll ready some tea and some snacks, and perhaps something light to eat," said Shiori.

It was too early for dinner, but it was the perfect time to fill up on a little food. Shiori slipped free of Alec's grasp and began laying out the food they'd bought at the outdoor stalls. Alec watched her in silence for a time before dropping his gaze down to the slime by his feet.

Rurii undoubtedly knew much more than it ever let on. Alec didn't know what its actual gender and age were, but the slime had learned a *lot* about human interactions since it started living among them. Even now, as it absorbed the rest of its candy, he could read its exact message in its dubious body language: *"We all know you're going to do that thing where you say it's just a taste test but end up turning it into a marathon."*

The problem was that Alec's half-hearted attempts at a "taste" always left him wanting, and taking, much more. He could feel the slime alluding to this in

its bearing.

“Look,” he said, muttering his excuses to the slime, “I’ll have you know that staying behind the line is important to me.”

Before meeting and entering a relationship with Shiori, Alec had sometimes been said to have a “bottomless appetite.” And when they finally consummated their relationship, he had a feeling that a mere marathon would not nearly be enough to sate him. He was confident that they would be up until morning, and that by the end of it they’d barely be able to stand.

And yet, Alec felt troubled by the idea of indulging in such a thing before his biggest issues in life were resolved. This conscientious and devoted part of him was his most troublesome character trait, and in this part of his relationship with Shiori, it was on full display.

He would only allow himself to have “everything” once everything had been settled. He’d made that pledge to himself, and it was not something he could bring himself to tell others. Not even Shiori, though it was possible she’d already sensed his feelings. Rurii, for its part, considered it all very tiresome as Alec dropped into quiet thought.

“We don’t actually wear very much under yukatas,” Shiori bashfully told him an hour later, dressed in white juban undergarments.

Alec felt his pledge, and his very self-control, slipping dangerously loose from his grasp...

Afterword

Hello. This is You Fuguruma. It's been about six months, but thank you for checking out Volume 7 of *Housekeeping Mage*.

In this volume, Shiori and Alec reveal to each other the secrets that they've been keeping from each other since they first met. Both of them had begun to wonder about each other, but actually only about three months have passed within the world of the novel. That said, because the books come out almost yearly, I know that many of you have been waiting for this moment for a while.

With this last hurdle between Shiori and Alec removed, the two are able to form an even deeper bond. You have Shiori, who has put her roots down in Storydia, and you have Alec, the brother to the king who wants to live true to himself and protect Shiori, a woman who is "special" in every sense of the word. Now the two of them can look for a way to cement their reputations and strengthen their position.

Also, now that Rurii has brought more friends into town, you can bet that the days are going to be even more fulfilling.

If such a thing is possible, I hope to continue to share with readers the story of a certain couple's future, which was touched on briefly in the "Idol of the Holy Night" arc. I hope you'll stick around to see exactly how our two main characters carve a path to that particular future.

When I was readying these chapters for publication, my family came down with an infectious illness. Thankfully, both me and my youngest were both okay, but for two weeks we were all cooped up inside, and I was doing all the child raising on my own. It was some hard labor if there ever was some.

That aside, thanks to all of your support, I made the deadline. I owe thanks to my editors for final proofreading support, my husband and son for cheering me on from their bedrooms, and my mother-in-law for all those trips to the supermarket on our behalf.

Finally, a big thank you to Nama-sensei for the wonderfully cultural cover art

and the lively insert illustrations, Akihito-sensei and the manga publishers for bringing the world to life in manga form, the people who provided information on ninjas and samurais for my depictions of Eastern samurais in battle, the production staff for the light novel, and all of you readers for your support.

I hope to write you all again in the future.

(Written in August of 2022, on the day the International Space Station sped across the sky.)