Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

9

BY You Fuguruma
ILLUST. Nama




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Part 1: The Fenrir of the Forest, the Dragon of the Void

Chapter 1: The Fenrir of the Forest

1

One week had passed since Storydia had thrown a grand celebration to commemorate the thirty-fifth birthday of its wise king, Olivier Fersen Storydia. In Tris, the nation's largest northern city, the celebratory air still lingered in the early summer sun, and its citizens looked set for another lively, energetic day.

"It's such a lovely season," remarked Shiori. "Everyone looks so happy."

She looked down from her apartment window to the beautiful trees and vibrant flowers that lined the city streets.

"That it does. It's great," replied Alec, who had been happily reading a letter from his younger half brother Olivier—the very king whose birthday had just passed.

Summer marked the longest days of the year in these parts, and even late at night the sky was still dimly lit. With the Nativity Festival in the books, Torisval now had the summer solstice festival to look forward to, and the city was filled with endless energy as the festival grew closer by the day. Food vendors and stalls selling souvenirs lined the streets, and the city squares were occupied by bards and street performers, always looking to enchant a passerby's eyes and ears. Many locals wore traditional outfits embroidered with flowers in vibrant colors, and tourists bought flower crowns with which to enjoy the festive spirit.

All of it combined to make up the sights of Storydia Kingdom, said to be the most peaceful land in the entire continent. Shiori felt a simple joy in the fact that she could finally look upon the peace of Tris, and take in its beauty without any lingering disquiet or regret. For some years, Shiori had been plagued by a loneliness that had haunted her from the moment of her arrival here—an entirely different world to the one in which she was born—with only the clothes on her back. During all of that time, Shiori had not been able to truly accept or enjoy her new life. She was an outsider here, an existence that was in every sense entirely foreign, and she did not feel as if she were a natural part of the world. She felt an impenetrable wall between the person

she was and the place in which she existed.

Completely separated from her home, and making a life for herself in a world to which she had literally zero ties had been a truly difficult undertaking, and the despair that she'd felt had run deep.

Now, however, things were different. She had a precious lover, an adorable slimy friend, and a brother she could always call on. Shiori Izumi would never again see the world she had once called home, but even then there were people around her who accepted her fantastic past and all it entailed.

Shiori was no longer alone, and she had made the decision to put roots down in this new world as she looked to make the most of it. She had come to accept what it really meant to make a new life for herself. Each day had become something to enjoy; life was a process of gaining experience, making a name for herself, meeting new people, forming bonds, searching for more such moments, and expanding the world she knew.

Shiori was lost in thought, her mind on the nearly finished first draft of her housekeeping magic textbook and the status report from Enandel Trading Company about her portable foods, when Alec looked up at her, having finished reading his letter. He meant the world to her, and she knew that she would give up everything for him. Alec pulled her close in his firm grasp and placed his lips on hers. His warm, powerful embrace sparked joy in her heart, and she smiled up at him and kissed him again.

"The day of Olivier's visit has been decided," Alec said.

"When is it?"

"Early July. Assuming nothing sudden comes up, it's safe to lock the date in."

"So it's really happening…"

Alec's half brother Olivier was, as previously mentioned, the king of Storydia. For a short period of his life, Alec had lived with Olivier in Storydia Castle, and while they were only half brothers, the two had been extremely close and always pushed each other to reach for more. They were so close, in fact, that they had even pledged to grow up and protect their nation side by side.

However, in the end the two young dreamers had gone their separate ways, a decision they'd made in the name of their country and the royal family. It had not been easily made; the boys had been young, far from the age of maturity, and in truth they'd had little other choice. But in Alec's case, the decision had

meant abandoning much of what he had dedicated his life to: the pledge he had made to his brother, his duties to the royal family, and the girl to whom he had given his heart. It was not the outcome that either brother had wanted, and Alec had been plagued by regret ever since.

Olivier had felt the same way, but their shared regrets had gone unknown to one another for a long, long time; from the day they had separated at the age of sixteen until nineteen years later, in fact.

"He said he's going to come wearing the slime sack I sent him," Alec said.

"'Slime sack'?"

Shiori knew she hadn't heard the words wrong, but they just sounded so absurd she burst out laughing. Almost everyone in Storydia knew that King Olivier had a peach-colored slime familiar. For that reason, Alec had a knapsack specially made so that Olivier could carry the slime around on his unofficial outings without drawing attention. This knapsack had been dubbed the "slime sack."

And if Olivier was coming with his slime sack, it meant he'd be coming with his slime, who happened to be one of Rurii's slimekin.

"He said he's using the opportunity to take his slime on a trip home while he's at it," said Alec. "Apparently it's not all that unusual in Brovito for people to have slimes now, so he might not stand out so much. He'll still be disguised, all the same."

"Well, there aren't that many good-looking blond men traveling with peach-colored slimes..."

"Yep... Apparently he sticks out like a sore thumb in the castle because of it. That said, new aides and servants are far less likely to mistake him for somebody else and say or do something rude now."

Alec must have been picturing the scene, because he covered his mouth with a hand and chuckled. Shiori giggled along with him.

"But is that okay? As someone so important, isn't it better if he doesn't stand out?"

"All of his personal guards are the best of the best, and completely trustworthy. His familiar is easily on the same level. I don't expect any trouble. Rumor has it that the last time someone tried to attack Olivier, his slime swallowed the guy

whole and spat him out buck naked."

"Buck naked?"

"The guy was escorted off the grounds wailing and, yep, naked as the day he was born. Lord of a distinguished count's family, no less. The more unfortunate thing about it is that it's taken the road all rumors take and twisted away from the truth; these days everyone says the guy was buck naked when he attacked the king."

"Oh... That's unfortunate..."

Slimes were especially good when it came to melting things, and it seemed Olivier's slime had not only taken the man's clothes but swiped his pride and self-respect while it was at it. Shiori looked a bit sad for the would-be attacker, and Alec chuckled.

"You shouldn't spare any sympathy for a guy like that," he said, reaching out to touch her left arm gently, as though comforting her. "You were hurt in Brovito when we were last there, and the man who attacked Olivier was the same man responsible for it all. Nineteen years ago, he also played a part in trying to put me on the throne as a puppet leader."

"Oh. Oh...my..."

Isfeldt, a former count, had been in the newspapers when he was arrested for treason due to his connections to merchants smuggling biological weapons for military use. These merchants had caused a snow wolf attack on Brovito Village, and not only that, one among their number had attacked Shiori with a lash as she was working to aid and rescue people. Now she was learning for the first time that that man was also connected to Alec, but not for any good reason. The battle for succession that had occurred almost twenty years ago had left countless people hurt in its aftermath, some of whom had been forced to abandon everything they knew. Because of that, the former count was not a man worthy of sympathy.

"I see... So he was finally made to atone for his crimes," Shiori said.

"Exactly that. He dodged the death penalty this time around because treason was not his intent, but even then he earned himself a life sentence. He dirtied his hands with illegal trade of weapons and magical beasts, all just to line his pockets. The harm he caused to his own nation... He's as corrupt as they come."

Alec let out a long sigh, then stood up and went to the window. There was a hint of bitterness in his smile as he looked down at the vibrant city below, from which laughter drifted up to them. Shiori could only guess at what thoughts might be running through his mind, but she sensed that these events had allowed him to turn the page on a particular chapter in his heart. When she joined him at the window, he smiled and pulled her in close. Rurii poked them gently and reassuringly.

"Sure smells good down there," remarked Alec.

A scent from a food stall below drifted up to their window; it was roasted sausage, and Rurii crawled up onto the windowsill and looked down as if to say, *"Sure does."*

"How about we eat something down at one of those stalls before heading to the Guild?" suggested Alec.

"Sounds great. What should we have?"

Rurii trembled at the understanding that it was in for a treat. The slime quickly tidied up all its "treasures" and put them neatly in the sweets tin that had since become its "treasure chest," then wobbled as it waited by the front door.

Shiori and Alec smiled at the excited slime and, with a nod to each other, got ready to leave.

2

It was only a few minutes from their apartment to the Guild on foot, but even in that short distance, the streets were jam-packed with stalls, and awash in delicious aromas. Skewered cockatrice roasted over coals, the fat spitting from it as it cooked; golden butter melted over steamed potatoes; glasses of water grape soda fizzing pleasantly; and the thick scent of smoked salmon and cream soup wafted through the air. The food stalls were bustling and lively, and all made good use of local produce.

"Hey! You two!" shouted a voice. "How about stopping by?"

The voice belonged to Marius Cassel, who had spotted Shiori and Alec looking for a place to eat. He gestured to them with a cheerful wave. Marius usually ran a local grocer, but this year he also had a stall serving Imperial cuisine. Tables and benches were set up in front of his stall, and local acquaintances were seated at them enjoying the food.

The scent of the erve foure pies, specially made by Marius's wife, tickled the adventurers' nostrils. They were freshly baked,

and as Marius cut through the pastry, an aroma of thick butter and erve foure meat cooked with herbs filled the air. The juicy meat sauce bubbled out and dripped onto the plate, and Shiori couldn't help but speak.

"Wow..."

Rurii, resting at her feet, wobbled in agreement.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" said Marius. "Now's your best chance to taste it fresh out of the oven."

The two adventurers and their slime didn't need to be told twice, and they took a seat at an empty table at a corner of the stall. A few moments later, Marius served them steaming hot pie and water grape soda to go with it. Rurii was quick to wobble with joy and absorb some of the pie quickly into its slimy mass.

"Itadakimasu," said Shiori, trying some of the pie. "Oh! It's delicious!"

Her eyes went wide as she forked some of the pie into her mouth. She tasted ginger and herbs, salt and pepper, and erve foure meat drenched in butter. While such meat was often divisive for its gamy smell, the meat of erve foure that fed on moss and water grass was far less pungent, and in fact had something of a refreshing grassy scent that made for a nice accent. The fat it was cooked in gave it a lighter mouthfeel than traditional vegetable oil, and it was all too easy to go for seconds and thirds.

This was true as much for Shiori and Alec as it was for the other diners, all of them digging into their slices of pie like they were just snacks. The diners at the stall weren't just Storydians, but also included some of Marius's acquaintances who were Imperial immigrants.

"People tend to dislike the Empire," Shiori whispered, "but its cuisine is quite readily accepted. I know there are a few specialty restaurants in town too."

It was something she had thought strange for the longest of times.

"Well, that's because it's not that far from home, in the end," Alec replied. "In the beginning we were all part of one big nation, and the Empire was the continent's cultural center. No matter where you go, every country has some of its cultural roots in the Empire. Storydia was occupied for some hundred and fifty years, and so it shares a lot of Imperial culture. Food is just the clearest example."

Marius's wife, too, had only learned how to make Imperial cuisine since coming to Storydia, when she found that the country had an abundance of ingredients. What she served, then, could more accurately be called Storydian-inspired Imperial fare.

"Oh, I see," said Shiori. "It's just a part of everyday life, then."

"Indeed it is. And in the end, good food is guilty of no crimes."

Alec licked the tips of his fingers greedily, his eyes on Marius. The grocer and his family were Imperials themselves, who, unable to bear the oppression, had fled their home country. They had been through their share of trials and tribulations in the ten years since they'd arrived in Storydia, but now they were just another part of its tapestry. None of them even spoke with an Imperial accent anymore.

"Speaking of which, I wonder if the two Imperials we met in Silveria are doing well? You know, Frol and Julia..."

Shiori and Alec had encountered Frol and Julia on an expedition in Silveria, where the two Imperials had hovered on the precipice between life and death. After the adventurers had helped them find aid, Frol had declared their wish to live on, and their desire to make a living as ordinary citizens. Shiori wondered how they were doing. If both were healthy, it was likely they were living every day as best they could in a refugee camp somewhere.

"I hope they get to celebrate the summer solstice," she said.

"Indeed," Alec added.

The Empire was in ruins, and the situation was so dire in terms of its food supplies that it did not have the capacity to hold any festivals or celebrations. The Torisval Margrave pitied them for this, and had arranged for the summer solstice festival to be celebrated at the refugee camps this year.

Marius, as a representative of the Imperial immigrants living in the third district, would be setting up a food stall as part of the festival. He was going about his preparations while he managed his usual business.

"I left my village without a word to anyone," he admitted with a chuckle. "And to be honest, I'm a little worried about what to do if I meet someone I know from back then. But you know, it's because the margrave was so generous that my family and I have the life we do now. If there's a way for me to give something back, I'm happy to help."

A man then came up and gave Marius a pat on the shoulder; by the look of it, he was a former Imperial himself.

"To our wonderful friends and our wonderful home," he said, lifting his ale towards the sky.

Everyone at their tables smiled as they raised their glasses. Joy was in the air in Torisval; everyone had just enjoyed celebrating the king's birthday, and now they had the summer solstice to look forward to. But even then, disquieting rumors still lurked.

"Did you hear? They say it appeared *again*, this time on the highroad path."

Among the friendly discussions over delicious slices of pie, a man at a table nearby lowered his voice in order to bring up just such a rumor. The faintly ominous weight of his words caused Shiori and Alec to turn in his direction.

"Oh, you mean the...?"

"Yep—and it turned up near Brovito, of all places. You know, where the snow wolf attack happened?"

"I hear more and more people have spotted it of late. Even if it's just their imaginations, it's still pretty worrying."

"Especially after last year. Everyone in Brovito must be shaking in their boots."

"Didn't the knight corps just do a sweep of the mountains at the border? Surely they could turn their attention to the Blue Forest too, no?"

"I'm not going to feel comfortable doing my shopping there if they don't."

The two men were whispering about sightings of a Fenrir, a mythical beast. It was a wolflike creature larger than a snow wolf, and with a luminous coat of fur said to look not unlike purple crystal. The mythical beast had been spotted near Brovito Village some three weeks ago, and it was causing quite the stir.

"Mythical beast" was the term given to magical beasts whose existence had yet to be proven outside of legends and eyewitness accounts. The Yeti that Shiori had encountered the previous year was one such example, and even now the beast was being carefully investigated. The existence of the Yeti was still confidential, but according to Zack, it was only a matter of time before it was publicly announced as a new type of magical beast.

But all of this did not answer any questions regarding the

Fenrir. At present there had been nothing outside of eyewitness accounts, and there were no major injuries to note. The Adventurers' Guild had decided to keep a close watch on things for the time being, but…

"The rumors are spreading," Shiori remarked.

"Yep. Though it's not uncommon for the area. It comes up once every four or five years. I wonder how seriously the knight corps will take it this time?"

"Once every four or five years? That's pretty frequent for a mythical beast."

"That said, while the rumors come like clockwork, nobody is ever sure what they're looking at, and so it's a cycle: The rumors spread, then they dissipate, then they resurface. That's why there are some who believe it's simply snow wolves; they say that if you get a big snow wolf and the light hits it just right, it might look like something else. That, or a snow wolf might look the right color in a field of snow violets from a distance. That's about the state of things."

"I see…"

But none of this would make the villagers of Brovito feel any safer. In early winter of the previous year, Brovito had been attacked by snow wolves. It had happened during the village's busiest time of year, and many were terribly injured. For a time, and while rumors were still swirling, tourism looked set to cease entirely while the village worked to rebuild. And just as that tragedy of the past was finally slipping from people's minds, Brovito had found itself at the center of more negative rumors, once again concerning wolves. Shiori could only imagine how hard this was on the people that called the place home.

"But look, I'm sure the garrison knights are doing what they can," said Alec, "and if things get any more troubling, then a request will probably be posted at the Guild. Let's just keep a lookout for that."

"Yeah."

Rurii's slimekin, all of whom called the Blue Forest home, had been openly visiting Brovito Village of late. Shiori thought it might be worth visiting the place so Rurii could enjoy a trip home. As she thought about it, Marius and the others moved on to another topic of interest. In Tris, there was never a shortage of gossip and stories to go around, and the rumor about the mythical Fenrir was just one of many.

“Well then, shall we head to the Guild?” asked Alec.

“Yep. Thanks for the meal, Marius,” said Shiori.

The two adventurers stood from their table, pleasantly full after a hearty meal.

“All good! Come again soon!” said Marius, seeing them off with a wave and a smile.

Yes, there were disquieting rumors floating around, but otherwise the city was the very definition of peaceful. As she looked at the bright, happy faces of the passersby around her, Shiori hoped that it would stay this way through the summer solstice festival too.

3

There was often a cool, pleasant breeze during the summer, and it wasn’t uncommon for the Adventurers’ Guild to leave its front door open during the season. It was just before noon and the temperature was rising, so today, too, the wooden doors to the Guild were thrown wide open.

“Wow…” uttered Shiori as they stepped inside. “It’s totally packed again.”

The effects of both Shiori’s recent housekeeping magic lecture and the newly established library still reverberated through the Guild. Over the last two months, adventurers had filled the building even when they didn’t have any work; they got into heated discussions about magic and lost themselves in books and encyclopedias.

The constant influx of adventurers also meant that the request board was always being addressed. Even the request tickets that had once been left to linger due to their unfavorable conditions had now been cleared; adventurers had taken them on as a chance to practice and hone their skills.

“I’m not sure how I feel about adventurers treating paid client work as a chance to practice, though,” muttered Shiori.

“Well, at least the work is being done, right?” said Alec. “And everyone looks like they’re enjoying it.”

“Ah, there you are!” called a voice. “Over here, you two!”

It was a mage by the name of Joel Fridell, waving to them as he sat with a group poring over spellbooks.

“Here’s a new batch,” he said, passing over some papers.

The papers contained information on vacant buildings. The

subtle, charming scent of water grape wafted from the sheets. Joel had kept in close touch with them ever since Shiori's magic lecture, and often shared information on potential sharehouse buildings whenever he came across them. He'd had his eyes opened to the joy of studying magic through his experiences with Shiori, and was nothing if not interested in her idea of an adventurers' sharehouse complete with a dedicated research room and library. He was just one of many others who couldn't wait to see it.

"Oh, thank you!" said Shiori. "I'll take a closer look later."

She hadn't had much luck in her own search so far. The buildings she'd found either didn't meet her expectations, or otherwise already had buyers secured. For this reason, she was very grateful to Joel, who was able to use his grandparents' wide network of connections to help provide information.

"Thanks, really," added Alec. " And thank your grandparents for us too."

"Sure," replied Joel. "If you see anything you like, just let me know."

He gave them a wave and returned to his group.

"Well then, what should we do?" asked Shiori.

Just as she turned to Alec, cheers rang out throughout the Guild, and Shiori nearly jumped out of her skin.

"What in the...?!" she uttered.

A crowd had suddenly formed at the guild doors, where Shiori spied Vivi Larety. A boy Shiori had never seen before was holding Vivi's hand, and Vivi's face was so red she might as well have been sitting in a pot of boiling water.

"The guy came all the way from their hometown just for her!" cried a voice.

The voice was one Shiori knew, and it belonged to Ludger Lanellied, who for some reason looked especially pleased, even though he wasn't the star of this particular show. Then again, the story went that he, too, had come to the Guild chasing an older girl he'd loved since childhood. That girl was Marena—a fellow adventurer and now his wife.

"Wooow..." uttered Shiori.

"She is just full of surprises, that one."

While Vivi had been through some steep ups and downs in her career, she was now well on her way to regaining the trust of her fellow adventurers. It warmed Shiori's heart to see her now,

a portrait of embarrassment as she was faced with a young man who was so in love he'd chased her all the way to Tris. The adventurers watching from a distance looked upon the event with kindness in their eyes. They had accepted Vivi as one of their own again, and no doubt they would soon be doing the same for the young man. As Alec wrapped an arm around Shiori, a calm voice spoke up from beside them.

"Pardon the interruption," said Zack, waving a few papers at them with a wry chuckle, "but I've got a designated request here for you two. It comes by way of Brovito."

"Oh, speak of the devil," uttered Shiori.

"You saw it coming, huh? Well, that's not surprising given all the rumors of late."

Zack did a masterful job of averting his eyes from his familiar, Bla, who had snatched a black creepy-crawly from between bookshelves while Rurii looked on.

"Then you know it's about the Fenrir," he said.

The client for the request was Caspar Selander, captain of the Brovito garrison knights. Caspar was the successor of Leo Nordman, who had been transferred due to an injury he'd sustained during the snow wolf attack. Unlike the knights, who needed express permission from their superiors before acting, adventurers benefited from more freedom. For this very reason, it wasn't uncommon for knights to call upon adventurers in circumstances like these.

"Sir Caspar..." uttered Shiori. "It wasn't that long ago that we met him, but it feels like an age."

"Well, we've both been through a lot since then," said Alec.

In the aftermath of the attack on Brovito, Shiori and Alec had worked with Caspar over a few days. They hadn't seen him since, and wondered how he was doing.

"The knights did an investigation of their own and didn't find anything out of the ordinary," said Zack. "But the locals aren't convinced. The rumors have only grown, in fact, and so people called for a follow-up investigation."

"Oh, so that's why the village elder's name is on the request ticket too," said Shiori.

"Yep."

The request was to ascertain the existence of the Fenrir. In the case that the mythical beast was found, it specified that the adventurers were to decide if it should be hunted or let be.

“That’s a bit vague, isn’t it?” muttered Alec.

Zack shrugged.

“There’s been a whole lot of noise about the mythical beast, but nobody’s actually gotten hurt yet,” he explained.

“It’s not like it’s given anyone trouble or rampaged through any hunting shacks either,” said Shiori.

“And if the Fenrir *had* hurt anyone, the knight corps would be allowed to send in a suppression squad.”

Two months earlier, Shiori and Alec had slain a jormungand in the Hasslo Forest, and the amalgamate magical beast, which hailed from the former Dolgast Empire, was still fresh in their minds. The beast was an experiment that had fled from its research facility during the civil unrest that rocked the nation. Worse still, the knight corps had reason to believe that there were yet others of its kind lurking in the mountains, and had launched a wide-scale hunting expedition for them.

“But if that’s the case, then the sooner we go the better,” said Alec. “We’ll want to have this cleared up before the summer solstice festival.”

“Yes. Shall we head out at first light tomorrow?”

“Good call.”

Rurii had turned up at their feet at some point, and the slime looked very happy at the chance to visit home. Bla wobbled nervously by Rurii’s side.

“Look, if it’s not too much trouble, would you take Bla with you?” asked Zack.

Bla began hopping on the spot excitedly.

Two humans, two slimes. It was the kind of adventuring party you just had to laugh at, but there was the sense that they’d all have more fun together this time than they’d had during the ordeal they’d been through in Hasslo Forest. That was when a thought struck Shiori.

“Oh, there’s an idea,” she said, looking down at the two slimes. “If the Fenrir has been seen around Brovito, that means it would sometimes pass through the Blue Forest, no? So have either of you two seen the Fenrir before?”

Shiori hadn’t really thought about it prior to this, but it seemed like if you wanted to know about a magical beast, why not ask a magical beast? She explained what the Fenrir looked like and its unique characteristics, and the slimes wobbled their response.

“We’ve totally seen it!”

“Wow, really?!”

The three humans went wide-eyed with surprise as the two slimes wobbled to confirm that yes, they *had* in fact seen the Fenrir.

“So it exists…” muttered Shiori.

“It really does…” muttered Alec.

“Are you serious…?” muttered Zack.

They hadn’t even left the Guild or started their investigation, but they now knew that the Fenrir existed. What an incredible shock. That said, none of them were prepared to submit a report based solely on the testimony of two slimes, and so the party of four prepared to head off for Brovito Village.

4

Early the next morning, the two humans and two slimes took the earliest charter carriage available. Brovito was within walking distance, but given how desperate the village was with the summer solstice looming, Shiori and Alec opted for the faster route.

The roads to Brovito were mostly flat, without much in the way of steep inclines. The total distance was about forty-five shilometers. On foot, it was necessary to camp somewhere along the way, but by carriage the journey took just four hours.

“All things going well, we’ll arrive a little before noon,” said Alec. “Let’s just take it easy while we can.”

The charter carriages were always busy, but the earliest of them was fairly bereft of passengers. It would pick up more people as it stopped at the various stations along the way, but until then they could stretch out and relax, just like all the other passengers were doing.

“Did you two already get in touch with your friends?” asked Shiori.

Rurii and Bla, both trembling with excitement, wobbled in the affirmative, their ability to communicate over long distances having made such a thing all too easy.

“Of course!”

The carriage then departed, pulled along by two white horses with more than four legs, known as sleipnirs. The two slimes happily stuck themselves to the windows. Having spoken with

the horses before departure, the slimes had learned the best sights to catch on the way to their destination, and occasionally wobbled around excitedly.

“Oh, if you look closely, you’ll see that one has wings,” remarked Alec.

The wings were difficult to notice, as they were folded and essentially part of the mane, but it was true: One of the horses had a set of small wings on its back. They did not look nearly powerful enough to provide flight, and seemed more decorative than anything else, but they gave the horse a little extra flair.

“Judging by those wings, it’s safe to say that the horse has some griffin blood somewhere in its lineage. They may look iron-willed and resolute, but griffins get around, if you know what I mean. They’re not picky.”

“They get around?”

“Let’s just say they’re open to new experiences. If a griffin sees a mare, it’ll try its luck. So much so that almost all the horses kept near griffin territory are said to have some griffin in them. What’s more, as far as griffins go, any female is fair game, regardless of the species. I’ve even seen one trying to get things going with a cockatrice. Their love for ladies knows no bounds; it’s impressive.”

“Oh my…”

Griffins were beautiful and brave, and symbols of power and mystique. It was why they were so common on coats of arms. Now that she knew that the beast had this other side to it, Shiori could do little more than cast her eyes awkwardly out the window, her former impression of the creature dashed entirely.

When the carriage passed from one side of the city walls to the other, the hustle and bustle of their life in Torisval began to feel like a distant dream in the face of the majestic natural world that spread out before them. The western forests, where many went camping, were thick with vibrant greenery, and the plains that stretched out from them were filled with flowers of all colors dancing in the wind. The lakes and snaking rivers, too, brought more change in the scenery. The sights were a treat for everyone traveling the highroad paths.

Storydia was a wealthy and developed nation, but much of its nature still went untouched. This was in part because the existence of ghosts and magical beasts made the acquisition of such areas difficult. When humans made a large-scale effort to

take land inhabited by ghosts, for example, they could acquire the land, yes—but the ghosts would then leave, taking their good graces with them. In the case of the water spirit, Undine, who resided in the Airola Marshlands on the outskirts of Tris, this meant that the flourishing water supply would dwindle and the vegetation would change in turn; the lands would revert to simple, ordinary fields. Though the land itself would not fall into disrepair, there was a great risk of the ripple effects transforming the surrounding areas.

In the world Shiori now inhabited, it was known to all that the spirits of the dead played an important role in maintaining the environment. When a ghostly habitat was to be cultivated, it was necessary for a summoner to act as an intermediary, and the process could take decades. Until it was properly understood how all these areas dotted throughout each region affected one another, it was thought much safer to simply let things be than to make any rash decisions that might be regretted later.

Then there was the existence of magical beasts that were not affected by barriers, of which there were many. These beasts made it extremely difficult to secure long stretches of land for the establishment of railways or other heavy-load transportation systems. It was rare for such beasts to gather and attack human settlements, but they felt no need to steer clear of otherwise uninhabited facilities. So while it was fine to set up such facilities in settled locations, any tracks placed through areas without such settlements were very likely to be attacked and destroyed.

It was because of the challenges of the natural environment that the transportation system in Storydia had been slow to develop, the result of which was the preservation of natural habitats. In place of such development, Storydia had worked more on road and water transportation methods, both of which were less likely to suffer beast attacks. Carriage travel was far more pleasant than Shiori had expected, and when strong magical beasts like sleipnirs were pulling the carriages along, travel was quick too. Shiori had yet to actually ride a boat or ship, but they were said to be constructed with magical tools and parts that made them durable over long trips.

Exactly how the world would develop in the coming decades and centuries was a question mark, but if at all possible, Shiori hoped that it would develop alongside the stunning natural beauty of the region.

At some point, while Shiori's thoughts touched on ghosts, nature, and methods of transport, she began to doze off, and before long was fast asleep. When she awoke, quite some time had passed; the carriage was almost full of passengers and, judging by the scenery out the window, had reached the outskirts of Brovito. When she realized that she'd spent her time asleep using Alec as a makeshift pillow, Shiori quickly sat up.

"S-Sorry!" she stammered.

"Hey, I don't mind," replied Alec.

In contrast to Shiori's embarrassment, Alec looked quite pleased.

"Thanks to you, I wasn't bored in the slightest. I had your adorable sleeping face to gaze upon the whole way."

"Erm..."

When Alec saw an opportunity to express his love, he took it. And while his feelings made Shiori happy on one hand, his blissful ignorance of where they were left her blushing. At the same time, however, Alec's closeness to her had kept a certain traveler—curious about the rare Easterner aboard—from getting too near. When Shiori noticed the fellow, she crept a little closer to Alec, though she wasn't conscious of doing so. The traveler offered the tip of his hat and a wry grin to indicate he wasn't going to try anything, and Shiori responded with a nod.

Rurii, meanwhile, had taken to playing with the kids aboard the carriage, and the slime's curious, wobbly dancing kept the kids happy and entertained just as they were starting to tire of the long journey. Bla, for its part, was seated together with some elderly ladies, and seemed very pleased to be doted on by them.

It wasn't long before the carriage arrived at Brovito Village. Given that the place was a tourist hot spot, more than half of the passengers alighted. When they had their luggage and were all ready, everybody wandered off to wherever they were going.

"Wow," remarked Shiori. "It really *is* slime heaven here now."

"Incredible," added Alec. "I'd heard the stories, but I didn't think things had progressed *this* far."

Just a few months ago, Brovito Village had been just another ordinary farming village. Now, you couldn't look anywhere without finding a slime. By the side of the road was a footbath, where a group of people with children had a green slime with

them working like a nanny. There was also an orange slime helping out at a stall nearby. The adventurers also saw a purple slime acting as a tour guide at the main street that ran through the middle of the village, and a white slime seeing off a villager at the local infirmary. The sheer sight of them all was jaw-dropping.

So it really is true that the Blue Forest slimes have started making inroads with the locals here.

A few of the local slimes all gathered together near Shiori and Alec as if to say *"They're here! They're here!"* and before long the whole place was filled with slimes. Shiori got the sense they had all come to welcome the two returning slimes in their party.

All of the passersby stared in wide-eyed surprise at all the happily bouncing slimes, but the shock on their faces quickly melted into smiles; it was clear in the warmth of their gazes that Brovito Village had welcomed the slimes as they would any other friendly neighbors.

"I'm amazed...by the slimes as much as the villagers," uttered Shiori.

"Yep... Slimes are nothing if not open-minded and adaptable."

Brovito had suffered after the damages brought on by the snow wolf attack, but the sights that met Shiori's eyes upon her arrival seemed to suggest that the place had made close to a full recovery. She didn't see any signs of past damage, and there were plenty of tourists. The footbath that Shiori had helped establish looked to be a village mainstay, and the food stalls nearby were bustling.

It dawned on her, however, that all this progress would only make the village more anxious. They were worried and fearful; they'd worked so hard to get tourists to return, but now, with the summer solstice festival so close, they were potentially looking at another magical beast scare. Shiori couldn't help but notice a few small groups talking among themselves while they gazed at the Blue Forest, lingering in the distance. One such face noticed Shiori and Alec.

"Oh?" said the girl, recognizing the two adventurers and smiling. "Long time no see, you two!"



“Anika!” exclaimed Shiori.

Anika was something of a representative for the village youth, and she had taken Shiori’s footbath idea and made it reality. She ran over, her shoulder-length curly hair bobbing all the way. She took Shiori’s hands in hers, grinning from ear to ear as she shook them wildly.

“I’m so happy to see you again!”

They had not spent a particularly long time together, and Shiori was surprised Anika still remembered her, until she realized how conspicuous an Easterner in a pointy hat with a slime familiar was. She said nothing of this, however, and instead returned Anika’s smile.

“I’m glad to see you looking so well,” she said.

“We have you to thank for that. The footbath you taught us about is doing even better than we’d hoped. We’ve got even more visitors than last year, and we’ve got our hands full every day…” Anika’s voice trailed off as her expression clouded over. “But now look—we’ve got this ominous mystery looming over us. Everybody’s worried that we might be in for another incident of some sort.”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Alec. “Once we meet with Sir Caspar, we plan to head straight into the forest.”

“Oh, thank heavens! The knights went into the forest and did their own investigation too. They didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, but…we just can’t shake this bad feeling, you know?”

Only one investigation had been run. With rumors only spreading, the villagers weren’t satisfied; what if the knights simply hadn’t run into the beast? What if it was still out there?

“I’m sure Sir Caspar has some thoughts on the matter as well,” said Shiori. “That’s why the request was posted at the Guild so soon after that first investigation.”

The knight corps was an official government organization, and it wasn’t easy for them to request resources for further investigations when their original investigation had come up completely blank. It also wasn’t wise for them to spread their forces thin by sending knights out on such tasks during the busiest time of year, when visitor numbers were at their highest.

The knight corps’ higher-ups were of the view that the number of garrison knights should be increased over the period, but many villagers worried that something might still happen

while security was thin. This had put Caspar between a rock and a hard place.

"I see... That doesn't make things easy on Sir Caspar," commented Alec.

They knew then that he likely had little other choice but to post a request at the Guild.

"It's better we get to him sooner rather than later," said Shiori.

Alec nodded. "We made the right choice coming by carriage today."

Shiori and Alec had already learned from Rurii and Bla that the Fenrir was real, but kept this information to themselves; they did not want to stir up any more worry. They bade Anika farewell and, with their slimes bouncing by their sides, headed to the knight corps' post.

5

Caspar Selander met the two adventurers and their slimes as they entered the garrison knights' post. He looked relieved to see them. As a knight assigned to defend both country and people, Caspar could be a hard, strict man. This was just one side of him—at heart he was a calmer, more generous sort. The incident that Brovito Village was facing, however, had the two sides of his personality at loggerheads.

"I'm glad you got here so soon," he said with a chuckle. "I've been hounded constantly—everyone's always asking me when I'm going to send the next investigation team out. It's wearing me down to the bone."

At a glance, Caspar looked to be in good health. Upon closer observation, though, Shiori noticed the dark marks under his eyes. The knight hadn't been getting much sleep.

"They tell me they hear howling in the distance, and that they see wolflike creatures," Caspar continued. "Recently, they've even been waking me to tell me about it while I'm trying to get some rest. That said, it's far better than it was previously."

Following the snow wolf attack, Brovito's villagers would run to the knights about even the smallest of issues. It had taken six months for things to settle down after that incident, and now the Fenrir scare had everyone feeling anxious all over again.

"I do understand how they feel," he went on. "And all I want is to put them at ease. Unfortunately, there are limits to what the

knight corps can do. That's why I wanted to reach out to you two, given that you're already familiar with the area. It's just, well…"

Caspar paused. He looked Shiori in the eyes, and then his expression softened into a smile.

"I am so very glad to see you're well," he said. "I often wondered how you were doing."

There was much depth to the words Caspar spoke, and much emotion. Shiori had been injured in the snow wolf attack on Brovito Village, but even before that, Caspar had come to know of her through an incident she'd been caught up in, and so he had been particularly considerate of her. It was not something he talked about in any great detail, but it had left a deep impression on him.

Caspar had been part of an investigation involving the party that Shiori had once been a member of. The details of that investigation had never been made public, owing to various circumstances. And, given that it was his duty, Caspar had never spoken a word about the other victims in the case—that is to say, women who had endured the same kind of suffering as Shiori.

Naturally, Shiori knew none of this, and so she could not completely comprehend what had brought on these words. Nonetheless, she knew that Caspar spoke from the heart.

"Thank you," she said. "I live a fulfilling life now, and I can truly say I've found happiness."

She meant every word, and though Caspar was initially surprised, he nodded profusely, his smile growing.

"And I guess the rest is obvious," he said.

"Yep," replied Alec.

He knew exactly what Caspar was talking about, and his swift reply only gave the knight more reason to smile.

"I see. In which case, there's really no more need to worry. Give her the happiness she deserves."

"You bet."

The two men seemed to be reading each other's minds rather than having a conversation, and Shiori felt a little awkward being kept on the outskirts of it. Rurii and Bla patted her foot gently to comfort her. When Caspar saw this, he chuckled.

"Let's get to business, then," he said, his features hardening once more into a serious expression. "In truth, however, we're already working on the assumption that the Fenrir exists."

"And just why might you think that?" asked Alec.

Caspar offered a wry grin that said, *Look, I know exactly how this is going to sound…* then turned his gaze out the window, where a few slimes were peeking in.

"I think that the two of you, at the very least, will understand where I'm coming from, but…the slimes told us."

The Fenrir was active in the Blue Forest, which was where the slimes made their home. With the slimes now essentially neighbors with the residents of Brovito Village, many had thought it prudent to simply ask them directly. Caspar had agreed, and they'd done exactly that.

"We asked Rurii and Bla," admitted Shiori. "They told us the same."

"So I gather you believe what they told you."

"About as much as you do," replied Alex.

Caspar chuckled.

"Well, they're our friends now—our partners."

At some point during the conversation, a purple slime had entered the room. It was a knight corps support unit, and as Shiori watched it bump fists with Caspar, it really drove home that there was a strong bond of trust between humans and slimes in Brovito.

"There's a reason we called upon the two of you, and in particular you, Shiori, with your Blue Forest slime. We believe that the Fenrir might find it easier to communicate with a human if said human has a long-standing relationship of trust with a local, so to speak."

"Ah, I see."

Shiori was the only adventurer with a familiar who knew of the Fenrir and of Brovito's circumstances. This was exactly what the knight corps and villagers wanted.

"According to the slimes we asked, the Fenrir isn't out to hurt anyone or get up to trouble. That said, the slimes' opinions simply won't hold up in an official report."

Caspar had come to the exact same conclusion that Shiori and Alec had with regards to the slimes' "testimony," and the two adventurers burst out laughing. Though a number of magical beasts lived in harmony with human society, it was nonetheless difficult to rely on them as official sources of information.

"We have three things to ask of you," Caspar continued. "First, we need the Fenrir's existence confirmed by human eyes. Next, you're to ascertain whether or not it's true that the Fenrir is not a

threat. And, if at all possible…though this is by no means compulsory…we'd like to look into whether the Fenrir is a mythical beast or simply a variant of some kind. I realize this is asking a lot, but we'd be grateful if you could bring back a few strands of hair."

"You just keep raising the bar on us," Alec said with a wry grin.

"That's why I said 'if at all possible,'" replied Caspar, shrugging. "You only have to tackle the third request if you're able to. Just confirming the existence of the Fenrir will make it easier for us to put our knights to use."

"I see—so we're a couple of pawns for the greater good, then."

Alec grinned, while Caspar cringed.

"Don't be like that," muttered Caspar, scratching the back of his head. "I know better than anyone that we're asking you to do our busywork. Given our budget, we can't raise the reward we're offering, but the village has a little they'd like to add to the total. As a show of gratitude, they've also prepared you a room at their finest inn. And I'll throw in a footbath and some delicious beef skewers."

"The footbath and the skewers are our bonus, huh?"

Though neither adventurer was sure that the reward was commensurate with the request, neither had come all this way just to turn down the job, and so they accepted.

"Thank you," Caspar said. "If you ever find yourself in need of help in the future, know that I'll do what I can to help. Well, as much as I can personally, anyway."

Caspar looked equal parts grateful and apologetic as the two adventurers set out for the Blue Forest with their pair of slimes as guides.

6

The rocky peak at the far end of the low mountain range which lay past the farthest reaches of the Blue Forest was known as Norrsken Mountain. In the age of the Empire, many had hoped it might be a source of moon ore, but when production rates proved disappointing, the area was abandoned before it truly had a chance to develop. Some two hundred and fifty years had passed since the ore mines had been deserted, and the village that had existed nearby at the time now lay in ruins. All

that remained of the place were hunks of stone and the foundations of former homes.

Norrsken Mountain was known as the first place a Fenrir had been sighted. An official sent from the Imperial capital had been on patrol during the evening, and that was when they had spotted the Fenrir standing in the rocky mountains, a full moon at its back. They had scribbled about the experience in their journal.

The legendary magic wolves had since been witnessed a number of times, but had always vanished thereafter. They were sighted every few years, and were often referred to as mythical beasts.

“So the Fenrir first emerged in the time of the Empire,” remarked Shiori.

“Yep. It’s most commonly known as a mythical beast in the north of the continent, but the truth is that it was in the age of the Empire that people first heard tell of it.”

According to experts, that was around the same time that rumors of Fenrirs began to spread through the kingdom. No older records had ever been found.

“That’s why many researchers believe the Fenrir began its life as either a tall tale or an urban myth. The Empire claims its first king was a mythological hero, and so such stories were of great importance. Some experts posit that the official who first ‘discovered’ the Fenrir might have simply seen a snow wolf, but ended up saying it was the mythical Fenrir just for attention.”

“You mean it might all be a lie someone told to become famous? That’s all too common…”

“Well, yeah. But don’t forget that Norrsken Mountain is a rocky location. It’s not conducive to the way snow wolves live, and that’s why they stick to the forests. Some think this is perhaps proof that a foreign wolf-type magical beast might have made the place its turf.”

“Oh, I see. But has nobody searched the area until now? If Fenrirs have been spotted so many times, you’d think we’d have found some bones or remains somewhere by now.”

“Researchers have been out there a number of times, but the mountain is a very popular nesting ground for snow birds. The area is also filled with the bones of livestock and magical beasts that fed those snow birds. It’s not easy work, gathering all those bones and then patiently, painstakingly working your way

through them all. I've been out there myself a few times, and I sometimes wonder why they didn't call the place 'Skeleton Mountain' instead. It's not the kind of place anyone wants to be for too long. Some people even say that the reason the mines were shut down wasn't the lack of ore, but instead all the bones."

"W-Wow," uttered Shiori. "But if Rurii and the other slimes said they saw a Fenrir, then *something* must be out there."

Rurii and Bla wobbled at her comment. She asked them a few more questions to get more information, and discovered that Fenrirs were awkward, aloof types that did not appear very often. When they'd spoken to the snow wolves about the most recent sighting, they were told *"That thing's no snow wolf."* That left the slimes unsure exactly what the Fenrir was.

"So it doesn't mean any harm, but you still don't really know what it is..." muttered Alec. "Well, that's why we're out here, isn't it?"

"But will we really be lucky enough just to run into it out there?"

If the slimes said it was aloof, then she was doubtful whether it would even give humans like her and Alec the time of day. There didn't seem to be any real rhyme or reason to why it sometimes showed itself in front of people, so for all they knew, it simply went where it pleased on a whim.

"There's also the question of whether it will be kind enough to give us a couple of strands of hair," said Alec.

"That too."

The two slimes wobbled their comments, and Shiori and Alec couldn't help but laugh. They continued chatting as they walked, and before long, they arrived at the square at the end of the farthest part of the walking trail. Travelers and tourists sat on benches, picking at their lunches or otherwise gazing out at the wonders of the Blue Forest spread out before them.

"So many people," remarked Shiori.

"Yeah, just like they said. Tourism really is back in full swing."

It was likely that the visitors had all heard the talk of the Fenrir, but there were no rules against coming out this way, and everybody seemed to be more interested in enjoying the sights than worrying about the mysterious magical beast. It no doubt helped that there were knights stationed on guard—but there were also the slimes, who looked so relaxed that the mere sight of them offered a sense of comfort and security.

“They really have made a home of this place,” said Shiori.

“That they have.”

Rurii and Bla wobbled with joy at the sight of their old friends, and the humans nearby all smiled at the sight. Even the tourists had quickly grown accustomed to the slimes as fellow residents and travelers.

“But there’s maybe just a few too many people for us to jump the fence and wander deeper into the forest,” said Alec.

While entry into the forest proper wasn’t strictly prohibited, there were signs around warning against entering a place that many magical beasts called home. Neither adventurer wanted to look like they were ignorant of those signs with so many witnesses, and so they turned back so as to find a different spot from which to enter the forest.

When Rurii and Bla had finished their own “work,” so to speak, they proceeded to catch up with their fellow slimes before wandering back to Shiori and Alec.

“Sorry that you’re stuck working on our schedule,” said Shiori.

The slimes, however, wobbled happily. “*Ain’t no big deal!*”

Once they had found a spot away from the nosy gazes of other travelers, Shiori and Alec quickly stepped over the fence and proceeded into the forest.

“The Fenrir has been spotted a number of times this last week by the main road path and on the outskirts of the village, so Caspar and the knights believe it probably hasn’t gone too far.”

“That’s assuming, of course, that it’s on its own,” said Shiori.

“They haven’t found any tracks so far. I don’t think it’s breeding enough to have a pack, but I don’t know for sure either.”

Rurii and Bla had only ever met lone Fenrirs—the slimes had never seen a pack before.

“I can’t help thinking that the village would have been better off hiring experts and sending them out with the Blue Forest slimes for this job,” said Shiori.

“Ha, I was thinking exactly the same thing. But the villagers all want some sort of reassurance before the summer solstice festival, and waiting for an expert would have taken time. I think that’s why they approached us instead.”

“That makes sense. And I guess that’s what adventurers are for, right?”

“Exactly.”

It was common for adventurers to pick up the work that the knights either left behind or couldn't get around to. In other nations, this resulted in people looking at adventurers as being lesser than knights. This, however, was still a relatively more positive outlook; in some places, people still saw adventurers as little more than vagabonds and reserve soldiers.

Storydia was a place in which knights and adventurers had established good working relationships, which marked it as unique. In part, this was thanks to the generosity of the kingdom's people, but it was also in large part due to the land being the origin of the Adventurers' Guild itself, which played an important role in the nation. All the same, Shiori still had misgivings about it; she was a registered adventurer who had come to harm at the hands of a former branch guild master, after all. Still, what had happened to her was anything but a common occurrence, and swift action had been taken as soon as the truth had come to light. She had also recouped all of the reward money she'd been owed over that period of time, and in the end, the head branch of the Guild had even dispatched investigators. All this to say that the Adventurers' Guild was an organization that took its role seriously.

"We have to keep doing our part and work hard to keep the friendly relationship going," said Shiori. "We're making more acquaintances among the knights now too."

"Indeed. But we don't have to work *too* hard. I mean that for both of us."

"Yeah," replied Shiori, giggling.

The party made their way farther into the forest, in search of the Fenrir's last known location according to eyewitness accounts and slime testimony. Along the way, they saw the remains of knight corps' campsites.

"They really did a dedicated search," said Alec.

"Yes. But even then, they didn't find it."

For all the times it had been spotted, it seemed true that the creature hadn't left any tracks. Occasionally they found fur and feces, but all were from different magical beasts.

"If it exists as the slimes say it does, then it must be incredibly careful about making sure it doesn't leave any traces of itself," said Alec. "I'm guessing that it likely doesn't have a specific 'home base' that it lives out of either. Unfortunately, the area we're looking to search is just too large."

It was quite the distance to Norrsken Mountain, and when you included the low mountains which came before it and the entirety of the Blue Forest, the scope of the search grew completely out of hand. A truly dedicated sweep of the area would require a huge number of people.

The adventurers had found nothing of note on their search until this point. Shiori's search magic, too, was coming up blank. Perhaps the Fenrir would not show at all. Just as that doubt was beginning to gnaw at Shiori's mind, the air suddenly changed.

Tension wrung through them, putting them all at the ready. The chirping of the birds came to a sudden halt; all they could hear was the wind through the trees and the sound of water flowing through a nearby stream.

Something is approaching. It's coming from far away.

"My search magic just picked something up," Shiori said. "It's not a threat, but…there's something strange about its presence."

It was similar to a snow wolf's, but Shiori could not say for certain that that was what they'd be dealing with. It gave off a quiet, perplexing aura.

And then the creature stood before them, revealing itself from amidst the white trees.

7

With the snowtrees blanketed in pristine white and the grass and wildlife nearly all the same color, the forest in these parts was nearly blinding. The bluish-white shadows cast by the foliage were what gave the Blue Forest its name. This blend of blues and whites turned the forest into something almost like a blank canvas, and anything that wasn't those colors immediately stood out.

That was why Shiori noticed at once when *it* appeared from among the trees. At first, it was almost like watching a section of the environment get dyed purple, but as the shape grew closer, it slowly took on the form of a magical beast. It was a wolf covered in purple fur, and it walked with a slow, easy grace. Its eyes were locked on the adventurers. It was too close to run from, but Shiori felt no enmity from the creature—it was just as the slimes had said.

"Wow, it's really here," she uttered.

"Yeah…"

In its entirety, the creature looked very much like a snow wolf, but it was impressively large, standing at least 2.5 meters tall. Its fur glittered like purple crystals in the rays of the sun. Then there was the intelligence that emanated from its gaze, and the stately way it surveyed the world. The adventurers could do little more than stand rooted to the spot, awed by the unique charm of the creature that now walked towards them.

The wolf came to a stop some two meters before Shiori and Alec.

"All the stories we've heard say that the Fenrir never gets close to anyone who sees it," Shiori uttered. "So why would it now...?"

Shiori had the feeling that the Fenrir had some reason for making this approach, but she didn't have insight into its thought process. And so it was Rurii—with Bla not far behind—who wobbled over, closer to the wolf. The slime wobbled, the wolf growled, and the slime wobbled again; it was a conversation between magical beasts, but it did not last long. The Fenrir, once cautious of the adventurers, now moved closer still.

"A-Alec..." muttered Shiori.

She still did not feel any enmity from the beast, but it was just so *big*. Alarm bells rang in her head at their sheer proximity. But Alec remained frozen. And though his hand had been resting on the hilt of his sword, ready for anything, it now suddenly relaxed.

"Alec...?" Shiori said.

"Amazing."

Alec's words came out like a sigh. In them was a sense of admiration.

"This wolf is not an enemy," he said. "The idea of this feeling never made sense to me before. Never clicked. But now it suddenly makes all the sense in the world. This is how Nils must have felt. It's how *you* must have felt, Shiori."

There was no clear subject in Alec's words, but Shiori understood exactly what was happening, and she let out a gasp.

"Wait, do you mean...?"

It was a meeting of kindred spirits, of different races. The coming-together of soulmates. This was the way in which people of this world described the strong link that bonded magical beasts to very particular humans. Because magical beasts lived their lives guided by a completely different set of rules, it was largely thought that no matter how friendly they became with humans, certain fundamental differences would—like a wall—

always separate them. However, among magical beasts, there were those who occasionally scaled that wall. When a human met with a beast that was a kindred spirit—their soulmate, so to speak—they felt an inexplicable but incredibly strong pull.

This had been true of the time that Shiori met Rurii as well. She had known instinctively that the slime was not an enemy—it was her friend.

The human race had made huge strides over its long history, but in getting to where it now was, it had lost some of the instincts of the natural world that it had once relied on to survive. One theory posited by researchers was that one such lost instinct was the ability to communicate with creatures of other races.

In order to flourish in the natural world, which was often cruel and unforgiving, it was necessary not just to ascertain enmity in other creatures, but also the possibility of harmony and even cohabitation. This need had resulted in the development of instincts that allowed creatures like magical beasts to communicate with one another.

Some scholars believed that the human race, which was by nature fragile, had managed to survive by conversing with other creatures. In this way, it had come to find safe living spaces and form strong bonds. Scholars pointed at the many human-animal marriages that had been recorded throughout the world as traces of these former instincts.

However, this loss of the ability to communicate was not unique to humans alone. Many living creatures had, over cycles of evolution and the subdivision of their species, also lost this ability, and so it only ever revealed itself in very particular individuals, under very particular circumstances. This current understanding explained why, when two such individuals *did* meet, they were strongly drawn to one another.

In the case of humans and beasts coming together as kindred spirits, the first step was almost always taken by the magical beast. This was said to be because humans, who had left the natural world and now lived by their own unique rules, had lost touch with the sensitivity that once connected them to other living creatures.

There were, of course, all sorts of opinions on the matter, and the phenomenon was still not completely understood in any

great detail. However, there was no doubting the existence of strong bonds made between humans and other creatures, such as Shiori and Rurii, and Nils and Eir.

Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I saw something in the newspaper recently about the king feeling drawn to his peach slime from the moment he saw it.

Much of what made up this explanation felt like the stuff of fairy tales, and as someone who was not native to the world, Shiori had her reservations and her doubts. However, given that the vast majority of these connections were started by the magical beast, Shiori wondered if perhaps the circumstances on the side of the human were largely irrelevant.

Or, perhaps, this all pointed at the histories of this world and her previous world sharing the same roots. This was a hypothesis that was nigh unbelievable. Shiori had no means through which to confirm her theory, and she did not know if the truth would ever come to light, even as the world developed further.

Still, Shiori saw her chance meeting and friendship with Rurii as a great blessing. The slime had saved her life, and was a companion whom she could trust implicitly. Alec, it seemed, had now met just such a friend, but none could have imagined that his bond would be with a mythical beast.

"It's such a strange sensation," Alec uttered. "It's like meeting a like mind."

He reached a hand out to the Fenrir like it was the most natural thing in the world, just like Shiori had done when she'd first encountered Rurii.

"May I pat you?" he asked.

The wolf let out a soft growl as if to say, *"As you like,"* and let Alec pat it.

"You've beautiful fur," Alec said. "It's like silk."

It must have felt wonderful, because Alec then began rubbing his cheek against it. He looked about to plunge his head into the Fenrir's fur entirely, but Shiori, who felt herself about to be swallowed up by the solemnity of the moment, remained cool.

"Um, Alec?" she said. "Perhaps we can put the petting aside for a brief moment and see to addressing our request?"

Alec snapped back to his senses. The Fenrir looked down at him with a dubious expression that said, *"Just how long were you*

going to pat me, anyway?" Rurii, meanwhile, gave Alec a few joking pokes in the foot. Bla, for its part, was slowly circling the mythical beast, basking in the wonder of having discovered a creature so rare.

"Uh... Oh. Yes," muttered Alec. "Good call. The request...from the villagers. Look, we heard from the slimes that you're not looking to hurt anyone," he said, addressing the Fenrir, "but the village wants some kind of proof of that. Can we trust that you won't harm any of the people around here?"

The mythical beast was clearly curious about and interested in people, but it had always avoided any close contact with them, much in the way it avoided other living creatures. Shiori worried for a moment that perhaps the wolf did not understand what Alec was saying, but her worry proved unfounded. Perhaps it really was true that there was an instinct that allowed for communication between different species. At the very least, there were magical beasts that understood human speech, and this mythical beast was among them.

The Fenrir growled.

"Of course."

"Excellent. That's really great," said Alec, relieved. A moment later, however, his brow furrowed. "Wait, that still doesn't solve our problem. It doesn't really mean anything if *we* trust you. We need to prove to Caspar and the villagers that you're not a concern."

"Yes, that's right... Hrmm," murmured Shiori.

"So...what now?"

While the two adventurers dropped into thought, the two slimes struck up another conversation with the Fenrir. After some wobbling and some growling, they seemed to come to a consensus, and Rurii wobbled a new message.

"Well, let's go."

"Huh? We're just going to take it back with us? Can we do that?" asked Shiori.

"It's the quickest way, but the villagers are still very cautious when it comes to wolves. That said..." Alec paused to think, then nodded to himself. "Let's get as close as we can for now. We'll stay out of sight of the village and have Caspar come see things for himself."

Shiori had her doubts, but she remained hopeful; after all, Brovito had made great strides when it came to accepting and

adopting slimes into their way of life.

"Will you come with us?" Alec asked the Fenrir.

The mythical beast offered a bark in the affirmative to indicate it was on the same page. It then nudged Alec, pushing him in the back with its snout to get him moving.

"Hey, now. Impatient, are we? Don't tell me you were wandering around out here all this time just so you'd bump into me."

Whether the wolf found Alec's joke funny or not wasn't clear, as it didn't expressly confirm or deny his statement. It did, however, let out a low growl and slap him in the back with its big tail.

Oh, I see where this is headed...

Shiori saw the way her lover and the Fenrir were acting with each other, and began mentally preparing herself for what was to come.

We're going home with a wolf tonight.

Shiori suspected they would have a new friend moving in with them who, like Rurii, would quickly become a member of their family. And it would not be long before Shiori's suspicions were confirmed.

8

While they walked back to the village, Alec asked the Fenrir a number of questions to try and learn more about it—things like where it had come from, where it lived, and what it was.

Naturally, the Fenrir could not speak. It was also not easy to get such information from a magical beast you had only just met. Still, after putting in some effort, Alec was able to ascertain that the Fenrir had been born deep in the Blue Forest, and that it lived near Norrsken Mountain.

The essential matter of *what* it was, however, which one might have thought obvious, was in truth not so easy to nail down. The Fenrir, too, seemed cagey about the subject, and its body language suggested that it was avoiding giving a direct answer. Either that, or perhaps it really did not know. Even when the adventurers tried showing it the page on Fenrirs in the newest edition of Shiori's pocket bestiary, the creature's response was anything but clear.

"Putting aside the color and the size," said Alec, "it's fair to say

we’re looking at a male snow wolf. But we can’t really say anything for certain until an expert takes a look.”

“Right…”

Brovito Village had a resident who was an expert when it came to snow wolves. Perhaps he would know something. The adventurers continued on, following Rurii and Bla, and avoiding the main walking trails so as to avoid bumping into and frightening any tourists or travelers. When they neared the outskirts of the village, they stopped and chose a place where the shrubbery and tree branches made for good cover.

“What now?” asked Shiori. “Should I go get Caspar? Or should we ask Rurii to do it?”

“Hmm…” murmured Alec, thinking for a moment. “Let’s send Rurii. All the villagers know our faces, and it might only worry them if they see either you or me return alone. Rurii, on the other hand, should be fine.”

Now that the village had gotten so friendly with slimes, Rurii would blend in. Shiori wrote a message explaining the situation in her notebook, then tore the page out and gave it to her slime. It wobbled to let them know it would handle things, and then it disappeared into the forest.

The Fenrir sat down and remained quiet while they waited for Caspar to arrive, though Bla continued to circle the creature and, after getting its permission, touched its magnificent fur coat and marveled at its giant claws. Many knew that Bla was extremely interested in insects, but it seemed that the slime was in fact simply keenly interested in all living creatures.

“There’s a tendency to believe that humans are the only form of intelligent life, but it looks to me like there are plenty of intelligent magical beasts that simply don’t have the ability to talk to us,” said Shiori. “However you think about it, there *are* ways we can communicate.”

“Indeed. And while opinions are split when it comes to determining exactly what ‘intelligent life’ is, magical beasts and spirits don’t share many of the behaviors we associate with ordinary animals. It’s probably not even right to assume that humans occupy the top spot when it comes to all life-forms. It’s true that present-day humanity has developed into an advanced civilization, but…”

There was a reason that Alec had qualified his statement about humans with the word “present-day.” Namely, there had

been other life-forms in the past outside of human beings that had developed their own languages and civilizations. This included bipedal magical beasts, such as goblins and orcs.

Unfortunately, these monsters were a danger to the human race. They attacked and ate people, and kidnapped women in order to breed with them. They were *not* the kind of species that was open to peaceful coexistence with humans. So, as humanity developed, the extermination of such magical beasts increased; today, they were now all but extinct.

The last known sighting of goblins had been recorded some ninety years ago, when two had been slain near the equator. The species had since been declared extinct. Small numbers of orcs and trolls were still said to live at high latitudes, but it seemed likely that both species would be extinct in a number of decades.

"It would seem that a number of individual magical beasts among orcs and goblins and such *were* friendly with humans, but this was decidedly rare, and relations never persisted very long," said Alec.

Though their culture was similar to that of humans, their value systems fundamentally differed, and so the magical beasts were eventually slain by the humanity they so hated. In the struggle to live, and the survival of the fittest, they had lost.

"I see..." muttered Shiori.

Shiori could not pass an ethical judgment on the situation, nor did she feel it was her place to make one. Perhaps as time went by, protection organizations would raise objections about what had happened in the past, but she did not think it was a problem that would ever see a conclusion.

"How about your home?" asked Alec. "Is there anything else in the way of intelligent life?"

"It seems there's only humanity at present," replied Shiori. "Other humans existed hundreds of thousands of years ago, but they went extinct for various reasons. No demihumans, and no magical beasts; those things exist only in fairy tales."

"I see. But it's interesting that our worlds have so much in common."

"Yes. What exists only in the world of imagination in my world exists here as a part of ordinary life. That's why sometimes I can't help thinking that perhaps they were the same world once, and that their histories diverged at some indeterminate point."

Would there ever come a day in which Shiori's sudden

appearance here was understood? Would there ever come a time in which the existence of parallel worlds came to light, and the two worlds intersected once again?

Perhaps, one day.

But that day would surely not come while Shiori was still alive. And yet, she hoped that an age might arrive in which it did. Even if she herself never got the chance to find out, she hoped that in the future that truth might come to light.

While the adventurers chatted about their two separate worlds, Rurii returned from among the grass. Soon after came Caspar, the Brovito Village elder, and with them an old man. The old man was the one who, during the snow wolf attack, had taken a closer look at the captured snow wolves. He was an experienced hunter who had since retired, and was an expert when it came to snow wolf ecology.

“Whoa,” uttered Caspar. “I remember asking for a couple of strands of hair, but I never imagined you’d bring the whole wolf back with you.”

The knight captain was, unsurprisingly, completely shocked by the sight of the Fenrir and its majestic air.

“And I, uh… I thank you kindly for gracing us with your presence today,” he said, fumbling through the words as the wolf eyed him suspiciously.

The village elder, meanwhile, was frozen stiff—stunned into complete silence. Only the former hunter, who introduced himself as Bjork, remained completely calm.

“My… You *are* a marvelous one,” he said, dropping to a knee before the wolf.

The Fenrir remained calm while Bjork went about inspecting it. This was likely due in part thanks to how respectful Bjork was, but it was also simply true that the Fenrir meant no harm, and was gentle in nature.

“Now let me just start by saying that I’m no fancy professor or scholarly specialist,” said Bjork when he was done, “but based on the shape of the face, the bone structure, the legs and claws, and the fur, I’m certain we’re looking at a young snow wolf male. That said, I’ve never seen one with a coat like this before. I reckon…that it might be a variant.”

The best conclusion that Bjork could come to was one that largely aligned with Alec’s own.

“But if this here’s a genuine snow wolf,” continued Bjork, “then it’s easy to tell why he’s all on his lonesome. You couldn’t fit in with the rest of your pack, could you, buddy? That, or maybe the pack drove you out.”

The Fenrir offered no direct answer, but the slight drooping of his ears and tail—along with his refusal to look anyone in the eyes—seemed to act as silent confirmation. Shiori suddenly found it a little hard to breathe, having experienced firsthand how it felt to be made an outsider in one’s own party.

Snow wolves were magical beasts known for being fiercely loyal to their own. They formed packs of up to twenty or thirty wolves, and lived by strict rules that allowed for order among their society. For this very reason, they were extremely sensitive to and unforgiving of any “outsiders” who might hinder their way of life or disturb the natural order of things.

“Snow wolves are beasts that gather in huge packs,” said Bjork. “The smallest disturbance to their delicate natural state of being can be the difference between life and death. That’s why they won’t stand for anything that bucks their trends. I reckon that’s what it was. This wolf here might have been one of their own, but if he presented even the potential of a threat, his pack would not have taken to him kindly.”

The vast majority of stray wolves were those who had been driven from their packs. The exact standards for expulsion differed from pack to pack, but this could range from personality issues disturbing pack dynamics to differences in physical appearance. It seemed likely that reasons like these were what had driven the snow wolves to tell Rurii, *“That thing’s no snow wolf.”*

“And just take a look at him,” Bjork said. “All the packs would have kept him at arm’s length, with that coat of his. And it would go a long way to explaining why he ended up living in Norrsken Mountain, which isn’t a particularly good place for snow wolves to live. If you were looking to stay away from snow wolf turf, it’s either Norrsken Mountain or the area around here.”

Considering the sheer number of snow wolves that existed throughout the forest, there must have been a significant number of variants. And if those variants were left wandering the forests in search of a place to call home, it was no wonder that these “Fenrirs” were spotted by people on a semi-regular basis.

Alec was silent for a long while. In the Fenrir, he saw something of himself and the suffering he'd endured as he struggled to grow accustomed to life among the nobility. He moved slowly closer to his new friend.

"You had it rough too, huh?" he said.

The purple beast let out a low growl and wagged his tail: *"Oh, it wasn't so bad."*

It was a moment between the two that Shiori didn't want to intrude on, but all the same, she couldn't simply leave her lover as he was, and so put a hand on his back.

"This decision is yours," she said. "With all that's on your mind, I think it's best that you do what feels right."

"I agree," wobbled Rurii, patting his foot.

"Thanks," Alec said, turning to them and smiling before once again facing the Fenrir. "I know you've been through a lot, but know this: You are not alone anymore. You can join us if that's what you want. Shiori and Rurii, too, will be happy to have you. But if that's not what you want, that's also fine; if that's the case, I'll come here to visit you often. So, how about it?"

He posed his question in the form of two suggestions. But the answer was already clear; the Fenrir had willingly come out of hiding to find them, and had come this far following them without any resistance. From the very start, his intent had been to join them. And so, the Fenrir stepped forward and rubbed his nose against Alec's cheek; that was his answer.

"So you're coming with us, right?" said Alec, smiling.

Caspar, who had mostly been a spectator this whole time, snapped back to his senses.

"Look, I don't mind you taking him with you…" he started.

"Oh, so you're okay with it, then?" joked Alec.

"How could I not be, after all of this?" said Caspar with a wry chuckle. "Still, we haven't confirmed exactly what the wolf is, and so we're not in the clear yet. We knights can't just give you a pat on the back and wish you all the best either. We need you to bind him to a magic contract; that's our first condition. Then, once you've sent a report to us through your guild, you take your new friend to an expert and get him properly identified."

Alec glanced at the Fenrir who, after a moment's thought, woofed his response. He had needed to mull things over, but had ultimately agreed to abide by the human way of doing things. Caspar watched them, then turned to the village elder, who

remained as still as a statue.

"Elder, please, get a hold of yourself. What about the village?"

"Oh," he muttered. "Yes, yes indeed. Er, as long as there's no harm to the village, then I don't see any issues. I'll inform the villagers myself, but I'd like to ask Bjork for his opinion too. What do you think?"

"I think it's fine. The wolf's not a threat. Yeah, the village was attacked by snow wolves in the past, but it was humans who shouldered the blame for that. As long as we don't do anything stupid, nothing much is going to happen."

His many years of experience were enough to convince the village elder.

"I reckon it's fine to let people see the wolf," continued Bjork. "All the fear and worry comes largely from the mystery—people not knowing what they're dealing with. Any of the hunters will know at a glance that this fella doesn't mean us any harm."

"I'm not a big fan of turning the wolf into a model," said Alec.

All the same, there was no getting around the Fenrir being eye-catching. If they were walking around with him, they were going to draw some stares. There was simply no getting around it. The wolf let out a soft growl, as if to explain that things hadn't been any different even when he'd been living around magical beasts. And in the end, he had made the decision to live among humans; if he wasn't going to be accepted by his own kind, he would make a go of things elsewhere.

Alec drew his sword from its scabbard and opened a tiny wound on his finger. The wolf then licked the blood that emerged from the cut. This act of exchanging a part of one's self was the establishment of a magical contract, and for magical beasts, it was similar to marriage or the bond between parent and child. It indicated that the magical beast was willing to obey its soulmate, though in truth the two stood together as equals; after all, the magical being had to enter into the agreement and ingest the blood before any contract could be established to begin with.

Regardless of all of this, Alec and the Fenrir successfully sealed their friendship, the act of which was a kind of declaration of safety.

"As for a name…" muttered Alec. "Ah, yes. How about Violid? Vio for short."

Violid was the name of a knight in an old Storydian fairy tale

who was beloved by many. He was a man of royal blood who did not assume the throne, but rather devoted his life to protecting his home, where the snow violets bloomed.

“Not bad at all,” replied the wolf with a sideways glance.

“Ah, the snow violet knight,” remarked Caspar. “I see. A nice choice.”

“You might have a knack for this naming thing,” said Bjork. “It fits wonderfully with his regal aura and affectionate gaze.”

Violid seemed to enjoy the praise and compliments; he huffed proudly through his nose, then pressed it against Alec’s cheek as thanks. Just as they were about to leave the forest for the village, Vio turned to the forest and howled. It did so only once, but the sound of it echoed.

No reply came to the wolf who had been abandoned by his own kin. Instead, two young wolves appeared quietly in the distance—siblings, or perhaps friends. Shiori could not be certain which, but she saw something like familial love in their eyes. For a time the two wolves stared at Vio, but eventually one wolf left, and a short while later, the other did too.

It was a silent goodbye—no words were spoken.

“He may have been alone, but even then, there were those who understood him,” said Alec.



“Yeah,” said Shiori.

Perhaps the reason the two wolves had remained silent was because of their positions within their pack. Still, the fact that they had come to say their goodbyes, silent or otherwise, was because they were moved by their emotions.

“Let’s go, Vio,” said Alec.

Violid let out a short “woof” and followed after Alec. He did not look back. Upon his departure from the wolves of the Blue Forest, Vio brought an end to the mystery of the Fenrir of Norrsken Mountain. The Fenrirs were not, in fact, mythical beasts, but rather variants—wolves that displayed in their appearance remnants of their long-distant, now-extinct ancestors, who had once crossbred with snow wolves.

9

Brovito was at its liveliest during the summer, when the days were at their longest. The main streets were filled with people, food stalls were open everywhere, and travelers and villagers alike were drawn to take part in the revelry. Excitement filled the air as the summer solstice festival neared.

The footbath, inspired in part by Shiori’s past experiences, was hugely popular. Thanks to daylight lasting so late into the evening, people rested their weary feet in the water long past eight o’clock while they gazed at the Blue Forest and indulged in skewered beef.

One corner of the village square was particularly lively; it was where Shiori and Alec were enjoying the skewers Caspar had given them as a reward. More noticeable, however, were the familiars behind them, munching on the very same treats. One of those familiars was a wolf with fur that glittered like purple crystal, and his presence drew a lot of attention.

Some villagers, perhaps remembering the snow wolf attack of the previous year, kept their distance out of fear and worry. Others, however, looked on with great curiosity. They, too, had been unable to hide their initial shock, but when they noticed the clear intelligence and grace in the wolf’s manner, they began to relax.

For the most part, Brovito Village accepted the wolf from the Blue Forest. Now it was clear to everyone that there was no longer anything to worry about. The village hunters, who knew

the forest and its natural inhabitants well, felt completely comfortable around the wolf, and had gathered around to chat with Violid about his life up until now. It was, it must be said, a largely one-sided conversation, with the humans asking their questions and Violid merely indicating yes or no in response.

Even then, however, the experience was precious to Violid, who since birth had only ever had his parents and siblings as fleeting company. He had never once found himself the center of so much attention and friendly interaction.

“Oh, so that’s what happened, huh?” said one hunter. “You had it rough, that’s for sure.”

“They’re a harsh lot, those snow wolves,” added another. “Dogged and unwavering. If they were all after you like that, I bet it was damn near unbearable.”

“I don’t even want to think about it,” said one. “But it’s not unlike humans, if we’re being honest with ourselves, so it’s not like we can talk.”

In that moment, Violid sensed how mysterious the world could be. Never had he imagined that he would find empathy in a species that had drifted so far from nature.

Violid was born in a corner of the Blue Forest. His parents were the most powerful wolves in the forest’s largest pack. Five years before, they had given birth to three pups, but one among them had fur clearly unlike his brothers’. The parents resolved to expel the pup from the pack; they were its leaders, after all, and they could not allow a wolf so different from the others to live among them.

Snow wolves sometimes gave birth to pups with purple fur and yellow eyes. It was the result of the blood of their distant ancestors revealing itself, but such pups could not be allowed to remain; they were easily spotted by the wolves’ enemies, and this made them a danger to all. As such, the vast majority of such wolves were driven away.

Violid’s parents, however, took pity on their son, and kept him in their care for a time. They had thought they might keep him with them until he matured, but he grew much faster than his two brothers, and became very big very quickly. The other wolves in the pack, fearing Violid’s issues might not simply be external, opposed the decision to keep him, and so he was expelled shortly after being weaned off his mother’s milk.

However, though at the time Violid had the body of an adult wolf, his mind was still that of a pup's, and as such, whether he survived would largely come down to luck. Perhaps he would die because he was unable to hunt. Perhaps he would fall prey to other magical beasts. Or, perhaps, as was most common, he would be attacked and killed by his own kind for being an outsider.

That Violid survived this period of his life was due to the fact that his parents kept him in a location they had prepared in secret. They could not feed Violid properly as they had to elude the rest of their pack to visit him, but the support they gave him during this time was no doubt the reason that Violid remained alive.

All the same, even as an adult, Violid never joined a pack, and lived life largely alone. Regardless of his appearance, he was a snow wolf, and it was natural for him to want to live as part of a family. Being forced into a life of solitude wore away at his mind and body.

It was for this reason that wolves like him—outsiders—did not live long, even when they survived long enough to become adults. Many instead chose death. They died slowly as their will to live sapped away, or they wandered out into the sight of the Norrsken Mountain snow birds and gave themselves up as food.

One of the reasons that Violid refused this path was his optimistic nature, but the greater factor was his two brothers. Both often split off from the pack to scout their surroundings, and occasionally used this time to visit their older brother. The act helped to soothe some of Violid's loneliness.

Theirs was a familial bond, unbroken even upon Violid's expulsion from the pack. And had it not existed, Violid would not have made it to the day on which he met his soulmate.

"What's wrong, Vio? Had enough to eat?"

As his new friend asked him this question, Vio shook himself from his thoughts and let out a soft growl.

"I can still eat."

He had a relatively small appetite for a snow wolf, likely due to his food situation when he was young, and was about four-fifths full. This did not stop him, however; at least for tonight, the snow wolf wanted to bask in the moment. He enjoyed the juicy red meat, drank down the fresh milk, and turned from the group of

kids and slimes to gaze into the depths of the forest.

“So long, brother. Live well.”

“You are now among others who have also abandoned the natural laws. Find in them your pack, and live a long life.”

The middle brother had never been much for long speeches, and the youngest brother had always put on a cool front. The “hot-and-cold” type, as his middle brother liked to say. As for Violid’s parents, they had not come to see their eldest son off.

Violid was a failure as a snow wolf, but all the same, his brothers had told him to live on. In making his decision, he could never return to the Blue Forest, the home of his strict yet loving family. And yet, he had now made a new friend, and had met people and beasts who would no doubt become his new family.

Violid was no longer alone, and it was now his duty to live a long life. To choose otherwise would be to disgrace his family, who had broken the laws of their own kind in order to see him survive.

Now that Violid had chosen to live among humans, he would need to learn their ways, but his heart leapt at the thought of the wide world that awaited him. He had left the mountain and the forest that had once confined him, and it was his dream to fully explore the new sights and sounds that awaited him in the future.

Father, mother, brothers. You need not worry any longer.

Violid wished only for his family to fondly remember him as a fortunate son—one who’d found a path to a world beyond.

Interlude: The Diary of Violid, the Familiar

■ June ⅩⅩ

I'm so bored. I don't mind taking things easy, but it's so boring living a life of hiding.

■ June ⅩⅩ

I was out wandering and I accidentally bumped into some snow wolves. Do they *have* to look at me like I'm some kind of monster before they flee? It's so rude. I'm just a little bigger, with different-colored fur and eyes. That's it.

■ June ⅩⅩ

My youngest brother came to visit today. He was as moody and aloof as ever, but he always brings the food I like. Snow bird gizzards, powder snow grass flowers, red boar tail; all the stuff that's hard to get…

I told him he was adorable and he slapped me with his tail.

Grow up, would you?

■ June ⅩⅩ

I was so bored that I decided to go for another walk, but I'm just so tired of running into snow wolves. A pack chased me around, shouting, "You outsider! We can't even tell if you're a man or a woman!"

Does it even matter? I'm *me*.

■ June ⅩⅩ

Today my middle brother came to visit. He's a busy one, but he still brought me some food. He's such a dutiful younger brother. I'm so grateful to both my brothers for bringing a little light to my days. We talked about all sorts of things.

Apparently, the Blue Forest slimes have been visiting the nearby human village. That was the village the humans ran to after they tried to kidnap some of the pack deeper into the forest. After getting wrapped up in something like that, wouldn't the villagers be even *more* afraid of magical beasts? Humans must be really mentally tough.

And those slimes…they're so lucky. They get along with all types of creatures. They don't worry about things like species or gender.

If only the rest of us were so fortunate.

■ June XX

I heard that a pack somewhere just gave birth to a pup with fur like mine. I hope they get raised well…

■ June XX

My middle brother came to visit again. He looked a little run-down.

"The neighboring pack is arguing over the next pack leader," he said.

It seemed it was a question of two potential candidates: brains or brawn. I asked my brother why they couldn't have the two just team up and do it together.

"Logical, but the old-timers won't have it."

That's what my brother said, but he wasn't totally convinced either. I had to wonder if my two brothers would one day be made to compete over who led their pack.

"Opinions would be split. Me on the side of intellect, and our little brother on the side of the action-oriented. I want to back our brother, but he's so standoffish. You know, a hot-and-cold type. Some of the old-timers aren't fans."

I just had to ask him where he'd learned that "hot-and-cold type" line.

"I overheard some humans using it, and I thought it was funny. All the young wolves are using it now."

Even with all the customs and traditions that were plaguing him, at least in this respect, my brother was enjoying himself.

"But some of the other old-timers say I'm not reliable enough," said my brother. "I hoped that maybe they'd just pick someone else entirely, but they want the lineage to continue; they won't back anyone who wasn't born to our father."

Jeez, why do things always have to be so complicated…?

"And you know what? Some people even said we should call you back. You're as tough as any of the males, but you're as tolerant and broad-minded as any of the females."

Well, I had thoughts about *that*.

What. Are you for real? Now *those old farts want to have their*

way, after all I've been through? Tell them to go dig themselves holes to die in.

"Brother, brother, no need to lose your cool. And look—it's not like I don't agree with you."

You're damn right, I told him.

"By the way, I hear you've been walking out in the open of late. The humans are in a real panic about it."

I told him he was most definitely mistaken!

■ June XX

I'm not even doing anything bad! Why do I always have to be in hiding?! It's not like I *chose* this life! I never asked to be an outcast! If I had my way, I'd be just another member of my pack!

It doesn't make any sense! They call me an outcast and they flee, or they attack me, but I'm not doing anything!

■ June XX

Boy, what I would give for a friend. Every now and again I'll get a slime or mandrake come to visit, but...just waiting around in cramped hiding spots is so depressing. I think I kind of understand why some of the other purple snow wolves just decided to sacrifice themselves to the snow birds.

But I won't do that! I'm too annoyed by it all!

■ June XX

I don't know how to describe it! My heart was racing all morning! I just had this feeling like something good was going to happen! I was wandering all over the place because I just couldn't sit still, and then I felt *it* approaching. It was so different from the usual slimes and bugs and plants!

I started to wonder if it was what they sometimes talked about. You know, a soulmate? Oh, that would be *so* wonderful! I was just beside myself wondering what species they might be!

And what a surprise! It turned out to be a human! A human! And that made sense. It was more believable than just making friends with another magical beast.

He's a real looker too!

We're too different in terms of species so I don't really know about his face, but the guy's aura just screamed "real man"! The woman with him had strangely colored hair and a mysterious aura about her, but she seemed okay too!

And the surprises kept coming! They came to see *me*?! They wanted to ask *me* some questions?! I couldn't believe it, but I was all for it.

Ask away, guys!

■ June ⅩⅩ

The man who came to ask me some questions turned out to be my soulmate. He said he's going to take me to see the outside world! His name is Alec, and he gave me my own name. Humans have a culture of naming themselves, and I was just *so* excited to get a name of my own!

My name's Violid! That's my name! It's inspired by flowers and a legendary hero! How wonderful!

I was so surprised, though. Humans totally understand me way better than magical beasts. Not that that's everything. I mean, there's so many of them, so I'm sure there are also lots of things that make them totally annoying too.

Still, I'm so excited! I've been cooped up on that mountain for so long, so I'm going to live this new life to the fullest! Mom, dad, brothers: You don't have to worry about me. I'm going to have a wonderful life! Thanks for everything! It's all because of you that I met this excellent new friend.

I love you guys, and I always will.

Chapter 2: The Dragon of the Void

1

The inn that Shiori and Alec were brought to that evening was simple but elegant, and judging by the attire of its customers, it was popular among the rich and influential. The brick building had once been a rich farmer's manor, and this gave it historical value. It wasn't uncommon for scholars to sometimes visit.

The adventurers had been given access to the inn's finest room—a room so spacious that their three familiars weren't an issue.

"It's such a nice room," Shiori uttered. "And it's really okay for us to have our familiars with us?"

The innkeeper—who was also the village elder's younger brother-in-law—answered Shiori's timid question with a smile.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "You're free to take them with you to all our facilities. In recent years, it's become quite common for people to travel with their familiars or their pets. Naturally, the number of inns accommodating such customers is growing too."

Brovito had begun its life with farming and logging as its core industries. But over the last few decades, as the standard of living rose and the working class were able to take more holidays, the village put more effort into its tourism and made the most of the wondrous sights of the Blue Forest.

Tourism became the village's third major industry, but it had boomed in recent years and begun taking over more of the village.

"In the past, the rich weren't really fond of farming villages like ours, but over the last twenty or thirty years, there's been a change of heart. These days, it's not at all uncommon for the nobility to stay here. And when they stay, they also bring their aides and servants with them, and so we've put a lot of effort into ensuring we've all the necessary facilities to accommodate such large parties."

"Oh, I see," said Shiori. "Wow..."

The profit that came from rich clientele was significant. Those of a good standing traveled with an entourage of servants and

guards, and so even a one-night stay meant for many filled inn rooms. On the flip side, however, the nobility were known to cancel their reservations at the first hint of trouble, and multiple canceled reservations during the village's busiest season spelled huge losses.

The snow wolf attack in the previous fall, too, had resulted in almost all of the rich customers canceling their reservations. The newly installed footbath could not make up for the sales, and a great many families were forced to take seasonal work elsewhere.

"That's why we couldn't be more grateful that you managed to see to our request so swiftly," said the innkeeper.

Violid's ears dropped apologetically. Everybody knew, however, that it was not the snow wolf's fault. The trouble had been started by humans—nobles who had no connection to Brovito whatsoever. And it had not even been Violid's family's pack that had attacked the village anyway; nobody blamed him for anything.

It was because the village understood all of this that they'd called upon their sole photographer to take a commemorative photo. Violid had been rather flustered by it all. And though a black-and-white photo likely wouldn't capture the wolf's beautiful fur coat, it would nonetheless capture the stately dignity of his bearing. Duplicates of the photo had been made, and the pictures now decorated the village hall and other notable facilities. The villagers promised to send Alec his own copy soon.

The adventurers' first-ever "family photo" included the villagers *and* the knight corps, and was a lively affair. The whole thing made Alec very happy; he saw it as a way to commemorate a very special day.

"Should we put the photo in the living room?" he pondered. "Or actually, we should look for a new place first, huh?"

"Yes, we really should, and the sooner the better," agreed Shiori.

Shiori and Alec's apartment was a good size for the two humans and a slime, but with a snow wolf joining them, the place would feel very cramped. The two decided to put their efforts into their new house and their planned sharehouse, and smiled at the thought.

"Life is so fulfilling when it's filled with fun things to do," said Shiori.

The following morning, Shiori woke to the sound of the cattle lowing outside. She deftly squirmed out of the still-sleeping Alec's viselike hug and sat up. Alec looked quite happy to sleep a little longer, so she dropped a kiss on his cheek and slipped out of bed.

Rurii and Bla were both spread across the floor, Bla's pocket bestiary lying on the floor by their side. The two had been gazing at it before bed, and had probably fallen asleep in the middle of their page-turning. Sitting by the side of the bed was the Fenrir who had just joined the family, though Shiori had to remind herself that Violid was in fact a beautiful variant snow wolf.

Violid appeared to have been awake for some time, and his sly gaze was all too easy for Shiori to read: *"Someone's up early after some late-night shenanigans..."*

Oh dear...he totally caught us in the act...

Alec had stirred during the evening and, in his half-dreaming state, had wanted to have a little "fun." It hadn't gone unnoticed. Shiori had been taken by surprise—who would do such a thing upon the welcoming of a new family member?—and had tried to resist. However, even in his slumber Alec had been thorough from start to finish, and try as she might—and try she did—Shiori had been powerless until she, too, slipped off into another world.

I will have to inform His Highness, the king's elder brother, that his idea of play sometimes goes too far. He will require adequate admonishment.

"Good morning, Vio," said Shiori, blushing. "You're up early."

The snow wolf barked a reply.

"Did we wake you?" she asked.

Shiori had tried to keep her voice as quiet as possible, but she worried that she'd woken the wolf, which she knew to have good hearing. Just thinking that she'd kept him from a good night's sleep made her feel terrible. Violid sensed her worry, and growled a light *"Nope."*

"Well, that's good to know, at least."

"He's probably a light sleeper anyway," said Alec, finally sitting up in bed. "Until now, he's probably been on edge all the time. He's had to be ready for danger no matter what."

Violid grunted to confirm Alec's comment. While it was rare for carnivorous magical beasts at the top of the food chain to be

attacked, Violid had lived a life in which he was always wary of attacks from his own kind. Though he was the same as them in shape and form, his different color put other snow wolves on guard, and sometimes brought out their savagery. Violid had thus been forced to constantly move from hideout to hideout, and was never able to sleep deeply.

"I see..." uttered Shiori.

Shiori knew only too well how hard it was to just live, and how harsh a place could be to navigate when you were marked as different. It forced you to work that much harder than anybody "normal," and it was horribly taxing on the body, the mind, and the spirit.

"In my life before I became an adventurer, I rarely got a good night's sleep," Alec said. "I couldn't be more grateful for the life I have now, and how it allows me to sleep without worry."

His former home in the castle was one that should have offered safety and security, and yet Alec could never truly feel at ease. When he had lost his father to illness, he had also lost his most powerful shield, and his own home had suddenly felt like a threat. He felt as though if he let his guard down, even for a moment, someone might take his life, or he might otherwise find himself waking in bed next to a woman whom he might then be forced to wed.

Alec had never wanted to be a part of the battle for succession to the throne, and even the nights that should have offered him some small respite gave him no comfort. Such was his anxiety and stress during his last year at the castle that he never slept deeply, and so his health suffered horribly as a result.

A lack of sleep stole from one the ability to think clearly. If the story of Violid's past was indeed true, then he, too, must have suffered terribly. Perhaps he, like Alec, had found himself standing at the precipice between life and death.

"But there's no need to worry any longer," said Alec. "Rest easy when you're with us, and sleep well."

Violid's tail wagged in response. The conversation had come to a neat conclusion, but then Shiori remembered something she'd wanted to say and whispered in her lover's ear.

"Alec..." she started.

"Hmm?"

"When we're together with someone new...to the family," she whispered, "fooling around is...well, it's a little embarrassing. At

the very least, we should do it in another room…”

Alec’s eyes went wide.

“You mean that wasn’t Vio?” he muttered.

He made it sound as if he’d been dreaming of playing with Violid, when in fact it had been Shiori by his side, and Shiori who’d been made to endure the night’s fun. Her jaw dropped.

“Then why’d you thrust your hand into my pajamas?!” she shot back.

“Oh, uh…sorry?”

“Those weren’t the hands of a man playing with a snow wolf!” she cried.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you…” muttered Alec.

The man seemed to wither under his lover’s glare.

“Well, aren’t the two of you awfully friendly this morning!” wobbled Rurii.

Bla, meanwhile, watched on in rapt silence at its first viewing of two lovers squabbling.

Violid’s wolfy grin spoke for him: *“You couldn’t fool a snow wolf, let alone a dog with* that *act.”*

Shiori knew that on the next expedition they went on, the one thing she’d have to be most careful of was none other than her own lover. She let out a cry of exasperation and covered her face with her hands. A single day had passed since Alec and Violid’s meeting, and things were not at all off to the start that Shiori had imagined.

2

Alec continued to murmur excuses as they readied themselves for the day, and once they had washed up and dressed, a knock came at the door. Breakfast was ready, and the staff had brought it promptly. Shiori opened the door to see the innkeeper, who had the inn’s waiting staff bring in trays piled with their breakfasts.

It began with a soup made with fresh milk and leafy vegetables, and offered all sorts of cuisine including colorful pickled vegetables, smoked meat fried with potatoes and beets, lightly toasted rye bread in baskets, boiled cockatrice eggs, black water buffalo cheese, beautifully pink ham, and berry jam.

“Are you sure it’s okay to give us *this* much…?” uttered Shiori.

As part of a bonus on top of their reward for having

completed the request, the village was footing the bill for the adventurers' room and board—but given the sheer amount of food they had just been presented with, Shiori wanted to make sure. The innkeeper assured them with a smile that the inn wasn't serving them anything that would run up losses.

"Everything you're being served was gathered by our villagers," he said.

"Huh? You mean the village produces *all* of this?"

"Indeed it does. Excluding the salt and spices, everything is local."

"Wow...that's amazing."

"I guess they don't call this place Tris's kitchen for nothing," commented Alec.

One silver lining in the past snow wolf attack was that none of Brovito's farming enterprises had suffered any damages. Because the damage had been confined to the main roads and the heart of the village proper, its farming locations had gone unscathed. The village had thus been able to continue shipping its produce to Tris, which had helped keep things up and running over the months during which it was recovering.

In emergencies, tourism was the first industry to suffer, and according to the innkeeper, the snow wolf attack had impressed upon the village elder the fact that they'd put too many of their eggs in their tourism basket.

"When the younger generation inherited things from their parents, many moved away from farming and turned to providing accommodations or opening restaurants and drinking establishments. However, those businesses rely almost entirely on visitors to make their money, and the snow wolf attack saw them facing a very sudden drought. We run our farm alongside our lodging business so we managed to make ends meet, but until spring of this year, many visitors to the village simply rested their feet at the footbath, then took off for the next town or village. Those were hard times, and have resulted in many saying we should take another look at how the village supports itself."

Alec had been listening with a solemn look on his face, perhaps thinking about it all from the perspective of the elder brother of the king. After mulling things over, he spoke.

"It's easy to get caught up in the thrill of it all when business is booming," he said. "And not just in Brovito either. I think it might be time the nation turned its attention to its existing industries."

“The neighboring Lovner domain, too, is seeing its farming business decrease,” said Shiori. “The younger generations of the farming villages are charmed by the idea of life in the city.”

Shiori and Alec were friends with Annelie Lovner, the countess who governed those lands, and that’s what she’d told them.

“They don’t call themselves a city of art for nothing,” said the innkeeper. “I’ve heard it’s even more lavish than the royal capital. Why, it was just in the newspaper the other day, in fact; something about the young countess unveiling a new plan for reform. The king, too, seems to be thinking a lot about the subject, and he’s gathering experts to discuss the matter. There’s the chancellor, and then…oh, what’s his name again? That agricultural professor who handed the family duties to his children so he could continue his research…”

“The potato professor, Lindvall,” said Alec. “Famous for his thesis on the coexistence of cities and farming villages.”

“Ah, yes, that’s the one. You’re quite knowledgeable on the topic.”

“Well, in this line of work you get requests from a whole range of clients. I try to keep abreast of recent stories and prominent figures so I don’t run out of things to talk about.”

“Oh, I see.”

“That said, I don’t usually read enough to get into any deeper, more complicated discussions.”

Alec’s upbringing had given him a wide and varied education, but Shiori knew where his knowledge of Professor Lindvall had come from, and she hid her wry grin with her napkin. Alec’s former lover from his youth had in fact married into the Lindvall family; she was none other than the professor’s wife. This was the reason Alec knew of the man in such detail.

“In any case, I’ve gone on for far too long,” said the innkeeper. “I’ll take my leave, so please enjoy breakfast at your leisure. Just ring the bell when you’re done.”

The innkeeper then left, and the two adventurers enjoyed their breakfasts in silence for a time, the only sounds that of a cockatrice clucking outside. Rurii, Bla, and Violid all happily enjoyed a breakfast of cocktrice giblets and freshly fished Tris salmon.

“I didn’t think you could eat cockatrice,” said Shiori.

“Really? As long as you remove the poison sacs, it’s perfectly fine,” said Alec. “And even the poison sacs make for good snacks

with alcohol if you age them with medicinal herbs. That said, I steer clear of them out of fear."

"Oh, is that so? Still, I wouldn't want to accidentally get poisoned..."

"Clemens loves the stuff. He often orders it when we go out for a drink."

"I have this image of him as a fan of bird cuisine," Shiori mused. "He's always delighted when I serve yakitori or liver paste... Oh, this cheese is just wonderful. It has a divine sweetness. I bet it would go great with wine. I wonder if they'll have any at the souvenir stalls?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. Let's take a look after breakfast."

"Great."

"We can pick up some maple syrup while we're at it. I love the scent of the syrup they make here."

"The one that's a touch stronger in flavor, yes? It almost sparkles; it's very pretty."

"That's it. It emits light because it's preserved with midnight sun maple leaves."

"It emits light?"

"It's quite dim, but you can see it when it's dark."

"Well, I never."

All of the fresh ingredients made for a simple breakfast with a deep range of flavors, and though it seemed like almost too much for the both of them, with their help of their familiars, there wasn't a single scrap left. As the two slimes trembled with satisfaction, Vio let out a most fulfilled sigh.

"That was delicious," said Shiori. "I love what they serve in the cities, but there's just something different about the food here."

"Yes, it's comforting, and the scenery is stunning too. How about we try to visit outside of work next time?"

"I like that idea. Rurii can take its time visiting home, and Vio can get to know the locals."

Once everything was settled, they'd make some time for a more casual visit. It was a future plan that would no doubt see fruition, and the thought of it made Shiori's heart flutter.

It's been so long since I took a holiday...

During her last year in Japan, Shiori had been so busy she could barely even make it back to visit home, let alone go on a holiday. And since arriving in Storydia, too, she'd spent her days struggling just to make sure she built a stable life for herself.

Alec's proposed Brovito holiday likely wouldn't be feasible for at least a few months, but the idea of having enough space in her life that she could even *consider* a holiday was like a dream come true. It was the strangest sensation for Shiori.

The couple chatted a little more about the holiday, and let their familiars know too, then got ready to go home. It didn't take long, being that they hadn't packed very much in the way of luggage. And when the innkeeper came to clear away their breakfast and saw them set to go, he looked a touch disappointed.

"Oh? You're leaving already?"

"We've got work to think about," said Shiori.

"And we've got to find a place for Vio here," added Alec.

"Ah, I see. I'm sure there's a lot you'll have to prepare, then."

The innkeeper was a little sad to see them go, but the smile he flashed them was heartfelt.

"I do so hope you'll come again," he said. "Perhaps on holiday, next time."

"That's the plan," said Alec. "And we'd love to stay here again too."

"We'd be delighted to have you, and will be ready and waiting."

"Thank you so much for everything," said Shiori. "Breakfast was simply wonderful!"

The inn's entire staff came out to see them off, which was a little embarrassing for Shiori, but at the same time it brought her joy—it showed the extent to which the village had come to accept Violid. She smiled as the two slimes waved their feelers and Violid woofed a goodbye, then the group headed for the main road.

"We'll stop for some souvenirs first, but...how should we get home?" pondered Alec. "I'd love to just jump on a carriage, but we've got to consider Vio."

Vio lowered his head as if to let them know he didn't mind if they rode *him* home.

"Don't worry about it," said Alec. "Shiori might be fine, but I'm pretty heavy."

He gave the wolf a pat, then suddenly stopped in his tracks. He was looking at a number of hunters gathered by the side of the road. Caspar was there too, talking with them. His eyebrows were creased into a stern expression.

“A flock of birds…?” uttered Alec.

The hunters were pointing to the north, where a flock of birds filled the sky. The birds themselves weren’t particularly rare, but beyond them was another flock, and this caused the adventurers to frown.

“They aren’t migrating, are they?” asked Shiori.

“I don’t know if there *are* any birds that migrate during this season…”

They squinted for a better look and noticed black shapes in the distance.

“Strange…” muttered Alec.

Shiori agreed. The birds flew from the distance intermittently, but it was not just one type of bird; the adventurers spotted magical beasts among them. Neither was particularly well-versed when it came to bird-type magical beasts, but both knew that their behavior was anything but ordinary. They ran over to Caspar, who flashed them a smile before his features hardened once more.

“Did something happen?” asked Shiori. “The birds… There’s just so many of them.”

“We don’t know yet,” replied the knight. “However, we believe something unusual might have taken place in the north.”

Caspar looked to the former hunter, Bjork, standing by his side.

“It just doesn’t feel right. It’s got all the beasts in the forest spooked,” said Bjork, letting out a low sigh. “I’ve seen it once a long, long time ago. But it wasn’t anything like this…”

It was some decades ago in the spring, when the old man was still a teenager. The summer birds that spent their winter in the south had returned, but then just as suddenly they’d started flying back to where they’d come from. And it wasn’t just one or two—it was almost all of them. Back then, the nation had lacked the modes of communication it now boasted, and so Bjork had never found out what caused the birds to act so panicked. However, the rumors on the wind had spoken of an extra large magical beast appearing to the north.

“A large magical beast…”

“There were rumors that it was a flock of wyverns or the Fenrir, but we never found out what it actually was,” said Bjork. “In the end, all we saw of it was the birds. For all we know, it could’ve been nothing at all.”

In this world, however, there existed a phenomenon known as a magical beast stampede. The term described a panicked state that magical beasts and animals alike fell into at the outbreak of a calamity or the appearance of an extra large magical beast. Stampedes could range in size, but one early warning sign was birds breaking from their natural flight patterns.

Shiori felt a sudden unplaceable anxiety, and inched closer to Alec's side. Rurii and Bla both wobbled, while Violid's golden eyes gazed off into the distance. There was a bad feeling in Shiori's heart, and it refused to dissipate.

3

The sudden, unseasonal migration—if that's what it was—eventually petered out, and after about thirty minutes, the skies were once again as calm as they always were. The people who had until then been watching with worry went back to their daily lives and quickly forgot what had happened.

Shiori and Alec asked the local slimes about it, but were told that the location in question was too distant to reach—the slimes did not know why the birds had behaved so strangely either. If the birds were to land somewhere nearby, then they could be asked directly, but based on how panicked they had been, all the slimes could tell was that something had happened in the far north.

"Surely it isn't the former Empire..." uttered Caspar.

The knight went back to the garrison to get their report, but they'd received no word regarding the strange occurrence there either.

"We sent a messenger bird to Tris just to be safe, but that's all we can do for the time being," he said. "All the same, we'll increase our patrols."

For a time the adventurers continued to watch the skies, but nothing else of note occurred, and so Shiori and Alec decided to return home. Fortunately, they were able to find a wagon that would take them to a village along the route back to Tris. They would be on foot the rest of the way, but still expected to reach the city gates in around two hours.

"I've written a letter on your behalf, just in case you need it," said Caspar, handing them an envelope. "If any knights or gatekeepers ask about your new familiar, all the information they

need is in there.”

He’d written the letter taking into consideration what problems might pop up on the adventurers’ trip home; the missive granted them permission to travel with the new familiar, and also allowed the creature access into the city.

“Wow, this is perfect,” said Alec. “Thank you, Sir Caspar.”

“No, thank you,” replied Caspar, looking suddenly bashful. “Once again, you provided us aid when we most needed it. This is the least I could do. Come back and visit again, okay?”

He clapped Alec on the shoulder, and the two men shared a firm handshake.

“The skewers were delicious,” said Alec. “Tell the store owner we loved them.”

“You got it. Miss Shiori, please take care of yourself.”

It was clear his first impression of her still lingered, and though his solicitousness caused Shiori to cringe slightly, she took his outstretched hand in her own and shook it.

“I will,” she said. “Stay well, Sir Caspar.”

“Of course.”

It was a short goodbye, but one filled with strong emotions. When they were done, the two hopped aboard the wagon and, with Brovito’s villagers seeing them off, started on the trek home. The wagon’s drivers were none other than the husband and son of Anika, who was often referred to as “the boss of the footbath.” They’d offered to give the adventurers and their familiars a ride while they transported some produce. Shiori couldn’t help but feel a little surprised as she saw Anika’s son, a boy of fourteen, take the reins with a proud grin. He had his mother’s casual grace and his father’s easygoing poise.

“I never would have imagined she’d have a son so old!” Shiori exclaimed. “She can’t be any older than I am.”

Anika and her husband had married at sixteen, right when the two were considered legal adults. It was surprising for Shiori, with her Japanese sensibilities, but in Storydia people marrying at such ages wasn’t particularly uncommon. Anika’s son, too, was already in a serious relationship, and the two were just waiting to hit sixteen themselves so they could get married.

“It’s more common in the cities for people to wait a little longer before they marry,” said Alec, “but in farming villages, this is often how things go. I’m guessing people wait even longer where you come from?”

“It was quite common for people to marry in their teens some seventy or eighty years ago, but the vast majority of people now go to university or otherwise complete their education right up until university age. Upon graduation, people often work for a time before getting married, so the general marrying age is naturally older.”

“It’s amazing that attending university is just a normal part of life,” remarked Alec. “I guess everyone has a passion for learning.”

“Hmm… Well, compared to the past, university has become very much a part of ordinary life, so it’s not always seen as something particularly special. And there’s quite a large number of people who don’t really have studies in mind when they attend; it’s more a way for them to put off having to enter society for a few years.”

“I see. Then again, you could probably say that about the upper classes here as well.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. It’s not always university, per se, but the nobility and the rich often send their sons to learning institutes. This distances them from their noble responsibilities and future marriages, so it’s not uncommon for some to indulge in the many pleasures of exploring other countries under the banner of ‘studying abroad.’”

“Whoa… That’s on a whole other scale,” uttered Shiori.

“Many believed that Professor Lindvall was doing exactly that, when in fact he was actually doing the work that made him the agricultural expert he is today.”

“Which is to say…?”

“Contrary to what people thought—that Lindvall was gallivanting around as a gourmand delighting in foreign delicacies—he was actually researching cooking methods and agricultural techniques from across the world. In the end, he played a huge role in developing the kingdom’s agricultural industry. His network of connections is nothing to sneeze at, and so in that sense, studying abroad can be very meaningful.”

“That’s true. But holding everyone to his standard might also be a bit unfair.”

“I suppose. If you’d demanded a younger me get out there and achieve similar results, I’d have been in tears.”

“I…don’t know if it’s okay to laugh at that or not…”

Alec had said the words in jest, but Shiori knew that as a youth, Alec had fled from many of his responsibilities, so she wasn't sure how to react. Alec could only offer a wry chuckle and explain that he hadn't meant it that way. All the while, Violid gazed around, excited about his first ride in a wagon. When Shiori and Alec noticed that the two slimes had slyly positioned themselves on the driver's seat, they burst out laughing.

The wagon proceeded at a trot, and was a more comfortable ride than Shiori had been expecting. Brovito's villagers had pooled money together to buy the best wagon available, and it barely rocked at all. The breeze that entered through the gap in its cover was also a delight, and Shiori felt not a hint of queasiness.

Violid poked his head from the tarpaulin covering the wagon to gaze at the magnificent natural beauty of the Torisval region. Passing travelers couldn't help but gawk at the sight of the curious wolf, which brought another round of laughter to all inside, who were enjoying the ride. At a glance, the roads looked as peaceful as they always did. But then...

"There's a little more commotion than usual," Alec commented.

He was referring to the lakes and streams along the main road paths, upon which there seemed to be birds they'd never seen before.

"These birds at least look calmer than the ones we saw this morning..." said Shiori.

"Those? You'd usually find them in the giant trees in the forest at the border," said Anika's husband. "Vidopnirs are usually happy-go-lucky types that don't scare easy. Looks to me like they wanted to get some distance. Pity, though; I'd love to get my hands on just one in the winter."

His eyes were glued to the birds, which he'd identified from quite a distance. Vidopnirs made their homes in the large trees common in colder climates, and weren't particularly comfortable in warmer areas. During the summer they lost a lot of their muscle mass, and the beautiful glow of their feathers dulled, which gave them almost no value as an item to be bought or sold. This hadn't stopped a group of travelers from taking aim at the birds from the nearby shrubbery, lured in by the temptation of the bird being well-known as a luxury cuisine.

“Oh, come on,” said Anika’s husband, his gaze resting on the would-be hunters. “Vidopnirs taste awful in the summer.”

“Look at that!” added his son. “The birds are so big, and those people are all so close, and they *still* missed. Talk about horrible aim! Where do they keep their eyes?”

“They’ll hear you if you’re not careful,” said his father with a chuckle. A moment later, his brow furrowed, and he turned to Shiori and Alec. “That said, I reckon it’s best we get back home soon. I hope you don’t mind hopping off at the next village.”

Magical beasts venturing outside of their natural habitat often indicated something unusual. Anika’s family had decided it was best to head back home quickly, just in case it turned out to be something serious.

“If the vidopnirs are here, it means that whatever’s happening is happening near the border, so perhaps we’re worried about nothing at all. But all the same, I don’t like the look of it.”

The birds made their nests about a hundred shilometers north of Brovito. Even if a rampage *were* to occur, whether it would extend as far as Brovito was unlikely, though nothing was for certain. Still, the effects of the snow wolf attack still lingered, and Anika’s husband was anxious.

The adventurers would have to alight earlier than expected, but they were thankful to Anika’s husband and son all the same; the trip had saved them considerable time. Shiori and Alec both had a hunch that the villagers had offered them the wagon ride more out of generosity than anything, and for this they were grateful.

“Get home safe, you two,” said Alec.

“Thank you for bringing us this far,” said Shiori. “And please give our best to Anika and the others too. Next time we visit, it won’t be for work.”

“I’ll pass along the message,” said Anika’s husband. “And thank you for all the help. Be well!”

“See you later, old-timer! And you too, miss!”

The carriage took off.

“You get ‘miss’ and I get ‘old-timer’...?” muttered Alec, looking maimed by the boy’s words. “There’s only three years’ difference between the two of us...”

Shiori did her best to soothe her lover’s hurt feelings until he decided to change the subject.

“I feel like people would have gotten an idea of what’s going

on by now."

"Yeah."

The larger birds seemed a little more comfortable, and those that had landed were happy just to rest. They had seemed to realize they were out of danger, and were largely relaxed. Rurii and Bla approached them to do some reconnaissance—and, Bla being Bla, to get a closer look at a rare bird. Upon their return, they came waving to indicate that they'd learned something.

Shiori and Alec asked their questions, to which the slimes replied with their wobbly gestures. Through this back-and-forth, they discovered that a large and unusual magical beast had appeared in the Forest of Giant Trees. It was this magical beast that the vidopnirs had fled from.

"A never-before-seen magical beast?" uttered Shiori.

"The forest they're talking about is at the border to the Empire. I don't want to believe that it might be another one of those leftover experiments of theirs."

"The beasts don't know it, but perhaps humans do. Perhaps there's something like it in the bestiary?" asked Shiori.

Bla looked thoughtful for a moment, then reached into itself and pulled forth its pocket bestiary. It flipped through the pages with a feeler, then stopped at one page in particular. Rurii, who was looking on, wobbled excitedly: *"This! It's like this!"*

"But that's..." uttered Shiori in disbelief.

"If they're right, then this is *big*," added Alec.

The two adventurers gulped nervously. The slimes were pointing at a picture of a dragon. Curious about it, Violid and a nearby vidopnir peeked down at the bestiary. The bird chirped: *"Yep, that's it."*

"If it really is a dragon that appeared, then these stampede signs are anything but good," said Alec. "We might be called upon to help. We have to hurry back."

"Agreed."

As thanks for the information, Shiori gave the vidopnir some of the Enandel familiar jerky she'd brought, then took off running with the rest of the party. It was then that a bird swooped down towards them: a messenger bird from the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild. Shiori's and Alec's brows furrowed.

Though rare, the Adventurers' Guild did sometimes send out messenger birds to adventurers in particular locations. Though

the chances of such birds reaching their targets wasn't guaranteed—an exact location was rarely easy to pin down—it was the most effective way to gather adventurers on a large scale.

In other words, the fact that a messenger bird had been sent was enough to impress upon Shiori and Alec that something very serious had happened.

The messenger bird—one of many that had been trained to circle a given location, arrive at a predetermined time, or return after delivering its message to a specified number of people—landed on Alec's shoulder. He removed the tube from its leg with the ease of experience and took out the message from within. On it was written a call for an emergency gathering, signed by all who had seen it.

"Big sis, Linus, and...oh, Ludger and Marena too," said Shiori.

"Yeah. This is serious."

The message called for adventurers above C-rank.

It was a request for an emergency response to a dragon-type magical beast that had appeared at the border, and the magical beast stampede that was likely to follow in its wake.

4

The message from Guild Headquarters said that it would be sending a suppression team out of Tris in the late evening. Traveling over evening wasn't usually recommended, but such was the nature of the emergency that there were simply no other options.

Shiori and Alec thus decided that they had to get back to Tris as soon as possible, and rest up as much as they could before departure. The distance wouldn't usually have been an issue, but now that they were aware of how dire the situation was, even the ten shilometers from where they were to Tris felt frustratingly long. And while one option was to rent a horse or carriage from a nearby village, searching for one might only make the journey longer.

"Given the situation, and the fact that there were likely other adventurers nearby, there might not even be any horses left to rent," said Alec.

His words proved clairvoyant. The first village they arrived at had just loaned its horses out, and to adventurers from the Tris

branch of the Guild, no less. After asking about their appearances, Shiori and Alec surmised that it had been the Lanellieds.

“Just as I thought,” said Alec. “I think we’re better off just walking instead of wasting time searching for quicker transportation.”

“I agree. And besides, I’m not all that good on a horse by myself. What a pain. To think we could make the distance in just twenty minutes if we had a car!”

There was no use complaining about what didn’t exist, but Shiori couldn’t help herself.

“Twenty minutes?!” exclaimed Alec. “That’s incredible. Transport in your world moves that fast?”

“Yes. You could make the distance from Brovito to Tris in about an hour.”

“I can scarcely imagine it. I hope we end up with something similar here someday, but right now it sounds like a dream within a dream. Huh? What is it, Vio?”

The snow wolf was nudging Alec in the back with his nose, and the message in his eyes was all too clear.

“Enough with jibber-jabber! Hop on and let’s go.”

Alec hesitated, but Vio wasn’t going to take no for an answer. The snow wolf’s mind was made up.

“All right, if you insist. But don’t push yourself too hard. Like I said before, I’m pretty heavy.”

The snow wolf woofed happily, howled, then lowered his body.

“On you get.”

“Shiori, after you.”

“Erm, okay.”

With Alec’s help, Shiori hopped onto the snow wolf’s back. Alec told her to hold her knapsack in her lap, which she did. He then leapt on behind her and wrapped her securely in his powerful arms.

“I’ve got you,” he said. “You just hold on to Vio’s mane.”

“Okay, got it.”

Vio let her know where to hold, and Shiori gripped the hair near the roots. The two slimes then crawled up and wrapped themselves around the wolf’s body.

“We’re ready when you are,” said Alec. “You don’t have to run, okay?”

Vio barked his response and took off at a brisk trot. It wasn't a full-blown sprint by any means, but still much faster than the adventurers could have managed on foot. It was about the same speed as a station carriage, and perhaps even a little faster. At this rate, Shiori expected them to reach Tris in about an hour.

"I feel so much steadier than I was expecting," uttered Shiori. "Is Vio factoring our weight into how he's moving?"

"Looks like it. But it feels to me like he's done this before."

As it turned out, the adventurers were the first humans that Violid had ever carried, though he *had* helped lost young magical beasts back to their families on a number of occasions. Many of them weren't exactly grateful, especially with the snow wolf's reputation, but Violid simply couldn't stand by and do nothing.

"You're so kind," said Shiori.

Vio replied with a bark that said, *"I just couldn't bear to leave them to their own devices."*

The snow wolf jogged the rest of the way to Tris in silence.

The adventurers were stopped by knights just once on their way back to town, but Caspar's letter was all the proof they needed, and the adventurers weren't hounded with questions. Still, Shiori and Alec used it as a chance to rest and gather some information about what was going on. They learned that the northern knight corps had already left Tris.

"Unfortunately for us, we're on guard duty," chuckled one of the guards with a touch of regret.

"Garrison knights have been ordered to protect the areas in which they're stationed," added the other.

"We're proud of ourselves as knights, and we'd be lying if we said we didn't want to be out there on the front lines proving our mettle. But it's our job to defend the nation's citizens. We're trying not to be too pessimistic about it, but…it's easier for us than it is for the younger knights."

In times of emergency, some knights were of course ordered to remain at their garrison, but because they were not playing an active role in things, many young knights saw this as not unlike a demotion. For knights who wanted to take part in battle and, by doing so, achieve greatness, defending quiet regions and the smaller villages within them was unsatisfying.

"If they knew just a little about the history of the Empire, they'd know better," muttered Alec. "If you pour all your energy

into offense and neglect your defenses, you may discover that you've lost the very thing you were trying to defend in the first place. After that, it's all over. That said, I do understand how they must feel, all the same."

Alec's words expressed the very thoughts of the two middle-aged knights they were talking to. And it wasn't uncommon for Alec to sometimes talk about the Empire in this way, as if he'd been there himself. This was naturally due to him being well studied with regards to Imperial history, of this there was no doubt—but Shiori also couldn't help wondering if, at some point in his life, he'd really been there.

"So what's the situation?" asked Alec. "I noticed there aren't as many people on the roads as usual."

"They're strictly regulating travel from Tris to the north," replied one knight. "That's probably having an impact on things here too. There's been no order to stay indoors yet, but I daresay it's just a matter of time before one is given."

"I see. And how are things at the epicenter, in the north? Have you heard anything?"

"The monster at the heart of it all appeared near the frozen lake," said the knight, lowering his voice. "Apparently, a group of hunters that just happened to be there at the time was attacked. There have been small-scale stampedes as a result, but we still don't know if they're going to get any bigger."

"The frozen lake?" Alec uttered in surprise. "And it's a dragon-type magical beast? If it's some kind of joke, I'm not laughing."

"None of us wants to think about it much. To be honest, we're all hoping it's another one of those experiments that have been roaming around."

The only frozen lake in these parts was the Dima Frozen Lake. Located near the former Imperial border, the lake was frozen all year round, and in legends it was said that an ice dragon lay in slumber beneath its surface. In the age of mythology, the dragon was said to have ruled the lands and turned them into an icy wasteland, until the day that it had been sealed away after a fierce battle with a hero said to be the Empire's forefather.

"There's also some concern that this might cause the refugees to panic," said one knight. "A lot of them are awfully sick of life at the camps, and their situation has dragged on for a while now. The legend of the ice dragon originates from the Empire, and there's already a worry that the slightest thing might set them

off."

"Do you mean there's a chance they might...riot?" asked Shiori.

"So the knights have *that* on their plate too, huh?" uttered Alec.

"Yep. They've had to divide their forces to accommodate both areas of concern. A riot is unlikely, sure, but if it happens, then there's no way the knights can handle it all on their own. I reckon it's likely they'll reach out to the guilds for support."

"Yeah, we actually just received a message about it," said Alec. "In any case, it looks like we'd best hurry."

"Yes," agreed Shiori.

"Woof," added Violid.

Shiori wasn't used to riding magical beasts, and so the short break had been as good for her as it had been for Violid. The two slimes, too, wobbled to announce they were good to go.

"Then let's hit the road," said Alec, and then, to the knights: "Do your best out there."

"We will. Give it a good effort for us, would you?"

Instead of the usual salute, the two knights thrust out their gauntlet-covered hands. In the strong handshakes they shared with Alec was the swirl of emotions they felt at being unable to stand at the front lines themselves.

Tris wasn't far now, and Violid picked up his pace, keen on performing above expectations on his impromptu "first job." The adventurers reached Tris quickly and flew through the western gates, which were only half open due to the state of emergency. They completed the paperwork to enter, then headed straight for the Guild, where Zack was waiting for them, completely decked out in his adventuring equipment.

Shiori gasped at the sight of her older brother. She realized then that the guild master himself was going to lead the adventuring forces headed for the north.

5

The air in the usually lively guild building was oppressive. Adventurers who were usually all smiles whispered to each other, unease carved into the lines of their faces. But when they spotted Shiori and Alec and—more importantly—the wolf with his evening-colored pelt, their eyes went wide. Zack, who was

solemnly working through some documents, glanced in the direction of the commotion and noticed Violid. His shock was like that of a man who had bumped into a dragon on the road purely out of happenstance, and he almost toppled over completely.

"What the…?! Alec…you…that…what…?"

All the heavy tension Zack had been exuding until that point crumbled to pieces with his stammering. Bla poked him in the leg to calm him down, while Shiori and Alec offered wry chuckles. Rurii wobbled at how odd it all was.

"It's a long story and I'll happily get into the details later, but for now all you need to know is that I made a Fenrir my familiar. And uh, it's not actually a Fenrir, just a snow wolf variant."

"Wait a sec, you just walked out there and made a Fenrir your familiar? Just like that?" asked Zack.

Violid, who had seen this reaction over and over for the last two days, offered a bark to the confused Zack: *"It's a pleasure to meet you too."*

"As you can see, he's not out to hurt anyone," said Alec. "And the clients are pleased that everything's all wrapped up. Here's a permission slip from the knight captain in Brovito and the completed request form."

"Huh. Yep…it's all here, no mistaking it," muttered Zack, looking down at the signed request form before heaving a great sigh. "And while I've got a mountain's worth of questions for you, I'll save them for later. Sure hope you can work a similar kind of magic on the dragon out there and bring things to an end peacefully…"

"So it really *is* a dragon," said Shiori.

It was surreal; it still felt like something out of a distant fairy tale.

"Yep. We just received a second report from the knight corps. They're all but certain of it, though they've been unable to ascertain the exact species. There's a chance we might be looking at a variant, or maybe an entirely new type of dragon altogether."

"You mean there's a chance it might be *the* ice dragon of the frozen lake?" asked Alec.

Everyone gathered at the Guild had considered the same thing, but none had voiced the idea save for Alec.

"We don't know," said Zack. "We don't have a clue, so prepare yourself for the worst."

An audible gulp could be heard from among the adventurers.

“Everybody, listen up,” announced Zack. “We’ve just received an official suppression request from the northern knight corps to handle the dragon to the north. The Guild has of course accepted it, but you should all know that many have already died during the dragon’s first attack.”

The light whisper of conversation stopped. Complete silence fell over the Guild. Nobody moved. Zack closed his eyes for a moment to think about something and seemed troubled by the thought. In one hand he held some documents; the other hand balled into a tight fist, then relaxed. When he spoke next, there was a heavy weight in his words.

“The dragon is an unknown type. We do not have any known tactics for dealing with it. We are going in blind. The northern knight corps have their hands completely full, as they are controlling the magical beast stampedes that have erupted in the same area. There’s also a refugee camp nearby, and they fear there might be panic or riots. All of that means that we’re mostly on our own. This request has therefore been designated as a special S-rank.”

A sliver of silence followed Zack’s words, but as they sank in, gasps could be heard among the gathered adventurers. Alec pulled Shiori close, but even then she felt the nervous tension running through his body. The air in the Guild felt suffocatingly heavy. Shiori sighed, her breath trembling.

Special S-rank.

This was the rank given to calamity-level incidents, in which losses—both human and environmental—were to be expected.

“I am glad to see that so many of you responded to our emergency call for adventurers. However, the circumstances have changed since we sent out word. Some of us may not make it back alive. Should the vanguard line break, even the backline support may find themselves fighting for survival. So I am not going to force anybody to fight. Each and every one of you has your own circumstances to consider. I will not look down on you should you choose to back out. You are our comrades, regardless of what choice you make. Our freedom is what makes us who we are. I ask that you think carefully and make your choice.”

“Where there is life, there is hope” could be called the first principle of adventuring. It was for this reason that Zack was not

going to order anyone to stake their own lives on this request. Instead, he would stand at the head of the charge. Today he was not dressed in his usual light armor, but instead decked out in dragon scale mail. He looked every bit the portrait of his “dragon slayer” renown as he looked around at the gathered adventurers.

Still, Zack was careful not to meet any one person’s gaze; he did not want to place even a sliver of pressure on anybody to make them feel compelled to go. However, in truth, it was perhaps the opposite as well; Zack did not want to meet any adventurer’s eyes, so that he would not feel compelled to tell them to sit the request out.

Many raised their hands and elected not to go—a man supporting a large family, a young mother working for her young baby, the young adventurers who had only just registered… Some cited their age as a reason for dropping out; the oldest adventurer in the country, Hailard Bjorne, was among them.

“I’m just too far gone to go head-to-head with a dragon,” he said, then with a chuckle, added, “but you can leave the Guild in my trusty hands.”

If the worst were to occur, and the front line was to fall, then it was possible the city would itself face an onslaught: a dragon, stampeding magical beasts, and rioting refugees. It was for this reason that Hailard wanted to leave the battle ahead to the Guild’s finest, and put his efforts towards protecting the city they called home. The others who had dropped out intended to be there with him.

“Nobody safer to leave the Guild with than you, gramps,” said Zack. “Thanks.”

“You’ll be fighting with me in spirit,” added Clemens.

Ever since Zack was young, Hailard had always seen him as no different from a grandchild. Clemens, too, was his beloved pupil. The old man smiled at the sight of the two determined adventurers, and with hands lined by both age and injury, he gave them a slap on the shoulders and nodded. No words could have possibly expressed his feelings in the moment.

When Clemens had finished speaking with his teacher, Nadia took Clemens’s hand. The two nodded at one another; without a word, they had both agreed to take on the dragon.

Shiori looked up at her lover, who nodded, then down at her

friend, who wobbled. Violid's tail wavered gracefully. None told her to stand down, or to stay home. Neither Alec nor her friends gave any hint that they thought of her as a hindrance in need of protection.

Shiori could not deny that she was afraid. She knew better than anyone that she was weak, and that she would provide little help in direct combat. But if her friends—the most important people in her life—would have her by their sides, then there was nothing else to worry about. She would give everything she had, all the power she could muster, to see the unknown dragon defeated, and to aid her friends when they needed her.

Zack Ciel was a hero, the dragon slayer who had defeated the dragon in Lyria Valley among the Florit Mountain Ranges. When he gave the call to action, those who were set to join him let loose rousing shouts that echoed through the Guild.

6

In the evening of that same day, the northern region of Torisval declared an official state of emergency. Residents were not to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary. Going outside in the evening and leaving the residential districts were also strictly banned. Residents of smaller villages and hamlets were ordered to take refuge in larger towns with ramparts to ward off magical beasts. Such designated safe zones—including the royal capital—were to keep their gates half open to accept fleeing residents in the case of a stampede.

The royal capital of Tris, which boasted especially reinforced walls, set comparatively lower security standards, but nonetheless it prohibited the serving of alcohol at its restaurants and drinking establishments while also banning balls and social events during the state of emergency. Many businesses—including theaters, bars, and brothels—ceased their operations entirely.

With the summer solstice festival just around the corner, some were unhappy that such measures were being taken. However, many of the citizens had seen the various signs of a potential stampede earlier in the day, and understood that there was little else that could be done to ensure Tris's safety.

Still, none knew when the state of emergency would be lifted, and so the faces of travelers looking for inns as well as those

heading home were etched with worry.

There was a strange air around Tris as Shiori and Alec headed home to prepare for the journey to the north. Rurii and Violid had stayed at the Guild; with nothing to prepare, they elected to meet with the Guild's other familiars to exchange information.

"Keep your food and recovery potions separate from your camping gear," said Alec. "Bring as many portable foods and recovery potions as you can carry."

"Got it."

Shiori didn't think there'd be much time to cook anyway. When they launched their attack on the dragon, she did not expect that they'd be able to rest until it was all over. They would be battling against time too. The most they might be able to spare was just enough time to munch on a ration and drink some warm water.

Shiori pulled a small knapsack from the shelf and filled it with rations, recovery potions, and cold-weather gear. Given that they were heading to the Dima Frozen Lake, which was perennially in a state of winter, cold-weather gear was essential.

"We'll nap at the Guild," said Alec. "That way we can rest just a little longer."

"Okay."

Zack would leave for Dima with the main forces at ten in the evening. The remaining adventurers were set to leave at three the following morning. Shiori and Alec were part of the first group, so they hurriedly prepared everything they needed, and left their apartment at a run.

A dim light still hung in the air at ten in the evening, as adventurers piled into two wagons and left by the city's northern gates. The wagons flew the flag of the Guild—two crossed swords—and proceeded past the capital's defensive forces, which were stationed at the northern ramparts. As the wagons rode past, the soldiers at the edge of the city offered a salute, knowing that the adventurers were heading to the front lines and the heart of the battle. Among the knights was Nicholas Neumann—he of the infamous ringworm—and Solne, one of Rurii's slimekin who had found its soulmate in a knight at the gates. But it was not just those few knights; many of them had talked to the adventurers and gotten to know them on their journeys in and out of the city. They were friends of a sort, even

though they had never been formally introduced.

All of them, in their salutes, offered well-wishes.

Good luck out there.

May we both live so that we meet again.

No words were spoken, but the messages came through in the bearing and the gazes of the knights as the wagons continued northward. Night never fell in its entirety here during the season of the summer solstice, and so the dim light that permeated the evening sky gave the journey the feel of the fantastical, and layered it with vague anxiety. Soon after the ramparts disappeared from view, the scent of iron began to drift on the air.

It was the scent of blood.

Recently killed magical beast corpses dotted the roadside: smaller stampedes that had been handled by the knight corps' suppression squads. Alec and Clemens gazed at the sight, their brows furrowing.

"There's a lot of them," said Clemens.

"Yep. Glad we can leave the stampedes to the knights," said Alec.

Shortly before leaving, the Guild had received word from the margrave himself letting them know that the smaller-scale stampedes on the way to the dragon could be left to the knight corps to handle. It was their job to head directly to Dima. As he had slain a dragon once before, Zack's presence on-site was a necessity. The margrave did not want anything impeding his arrival.

Outside of the wagon, Shiori spotted lights occasionally dotting the plains. They belonged to the suppression squads. Every so often, magic lit up areas in the distance as battles were waged.

"These smaller-scale stampedes are a precursor to something bigger," Alec explained. "Oftentimes, full-scale stampedes are started by smaller stampedes merging. By dealing with them now, the knights can slow them down or even stop them from getting bigger. Still, stampedes will be breaking out all over the place, so they'll have to keep watch over set areas and be ready to deal with whatever comes up."

"Wow..." uttered Shiori.

However, because the stampedes occurred over a wide area and at a near-constant rate, stopping them felt like an endless

battle, which wore down the body and soul. Alec explained that if the knights weren't efficient, they could rapidly find themselves completely overwhelmed.

"But word among the knights is that they've just instituted a brand-new weapon of sorts," said Zack. "If it works out like they're hoping it will, their job will be a whole lot easier."

"An all-new weapon?" asked Shiori.

"Search magic. Just like you taught them."

"Oh..."

Shiori had taught the spell as part of her housekeeping magic lecture. But she hadn't expected to see it being put to use in a situation like this one.

"I've heard that they've still got work to do in terms of range and accuracy, but they've at least got it to a point where they can use it out in the field," commented Alec.

"It's a huge advantage to have an idea of what you're dealing with and where it's coming from before it reaches you," said Zack. "And it saves you from wasting time searching where there's nothing to be found. Beasts are far less likely to slip through the search net, to boot."

It had been an hour since they'd left. They had come a considerable way, but had yet to see a single magical beast alive. The suppression squads were making good use of the spell Shiori had taught them.

"I see," she said. "I'm just happy to hear that it's coming in handy."

Alec pulled her in close, and Rurii poked her proudly. Violid, lying along the floor, snorted: *"Go you."*

The knights were doing everything they could to contain the smaller stampedes, which often came together to form larger ones. Thanks to their efforts, the adventurers only encountered magical beasts twice on their journey, just as they were nearing the border.

"We're not going to outrun these guys..." muttered Alec, drawing his sword.

Just as the wagons were approaching the site nearest the danger zone, they found their path blocked by basilisks. The pack of beasts ordinarily lived deep in the forest, in swampy areas out of the reach of the sun, but they were here now, and in an instant they had the wagons surrounded. Their hissing cries

pierced the ears, sounding not unlike rusty doors in need of oiling, while their black scales glittered ominously by the light of the wagons' magical lanterns.

"Just like we agreed," said Zack, issuing his orders. "Alec, Nadia, your groups are up."

The adventurers had been assigned groups prior to leaving, and they now leapt from the wagons. Ludger flashed a message to the wagon behind by blinking a lantern: a call for it to come to a stop while they handled the beasts. A return message arrived in moments, and the wagon slowed to a halt as the basilisks looked to intimidate and assault them.

The attacks proved futile, however; someone had already cast a barrier spell, blocking the magical beasts from getting too close. With their way forward barred, the poisonous lizards bared their fangs and let out hisses of frustration. The adventurers waited for the basilisks to open their mouths as they prepared for another attack, then moved, slamming the beasts with spells and leaving them flailing in agony on the ground before slicing off their heads. The basilisk pack would have been considered A-rank, but they were up against the Guild's finest, and in no more than five minutes they were drowning in a sea of their own blood.

"Nice work," said Shiori.

"Thanks," replied Alec.

Rurii plucked a chunk of basilisk flesh from Violid's teeth while Shiori wiped some stray blood from Alec's cheek with antiseptic gauze.

"Those other monster corpses—they're the type you don't often see near towns and villages too," said Shiori.

"Yeah. More and more of them are flooding in from the forests."

So far, there still wasn't anything on the scale of a major stampede, but the dragon that was the source of it all was still at large. Until it was slain, the threat of a large-scale stampede still remained. Time was of the essence. Just as Shiori thought this, a low roar echoed from afar, trembling through the air.

GROOOOOOOOOOAR...

The sound was like the reverberations one heard after fireworks, and it seemed to echo in the pit of the adventurers' stomachs. It was the roar of a gigantic magical beast. Everyone stood in silence, forgetting to even blink as the sound drifted

through the air and dissipated.

It was two in the morning, and the dimly lit sky began to slowly whiten as dawn approached. It should have been a refreshing early-summer sight, yet looming over it was a heavy sense of dread.

7

The two wagons dispatched from the Adventurers' Guild passed through Dima, the largest town in the border area, and climbed farther north through the Krystale Plains. The plains were the farthest northern point within Storydia, and were once known for producing light crystals and other giant crystal ore.

The mining of such crystals, which sparkled like the light of the moon, was once one of Torisval's main industries, but during the time of the former Empire, overmining resulted in a severe drop in production. The area became so bereft of ore that eventually their mining endeavors resulted in little more than dust, and the mountain in which the miners worked became a husk of its former self—it sank and sank until it became little more than hilly plains.

The mining operations were thus closed, and people lost any reason to visit the area. Over the many long years that followed, new life was born where the mountain once stood, resulting in a beauty very different to that which had once existed during the mining age. Following the battle for territorial reclamation and the construction of the fort that divided the plains, the location became one of Torisval's most well-known scenic locations. Now, however, it was also home to the refugee camp that housed Imperials who had fled from the uprising in their former home.

The knights had set up their forces about an hour northwest of the refugee camp. Baltasar Gate was the only way into the former Empire from Torisval, and as for the refugee camp, it took up the greater part of the area. Shiori looked at it from the wagon as they passed through, and her brow furrowed with her troubled thoughts.

It was still only four in the morning, and while almost everybody should have been asleep, Shiori spotted refugees awake and standing around the temporary huts that lined the camp grounds. She shouldn't have been surprised. The area around the camp was dotted with magical beast corpses that

had yet to be cleared, and knights rushed around busily with adventurers who looked to be of Imperial descent. Then, of course, there was the roar they'd heard earlier. Sleep would not come easily to anyone here.

In the faces of the refugees, Shiori saw worry, confusion, and despair. In yet others, there was only emptiness. It felt like looking into a mirror at the person she'd once been, upon her arrival to this world, and her breath caught in her throat.

It had been about one year since the uprising. For a time, many of the tens of thousands of refugees had returned home as the situation settled. A portion of them, however, had remained in Storydia. These were people who wanted to wash their hands of their former home, but had not the strength to immigrate to another country. They had been driven from their lands by their lords and left wandering from place to place, and now they wanted to live the rest of their days in Storydia.

However, just when a location had been chosen for them upon the remains of a once-abandoned mining village, disaster had struck. Their settlement was postponed, and the safe home that had been dangled in front of their very eyes was ripped from their grasp. Their despair ran incredibly deep.

Shiori knew all too well the pain of suffering over and over, only to have your wishes denied. She had been through that very experience during her first years in Storydia, and it was easy for her to empathize with the refugees' hopelessness. She did not realize that she had her arms wrapped around herself until Alec pulled her in closer. He patted her arm gently, the way a parent might soothe a child, and Shiori felt her swirling emotions settle.

"The refugees are much calmer than I expected," said Alec.

His decision to bring up this topic instead of asking Shiori what worried her was a kindness on his part.

"Yeah, but apparently it was pretty rowdy for a while there," said Zack. "They made quite the commotion, worried that we'd either abandon them or use them as bait. It's a crying shame."

The problem was that the camp refugees *had* been abandoned. Back in the days of the Empire, they'd been little more than tools for the purpose of producing resources, and then, in the final stages of the uprising, they'd been forced to act as shields for the retreating Imperial army. An unknown dragon was a terrifying thought—of this there was no doubt—but it was

not nearly as terrifying as the treatment they'd endured to this point.

"How horrible," muttered Clemens.

Alec's eyes dropped to his feet.

"But I've heard that the refugees have found themselves a leader of sorts," said Zack. "He did his utmost to talk them all down when they were panicked, and he kept chaos from breaking out."

Once a noble, the refugee in question had spent much of his life as a commoner, which made it easy for him to relate to people. He had drifted into the camp some six months ago, and it was not long before he'd become well-liked and highly regarded. He was now a central figure in life at the camp. He had gathered able individuals to form a self-governing body that did not need the kingdom's help for such things as security, food procurement, and repairs to their temporary housing. The camp had quickly come together under the man's leadership, and he was careful to make sure that it did not devolve into lawlessness.

The same man had made the decision *not* to work with the knights to handle the small-scale stampedes, but to instead trust them and focus on the camp's defenses; in this way he was careful to show that he understood the power dynamics at play. One of the knights in the carriage with Shiori explained that the relative calm in the camp was likely due to these efforts.

"I see," said Clemens. "I don't know who he is, but he's proof that the Empire is still home to a few genuine nobles."

"True indeed. Unfortunately, that's caused problems of a different nature," said the knight. "With all this dragon business going on, we wanted to have the refugees take shelter on the other side, but... And look, this is just between us, but the state of things at the Imperial camp and the Storydia camp are night and day. None of the refugees here want to move, especially the women and children."

"It's that bad?"

"Yep. When that monster roar rocked the lands earlier, a few groups decided to make the move, but as you can see, a whole lot chose to stay put. You have to imagine things were pretty gosh-darn horrible if they'd choose to face a dragon over returning to their former home..."

The knight then dropped into silence, and while he continued to wear an expression of calm, he could not hide the exhaustion

that weighed upon his features.

An unknown dragon. Magical beast stampedes. Refugees at breaking point.

In just one day, several problems were converging. The knights were a well-trained organization, but the pressure of controlling all of these situations at once meant for near-unbelievable mental and physical strain. Reinforcements had been confirmed from nearby regions, and even from the royal knights' main division, but it would nonetheless take days for backup to arrive. And while the dragon still had yet to move from the frozen lake, there was no guarantee that it would remain there indefinitely.

The dragon might head elsewhere while the knights are waiting for their reinforcements. It might attack a town. That could mean bigger stampedes, and more of them. If that were to happen...

Shiori thought back to the terrible sight that had met them at Brovito Village. The countless snow wolves filling the village square; the sections of wall that had crumbled, and the broken glass scattered along the ground; the blood-soaked, unmoving bodies of the villagers; and a knight who had fought on even as he'd sacrificed his own arm.

If things were left for too long, northern Storydia might meet with tragedy on a scale far beyond that of Brovito. Having been brought up in the peace of modern Japan, Shiori understood that they could not afford to let the situation continue. And it was for this very reason that the margrave had decided *not* to wait on reinforcements, and had immediately decided to call upon the Adventurers' Guild, which had experience dealing with such magical beasts. He was not concerned with foolish notions of pride and the honor of the knight corps—his main priority was the protection of the land's citizens.

This respect could be felt the moment the adventurers reached the main camp. It was in the bearing of the knights who ushered them inside, and the reverence with which they approached the adventurers with their legendary dragon slayer. The knights had even prepared tents especially for them.

"Please make use of these tents to rest before you move out," said one of the knights.

"Thanks," said Zack. "Appreciated."

Zack and the other group leaders had a strategy meeting to attend. Everyone else was essentially free, and most adventurers

were grateful for the chance to get some extra rest. Nils and Ellen began handing out blankets, and the adventurers who took them lay down still decked out in their armor so they wouldn't have to waste time putting it on again later.

I don't know if I'll be able to get any sleep while I'm so on edge like this, but I think it'd be good for me to at least lie down.

It had been a long trek just to get this far, and while Shiori didn't like the idea of resting while her lover still worked, she also had to consider their differences in stamina and strength. Resting up was for the best. But just as Shiori was starting to take off her knapsack, Zack called out to her.

"Sorry, Shiori, but you're with us," he said.

"Huh?"

Her eyes went wide. She wasn't sure she'd heard Zack right.

"It's because your magic has been so helpful in all of this," Zack explained. "The head of the support troops wants to meet you and thank you in person."

Both he and Alec looked troubled by this…or more accurately, unimpressed—they seemed to suspect ulterior motives. Only the knight who was set to lead them to the generals remained unfazed as he offered a nod. Shiori realized then that her attendance at the meeting had been a given from the very start, and as she looked at the three men, she got the feeling more than her mere presence might be required.

I don't know if I'm going to like this…

But all the same, Shiori nodded.

"Okay," she said.

"Very well, this way please," said the knight.

Behind the knight was Zack, followed by Clemens, Kai, Nadia, Linus, and a few others. Alec and Shiori trailed behind.

"If they try to force *anything* on you, I'll tell them where to shove it," whispered Alec. "And I'll pressure them from behind the scenes if it comes to that, so don't worry about a thing."

Without making it obvious, Alec was implying he would use his influence. Shiori couldn't believe it. Was this going to be that big of a problem?

"So it really *is* going to be a pain to deal with?" she asked.

"I'm not sure yet," muttered Alec, his brow furrowing, "but they just *love* you. They may even want to put you in charge of your own troops."

"Huh? But that's beyond ridiculous!"

The words spilled from her lips before she could catch them. Alec chuckled.

"It's great you're more comfortable speaking your mind now," he said. "Look, at the end of the day, I'm not going to just hand you over to them. So relax, be yourself, and turn them down if you have to."

Rurii wobbled confidently at her feet: *"I'll help!"*

At the thought of a knight stripped naked by a slime right before deployment, Shiori laughed.

"Thanks, you two," she said.

"Here we are," said the knight, stopping before the entrance of the tent. "I've brought the adventurers."

"Let them in."

The knight opened the flap for the adventurers to head into the tent. The air inside was intimidating, and Shiori felt herself shrinking under it. A table had been set up at the tent's center, around which sat fully armored knights wearing grave expressions. The space was so ready for battle that Shiori wondered if the atmosphere itself was sharp enough to cut a man.

None of the knights reacted in any way to the sight of the strange slime and alraune familiars, but at the sight of the snow wolf variant, a few let out quiet gasps. Shiori could tell by the way the men held themselves that they were all knight corps leaders. But even then, their armor was splattered with mud and magical beast blood they had yet to clean off; these were men who got their hands dirty.

"Zack Ciel, the S-rank adventurer and dragon slayer himself. Tris's finest adventurers. Thank you for coming. I know the request was sudden, and you have my gratitude."

It was the stately Torisval Margrave, Kristoffer Osbring, who greeted them from the head of the table. Gone was the bright, friendly face that Shiori knew, replaced by a deeply furrowed brow, a sharp and focused gaze, and tightly pursed lips. He looked like an entirely different person, and it impressed upon Shiori the fact that, like it or not, she had come to a battlefield.

Behind the seated generals, Shiori noticed the former captain of the Brovito garrison, Leo Nordman, standing at attention; he was the only one among the knights to offer a look that showed some concern. His expression softened a touch when his gaze fell upon Shiori, but a moment later he winced slightly.

Oh, that's right. Leo was transferred to the combat support division…

She had assumed that Leo was the combat support leader's source of intelligence, and seeing him here only served as further proof, particularly when his gaze dropped apologetically to the ground at his feet. The man sitting in front of Leo, the leader in question, eyed Shiori with a grin, as though he were appraising her. It was not exactly ill-intentioned, but it was by no means a pleasant smile.

Erm…this really is *going to be a pain after all…*

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Shiori looked up at Alec in the hopes of finding some respite, but his gaze was focused on something else entirely. There was a tension in him as he watched a corner of the tent.

What's going on…?

Being of small stature, Shiori couldn't make out what Alec was looking at because of all the taller bodies surrounding her. She shifted slightly for a better view, and realized that it was a pair of people, a man and a woman, that Alec was staring at so intently. They were staring right back at him, though Shiori could not discern why. She did not feel any enmity from them, but their piercing, searching expressions had Alec on guard, and his hand fell casually to the hilt of his sword.

The man and woman were surrounded by knights, and they spotted Shiori as she poked her head out. They opened their mouths in silent shock when they noticed her; both looked as if they had suddenly bumped into an acquaintance they hadn't seen in years.

Who are they…? Have we met…?

The man had pale brown hair; thick, graceful eyebrows; and blue eyes brimming with a strong, confident light. He stood tall and with an elegant grace, and while he was thin, the arms that poked out from his rolled-up sleeves were powerful; Shiori gathered that the body under the simple clothes he wore was a muscular one.

The woman shared the man's eye and hair color. While the features of her face differed from his, the general aura of her person matched the man's, and Shiori wondered if perhaps the two were siblings. Both looked to be refugees, and Shiori didn't know any refugees. Yet she felt as though they'd met before.

"I feel like I've seen those two before," she said in a low voice.

“But who are they?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Alec. “But…I *think* we’ve met…somewhere.”

Kristoffer noticed their whispers and the fact Alec’s focus was diverted. He shot a glance at the refugee couple.

“What is it, Frol?” he asked.

“My apologies,” responded the man. “I was lost for a moment. I did not expect to meet the people who saved my life under circumstances such as these.”

His words brought all the pieces of the puzzle together. The name. The unique accent. His comment that they had saved his life. As the couple’s identity became clear to Shiori and Alec, the truth also dawned on Clemens and Nadia.

“You’re the Imperials…from Silveria!”

Now refugees, the two Imperials had been on the brink of death when Shiori and her party had encountered them in Silveria Tower. Now so healthy that they were almost unrecognizable, the pair smiled at the adventurers.

8

“So you saved their lives, huh?”

Intrigue flashed across Kristoffer’s stern countenance. He gestured with a jaw towards the Imperials; the motion indicating he was happy to give them a little time to catch up. Alec read the intent of this gesture from his longtime friend, and walked over to Frol and Julia Rakhmanin. Shiori, Nadia, and Clemens followed, and the group shared handshakes and hugs.

“I’m so glad to see you doing well,” said Alec. “I didn’t even recognize you.”

“We owe it all to you,” replied Frol.

His face no longer bore the dark hopelessness that had once haunted it; his smile was filled with the light of hope.

“Are you both fully recovered?” asked Shiori.

“Yes. We almost caught pneumonia, but managed to fight our way back to full health. The knight corps was good to us, as well as kind. And as you can see, we’re both much better for it. But truly, we owe you more thanks than it is possible to give.”

Both Frol’s and Julia’s hands were hardened and worn—a sign of all the work they’d been doing since their arrival at the refugee camp. But neither looked pale or sickly, and there was a

luster to their skin. Even under their current circumstances, Frol and Julia seemed to be making the most of the life they had, and this was no more evident than in the lively expressions of their faces. Shiori was surprised to think that the look on someone's face could so vastly shape the impression they gave others.

"It is Alec, yes?" said Frol. "I recognized you straightaway, but I had no way to be certain that you were in fact one of the people who saved us. But when I saw the mage by your side, I was sure beyond the shadow of a doubt."

An Easterner in a triangular hat was, it seemed, something that stuck in a person's memory. And while Frol had refrained from phrasing it in that exact way, Shiori still cringed slightly.

"Oh, well, I…what to say…?" she muttered.

Triangular hats were, in and of themselves, not particularly uncommon. Shiori had chosen to wear one because it would both block out the sun and hopefully help to hide her identity and her dark hair. Nevertheless, she smiled amicably, though her thoughts wandered for a moment.

But if it's only serving to make me stand out more, then maybe it's time for a change of outfit…

"So what are you doing here?" asked Alec.

The question caused Frol and Julia to look a touch concerned. Pained, even.

"It's embarrassing, and a case of having to clean up someone else's mess, perhaps, but it would appear that our own people are involved in all of this. Some of them said that we were behind it all. The frozen lake *was* once home to the Rakhmanin family, and so we were brought here in case we knew anything."

Frol and Julia sighed; they wanted nothing more than to be with their fellow refugees, who were racked with worry, yet now they had been brought to the knight corps' leadership. They had been dashing around the camp when they'd been brought to the knights' camp as prime suspects. That was the reason they were surrounded by guards.

"Cleaning up someone else's mess…?" asked Alec.

"In other words, it's not just a beast attack; deliberate human meddling is behind it," said Kristoffer. "And by the former Empire, no less."

"How does that work?"

"It's the work of remnants of the emperor's supporters. They awakened an ancient monster."

Kristoffer then raised a hand, and a knight by his side strode forward.

“Allow me to explain,” the knight said.

He held in his hands a sheaf of documents, but it seemed that he’d read the information in them so many times that it was now committed to memory. As he explained the situation, he did not even glance at the papers.

“The former emperor’s supporters disguised themselves as a group of hunters and took a long detour around the border fort from the Empire to enter Storydia. Yesterday, sometime before dawn, they arrived at Dima Frozen Lake by the southern ravine. There, they broke the seal that had kept a test subject in slumber since the end of the Empire’s reign over the area. The test subject awoke, and in the subsequent attack, half of the Imperials were killed. The security patrols investigating the strange magical beast behavior following the attack apprehended a number of the survivors, at which point we knew for sure that the dragon’s awakening was no mere accident. According to scouting reports, the test subject in question is an earth dragon. However, it has wings that are more common among smaller dragons, and shares similarities to a number of other magical beasts, including basilisks and wyverns. We believe it likely we are dealing with an amalgamate magical beast.”

It was a flood of information, all of it delivered in a cold, toneless voice. The adventurers dropped into silence as the facts of the report sank in.

“They sealed away a test subject at the site of a mythical legend. Unbelievable.”

“Were they trying to bring that legend back to life a second time?”

“If they were telling the truth, then yes, it would appear so.”

“What a sick joke,” spat Zack, ruffling his hair with a hand. “And then they threw two of their fellow Imperials to the wolves for good measure, huh?”

Given that the dragon had been sealed away at the end of the Empire’s dominion over the area, that would have been more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Considering how much time had passed, the dragon would have awoken with a fearsome hunger. Unaware of this, the Imperials had thus sealed their fates when they had unleashed the dragon, and become its first

meal. But had they been enough to sate the beast's appetite? Or would the dragon move again soon in search of more food?

"And what connection does the Rakhmanin family have with all of this?" asked Alec.

He glanced at Frol and Julia, uneasy with the idea that the two people he'd saved were prime suspects.

"While we can't say anything with complete certainty," said Kristoffer, shrugging, "it's our conclusion that those two have nothing to do with it. Both were brought to the knight corps infirmary in early December. For two months they were watched over while they were nursed back to health. There's no way they could have possibly been in the former Imperial capital in mid-December, gathering comrades for the restoration of Imperial rule."

A messenger bird sent from the Silveria garrison confirmed this; they had records stating that after their stay in the infirmary, Frol and Julia were sent straight to the refugee camp on a supply wagon. The knight who had been aboard the wagon with them was part of the cleanup crew here at the border, and could confirm the information firsthand.

"So..." said Shiori, looking at Alec and sharing his wry grin.

"It's impossible," he said. "Even if there was a spy among the knights, it still doesn't add up."

"The Rakhmanin family owned that area until about three hundred years ago. That's more than a hundred years before the dragon was ever sealed away. We can't be sure they had any idea that the dragon was even there."

"Actually, the suspects have a whole lot of desperate 'excuses' regarding the involvement of the Rakhmanin family," said Kristoffer. "None of their testimonies are consistent. It's more like they just remembered there were some Rakhmanins at the camp and tossed them out there."

The emperor's supporters knew their way around the history of their home, but had no idea how hard Frol and Julia had been working at the camp, nor any clue about the near-death predicament they had experienced some six months ago.

"What horrible trouble to be caught up in," muttered Shiori.

"You said it," said Frol.

Despite having made up their minds to live honestly and to the best of their abilities, Frol and Julia had found themselves embroiled in somebody else's revenge scheme. They chuckled,

but their faces showed how weary of it they were.

"But we're all in the same boat," said Frol. "So we're joining the suppression squads."

"Our people got the kingdom wrapped up in another one of its problems," said Julia. "We can't just sit by and do nothing."

In other words, now that they were in this deep, they were involved whether they liked it or not. The Rakhmanin family had lost out in a time of political strife, and had been forced to surrender the title of margrave. They had been demoted to small-time nobility, and given a tiny corner of the region to govern, upon which they had seen out the last three hundred years.

Frol and Julia had been collateral damage, and now they were not even members of the nobility. Nonetheless, they intended to take some responsibility for what had happened. Their resolve was praiseworthy, and yet on some level it was twisted out of shape; it spoke to the deeply rooted problems of the nation they had once called home.

The vast majority of former Imperial nobility—who had committed atrocities against their own people in order to see vast profits—were mostly locked up. Many were looking at long sentences, and some even awaited the death penalty. It was they who should have been tasked with solving the problem now at hand, and yet in some sense, they currently resided in the nation's safest location. It was those who longed to live as ordinary citizens who had been left with the burden of facing their empire's many problems, much as Frol and Julia were doing right now.

"Please, just...try not to overdo it," said Shiori.

The two Imperial refugees looked shocked for a moment, then relaxed into smiles.

"You Storydians really are so very kind," said Julia.

"Indeed," added Frol. "The knights were nothing but good to us when we were in their care. Your parting words, too, have remained a source of encouragement for the both of us. We think of Storydia itself as our savior. We merely want to give back."

For Frol and Julia, this was more than just self-sacrifice.

"I...I see," said Shiori.

"We won't overdo it, though," said Frol. "I never want to be so ill I'm stuck in bed for weeks ever again. That, and I'll do anything

to avoid that Dennis fellow erupting into a rage again."

Frol admitted that in the midst of his fever, with no way to deal with his agitation, he'd lost days and nights to what felt like endless brooding.

"I realize now that death is not a way out, and not the answer," continued Frol. "I will not act in desperation. You have my word."

They could stand on their own now, and so the most Shiori and the others could do at this point was watch over them. Alec gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder, and she smiled up at him. Rurii wobbled by their side, and Clemens and Nadia were also touched by the moment. Violid and Bla, who knew nothing of the backstory, were unfortunately left puzzled.

"We don't intend to send our valuable fighting forces to their deaths either," said Kristoffer. "We'll be sending someone to keep an eye on you, but the truth is we need as many skilled individuals as we can get. I've heard Frol knows his way around a sword, and that Julia is a physicker. I've high hopes for the two of you."

In Kristoffer's words was another message—one that went unspoken: *"If that's how you feel, then use this opportunity. Fight, return, and scrub away some of the sullied reputation of the former Empire. It will not be easy, but I will give you the platform to see your wishes granted."* Kristoffer was giving them what they asked for, but for the margrave of the kingdom's north, this was also a trial of sorts. Indeed, it was entirely possible that he had known they were innocent right from the very start, and had used these circumstances to enlist their support.

You don't *want to get on his bad side...*

Kristoffer remained calm and in control, but Shiori was not sure what to make of him. For a moment his eyes met her own, and they narrowed just slightly, as though he were hoping for something from her. It was just a moment later that a voice spoke slowly, drawing her gaze away from Kristoffer.

"Speaking of skilled individuals, might I have a word?"

It was the man seated in front of Leo Nordman—the high-ranking official in the combat support division. The corners of his lips curled into a smile, his eyes on Shiori.

9

"You're out of line, Svenden," said the man by Kristoffer's side.

“Let him speak,” said Kristoffer.

The margrave was unbothered by the lack of manners shown by the combat support division’s Rud Svenden.

“Regimental Commander Svenden,” he continued. “I assume that if you have spoken up, it is because you have deemed it a necessity?”

“I believe so,” replied the commander.

“I see. Then make it quick.”

What?! He’s been given permission to speak?!

Shiori had hoped he might be reprimanded. And yet, with a nod of the head, Kristoffer was happy to let Svenden speak. For a brief second, her eyes met the margrave’s, and for just a moment his eyes narrowed as he smiled. Before Shiori even had a chance to be shocked by this expression, however, his stern gaze had returned. Alec, standing by her side, offered a quick gesture with his hand, while Zack, too, gave her a quick glance. It was a few brief instances of communication between them.

They won’t let anything happen to me.

Given his rank and the circumstances, Kristoffer could not offer an outsider like Shiori support openly. However, he was one of just a few people who knew her true identity. Whatever the other leaders of the northern knight corps had in mind, Kristoffer was not simply going to sit back and watch.

Shiori had never been good when it came to negotiations, but knowing that she had support made it easier to relax. Still, she wanted to get through this on her own. And though she wasn’t sure she could, it was important to her to show that she could stand up for herself; she was not a delicate flower in need of protection. Her past party members had felt like they had her under their thumb, and she did not want to let such a thing happen again.

“If you want to say something,” whispered Alec, “don’t feel like you have to hold back. Give it to them straight.”

Shiori nodded.

“The mage with the black hair. Miss Shiori Izumi. That is you, isn’t it?” asked Svenden.

“Yes, I am Shiori.”

“I apologize for calling you to the tent for this meeting, but I wanted to use the opportunity to say a word of thanks. We are truly grateful to your research efforts and teachings, Miss Shiori. It is because of you that we’ve been able to keep the stampede

damages to a minimum."

It had been one day since they'd noticed the signs of possible stampedes. Ordinarily, by now, a large-scale stampede would have already broken out. According to Svenden, the reason that the smaller stampedes could be stopped before growing into something bigger was largely due to the search magic implemented in the knights' sweep-and-clear strategy.

"We wouldn't be sitting here having this leisurely meeting otherwise," said Svenden. "It would not be an exaggeration to say that our ability to crush the smaller stampedes is thanks entirely to your spell. While we *are* dealing with a huge number of magical beasts, their numbers are finite. By keeping their numbers down, we significantly lessen the chance of a stampede. The proof of that is, as they say, in the pudding. That said, search magic has only been in use for about a month. It's still being tested. It is safe to say we have yet to master it, and while it shames me to admit it, our troops struggle in dealing with the many plant-type magical beasts in the forest, which cause complications. It is in this area that I would like to request your help, which is to say, I'd like you to accompany a squad."

In other words, you want me to do the searching instead of your knights.

Though Svenden had made a point of using the word "request," the force of his words made it clear that this was more of an order. The man was essentially using their emergency operation to push his own agenda. Shiori felt frightened, but that did not mean she would simply acquiesce.

"If it's advice you would like, I would be happy to help. Accompanying a squad, however, will unfortunately prove difficult. I am here today on behalf of the Adventurers' Guild, as a dedicated search support member."

"We are well aware of your position. And I am not asking you to do this for nothing. We are prepared to welcome you into our ranks as an official adviser. I know that life as an immigrant brings a great many challenges; joining the knights will guarantee you stability and status. I believe this to be a good deal. What do you say?"

"An adviser...?"

Svenden was a man who would bring anyone into his fold if they were useful—even disabled soldiers. His gaze was firm, his offer serious. Shiori was shocked. She couldn't have imagined

that the conversation would move so quickly. Her silence made room for another knight to speak up.

“Svenden, trying to get the jump on snatching up a talented prospect? Hardly praiseworthy behavior. My own division is desperate for such talent. And I think it’s fair to say that Miss Shiori would not be able to maximize her capabilities in the combat support division. She is an expert when it comes to the subtle handling of spells and combined magics, and we hold her highly in this regard. Miss Shiori, how about considering a researcher role in the knight corps magic division? We would welcome you with open arms.”

“If you two are just going to jump in like that, then don’t expect *me* to stay silent. Many in my own division would love to have her on the team.”

“Appelberg, Ronnegard, stand down.”

“We can’t allow anybody to have a monopoly over such talent. It’s only fair that she be split evenly among all our divisions…”

The men at the table were bickering, all of them speaking as if Shiori’s joining their divisions were already a done deal. Within moments, however, they had moved on to discussing how to divide up all the adventurers between their divisions. Perhaps, despite the cooperative face of the operation, this discussion had been their aim from the start.

The adventurers began to get a sense of this, and Shiori could feel the confusion drifting through the air. And while Kristoffer looked emotionless at a glance, upon closer inspection Shiori noticed his finger tapping rapidly on the table; the discussion was irritating him.

Alec let out a sigh and glanced at Shiori.

“You need me to jump in?” he whispered.

“No, let me handle things a little longer first,” she replied.

At the very least, she wanted to make her own feelings clear before anybody moved to help her. Alec offered a wry grin and nodded.

“While I find all of your attention flattering,” said Shiori, “I have decided to make everything I know public. It is my way of repaying the many people who have supported me. If I were to join the knight corps, this would become impossible. And it is my desire to see my skills shared in the way that I see fit.”

She explained that any skills she developed within the military would, given the nature of the organization, stay in the military.

Depending on the circumstances, a life in the military might also mean having to live apart from Alec.

"While it is true that your research would be handled confidentially, it could conceivably be published publicly in a limited capacity depending on the circumstances. And if separation from your partner is a concern, we have no qualms welcoming him aboard also. Sir Alec Dia, we have heard about your many achievements. It would be an honor to have you among our ranks."

"Thanks, but no thanks," replied Alec bluntly. "I don't have anything against the way the knights do things, but it's not for me. I want the freedom to live my own life."

"However... No, it can't be helped. Miss Shiori, will you at least consider our proposal?"

Svenden was not about to just give up. He told her that the knights had no trouble assembling people it could use for its fighting force, but it struggled in gathering people who *wanted* to play a support role. It desperately longed for a dedicated and specialized support expert like Shiori.

"My answer remains no," said Shiori. "I am happy to offer counsel as necessary, but I simply cannot accept an offer to join the knight corps. I... I will not have my freedom taken from me again. In the past, I was turned away, abandoned, and essentially told that I was an annoyance by the knights; I will not allow that to happen a second time. The nature of the military means I cannot avoid sacrificing some of my freedoms. So..."

In the past, the knights had turned their back on Shiori. It had happened during the Akatsuki incident. The problems were clear as day to anyone who looked, but the knights had claimed that there was not enough evidence upon which to build a case. Rumors had gone around claiming that pressure had been put on the knight corps to say as much, and there was a good chance those rumors were true. The former guild master and string-puller in the Akatsuki incident was a noble, and many believed it was his family who had put pressure on the knight corps.

Whatever the case, the Adventurers' Guild had moved quickly and thoroughly to see the case investigated, though the conclusions had never been made public. And while there had been external pressures at play, Shiori had no way of knowing that intent on the part of the knights had not been the real

reason for her treatment. Still, and regardless of the particulars, Shiori had come out of the experience feeling as if the knight corps—an institution the people were supposed to be able to rely on—had turned their back on her. She had felt abandoned by them.

There were many problems in the world that could not be solved by the law alone, and while Shiori knew this, she still could not deny how she felt. She had grown friendly and close with individuals within the knight corps' ranks, and she knew that the vast majority of them were good, decent people. But as long as it remained a state organization, there was always the chance that an emergency might result in her being once again abandoned.

It was not that Shiori hated the knights. But she remained suspicious of them, and she could not simply ignore or deny it; there was a whisper in the back of her mind that at some point she might once again find herself betrayed.

"I am sorry," she said, "but I will not give up a place I think of as home to join the knight corps."

Her voice trembled as she came to the end of her sentence, and Alec put an arm around her softly.

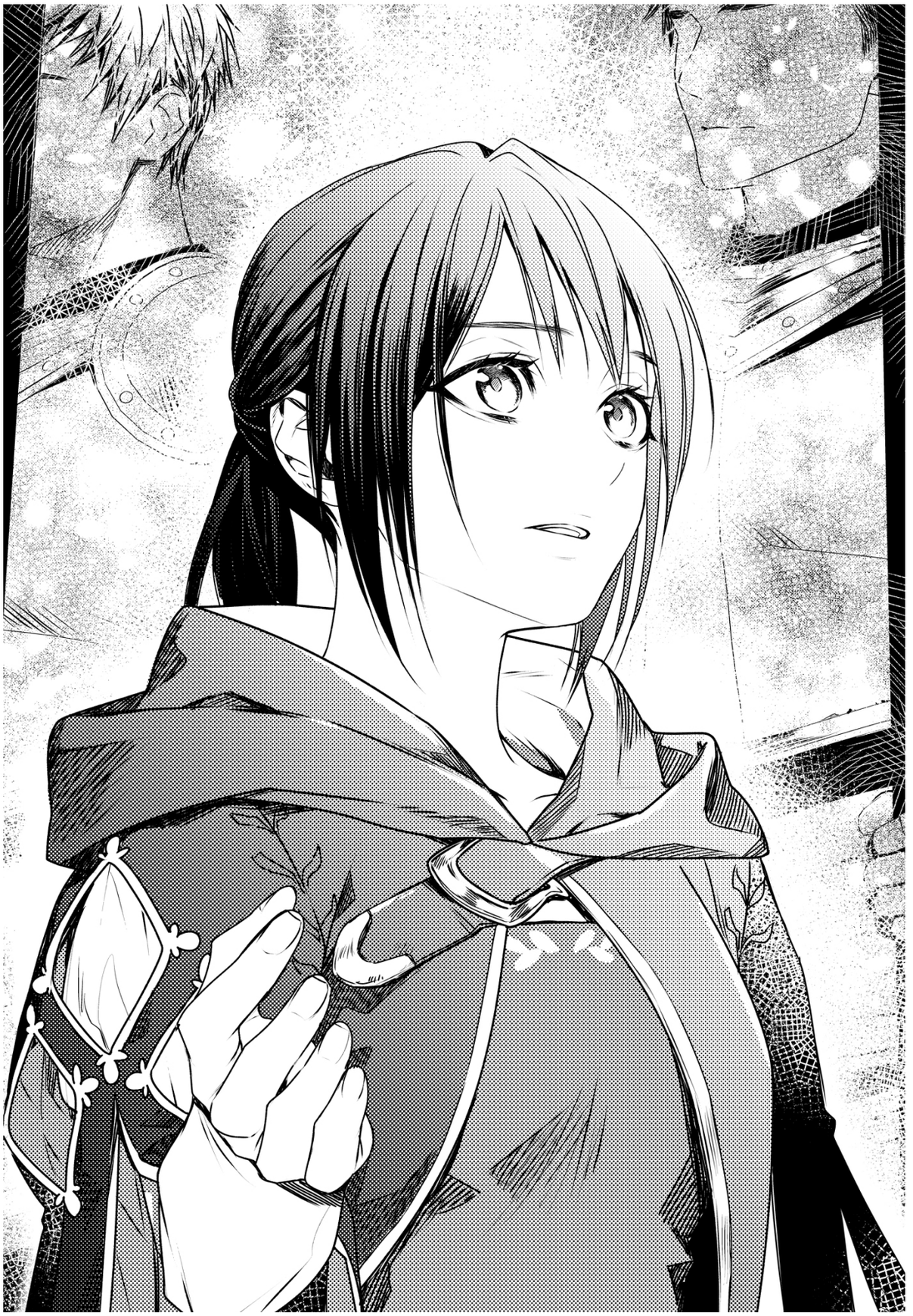
"I respect the knight corps," he said, his voice quiet and deferential. "You are loyal to our home, and you fight for it. But you know as well as I do that its structure as an organization makes it harder for some to be a part of. All the more so when they've been betrayed or abandoned in the past. So I ask that you respect my partner's decision."

As a man with ties to the throne, he did not want the knights to think that he was negating their efforts. However, there was an anger in him at the way the men at the table refused to give up. This brought tension into the air, and with it a silence so heavy that one could have heard a pin drop.

One of the knights at the table, who didn't know the deeper circumstances they were alluding to, turned to another, who whispered in his ear. His brow furrowed, and then he put a hand to his face. His body language grew suddenly awkward. It was Ronnegard, and he had just learned of Shiori's past.

"For better or for worse, adventurers come with baggage," said Zack, who until that moment had remained silent. "Many of us are pushed into the career by our pasts; pasts we hold close to the chest. Shiori is one of us in this way too, and I will not have

you reopening old wounds. You called us here to slay a dragon. We didn’t gather so you could argue about one of us like she’s merchandise. We’re about to go into battle against a dragon we’ve never seen before, and you’re trying to steal one of our people? I won’t stand for it. If you’re going to insist on continuing this useless bickering, then our ‘cooperation’ ends here. We’ll handle this on our own.”



Zack spun around; as far as he was concerned, they were done talking. He glanced at the adventurers who'd been waiting behind them, sending a message with his eyes that they were leaving.

"Wait," said Kristoffer, the steel in his voice stopping them all. "I'm the one who gave my commander permission to speak. I'm at fault for the reopening of old wounds. I'm sorry."

It was an apology from the margrave's own mouth. It was followed with a single slight nod, but all the same it shocked the men sitting around the table.

"Your Excellency, there's no need for *you* to apologize—" started one.

"It was I who ordered that we call upon the adventurers for help with the dragon," said Kristoffer. "We're sending them into danger, and yet I allowed my own subordinates to speak without thought. An apology is only natural."

A leader took responsibility for those under their command. That was the way of their organization.

"But, Your Excellency, you can't deny that there is no better place to protect prodigious talent than among our own ranks. No more so than when considering an immigrant with no known relatives in the country. We can be a shield to protect Miss Shiori. Is this not a natural response?"

"You *do* realize that the knight corps turned its back on her, yes?" replied Kristoffer. "That alone is more than enough reason for her to refuse us. And yet now you speak brazenly of 'protection'? Or are you telling me that you have not actually looked into the past surrounding this 'talented individual' you so desperately want among your ranks?"

"I…"

The margrave knew what Shiori had been through, but most of the men at the table—all of whom intended to be her superior—did not. Svenden and Appelberg had a grasp on things, but Ronnegard, who had but surface-level knowledge of it all, had gone pale.

"It's come to my attention that some among our ranks have tried coercing citizens—and particularly adventurers—to join our ranks. I understand the desire to employ and support talented individuals, but I want to ensure good relations between ourselves and the Guild well into the future. I do not want to fracture those ties. You all understand what I'm saying."

They were business partners. The knights could poach people now, but that was no guarantee they'd have any such success in the future, nor that they'd maintain a working relationship. The margrave was issuing them a stern warning, and the commanders around the table had no choice but to accept it.

"Understood."

"You have my apologies."

"Then the matter is settled," said Kristoffer. "I know we did you wrong, but for my sake, please, let's put it behind us, Zack."

Zack stared into Kristoffer's eyes.

"As long as you understand our stance, we've nothing more to say on the matter," said Zack. "But given the nature of this request, and the magical beast waiting out there for us, I don't want us to make *any* mistakes. We're going to make the roles and responsibilities of our groups clear, and you're going to let us do things our way."

"But of course," said Kristoffer almost immediately.

None of the knights at the table spoke up; their attempted negotiations had ended in failure.

In the end, it was enough that Shiori offered advice to the main squad of the northern knight corps, which was handling stampede control. Upon receiving some tips for making their search magic more efficient, the knights from the reconnaissance teams ran off to issue changes to their formations.

The northern knight corps' main squad was tasked with surrounding the forest around the frozen lake and halting the movement of both stampeding magical beasts and the dragon. Changing troop formations over such a wide area was destined to be backbreaking work, but the knights doing it merely chuckled.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," they said.

The adventurers, who were the main offensive force against the dragon, were assigned a knight to act as their messenger. They would be accompanied to the site together with a support detail made up of archer, mage, and combat support squads, along with supply and medical aid squads—"insurance" in the case that the adventurers fell.

Frol and Julia, the former Imperials, were also coming along.

"Finally getting down to business," whispered Shiori.

“Yep…” muttered Alec.

There’d been a few bumps on the road, but it would not be long now before discussions wrapped up and they set out. The adventurers could do little more than share wry grins.

“I feel like we’ve wasted time,” Shiori muttered.

“Because we have. All of us would have preferred sleep to slogging through all that rubbish earlier.”

The familiars were all in agreement; they were fed up with it all too. When the meeting came to a close, the departure was set for an hour’s time. Shiori made sure her equipment was in order, then wrapped herself in a blanket and closed her eyes, intent on resting with what little time they had left.

With the strategy meeting over, Kristoffer was left with his officers at the table. He shot a glance at Svenden. The other generals quickly left, giving him belittling or pitiful gazes; they were certain that he was in for a very harsh talking-to. In truth, however, this was not so.

“I know I asked this of you awfully quick,” said Kristoffer. “But you were amazing. Thank you.”

“It was nothing at all,” replied Svenden, grinning. “Who’s better at playing the clown than me?”

“Nonetheless, I’m grateful,” said Kristoffer with a wry chuckle.

It had surprised everyone when search magic had revealed itself to be such a huge help in the knights’ efforts to control the stampedes. The news had spread quickly, and Kristoffer then learned that some had begun making moves so as to recruit the original developer of the spell. The news chilled him to the bone. Though the actions were not in themselves terrible, Kristoffer did not want to see the peace and happiness of his friends disturbed by such schemes.

The leadership of the knight corps was made up largely of those of noble upbringing. Since long ago, it was not uncommon for such knights to use the corps to entice talented individuals to their families. When such things happened, even the margrave could do little to interfere. Realizing he had to move quickly, Kristoffer called upon Svenden, with whom he’d been friends since both were young.

The two had first met when Kristoffer had hidden his identity and visited a local pub among commoners. Svenden was born to commoners, had a bright personality and was something of a

joker, but was someone who'd spoken very passionately about the importance of a dedicated support division. The conversation had left a deep impression on Kristoffer, and the two remained firm friends.

"A girl's in trouble, and she may well be surrounded."

This was how Kristoffer had introduced the problem when he'd explained that he wanted Svenden to play the part of a knight looking to weasel a way for Shiori to join his forces. Thanks to Svenden's skilled performance, Kristoffer had been able to make it clear that *none* of his divisions were to make a move on her.

"I'd heard about Ronnegard," said Svenden, "but Appelberg came as a surprise. I always saw him as conservative. Guess I was wrong."

"He hasn't delivered much in the way of results the last few years," said Kristoffer. "He's likely spurred by impatience."

"So he'll talk an immigrant woman into joining his forces, then take the credit for her work?"

"Presumably so."

Kristoffer shrugged and chuckled. It was then that he noticed a certain blue slime under the table, eavesdropping on their conversation. The corners of Kristoffer's mouth began to twitch. He prayed he would not be punished, and left to oversee the battle ahead minus his pants. His pleading was clear in his eyes, at which point the slime wobbled a brief *"You're off the hook...for now,"* before sliding out the tent with a casual wave.

"I'll tell you what, though, that Alec's glare went straight through to my soul," said Svenden. "For a moment there I thought I'd be meeting the goddess herself even before we went to battle."

"I'm...sorry about that. I'll make sure there's no misunderstanding. And I'll reward you for your help."

"I only did what anybody in my position would do. But if you insist, then how about some of the wine in your secret stock? The stuff behind your office shelf, perhaps?"

Kristoffer was shocked by his friend's words; they were so entirely unexpected. Svenden burst into laughter.

"It's the nature of my work. Finding secret stashes is all too easy, you see."

"How utterly terrifying..."

Tales had been told of Svenden. Some said that he sniffed out

the luxuries ranking officers brought with them on training expeditions—where such indulgences were strictly prohibited—and shared them with his fellow soldiers. Others said that he sometimes “stumbled across” fruits, vegetables, and nuts which allowed him to donate large sums to squads that had lost rations due to accidents.

Svenden was observant, intuitive, and he had an excellent memory. He was, above all else, tactful. His division was often forced to cart the supplies of other divisions, and Svenden had quickly seen the power and leverage this gave him; he was just as quick to start putting it to use. In this sense, it was no wonder he’d been the first to take notice of Shiori’s spellwork.

While many thought him shady and frowned upon his ways, he had just as many true believers for his outstanding skills, and the way he took care of those he worked with. To Kristoffer, he was an indispensably talented knight and a precious old friend.

“In any case, I should see to my own preparations,” said Svenden.

The knight saluted and took his leave. Kristoffer watched him go, and prayed for the safety of his friend and the knights that served him.

Part 2: Dragon Slaying and a Celebration of Blessings and Prayers

Chapter 1: For You, Child, a Warm Place to Rest

1

The adventurers woke and readied their gear. When they left their tent, preparations for departure were already complete; suppression and supply squad carriages were waiting by the road, and the magical beasts that would pull them along were ready to go. One look at their powerful bodies made it clear that the knights' horses and magical beasts were specially trained; the sleipnirs neighed restlessly, ready to take off at a moment's notice, while the tanngrisnirs that were lugging all the supplies munched casually at the nearby grass.

The Guild's own horses were left in the care of the knights, and sleipnirs were readied for the adventurers' carriages.

"Fine horses, these," said Zack. "We'll be counting on you guys."

The beautiful black sleipnirs, buoyed by the dragon slayer's praise, neighed boldly.

Departure was imminent. The knights would lead the way and the adventurers would bring up the rear. Before they left, however, Kristoffer came out to see them off. His stern expression never wavered, but there was a brief flash of emotion in his eyes as he spoke but three words.

"Come back safe."

The words were not just a formality for the man; they came from the heart. Kristoffer was himself a soldier. Had it been possible, he would have led the charge himself, fighting alongside his allies. His position, however, denied him that luxury. That he was thus forced to send his soldiers and dear friends into battle on his behalf—where death was a very real possibility—weighed upon his soul.

Zack had a foot up on the ladder to the driver's seat of the adventurers' lead carriage, but spun and walked over to the margrave. He held his hand out at arm's length and at shoulder height. For a moment Kristoffer was taken by surprise, but then

he smiled as he raised his own to meet his friend's. It was a tradition, a pledge between friends: *"We will return."*

Very few among the gathered knights and adventurers knew of the connection between Kristoffer and Zack. But all understood at this moment that they shared a bond of brothers.

The carriages departed. Shiori, Alec, and all those with them kept their eyes ahead, where the dragon lay waiting. Not a single one of them looked back. The knights gathered at the camp watched them go, still and silent, and the carriages disappeared as if swallowed by the forest.

The carriages passed through the dense forest area that spread across the border and led to the frozen lake of Dima. They trundled along the paths flattened out by local hunters, which weaved around the roots of the forest's giant trees, and proceeded farther along.

Shiori was overwhelmed by the gigantic trees with their huge branches and leaves soaring skyward under the summer sky. She couldn't help but let out an awed sigh. The trunks of the trees were so thick it would have taken a whole group of adults to surround a single one with linked arms. Their roots, too, spread out like dragon tails slithering along the ground.

The forest remained largely untouched by human hands; cultivating the area would require too much effort and time. As a result, very little had been done save for creating the path that weaved through it from one end to the other. All the same, the forest was essential to those who lived nearby; it offered an abundance of nutritious soil, was a source of fresh water springs, and was dense with magical essence.

"Unfortunately, people won't be able to rely on the blessings of the forest for at least the rest of the year..." muttered Alec. "The knights have had to slay a great deal of magical beasts to rein in the stampedes, and it will take time for them to breed and propagate the forest anew. Until then, however, a lot of hunters are going to be out of work."

His eyes were on the magical beast corpses that littered the sides of the road, and the berry bushes that had been ravaged by panicked creatures. The effects of a stampede, it seemed, went far beyond just the damage caused by the stampede itself.

"But the reason all the corpses haven't been cleared away—it's not just because the knights didn't have the time or help to

do it," said Shiori.

"Yes, that's true," admitted Alec. "At least the locals will be able to collect what's useful when everything calms down. The corpses will rot if they're left too long, but until then, there's a wealth of materials to be found."

"That's why we have to handle this as quickly as we can."

"Yeah."

Once the ice dragon was slain, the recovery of the area would become a burden for the margrave to shoulder, though no doubt Alec and Zack would lend a hand in secret. At present, the ice dragon in question had not moved from the frozen lake. Having indulged in a surprise "breakfast," the monster was now curled up by the side of the lake, dropping in and out of a light doze. After some two hundred years in slumber, it might have been resting and recovering, or perhaps it simply found its current environment comfortable; both were nothing more than conjecture at this point, and none knew when the beast might decide to move to a more populated area.

The advance squad on-site had been ordered not to attack the largely unknown dragon outright, and to wait for the arrival of the suppression team. Until then, they were given one main goal: to ensure that the dragon did not flee elsewhere, and to keep it from reaching a village or town. They'd dug holes covered in mud to slow down its progress, and also set up barriers. Though earth dragons couldn't fly, mages and archers had been positioned around the area in the rare case that this one was capable of flight.

The forest was usually vibrant and full of life, but now there was only an unnatural silence and a magically laced, oppressively chilly air in which the knights watched keenly for movement. Whatever had once lived here was now all but gone, and the quiet brought with it waves of uncertainty. Rurii and Bla couldn't seem to calm down, and Violid, too, glanced this way and that uncomfortably—all signs that this was not like any forest they were used to.

The carriages passed by the knights' defensive line, and as they proceeded deeper, a heavy, suffocating chill that clung to the air settled over them. Shiori began to shiver. The cold was not natural to the forest, and it was not caused by their proximity to the lake either. Had one encountered it unprepared, no doubt it would have caused an ache in both mind and body.

It feels like a gathering of spirits…

The presence they now sensed was unlike that of any living creature. Rather, it was like the spirits of the dead—a unique presence that Shiori had felt on a number of jobs. A few among the carriages began to feel ill, and drank the stimulants that Nils had handed out. This did not work for everyone, however, and those who continued to suffer were left in the care of a camp they encountered along the way, where another knight was already being treated for the same symptoms. The knight had used his search magic to investigate the dragon's presence and fainted as a result.

"That was a nightmare," he'd moaned when he'd come to. "It felt like being absorbed into a spirit's body…it was just terrifying…"

The ice dragon was not a spirit. This had already been determined by those who had seen it. Yet its presence was similar, and so, when the brave knight had searched for it with his spell, he'd felt himself being pulled into a presence of such enormous toxicity he did not believe it a natural part of the world. As Shiori listened to him speak, she began to cautiously reach out with her own search magic.

She felt it. It was a thick and unpleasant mass—several times more powerful than what they all felt now—gathered past the trees. She knew immediately that it was not safe to be in contact with it for long, and she was careful not to fall in sync and sympathize with the dragon as she stopped casting her spell.

"Don't push it, Shiori," said Alec, worried. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I've learned how to…avoid the worst of such things," she replied.

Shiori had not poured her efforts into developing her spells for nothing. She was now perhaps the leading authority on search magic, and was keenly aware that in the spell lay the ability to "touch" the feelings of the target, which were wrapped up in its presence. The people here referred to this as "sympathizing." Over time, Shiori had become skilled at avoiding the negative impacts that often came with such a phenomenon.

"But based on what I felt," continued Shiori, "I think the dragon may have attacks that target the mind and spirit. We'd best be careful."

"Good call… Let's make sure we all have enough stimulants, just in case."

Nils was quick to pass around more stimulants to everyone as soon as he heard about the dragon's possible attacks on the psyche.

"They work as smelling salts, and as a light sedative too," he explained, "so you can also wet a cloth with them in advance to use that way."

The stimulant was made from natt hortensia flowers, which gave it a refreshingly sweet fragrance. That alone was enough to calm everyone, and ease the tension that had been hanging over all of them.

The carriages rolled on, and it wasn't long before people were putting their cold weather gear over their summer clothing. Even then, however, the chill persisted; this was the residue of the dragon's presence in the air.

"The lake surface is frozen over, and the area around it is in a perennial winter," said Alec, explaining things to Shiori, for whom it was all new. "Since times of old, it's been believed that an ore deposit of magic ice crystals might exist at the lake's bottom. Given that the entire surface is frozen, however, it's probably quite deep. Specialists have come to investigate on numerous occasions, but all went home without much in the way of discoveries. All of that said, the place has *never* felt like this before; something is off about the air."

"Right?" commented Linus. "I've come out this way a few times for work, but this is the first time it's ever felt this way."

Linus's voice was as lively as ever, but his smile was not quite as bright as it usually was, and his face was pale.

Zack said it was likely that the oppressive air was on account of the legendary dragon's awakening.

"It's said that just the presence of a dragon is enough to kill a man," he said. "But even *I've* never encountered the likes of this. If you don't keep your wits about you, you'll be done before the battle even begins."

Zack was experienced when it came to dragons, so there was a weight to his words. This was also one of the reasons that the knight squadron on-site had been ordered not to attack until his arrival. If the knights were to agitate the dragon to the extent that it fled elsewhere, its very aura alone could be enough to kill nearby villagers and townsfolk. Worse still, if it fled across the border, Storydia would have an international issue on its hands.

It wasn't uncommon for such issues to arise along the nation's border, and so the margrave was expected to be not just a wielder of military and political power, but to also have the flexibility to handle such problems as they arose.

Even with the knight corps at his command, Kristoffer had asked a civilian organization, the Adventurers' Guild, for support. He had made the decision based on the belief that an experienced hand would see the problem handled far more efficiently. But not everyone would have been so quick to make such a decision when it meant placing their reputation and rank on the line. Especially nobles, for whom prestige and appearances were everything. By his actions, Kristoffer Osbring had shown once again that he was the right man for the responsibilities of the margrave.

It was then that a horse in front of them neighed, though it did not belong to one of the squads ahead; it came from a messenger, weaving through the trees.

"The dragon has awakened!" he shouted. "It's showing signs of movement! The mages and archers are engaging it!"

Together with the messenger's shouts came the rumble of a low roar, echoing like that of a distant explosion. Light flashed from between the trees ahead.

"The lake is right ahead!" barked Zack. "Be ready to deploy!"

The tension could have cut the air, and Shiori's fingers trembled.

"This is not just for us," uttered Alec, dropping a hand to his sword, his eyes ahead. "We do this for Kristoffer, and we do this for the people of Storydia. We'll defeat this thing, and we'll make it home."

He was a member of the royal family, fighting on the front lines, sword in hand, and his quiet pledge was something only Shiori was close enough to hear. His identity was hidden from the people, but in his own way, he continued to fight for them and for his country.

"Yes, we'll do our job and we'll get back safe," said Shiori. "And we'll all enjoy the summer solstice together."

Neither said they would fight like their lives depended on it. To say as much was to give up; to have nothing left to give but your life, and to be more than willing to sacrifice it for eternal rest. And so Shiori's words were bright; they were a way to rouse herself and her lover as they approached a chilling presence that

seemed to negate life in its entirety. Rurii wobbled its agreement while Violid bared his fangs, readying himself for anything.

"We're hitting the lake!" cried Zack.

The forest disappeared as a wide expanse suddenly spread out before them all. Their eyes met with a mass of sparkling whites and pale blues not unlike a small snowy mountain, though upon second thought, Shiori felt it was more like a blinding pearl. It was, in fact, a silvery white dragon, and as it scanned the roads, its gaze fell upon them. The dragon's eyes were like glass marbles, and to look upon the creature was to stare into a void, where not a single sliver of emotion could be found.

The dragon's stare, and the feeling that she was staring into a cavernous abyss, made Shiori shrink into herself. Alec gulped—he was hit by the shock of déjà vu. Rage, sorrow, pain, suffering, loneliness, yearning—in the dragon's eyes was the crystallized emptiness that came when all these burdensome feelings were boiled together. Alec had seen it before.

I've seen that same look...in Shiori...

The dragon's eyes were just like Shiori's on the day when she had stood and faced down the three adventurers who'd looked to threaten her very existence. "Despair" was far too simple a word to describe the emotion in those eyes—in that gaze, hope no longer existed.

2

At first glance, the dragon appeared to be carved out of pearl. However, upon closer look, one could see how deformed it was. Its body was indeed that of an earth dragon, but it had hind legs like that of a bird and a curly tail which was unique to basilisks. Its front legs, which were connected to its wings, were like that of a wyvern. It was a patchwork creature made up of different parts, and even from a distance the adventurers could see the black-red remains of corpses in its claws—the dead Imperials who had foolishly awakened the beast.

They were bearing witness to the very incarnation of a creature of myth. It glared down emotionlessly at the people surrounding it. Those eyes should have revealed *something*. It was a living creature, and thus capable of feeling, at least in

theory—but in that gaze was nothing but an endless void.

Without thinking, Alec looked down at his lover. But though tension and worry were etched into her face, in the calm of her eyes was the strong light of determination.

"It's okay," her gaze told him. *"I'm not that person anymore."*

Alec had worried. The dragon's eyes had been so eerily similar to Shiori's in the past that he feared she might sympathize with it if she had to use her search magic again. Shiori assured him this would not be the case.

"I'll be fine," she said, smiling. "I'm no longer empty."

Shiori, ever perceptive, had noticed at a glance the worry in Alec's face.

"I *was* an abyss," she continued. "But you fulfill me, Alec. Even now, even right this instant, you fill what's missing. I know we haven't even known each other for a year yet, but I am bursting with you. You need not worry."

"I see," said Alec, grinning as he gripped his sword and stared down the distant dragon. "If you're going to say something *that* cute, then we really *do* need to finish this thing off and get home ASAP."

Shiori knew he was hinting at the pleasures of the evening, and she blushed. Rurii stared up at him, exasperated: *"You just said that. Here? Now? In these circumstances?"* Violid to Alec's right, snorted: *"Lots of fire in you, huh?"*

Alec chuckled.

It's just like always. No different. I will not falter. This is just like always.

Yes, he thought. *I just need to fight like I always do.*

The carriages came to a stop at the mounds that had been built upon a small hill that was the battlefield's first line of defense. The mounds would of course prove useless if the dragon was intent on breaking through them, but they were built with earth magic and worked like ramparts. Raised just outside of the dragon's expected range of attack, they were likely to withstand shock waves from magical attacks, and were at least better than nothing at all.

"We've been waiting!" said the commander of the advance squadron, who kept his intro short and dove straight into a status report. "Here's what we're looking at: The target is attempting to head northeast, to the plains. Our mages and

archers are engaging with it at present in an attempt to slow it down and keep it from moving. In terms of attacks, the target will charge, but it also uses magic: ice, fire, and wind have been confirmed. It's also magic resistant. It's still unclear whether it has any physical weak points or magical weaknesses."

"Can it fly?"

"That's still unconfirmed, but those front legs are just like a wyvern's. We've seen it take a stance as though it might attempt flight, but only once."

"Got it. But you said it's magic resistant? And you've tried fire, right?"

"Of course. We blasted the target with everything we had, and from every angle. It didn't even flinch. The best our fire magic does is slow the thing down."

The dragon was every bit as strong as one would expect of a monster of legend. It wasn't just the beast's body that accumulated magical energy, but also the scales that covered its body, which gave it a very high magical resistance. Knowing this, and even with the dragon as large as it was, the adventurers had to prepare themselves for a close-quarters battle where they could focus on physical attacks. Still, if the dragon was elemental, then it *had* to have a magical weakness, and this could be used to tire it out and weaken it. In the case of this ice dragon, however, fire magic had proven ineffective. This knowledge made the air around the adventurers and knights heavier still.

"Are we certain that the dragon is an ice-type?" asked Zack.

"To be blunt, no. It feels like an ice-type, but we can't say for certain."

"The heck?"

Such a vague reply was not common for the knight corps, and Zack frowned.

"We tried getting a feel for it with search magic, but for some reason there's a mix of elements inside of it," explained the knight. "Half of the mages who tried to discern the target's elemental state fell unconscious. We didn't push it after that. You'll feel it when you move in; that presence is as terrifying as they come, and it crushes you mentally. Some knights were hit with it directly and they couldn't go on. It also expels magical energy that blasts your mind even harder, so you have to be careful when you get too close."

“A mix of elements?!” exclaimed Zack.

Ordinarily, living creatures had a single elemental affinity. Even when creatures of differing elemental affinities mated, the offspring inherited only one of those affinities. So was this dragon capable of holding within it *several*? Zack dropped into thought, and then his gaze fell upon Shiori.

“Shiori,” he said. “Can you look into it?”

Worry was etched into his brow, even though he was the one who’d called upon her. Several knights had collapsed upon trying to examine the dragon; he was unsure whether it was right to leave the job to one with such low levels of magical energy. But in the face of his concern, Shiori nodded.

“I’ll give it a shot,” she said.

She closed her eyes, focused, and let strings of magical energy stretch out from her person. The knights who had been watching nearby with some curiosity let out awed gasps. They could feel her delicate flow of magic, and the control with which she wielded it; not a single drop of magical energy went to waste.

“I feel a strong sense of ice magic from the dragon as a whole,” she said, “but the front legs…the wings… One is wind, the other fire. I think the hind legs are earth. At its center is something different from ice, a feeling like a terribly deep pit of darkness. A strong sense of rejection, denial; I can’t search it any further or I’ll break. I’m sorry, brother.”

Shiori had come in touch with the toxicity of the dragon’s presence and had grown slightly pale as a result. She bit her lip, perhaps with some frustration, but the knights could not hide how surprised they were at her incredible accuracy.

“She’s even *better* than we’d heard,” whispered one.

“No, you did great,” said Zack. “It’s a real help that you could discern so much from so far away.”

Shiori’s brow remained furrowed. Something still itched at her.

“What is it? Is there something else?” asked Zack.

“Where the magical affinities change…” Shiori said hesitantly. “I’m not sure exactly what to call it, but I felt something like a border, like a line drawn between parts of its body. It struck me as unnatural to feel such a thing in a living creature. It’s like when you stitch together different materials; the point where they meet and change stands out.”

“What could it mean?”

The knights were perplexed as they tried to discern whether Shiori's intelligence could be put to use.

"You said the front legs and the hind legs, right?" said one knight, speaking up. "We've had reports that those parts of the dragon's body are a slightly different color than its torso. We thought it was just the pattern on the dragon's hide, but perhaps it actually means something."

Everybody looked over at the dragon. Its neck was bent, its tail swinging as the knights looked to keep it under control from afar. None had been injured thus far, but the battle was a fierce one. And as the dragon moved, it did so with a noticeable awkwardness in its legs. Ellen discussed something with Nils, then broke the silence.

"Permission for us to speak, please," she said.

All eyes fell upon the two adventurers, both healers, their expressions tense.

"Let me start by saying that this is only speculation," said Nils. "We haven't seen the dragon up close, and the procedure we're about to discuss isn't yet allowed in Storydia. Still, it's possible that those sections of the dragon are the result of transplants. In the case of animals and magical beasts, tissue is used from the same or a similar species. Apparently, when the tissue donor has a different elemental affinity, that same affinity remains even after the transplant. In other words, this allows the receiver of the transplant to acquire multiple elemental affinities."

"When animals and magical beasts of two different affinities breed, this sort of thing never happens," added Ellen. "The offspring always inherit only one of the two possible affinities. If that dragon is an amalgamate magical beast produced from crossbreeding, it should still only have a single affinity."

"I understand the logic," said the commanding knight, "but you're saying that thing's got transplanted limbs?"

"Is that even possible with a creature so big?" asked another. "Even the surgery would be a headache, let alone finding big enough donors."

Even then, Nils and Ellen refused to rule out the possibility.

"It's not impossible in the case that the surgery is done while the subject is young," said Nils. "After hatching, dragons are known to remain about the size of a large dog for a few years. It's not outside of the realm of possibility."

"Given that the dragon contains multiple elemental affinities,"

added Ellen, “it’s less an amalgamate magical beast and more a patchwork of creatures.”

The former Empire had once been the height of prosperity, and at its peak, it had been at the cutting edge in any number of different fields, bioengineering and medical technology among them. It had also created a variety of amalgamate magical beasts. Alec and Shiori had seen two firsthand, and could not deny that the Empire had been capable of astounding feats. Nils and Ellen’s hypothesis could not be ruled out.

“If it is true that this is the work of transplants, such a thing simply cannot be called surgery. If anything, it…”

Nils’s words petered out as he fell into silence.

It was done out of curiosity… Were they simply playing God?

Alec’s mind supplied the words that Nils didn’t say, and he groaned as a hatred that verged on physical nausea welled up in him. He pulled Shiori in closer to him and felt her trembling in his grip. Rurii, by their feet, remained completely still, while Violid bared his fangs and growled.

Their riches and their greed took them beyond limits, and it warped their sense of morality…

If their assumptions were correct, then the words “inhumane” and “grotesque” could not adequately describe what had happened to this creature. Alec looked up at the sky; he felt as though he’d caught a glimpse of the reason behind the abyss that existed in both the eyes and heart of the dragon. It was a clear summer morning, and the sky was so beautifully blue it felt almost heartless. The dragon had awoken, and now, even under the sparkling rays of the summer sun, it remained an ice-cold abyss—a void.

“All this is still just speculation,” said Zack, raising his voice. “We’ll see the truth for ourselves later, up close. For now, we need facts. Have you tried a barrier with combined magic?” he asked the knights. “That should work against even a beast with magical resistance. It could stop the thing.”

“Easier said than done,” said the commanding officer, raising an eyebrow. “We’re not yet at the level where that’s an option for us. The chances of an explosion are simply too high.”

Zack was so used to Shiori’s magic that he hadn’t thought his suggestion through, and it suddenly hit him that he was asking a lot.

“Oh, right…” he said awkwardly, scratching his cheek. “Makes

sense. Sorry. In that case, we'll give it a shot on our end. Shiori, all good?"

"Leave it to me."

"And on that topic, let us slow the dragon down," said Nadia. "We're capable of more than just offensive spells."

She looked at the mages with her, all of them ready to try out what they'd been working on since Shiori's lecture in the spring. Zack trusted them completely.

"I'll be counting on it," he said, giving them his full permission. "Which leaves the rest of us to focus on putting the dragon down. I assume there are no objections? When we reach the endgame, we'll launch a full-scale attack, but until then, no interference. Are we clear?"

He was stating things once more to ensure no misunderstandings, and the commanding officer was quick to nod his consent.

"No problem. We'll have your back. Even if the target *can* fly, we won't let it get far. We've got supplies, so you can fight hard, but..."

The knight's voice trailed off unexpectedly. A few moments later, he spoke again.

"But the truth is, we knights want to be out there, fighting. You're adventurers, I know, but you're civilians too, and I wish we didn't have to put you on the front lines."

There was a slight trembling in his voice, and a frustration in his features. Perhaps he was irked by the top brass, who had put aside their own knights and left things in the hands of a civilian organization.

"You mad about it? You don't like us taking the credit?" grunted Zack.

"It's not that," replied the knight. "The battlefield is a place where life hangs in the balance. Engaging with danger is our duty, as knights."

"You are earnest to a fault, my friend," said Zack, chuckling at the knight's sour expression. "But in times of crisis, it's not about knights and civilians. It's about who can get the job done. We've got experience when it comes to dragon slaying, *and* when it comes to assault, we're as good as it gets. But we're not as skilled when it comes to protection. And the more you have to protect, the truer that fact is. When you're talking about defending whole domains and even an entire nation, we've got nothing on you lot

in terms of resources and reliability."

For Zack, it was all about making sure you used the right tool for the job, and the knight knew this. He nodded.

"Yeah, I get it," he said. "Just don't lose anybody out there. I want you all back alive. I'll be kicking myself for the rest of my days otherwise."

Come back safe.

The commanding officer, just like Kristoffer, offered the same message in different words. And the moment they were spoken, he pushed his personal feelings aside and he raised his voice to command his troops.

"Get the message to the squads at the front lines! They're to swap out with the suppression team and pull back to our first line of defense! Take position next to the suppression squad! We'll give the adventurers all the support they need!"

A moment later, Zack barked his own orders.

"Our first task is to lock down the dragon's movements. We'll hit the tail and the wings. If we can take them out of the picture, the monster's mobility will be severely compromised. My team will work on lopping off the tail. Alec, you're with us. Severing the tail will wreck the dragon's balance. Clemens, your team will take the wings—you just need to sever one of them. If Nils and Ellen are right, then the area where the legs are connected to the body should be weaker, and we'll have to confirm that on-site. But if it's true, those locations are targets."

"Understood."

"Linus, if you can do it, hit the dragon's eyes. Nils, Ellen—you're going to investigate the possible connection points at the legs. I want a doctor's eyes on this. Kai, sorry to pull you away from the action, but you're on bodyguard duties for those two. I want you to take them where they need to go. Your team will fall under Clemens's command until you're done."

"Zack, put Vio with them," said Alec. "He can carry people over short distances."

The snow wolf was fleet of foot and smart to boot—he would make a fine bodyguard of his own, and he'd agreed with Alec to act as such. Zack needed a second to take in this suggestion, but no longer than that.

"Then you're on protection, bud," he said.

Violid, ever the trusty sidekick, barked in reply.

"Nadia, Daniel, your teams will lock the dragon down and

provide support. How you do it is up to you. Healers, I want you on standby with each team—you have to be ready to get to the injured quickly, and carry away any who are critically wounded. Ellen, Nils, I'll be counting on you."

"Understood," said Nils.

"We've got it," added Ellen.

"Your team leaders will issue any other necessary orders. I'll give follow-up orders pending any changes on the battlefield, but we'll be dealing with a dragon out there—do not expect things to go according to plan."

Dragons did not exist in large numbers. They were also not known to appear in fixed locations. In the last twenty years, the total number of dragons fought within Storydia did not even reach ten. The fact of the matter was, useful information was incredibly scarce. Fighting a dragon was therefore extremely difficult—adventurers and knights had no choice but to gather all intel on-site and assemble their strategies on the fly.

"Got it," said the adventurers.

"Other than that... Frol, Julia. I'll put my faith in you and your weapons. Frol, you're with Clemens. Julia, you're with Nils. You'll be in the thick of it, but I believe in you."

The two Imperials nodded resolutely. Frol's sword and Julia's wand had been left behind in Silveria Tower, but when the local garrison knights had investigated the location after the snow melted, they'd gathered the equipment and, thinking the Imperials would be sad to have lost their weapons, had them sent to the refugee camp. Frol and Julia were intent on seeing that kindness repaid.

"We'll do our utmost," said Frol. "We won't let you down."

"I don't mind if you give it all you've got," said Zack, "but don't risk your lives for anything, you hear? I can live without those regrets, and more to the point...I don't want to see how sad the camp will get with the two of you gone."

"You Storydians really *are* amazingly kind," said Frol. "But I like it. It's nice."

He looked down, tears dribbling from the corners of his eyes as Alec gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"I'm fine," said Frol, wiping his eyes. "Good to go. I've never fought a dragon, but I've experience with wyverns. You can count on me."

"Good to hear."

When Zack received the signal that all the squads were ready, he grinned and waved. It was almost time for battle. Everybody stood up a little straighter.

"One last thing," said Zack. "When you're in battle, do *not* stand directly in front of the dragon. You will not be able to avoid its charge. Always stay at its sides. If you're in the vanguard, you jump in to attack, and then you get clear. Don't get pinned down. Be careful of the tail too. Even a glancing blow can break bones. All right, let's do this!"

The battle with the dragon—or at the very least, a monster that took the form of a dragon—was about to begin. It would require not just the ability to fight, but keen awareness, split-second judgment, and flexible strategies.

3

With Zack leading the charge, the adventurers slid down the hill and to the battlefield—the eastern shore of the lake. When they were fifty meters out from the dragon, the advance troops, who were in a semicircle around the dragon, cheered. There was a platoon's worth of knights working ceaselessly on defense, darting in to keep the dragon in place before darting back out to safety. It was exhausting work.

The knights' forces had been split in order to handle potential stampedes across the entirety of the northern region. The northern knight corps' best had also been dispatched to handle the habitats of smaller dragon-type monsters and other large magical beasts. All of this had meant that the advance and suppression squads here on-site lacked manpower. A single platoon was simply not enough to take on a creature straight out of a fairy tale. However, their orders to not engage had paid off, and none had been severely wounded.

"The suppression team has arrived!" shouted a knight.

"About time! All troops, we give one last push and then we gather the injured and pull back! Regroup at the defensive line!"

"Mages! Ready a barrage of flame magic... Fire!"

The squad of some twenty-plus mages launched their flame magic simultaneously, and though it did not have an elemental effect, the sheer force of their attack pushed the dragon back, its feet catching in muddy pitfall traps and sending it off-balance and tumbling to its side. This was all the advance squad needed

to begin its retreat. The suppression team, meanwhile, took up position.

Alec stood by the lakeshore, shocked. The chill of the lake itself should have frozen the ground white, but the ice had melted—it was dry, even *warm* under his feet. It was the remnants of the work the advance troops had done to ready the battlefield with their magic.

“Let us knights keep the ground maintained,” said the commander of the advance troop. “You just focus on fighting!”

The chill of the lake was constant, and it would not relent—in time the ground would once again freeze over. The knights were therefore doing the backbreaking work of keeping magic running through it to give the adventurers stable footing.

“Many thanks,” said Zack.

“Don’t mention it, it’s our job. And it feels good to not have your feet frozen.”

Alec felt like he’d seen the knights’ spell somewhere before, and was told that they’d used Shiori’s housekeeping magic as a base upon which to build the spell they used. The developer of the spell had attended Shiori’s lecture, and the idea had hit him when Shiori had told him about softening the ground to make for more comfortable bedding while out on expedition.

“I’d love to hear more about it at a later date,” said Shiori.

The knight smiled in response, then took off, taking those under his command with him.

While all this was going on, the dragon was stuck in the muddy ground the knights had prepared earlier, and was struggling to pull its gigantic body free. For a moment, a thought flitted through Alec’s mind—couldn’t they just keep the dragon sinking and seal it beneath the surface again? Very quickly, however, he realized this was little more than a stopgap solution—the dragon had awoken, and it stood here defiant before them. Sealing it away would only mean that it would one day wake again to cause more trouble. They had to make sure it never got that chance.

“But damn…” he muttered. “It’s huge.”

He’d known the magical beast was big, but up close he was almost overwhelmed by its size. In truth, he felt it was too big a monster for humans to be fighting. This was not like the fire dragons he’d fought before, which were small and lithe in order

to allow for flight. The ice dragon they faced now was like the size of a small mountain. When he thought of how it had been sleeping for so many years, completely unbeknownst to the people of Storydia, he shuddered.

Up close, and past the muddy pitfalls, Alec spotted other holes and fractures in the ground, above which were chunks of dirt and ice—the remnants of the earth and ice magic used to slow the dragon down. Based on the size of the fractures and the chunks of rock and ice, they'd bound the dragon with considerable magic. And yet, with brute strength alone the beast had powered through.

What bothered Alec now, however, was that the dragon appeared totally fine. Steam wafted from its feet, and it was obviously soaking in searing-hot mud, but it did not appear to feel a thing.

"Wait a moment," said Nadia. "The heat's not having any impact on it."

"So perhaps air-conditioning magic won't have an effect?" pondered Shiori.

"Zack, should we try?" asked Nadia.

Zack stared at the dragon for a moment, but answered quickly.

"Don't bother. No point wasting your magic."

Exposing it to heat over a long period would most likely prove ineffective. It also meant the adventurers had lost a potentially powerful opening gambit.

"So it's impervious to both heat *and* cold? Oh my," muttered Nadia.

"We're going to have to hit it hard with physical attacks, then," said Alec.

"Yep. We'll just have to make that work."

Alec would have preferred to avoid fighting something so big up close if it had been at all possible. With their huge bodies, dragons were dangerous even when they weren't trying to be. They could move meters in a single step, and just a light movement of the front legs could send a fragile human body flying through the air. A brush with the claws, too, could rip skin from the bone.

That meant their first order of business was to lock the dragon's movements down. Earth-type dragons were smaller only than ice-type dragons, and given what they were up

against, Zack could bury his greatsword to the hilt in the thing and he still wouldn't reach its heart. The legs and tail that protected its body were also huge, and they would not be severed in a single strike.

All the same, the adventurers had little other choice.

Nadia and her mages quickly shifted their strategy to allow for a focus on a close-quarters battle. Shiori joined up with the medics now that it was clear her air-conditioning magic was no longer necessary—she took out the potions in her pouch and replaced them with supplies from the supply squad and medicine from Nils. Rurii and Bla, ever the considerate slimes, put themselves on defense and the transporting of the injured.

The dragon slowly settled itself back on its feet. It realized it was up against different foes now, and settled its gaze on the adventurers, who were ready and in position just as the knights gave the word that they had successfully pulled back.

"Let's do this!" barked Zack. "Nadia, Daniel, freeze the dragon!"

His voice echoed clearly.

If my older brother were alive, Zack would be the commanding general of the entire Storydian Knight Corps right now.

It was an instant in which Alec saw a vision of an alternate future—the path that Zack might have walked. He pushed it into a corner of his mind and readied himself to move in.

"Total Freeze! Helt Frossen!"

With Nadia at their head, the mages unleashed their freezing magic, turning the high-temperature mud pits into giant clumps of ice. The dragon, still not completely free, let out a roar, its attempt to remove its legs and body only resulting in a rubber-band effect, causing its head to slump to the ground.

Linus took off the moment it happened, unleashing a moon ore arrow, sharp and powerful enough to pierce even steel. At the same instant, the dragon opened its mouth—lined with spear-like teeth—and let loose a gust of wind with a roar, blowing the arrow off course.

"Damn it!" shouted the archer. "Not going to make it easy, are you!"

Linus leapt away and out of danger like a bounding hare, but as the dragon kept its gaze on the archer, it left an opening for others. While it was occupied chasing the lithe archer with its eyes, giant spears of ice and earth shot up underneath the dragon. While they were not hard enough to pierce its skin, the

impact of them sent the beast's head rocking. Then, as Linus's follow-up arrow hit the dragon directly in the eye, it let out a growl.

"Damn, he's good!" shouted an adventurer, whistling in admiration.

Alec and the vanguard were not sitting still while all of this was happening. They quickly closed in on the dragon and took to its tail with their swords now that it was frozen to the ground. Alec and Ludger, their swords alight with flames, began shearing at the dragon's scales. The scales acted as armor against both magical and physical attacks, but while they were strong against attacks that came from above, they were significantly weaker against horizontal slashes. This weakness of scales was something Alec had learned when he'd fought the jormungands, and he was glad to find that it was just as successful against dragons.

"Wow! This feels great!" said Ludger, shearing away some scales.

As soon as the scales were clear, Zack brought his greatsword down upon the flesh of the tail with all the power he could muster. The sickening sound of blade rending flesh met their ears as blood sprayed up into the air, coating Zack in red. The dragon howled, thrashing wildly. The swordsmen, of course, had leapt out of danger as soon as they'd thrown their strikes.

A cracking sound quickly filled the air—the icy clumps keeping the dragon down were fracturing. When the dragon could not pull itself completely free, however, it let out a frustrated roar.

"Just as we thought," said Zack, grinning as he clenched his blood-drenched sword. "It's going to take some work. But we're on the right track! Let's lop off that tail while we can!"

The vanguards around him cheered, but all knew that it would not be easy. A slice from Zack's greatsword was usually enough to sever bone from flesh. He had launched a strike with everything he had against the dragon, but had yet to even reach bone. Just how many times would he have to hit the tail to cut it off completely? And would the dragon simply lie there and let him do it?

We might only get one more shot...

Alec's instincts proved right, and the moment they sheared away more scales, the dragon let loose a roar. Its legs began to bubble, and then the ice around them turned once more to mud.

The air wavered, and the dragon's chest expanded. It was a feeling that pressed upon the skin, and Alec knew what was coming by the unique sensation.

"It's expelling its magical power! Everyone, stand strong!" he shouted.

A low roar rumbled behind his words, and the wind swirled as magical energy left the monster. It plunged Alec into darkness—a feeling like an icy hand gripping a hold of his mind and his heart overwhelmed him.

"Hrngh...!"

The darkness threatened to drown one in despair, and Alec grunted through gritted teeth. He felt trapped suddenly in the depression of his younger days. As Rurii and Bla rolled along the ground from the force of the expulsion, Alec spied Shiori standing in place, her arms wrapped around herself. He wanted desperately to run to her and hold her, but the circumstances would not allow it.

Violid stood in a low stance and on guard, the wrinkles at his nose and his bared fangs telling the story of his heart—it bothered him to be thrust once more into the loneliness of his past.

"Second wave incoming! Block your ears!"

The earth rumbled together with the roar, inspiring fear in those gathered around the dragon. The effects stretched even as far as the knights on standby—some couldn't bear the pressure and fell to their knees, while medics dragged away those who had crumpled into unconsciousness. Many of the adventurers had soaked a cloth with stimulants so they did not faint, but all the same, their morale was shaken.

"Drink your stimulants!" shouted Nils harshly.

Listening to the herbalist's words, the adventurers gritted their teeth and reached for their pouches. They imbibed the liquid in the small bottles Nils had prepared for them, tasting the slight bitterness that was followed by a sweet, refreshing aromatic mint rushing through their nostrils. For many, this soothed their anxiety and nausea, but it was still not enough for some, and these adventurers were carried to safety by Rurii and Bla.

The effect of the dragon's attack on the mental faculties differed for everyone. Some were more receptive to it than others, and even one's condition on the day could sway the

impact. And for those for whom the load was too much to bear, a loss of consciousness was the only way to cope—such was the sheer weight of what the abyssal dragon expelled. In its magical energy was loneliness and despair—anyone who knew these feelings well was hit especially hard.

Alec quickly surveyed the battlefield, and saw Nadia helping Clemens to his feet. Zack stood firm and at a glance appeared unfazed, but he was pale and frustration was etched into his brow. He had been made to reconnect with tragic memories from twenty-six years ago, and they still weighed upon him.

“Are you okay?” Alec asked Shiori, his eyes still on the dragon as he retreated slightly, while his lover was catching her breath.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she replied. “It just came as a bit of a shock.”

She always tried to play things down; all Alec could do was mutter with a bitter grin.

“Just ‘a bit,’ huh? I know I keep saying it, but don’t push yourself,” he said.

In the single minute since the attack that had left the adventurers dazed, the dragon had emerged from the muddy pools at its feet. It looked down at the scrambling humans around it, but showed them little regard as it took two steps to the northeast—the direction of the Krystale Plains.

It was trying to leave for a more inhabited area.

“Tch, so we’re not good enough for you, huh?” Alec spat.

“Fine by me,” muttered Zack, his voice building to a roar as blood dripped from his hair, a fierce grin stretching across his features. “If the beast has eyes for someone else, we’ll have to work all the harder to get its attention!”

His voice echoed across the battlefield, buoying his comrades.

4

The dragon took two more steps. As long as it kept moving, the adventurers could not approach safely. Nadia pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear and shouted a command.

“Everyone, ready yourselves! We’ll stop the dragon where it stands!”

At her order, the mages unleashed all the magic they had to bring the dragon to a halt and keep it still. The monster’s legs sank into pitfalls, and the chunks of ice waiting within attached to its limbs like quicksand, blocking the dragon from any further

forward movement. Rocky manacles of the magical variety then wrapped around the huge beast's legs, further anchoring it to the earth.

The mages then focused their efforts on maintaining their spells and blocking any counterattacks by pummeling the dragon's face with giant "fists" of earth and ice magic. While they did this, Zack's forces rushed in, their eyes set on the dragon's tail and wings. The dragon twisted its neck and opened its mouth to let loose a furious roar, but Nadia's fire magic was waiting for it, the searing heat of her spells silencing the monster in an instant. But even then the beast continued to struggle to break free, and as it writhed, fractures opened along its magical binds—fractures that were quickly sealed with deft spellwork.

The mages continued to pummel the dragon while the supply squad provided them with magical recovery potions. They had to keep up the offensive to stop the dragon from retaliating, and so far things looked good—the dragon could do little more than let out short grunts under the pressure.

"Storydia's mages are incredible!" said Frol. "I've never seen anything like this!"

He had been told that Storydia's adventurers were kind and generous, but their merciless assault on the dragon left him pale with awe as he raised his sword and attempted to plunge its blade into the monster's wing. Unfortunately for him, the blade slid away, leaving him scrambling not to drop his weapon entirely.

"What the—?!" he exclaimed, stumbling as he was carried forward by the momentum of his failed strike.

Clemens, too, attempted to thrust his pitch-black dual blades into a softer part of the dragon's wing, but quickly discovered that he couldn't—the blades didn't catch, and instead slid along the wing's surface.

What is going on?

The two peered at the dragon's wing and saw a thick liquid oozing along its surface.

"What is that...?!"

The monster's bat-like wings were covered in very thin, narrow feathers, and appeared to secrete an oil which kept them from drying out, providing a water-repellent effect.

"Damn thing's just full of tricks!" said Frol.

“Oh no—our shoes!” shouted Clemens, having just noticed what had happened to their feet.

The sight was enough to make the blood drain from the men’s faces—their shoes were covered in the monster’s oil. Such a thing was fatal for a swordsman, as it would badly hamper one’s movement, making dodging and weaving almost impossible.

We need to wash them clean—but how?

Clemens’s first thought was to have a mage cast a stream of water over them, but he didn’t think that water alone, warm or otherwise, would be able to remove the beastly oil. They’d have to be washed with soap…

“Wait, soapy water…” he uttered.

If it was soapy water they needed, he knew just the person for the job. As the realization hit him, Clemens glanced around for Shiori, and though she was rushing around doing medic work, she quickly noticed his gaze. Perhaps she’d realized that something was up when Clemens and Frol stopped moving. She ran over, got caught up with the situation, and promptly whipped out some soap.

“Fantastic,” said Clemens. “You brought some with you.”

“I don’t go anywhere without it,” replied the housekeeping mage.

She cast her spell quickly and cleaned the oil off the men’s shoes in an instant, but was careful to rinse away any remaining soap bubbles as she did so.

“How’s that?” she asked.

“Perfect. Thanks.”

The whole thing took no more than two minutes. Frol was dumbfounded by the speed of it all.

“She would be *so* amazingly helpful to have at the camp…” he uttered.

The words fell from his lips in such a way that it was obvious they were no empty compliment.

“But what now?” he asked, as another realization hit him. “We can’t get close to the wing. The same thing will happen all over again.”

“In which case, we might have no choice but to cut it off at the root,” replied Clemens. “Easier said than done, however…”

The dragon’s wings were essentially a mass of skin that stretched from the beast’s arms to its trunk. The wing’s root, in other words, was part of the arm itself, and was powerfully built

in order to support the dragon's great weight. As such, cutting off the wing at the root might prove even more difficult than felling one of the nearby forest's giant trees.

For an instant, the idea of giving up on the wing entirely flashed through their minds. It was an earth dragon, after all, and earth dragons were incapable of flight. It was possible that, given the patchy way in which limbs had been attached to the dragon, it would not be able to carry its own weight through the air. Even if it could, the dragon would not have complete freedom in the skies—the adventurers guessed that the best it could do was either glide or otherwise use wind magic in order to float.

"Given the lay of the land here, the dragon couldn't possibly take off, could it?" asked Frol.

"Ordinarily, you'd be right," replied Clemens. "Ordinarily..."

Clemens thought back to a record he'd read before, one that had been left by a foreign adventurer. In it was written a description of a dragon that had used a run-up in order to achieve flight. That particular dragon could only spend short periods in the air, but that was more than enough time to send some twenty or thirty men to their deaths. Even without any magic, the speed at which it ran before taking flight—its charge, in other words—was fatal. The writer of the record had survived the ordeal, but had been left paralyzed. They'd lost more than half of their companions too.

Though it wasn't *likely* the dragon could do such a thing, it was nonetheless *possible*. The knights had also reported themselves that they'd noticed the dragon seemingly attempting to ready itself for flight. This was why Zack had given the order to dismantle its wings.

"Shall I wash the wings, then?" asked Shiori. "I'm not sure if that will do much, however; not if it has secretory glands."

"No—even then, it's worth a shot," replied Clemens. "No need to do both. Just wash one."

"In which case, I'll go get some more soap. I'm not carrying enough for a whole wing."

Marena quickly relayed Shiori's request to the supply squad.

"Those knights use the good stuff," muttered Marena, as she brought the disinfectant soap over. "It's made by Rose Dvol. Unscented, but still."

"They make the best soap around," said Shiori. "Perhaps this

is the only brand that meets the medics' standards? I've heard that other soaps have too many impurities."

Clemens and Frol didn't understand much of the conversation between the women, who had strong preferences when it came to soaps, but both only really cared whether or not the soap would provide them the breakthrough they needed.

Shiori and Marena tore open the packaging and Shiori got ready—she broke the soap into tiny pieces with wind magic, then launched it at the dragon's wing.

"Bubbling Water Current!" she shouted.

The soapy water glimmered faintly like a rainbow in the sun as it enveloped the dragon's wing. Shiori did not hold back, and scrubbed away the oil with murderous intensity before washing it all away with boiling water such that not a single section of the wing went unwashed. Had it not been a dragon she'd been working on, Shiori's washing magic might well have sent her target straight to the afterlife.

The familiars, who were watching her as they took to their own individual tasks, trembled at the sight. This was the feared "merciless witch" who sent tremors through the world of magical beasts. Shiori, however, didn't notice their reactions as she evaporated the water she'd been using, then deftly imbibed a recovery potion.

The work had left the housekeeping mage pale. Fire magic took a lot out of her, and considering her low reserves of magic, she had needed to dig deep to tackle the dragon's entire wing. Alec, who had just leapt back after attacking the dragon's tail, glanced over at her. He worried for his lover, but neither he nor anybody else told her to retreat. Shiori knew her own limits, and it was within these limits that she fought to help turn the tide of their battle.

"All done with the drying!" stated Shiori. "Over to you!"

"Thanks!" said Clemens.

"You were great!" added Frol.

The two adventurers moved in so as to handle the wing before it was once again covered in oil. They took to the air and brought their blades down with everything they had. This time, the blows found their mark, and while they did not pierce through the wing entirely, they felt the effects of their strikes reverberating through the weapons.

"Yes! Our swords work!" cried Frol.

“Then let’s make the most of this! Keep up the attack!” shouted Clemens.

The swords and spears cut and stabbed ceaselessly, creating a tear in the wing. With that done, the rest of the work became simpler—the adventurers plunged their swords in and pulled with all their weight, forcing the tear to widen. The damage was enough; there was no way the dragon would be able to take to the skies.

“We’ve taken the left wing out of action!” cried Clemens.

The wing had been torn into two parts like an open set of curtains.

Clemens’s voice, echoing with a sense of victory, buoyed the adventurers. Their achievement proved that while it was indeed a dragon of legend that they were facing, that did not mean it was invincible—it could be hurt.

“They’ve one-upped us!” shouted Zack. “Come on, people!”

As his voice boomed across the battlefield, there was a maniacal grin on his face. His hair was drenched in dragon’s blood. Alec couldn’t help thinking that he looked every bit the incarnation of a red dragon, and a mythological god of war.

Zack was a cheerful and generous person, one who had no shortage of friends around him. But when the man set foot upon the battlefield, he became as strong, harsh, and merciless as a god of war, and it was this man whom the young Alec had idolized.

“He shares similar circumstances to your own. He will make a good friend, and a shoulder to lean on.”

So saying, Alec’s father had arranged for him and Zack to meet. In doing so, Zack had become a role model. He’d taught Alec how to behave among the nobility, how to make conversation and deflect insults, how to extricate himself from trouble, and how the common people liked to enjoy themselves. All of this advice, coming from someone who knew life outside of noble society, kept Alec going.

Within months of them having met, however, Zack turned his back on noble society, but he remained in contact with Alec through letters. It was Zack who introduced Alec to adventuring—a harsh, unforgiving, and yet fun and interesting world in which one’s background, status, and rank meant nothing, and

you were judged only by your ability.

When Alec left the castle and walked the path of the adventurer himself, Zack became like a true big brother to the young Alec, who struggled to get to the point where he could fully support himself. He taught Alec fighting skills, the importance of preparation, and everything he needed to know to survive nights in the wilderness. His lessons were harsh at times, and gentle at others. And while Zack had not always had it easy himself as a youth, he never let it show in his hearty, bright smile—he was everything Alec believed a man ought to be. Alec knew that he would never be where he was now without Zack. He never would have come this far, nor met the love of his life.

Zack was at once Alec's big brother as well as a rival that Alec dreamed of surpassing. He had always felt that with Zack by his side, no problem was insurmountable. At the same time, he could not escape the sense that he trailed behind the man, struggling to keep up. Even now, he did not see himself as Zack's equal.

Zack did not have any magical abilities, but was nonetheless extremely capable. Through his wealth of experience, he had come to understand how magical essence wavered through the air. The greatsword that he handled with ease was so heavy that an ordinary person could only ever *dream* of swinging it. To top it off, he had achieved the highest known position among adventurers by earning himself the title of "dragon slayer."

How long would Alec have to work before he could proudly stand shoulder to shoulder with such a giant? He did not know, but as he stood now on the battlefield, next to the man he so looked up to, the sparkle of the sun in his eyes made them glimmer like purple crystals.

Alec was known for being incredibly cautious, and protective of his solitude. At the same time, he was fiercely loyal to those he let into his heart—the people for whom he would give his life without so much as a second thought. That, together with his memorable eyes, had earned him a nickname he was not aware of, and one that would have caused him great embarrassment to ever learn: "the magenta lone wolf."

And so it was that he stood with one such person he trusted, the crimson-haired dragon slayer, as the two brought their swords down upon the dragon's tail. While Alec sheared away the scales that deflected magic, Zack tore away at the beast's

dense and fibrous muscle until finally they saw thick bone—or more accurately, the joint that connected the tail to the dragon's body.

While cutting directly through solid bone might have been impossible, destroying the joint was another story. Alec's magic had boosted his team's strength, and they brought their swords down upon their target. They sliced through the muscles that connected bone to bone, tore through skin, crushed cartilage, and felt the tips of their blades slice deeper still. The tail was messily torn up and dangled where it was, now connected by nothing but the last remaining threads of skin. Zack tore through these with his blade, and Alec quickly used his magic to cauterize the wound. The stench of roasted meat wafted through the air, a sign that the reptilian beast would not be able to regrow the tail it had now lost.

"We did it!" shouted Ludger.



As Zack and the vanguard continued their work, Nils and Ellen rushed into position, ready to see to their own duties.

“Ellen, you take the front legs, I’ll take the hind legs!” said Nils.

“Got it. Be careful!” she replied.

“You too.”

Nils jumped on Violid, while Ellen remained safe in Kai’s grasp. The two pairs took off. When Nils reached the hind legs, he put a hand to his mouth and gagged slightly as he jumped off Violid. The rough ride on the way up and to the legs had given him motion sickness, and the unpredictable movements of the dragon’s body were doing nothing to improve things. Violid, who reached to keep Nils upright with his nose, growled for the herbalist to keep it together.

Nils longed to down a potion to ease his nausea, but he did not have the luxury of time. The dragon was frighteningly powerful, its energy seemingly limitless, and at any moment it might go wild, breaking the magical binds that currently held it down. His alraune familiar, itself a precious store of herbs, passed him a leaf with strong medicinal properties.

“Yes, this’ll work,” muttered Nils gratefully, kneeling down to inspect the dragon’s hide. “Let’s hope we find what we’re looking for.”

He knew they were working with an unproven hypothesis, but the sutures he and Ellen were looking for would have happened after a transplant operation undertaken centuries ago. Even if their hypothesis was right, there was no guarantee they’d be able to easily locate scars from so long ago. The knights had said that the dragon’s hide looked like it was different colors where the limbs would have been sewn on, but up this close, it all looked the same.

“I wish I’d studied more about treating beasts,” Nils muttered.

This was not something he’d have ever uttered in front of a patient, but it was just him and the familiars right now.

“I’m guessing…” he continued, “…that they wouldn’t have done a very neat job, given when the operation took place. The scars should stand out. And if the transplant happened above the joint, then it should be right around here… Whoa!”

The ground shook. But it was not really the ground shaking, in fact—it was the dragon upon which Nils stood. The beast was beginning to recover from the barrage, and with each shake of its body, it was interrupting Nils’s examination.

“Ah! Hurk! Ugh, damn it all!” spat the herbalist, revealing a side of himself that went largely unseen by others.

Nils’s mind raced. According to the knights’ reports, the hind legs were similar to those of a basilisk. This matched Shiori’s prior conclusion that they were earth-aspected, but basilisks were closely related to dragons, and their hides were similar in composition. Noticing the difference would not necessarily be easy…and then he gasped as it hit him.

“Ah, yes,” he uttered. “Search magic.”

Shiori’s search magic was not only useful for locating threats. She had demonstrated this herself, earlier, when she’d scanned the dragon from a distance. She’d also expressly advised everyone at her lecture to be open to coming up with new uses for old spells.

“Yes!”

Nils steadied himself upon the shaking dragon’s back, then placed a hand on it. This was not a spell he was especially used to, and on top of that, Nils did not have much in the way of magical reserves, just like Shiori. Casting search magic here would result in a significant drain on his reserves, but he had no other choice. He circled his hand gently as if rubbing ointment on a wound and sent his magical energy through the dragon’s scales.

I don’t have to go deep; I just have to be thorough near the surface of the skin…

Sure enough, the hind legs did bring to mind the earth element. But then, in an instant, that sensation was cut off. It *changed*.

“There!” Nils exclaimed.

Just like Shiori had said, it gave off a feeling like different materials had been patched together. Nils settled his gaze around where the feeling had hit him, and saw a slight, near-imperceptible pale discoloration. The scales in that area, too, flowed in a slightly unnatural way. It was very subtle, but the scar was there, and this proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the dragon’s parts had been transplanted.

Nils looked over at Ellen. She was on her hands and knees, supported by Kai, and her eyes met his own. *“I’ve found it,”* her gaze said.

“Zack!” Nils shouted. “We found the scars! These legs were sewn on!”

After such a massive transplant operation, scars would always remain. Even if the wounds closed, they would never heal completely. And where the transplant had taken place, the tissue would be weaker to shock and impact.

The nearby adventurers who heard Nils shouted triumphantly.

One of the dragon's wings had been rendered useless, and now its tail was gone. This cut the magical beast's mobility by at least half. All that remained was to get through the legs and lock its movement down completely, at which point they could launch a final all-in assault.

Victory was in sight.

But as the tension in the air lifted ever so slightly...it happened.

For Alec, it felt as if his vision blurred. It lasted for a brief second, and was followed by a strange feeling, not unlike floating. At first he thought it was a dizzy spell, but then the air itself began to waver. He knew at that moment that this was the sign that dragons gave off before a huge expulsion of magical energy, and his shout boomed across the battlefield before he could even stop to think.

"Magical shock wave incoming!"

"Magical barriers!" shouted Nadia, who noticed the signs herself an instant later.

"Defensive postures, all of you!" barked Zack.

Then came the sound of something fracturing. It grew into a roar as the ground shook violently. The earth around the dragon began to furl, then crack as chunks of rock and clumps of earth burst upwards. Humans were especially helpless when it came to attacks from beneath them; similarly, this was the greatest weakness of barrier spells. Rock and earth burst upwards from people's feet before returning like a heavy rain, pummeling the adventurers' bodies.

Those caught directly underneath the exploding earth were sent flying, the breath knocked out of them as they slammed back down to earth. Those who had stayed low were pelted in the eyes with dirt and dust, or otherwise took what felt like hard punches from stray rocks. The rain of earth magic lasted less than a minute, but felt like an eternity to those caught in the

middle of it.

Ellen, Kai, Nils, and the familiars were unharmed thanks to being directly on top of the dragon. Linus and Julia, who had happened to be near Rurii and Bla, were fortunate in that they were sheltered by the slimes' squishy forms.

However, Shiori had almost found herself struck with a chunk of rock as big as herself, and had only been saved because Alec had leapt—without a thought for himself—and carried her out of danger. Unfortunately, the movement led him to fall awkwardly on his left side, and though nothing was broken, pain shot through his arm at the slightest movement, and it would not respond to his commands.

Zack had knelt low and shielded himself behind his sword, avoiding any major damage. A stray chunk of rock had cut open his forehead, however, and blood streamed down his face. But the three were among those who had gotten off lightly. A majority of the adventurers had been hit much, much harder. In an instant, the adventurers had lost their hard-fought advantage.

The dragon remained still—likely due to the huge amount of energy it had just expelled—but it seemed to understand instinctively that the tables had turned. It let loose a roar that only served to further stress those who were writhing on the floor in pain—it was like a dark phantom, sliding into the already weakened adventurers' hearts with ease, sapping at their will to fight.

The void-like gaze of the dragon twisted slightly, and Alec got the strong impression that the beast's glare was showering them all in contempt.

5

"Get the injured to safety!" shouted Zack.

He held a handkerchief to his bleeding forehead as his slime Bla came up close to him with a wobble that said, *"Aren't* you *one of the injured?"*

"I'm fine," he said to it, grinning.

The slime was not completely satisfied by his response, but it followed Zack's orders and went about carrying the badly wounded. The dragon remained frozen for the moment, but there wasn't much time. The adventurers needed to cart the

injured to safety and regroup, and they had to do it quickly. Zack saw to his own wound, then began aiding the medics. Meanwhile, Nils's and Ellen's voices rang out clearly.

"Use antiseptics and styptics on any open wounds!"

"Physickers, prioritize healing those with minor injuries! We want the healed to help us here!"

"Be careful with any broken bones! Do *not* use your physicking on them!"

Those who were safe raised themselves on unsteady legs and helped one another up.

The stench of blood, the cries, the shouts, the moaning—none of it felt real. Shiori felt for a moment as if she were watching a scene straight out of a movie, her brain refusing to accept what met her eyes as true. But there was no denying the reality that faced her, and with shaky hands, she reached into her pouch and pulled forth a painkiller. Her lover stood steadfast, gripping his left arm as sweat beaded on his pale face. She knew the pain he was experiencing must have been nigh unbearable.

"You hurt yourself saving me," she said. "I'm sorry."

Alec shook his head.

"All I did was move to protect what matters. I didn't even think twice."

Even under these circumstances, he put up a brave front. Shiori could do little more than respond with a wry grin. She also knew that, under similar circumstances, she would likely have done exactly the same thing to see Alec out of danger.

"Take this," she said. "It'll help with the pain."

It was a pill, and one they were warned not to use in excess. Made with extract from alraune root, it was tremendously effective for pain relief, but poisonous when ingested in large amounts over short periods. Nils said that until the medicine ran its course, it could produce powerful drowsiness, lethargy, and headaches. He made certain that each adventurer carried only enough for a single day.

Switching off the body's ability to use its pain sensors was, in and of itself, a dangerous and risky move. It was impossible to know what damage would persist when one ignored and fought through their injuries. Painkillers were thus not a medication to be used recklessly.

"Each of you gets two, and they're to be used only in dire

circumstances.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Nils would never have allowed these painkillers to be in the hands of the inexperienced. But in a battle against a dragon, the medics could not be everywhere at once. Nils had thus made an exception, knowing that any one of the adventurers might find themselves bereft of help, and in situations where they might need to fight through pain—or ignore it entirely—to survive. Shiori and Alec were now confronted by such a reality—the physickers around them were rushed off their feet.

“I’ll be okay,” Alec said, swallowing the pill. “I don’t think I broke anything.”

All the same, the constant pain wore at both his mental and physical endurance. This was not to mention the fact that the dragon was liable to move again in an instant. Fortunately, it was not long before Ellen made it to Alec, and Shiori could breathe a sigh of relief.

“Must have been incredibly painful for *you* to fall back on a painkiller,” she muttered, inspecting his injury and confirming that nothing was broken. “Nothing serious, good.”

In the next instant, the swelling subsided as her physicking did its work.

“I’ll be fine now,” said Alec. “Thanks. Go help the others.”

“I’m on it,” said Ellen, speeding off.

“We better get to it too,” Alec said. “The dragon is rising again.”

“Yes…”

Unfortunately, about half of the mages—who were responsible for binding the beast’s movements—were in no shape to fight. With time working against them, Shiori and Alec moved to help where they could.

The physickers never stopped moving. Ludger was waiting for them with his wife motionless in his arms. He’d managed to get them both out of immediate danger.

“Marena!” he shouted, tears welling in his eyes. “Marena! Hang in there!”

Her arm was broken at an awkward angle, and it was not a mere dislocation or joint injury. Though it was not her dominant hand, it was nonetheless disastrous—Marena needed both arms to wield her spear effectively. Worse still, she couldn’t even stand, and just opening her eyes took significant effort. And yet,

she forced a smile to her face and, though it felt incredibly heavy, raised her hand to touch her husband's face.

Ludger was younger than Marena, and she'd watched him grow into a strong and trustworthy vanguard adventurer. But at heart, he'd never really changed at all—he was still the cowardly and tearful youth who had chased after her, lost to his love.

"I'm okay," Marena uttered. "I still have my short sword. I can still...fight..."

It was not easy for her to get the words out, but they roused her even as the abyssal dragon's roar chipped away at her spirit.

"Don't be stupid," Ludger shot back. "That's no ordinary magical beast we're up against out there!"

Marena couldn't possibly stand up to such a fearsome dragon with just her short sword. She knew this as well as anyone, but she bit her lip, frustrated that she would have to leave her husband to fight without her. More than anything else, though, she knew that she hadn't been herself since the battle began. With adrenaline powering her, she had not felt much in the way of pain, and yet her body had felt dull. She'd been more exhausted than usual, and it had built up; she hadn't been able to move or fight as she usually did. And yet, even now, she insisted on being healed and getting back out there.

"No more fighting for you," said Julia, placing a pale, gentle hand over Marena's mouth. "We have to make sure this break is properly seen to, and we're going to do that somewhere safe."

The former Imperial was part of the physicker team. Physicking, however, was not all-powerful. It could remove poisons and close wounds, but it could not heal broken bones back into their former shape. To use such magic on Marena now would only connect her bones at the odd angle they were bent at. If care wasn't taken, Marena would never use a spear again.

Rurii slid up and stretched out under Marena's body, ready to transport her to the medics waiting at the defensive line.

"I'll fight enough for the both of us," said Ludger. "So don't worry about a thing. Just rest."

The words showed he was putting on a brave front, and he leaned down to plant a kiss on his wife's lips before standing to his feet, tears running down his face.

"I know," Marena replied. "Now you go out there and you make sure you win."

In her words was an unspoken plea that he return safe.

“What other option is there?” he said. “No way am I going to leave my gorgeous wife a widow.”

A physicker put a hand to Ludger’s cheek and healed his cut. He then ran off to regroup with the others.

At the same time, physickers and adventurers were working tirelessly to nurse Nadia and many other mages back to health. Nadia had fainted when she’d depleted the entirety of her magical reserves in an instant to protect those around her from the dragon’s burst of magical energy. It had been a dangerous move—had she failed in her attempt, she would have taken out even those who were now fighting to help her.

“So reckless...!” uttered Clemens.

He tried to get Nadia to drink a stimulant, but the contents simply flowed down her cheek and pooled on the ground.

“Damn it!” he cried.

He poured the stimulant into his own mouth, then covered her lips with his own. He did not think twice—this was the only thing left that he could do to bring her back, though it was grueling work.

Even then, however, Nadia remained as still as the dead. Clemens pushed away any thoughts of worst-case scenarios and fished a hand into the pouch at Nadia’s waist. He pulled forth a high-grade magical recovery potion, intent on replenishing her reserves, and sure that it would bring her back to her senses.

Bit by bit, he fed her the contents of the potion, praying for her to wake. Little by little, as he persisted, the color began to return to her face. Once she’d been fed a whole *five* potions, she opened her eyes.

“To think I’d wake up to the worried, troubled look on your face,” she whispered with a chuckle. “It’s exactly how you looked the morning after.”

It was a joke that only the two of them understood, and Clemens immediately blushed.

“The sheer gall...” he murmured.

His expression was one of both relief and exasperation. Behind him, Daniel and Yksel leapt to their feet, screaming.

“Ugh! The heck?!” cried one.

“Gah, this is putrid! Yuck!” cried the other.

With nobody to transfer any potions to them mouth-to-mouth, medicine had not been administered to the two mages.

A frustrated Eir had instead shoved its own stimulant—squeezed from its own leaves—down their throats. It was a bold, aggressive move, but the effects were undeniable. And while the two were likely to suffer mild nausea for a few days as a side effect, they at least had their senses back. The rest they could worry about later.

The two mages, both of whom had come hurtling back to reality thanks to the effects of the liquid—which was like pure, unfiltered, concentrated bitterness—drank down a number of magical recovery potions in quick succession. None could tell whether they were doing so to regain lost magical energy, or to wash away the awful taste still lingering in their mouths.

"Ah?" murmured Eir.

The familiar shook its leaves as if to say, *"And to think my partner imbibes the stuff without so much as a second thought."*

Daniel and Yksel were making such unexpected fools of themselves that Nadia and Clemens couldn't help but burst into laughter.

I really didn't know what was going to happen for a second there... thought Clemens.

The mages were now standing under their own power, and with that, the tension in Clemens's expression bled away.

The fight isn't over yet.

One by one, adventurers rose. They'd lost a third of their number to the dragon's magical attack, but many of those had been replaced by others who had since recovered from the dragon's attack on their mental state.

We still stand. We can still fight.

News had just arrived, informing them that the adventurers en route would arrive in about an hour. A portion of the northern knights who had been handling stampede control were also being redirected to the lake to face the dragon—after implementing Shiori's search magic strategy, they'd seen results and deemed the situation largely under control.

The dragon had lost its tail. One wing was all but gone. The adventurers were driven by hope—the belief that they could still slay the beast.

"In formation!" barked Zack. "Ready yourselves for a full assault!"

He sent Linus—the lightest and nimblest among them—to

bring word to the knights. It was time to combine forces.

“Now the knights can finally fulfill their duty…” whispered one among them.

The knights had been ordered to take up position as “insurance” in the case that the adventurers—all of them technically civilians—fell at the front line. But when it came to fighting dragons, sending waves of soldiers to attack was in fact a dangerous tactic, and doing so in the past had led to huge losses. Such deaths were to be avoided at all costs, and so the knights were ordered to stay back until such a time as the dragon’s mobility was neutralized. Only the medics and supply squads were authorized to provide direct support.

The knights, who had been forced to wait while the adventurers were broken down and hit by waves of magical energy, trembled with anticipation as they waited for the order to charge.

The dragon began to rise from the epicenter of the magical blast. Its face was covered in dirt, grime, and its own spittle. Its eyes, once as empty as cold glass marbles, now wavered with a flash of eerie light. It was a creature that oozed with despair and loneliness, but it now looked down at the dwarfish humans by its feet with clear enmity. It recognized that here were threats that needed to be exterminated.

Zack met the dragon’s gaze head-on, wiping the dripping blood from his forehead as he grinned. Everybody was hurt, covered in both their blood and the dragon’s, but no one had died yet. None of them were heroes setting foot in Valhalla.

We aren’t the ones who’ll meet the goddess today. That honor belongs to you, you pitiful beast.

Zack raised his greatsword high.

“Begin the assault! Everybody, attack!”

6

The order was given. Battle cries filled the air as everyone closed in on the legendary dragon. But as mythical as it seemed, it was still a creature that would die if its heart were pierced or its head cut off. Everybody knew this. It was common sense. And yet, attacking its weak points had *not* been the first plan of action.

Observers with no experience in the field spoke as if they were true experts, offering criticism such as “If we know how to kill dragons, why do we not make their weakest targets our priority? Sending brave warriors to attack tails and wings is a fool’s errand that will result in needless sacrifice.”

In truth, however, a dragon’s head often hovered at a height of more than ten meters. How were humans—capable of only reaching around two meters with a jump—supposed to reach such heights? And how was one to reach the heart when it was protected by armored scales and tough muscle and sinew, and buried so deep that a long spear couldn’t reach it?

It was because these targets could not be immediately reached that strategy demanded the dragon’s other weapons and hindrances be dealt with first. Eliminating the wings stopped the dragon from flying away. Removing its tail took its huge whiplike weapon out of the game. Hacking at the legs stopped it from easily treading on and crushing people. When these problems were dealt with, only then could a dragon’s weak points be targeted.

Naturally, of course, the dragon would take none of this lying down. But this was the nature of the task at hand—it was a battle in which even a single act of resistance could be fatal. The dragon of the lake had put up a fierce resistance, chipping away at the forces that looked to fight it. And yet it was not simply lashing out—through battle, it learned, and with this knowledge, it sought to take away the tools the humans wielded. By unleashing bursts of magic that forced the human mages to concentrate on defense, the dragon removed their ability to maintain its binds.

The dragon was now free, and with the heavy stomping of its legs, it kept the humans at a distance, sweeping its neck over the adventurers who stood strong and, without giving them so much as a chance to run, showering them in flame.

But all the same, even in the face of such danger, the humans were driven by the will to see their foe defeated. They drank painkillers, they magically boosted their physical abilities, and they downed magical recovery potions. Every time they were sent reeling, they came back.

“Hold the line!” shouted Zack. “When you go in for your attacks, circle from the back!”

“Mages!” ordered Nadia. “Leave defense to the support team

and focus on keeping the dragon still while you hit it with your spells! Support mages, keep the barriers up!”

Under the pressure of the dragon, the adventurers came together in formation. Little by little, they were taking back the advantage. The dragon roared, intent on ensuring the humans did not turn the tables on it, and called forth a flock of carnivorous hraesvelgrs. Spurred on by the king of the beasts, the flock of birds let out shrill cries before diving upon the gathered humans.

The hraesvelgrs were so large one might have thought they were griffins at a glance, and their appearance struck fear in the hearts of the adventurers—they already had their hands full with a *dragon*, and now they had to watch the *skies* too*?* It felt like far too much to bear.

But at that very moment, a powerful roar—that of a magical wolf—pierced the skies. It was so loud it felt like it pierced the heavens, and it echoed into the far reaches of the forest. The roar was enough to allow the birds to shake off the fear that the dragon had instilled in them, and they took once more to the skies, where they circled once before disappearing back into the forest.

“Great work, Vio!” said Alec.

The snow wolf replied with a short but pleased bark, then pounced back into the battlefield.

“All right! Give us a hand, Ludger!” said Alec.

“On it!”

The two swordsmen used their earth magic to open a pitfall at the dragon’s feet. It wasn’t going to keep the monster still for long, but it would at least halt its forward momentum. The weakness of the magical swordsman was that the class did not have the magical power of a mage, nor the expertise of a dedicated swordsman—they landed somewhere between the two. It was therefore a magical swordsman’s efforts that determined whether they were a versatile jack-of-all-trades or lacking in both of their fields.

“Earth magic is a subtle art, but it sure comes in handy when you need it!” cried Ludger, summoning a path to run up.

“You got that right!”

The dragon’s own earth lances turned Ludger’s creation to lumps of earth while Alec swung his fiery sword. Scales were sent flying through the air, and others were waiting to plunge

their weapons into the softer flesh that lay beneath.

“Ain’t nothing like the strength of youth!” said Zack, whistling as he watched them work. “You can’t beat the clock, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it! My hands are going numb!”

But in his actions, Zack showed not a hint of his age.

“Try to keep up with the young and you’ll only pay for it later!” said Daniel, who was in fact older still. “Perhaps there’s no better time, or age, to start changing up the way you do battle!”

Once a powerful A-rank mage, Daniel was now transitioning to a support role. While in the past his preference had been for offensive spells, his style was different now—as a born obsessive, he’d since mastered a variety of support and defense spells, making him just as active on the battlefield as he had been in the past.

“In any case, I have a feeling we’ll both be bedridden for a few days after this!” said Daniel. He readied himself and bellowed, “God’s Hammer, God Hammare!”

“Damn straight!” replied Zack. “Now eat this!”

Daniel slammed the dragon in the back of the knee with a huge chunk of earth. As the monster crumpled, Zack was waiting, and he thrust his greatsword into the seam where the legs had been attached to the body. The small area, which lacked the same scale coverage as the rest of the dragon, was just as weak as Nils had suspected—Zack’s blade plunged in deep.

The dragon immediately roared with rage, opening its mouth to snap at the two nuisances by its leg.

“Archers! Fire!”

Before the dragon could reach them, however, archers fired countless magically charged arrows at it, which pierced the fleshy inside of the monster’s mouth. Some of the missiles hit the tongue itself, while others lodged themselves in the beast’s gums. But for all their effort, the arrows appeared useless when the dragon chomped them into bits. It opened its jaws once more, but Sigurd scratched it across the tip of the nose, allowing Kai to dash along the dragon’s back and launch a powerful and magically boosted kick right at the base of its neck. Shock and pain pulsed through the beast, and it let out a shriek. Nils saw an opportunity, and pulled forth a treasured new medicine from his pouch.

“Linus!” he shouted. “Put this down the dragon’s throat!”

“Okay! I got you!”

Linus quickly tied the potion to an arrow, and in the next instant he'd landed a direct hit. The dragon chomped the arrow down, then let loose an ear-piercing screech as the transparent liquid burned its throat.

"Hey, Nils! What did I just fire?" asked Linus.

"Undiluted brain-sucker repellent!"

"The heck! Are you for real?!" shouted Linus, suddenly serious. "You're as ruthless as they come, Nils!"

For all intents and purposes, the tale of Shiori mercilessly showering the rare magical beast in spicy oil was now a story carved into the history books. Joel couldn't help but also let out a scream at the herbalist's terrifying work, resulting in a slight error in his spell incantation.

However, having practiced hard to improve and expand his skills since Shiori's lecture, Joel's general accuracy level was still incredibly high. Even with a slight error, his ice blades flew through the air, slicing off dragon scales as they went. And the scales that weren't cut off still flipped upwards, revealing an opening of flesh for others to take advantage of.

"Amazing stuff!" remarked Yksel.

Yksel was the same age as Joel but a rank higher, and his unfiltered praise made Joel puff up a little.

"Now we can shave off the scales that swords can't reach!"

"Then get to it!"

"You got it, future archmage!"

All of Joel's fellow adventurers knew that he was a man who thrived when praised. With his morale as high as it could get, the dragon's scales were sent upwards and out. The attacks that followed came down on unprotected flesh. Nadia, in particular, was incredible; she honed her powerful fire magic into a single point and sent it piercing straight into the dragon's body...or at least, it looked like that for a moment.

However, the dragon responded by expanding and expelling magical energy. Nadia's fire spell wavered, then dissipated as little more than sparks.

"Just when things were looking up! How annoying!" said Nadia, her lips curling into a snarl.

"We can't let this go on much longer," said Alec, his face stern.

The longer the battle went, the more the dragon learned. As a species, dragons lived long lives and were incredibly tenacious. Even now, after the adventurers and knights had kept up the

attack, the beast was still capable of holding its own. The longer things dragged on, the more the battle would begin to turn in favor of the dragon. To make matters worse, it still had all four of its legs.

In terms of size, the dragon of the lake was second only to a full-grown ice dragon. It was all too clear to Alec now just how difficult an enemy it was to slay, and he gritted his teeth—what would have already killed almost anything else had been little more than a flesh wound to this monster.

"It's no good!" shouted Yksel. "Our boiling water and mincing spells are useless!"

"It's pushing everything back with its own magical energy!" exclaimed Joel.

The mages had tried to attack the dragon's innards with Shiori's housekeeping magic, but the dragon's enormous magical reserves were blocking their every attempt—the damage was surface level at best.

Shiori had not gotten in touch with the core of the creature with her search magic, and it was that very magic that knocked back the powerful mage's spells.

"I wish it had some definitive weak point! Some way for us to lock it down securely!"

But did such a weak point exist? Everyone knew that it was pointless to wish for the moon, but the yearning for such a thing spilled from the adventurers' lips all the same. The dragon roared as if it were laughing at their pitiful struggles, though its voice was noticeably less forceful, perhaps due to its burned throat. Even then, however, this sound was enough to summon countless spirits, and wandering, low-level ghosts that had lost all sense of who they had once been began to spread across the battlefield.

"And now it's summoning ghosts...?!" someone exclaimed.

The dragon was, of course, a living, breathing creature, but in its heart and mind it seemed more like a spirit of the dead. Because of this, it had the rare ability to summon ghosts. It now called upon frost ghosts—that which might have been called "icekin." They made a sound like the tolling of a bell as they floated through the air, like fireflies of pure white. As the ringing echoed and layered upon itself, a powerfully chilly wind followed in the spirits' wakes.

"Hrngh...!" grunted one adventurer, as others coughed

nearby.

The air was so cold and dry that it prickled at the skin, impeding the natural working of the throat and the lungs. Breathing was possible, yes, but after thirty minutes of being locked in battle, the adventurers craved oxygen, and this sudden change in the environment put enormous strain on them.

The frost spirits emerged one after the other from the frozen lake, seeming to cackle at the adventurers who were suffocating before them. It was right then, however, that the air wavered, and on it came a gentle, warm breeze.

Shiori's magic.

Her air-conditioning magic was useless against the dragon, but the spring warmth of her magic—a climate that fit her natural disposition to the letter—melted the wandering spirits and wrapped itself like a blanket around those on the battlefield.

"Wow..."

"So *this* is what they're always talking about..."

Shiori had made no gestures and spoken no incantations. She'd cast her combined magic in an instant, and while the knights reacted with a mixture of surprise and awe, they were also quick to take action. Just as with powerful spells, a large-scale summoning consumed huge amounts of magical energy in an instant, which left the caster vulnerable. The knights knew this from their training, and were not about to let the opening go to waste. With the dragon momentarily frozen as it recovered, they swarmed in and took to shearing the monster's scales and plunging their weapons into the flesh beneath.

Alec and the adventurers, too, were on the move, hacking away at the dragon's transplant scars. Blood gushed from its wounds as the joint connecting one leg to the body was revealed.

"Let's have at it!"

But just as Alec raised his sword to chop the dragon's leg off, the beast let loose a fireball. Pushed along by fierce winds, some were sent hurtling through the sky, unable to defend themselves or evade in time. The advantage thus swung like a pendulum between the two sides, and the battle began to look like it would be drawn out longer still.

It was then that Alec felt the tiniest of incongruences. His brow furrowed, though he could not immediately identify what it was that felt so out of place. He thought of the dragon, and the

constant barrage of magic it was attacking them with.

Fire, earth, wind, fire, earth, wind, fire, ice, fire…

The monster was even capable of unleashing powerful magical energies that brought on dark hallucinations. And now, once again, it was launching fireballs at them.

"Ah, so that's it…" Alec muttered. "For a so-called legendary ice dragon, it doesn't actually use much ice magic."

It wasn't just that either—fire magic was traditionally an ice-elemental magical beast's weakness, but the dragon seemed very fond of it. Alec's words seemed to lead Shiori to her own realization, and she gasped.

"That's it, Alec!" she exclaimed. "The fact that it was sealed away in an ice lake… Don't you think that's odd?"

"What is?"

"If it *is* an ice dragon, how would plunging it into an ice bath put it to sleep?"

Being placed at the bottom of a deep lake—surrounded by thick chunks of ice—should have been akin to heaven for an ice dragon. And yet it had remained trapped and unable to move, asleep for nigh on two hundred years before it had been released. Alec's eyes went wide. He felt as if the truth were hovering right there before him—both the dragon's weakness, *and* its true form.

"The way it's been asleep here for so long," continued Shiori, "it's like it was in hibernation. And if that's the case, the dragon's affinity *isn't* ice, because it's clearly vulnerable to it. Which means…"

"Its element is fire!" exclaimed Alec. "It's a fire dragon!"

Alec thought it likely the dragon was a crossbreed between an earth dragon and a fire dragon, with the appearance of the former and the temperament of the latter.

"So the element it's hiding deep in the darkness of its core…is fire?"

Wrapped deep in that seemingly boundless magical energy was the element of fire, and yet to gaze upon it was to lay eyes upon the king of ice monsters.

No, Alec thought. *It was deliberately* made *to appear that way.*

It was an earth dragon with an affinity for fire, made to live in an icy lake. Over many long years, a preconceived notion about the creature had developed, then solidified—that the dragon trapped in the lake was itself the most feared of ice monsters.

And all of this had been done to offer the Empire's descendants one last ace to play.

"This blood…" Shiori said, her voice shaking as she touched the liquid that had sprayed across Alec's armor. "It's probably ice-aspected."

It was a fleeting, near-imperceptible sensation that was difficult to read while within the natural chill of the area. However, Shiori could feel it all the same—the cool chill of ice in the blood on her fingers.

"Perhaps it was fed with ice magic crystals crushed into dust and mixed with its food…or perhaps a blood transfusion from an ice dragon," mused Nils. "I don't know how they did it, but they hid the dragon's natural elemental affinity by the use of ice elemental blood."

There was rage boiling in the herbalist's every word. It was like he could see the smirking researchers who had done all of this to the unfortunate dragon—a magical beast made into a symbol for the very thing that it was not. In their minds, these imagined researchers' evil smiles felt like those of the nobility in the Imperial capital, and it was enough to make them all sick.

"The dragon is a force to be reckoned with," added Zack, wiping the blood from his face, "but I *did* think there was something strangely dull about the way it was moving. If your hypothesis is correct, it all makes sense—the dragon isn't meant for a climate like this, and that's why it's instinctively looking to move elsewhere."

The guild master's expression was stern, but there was pity in his eyes.

"What's our next move?" asked Alec. "Should we hit it with ice magic? All things going well, we might even put it to sleep."

It was anything but a certainty. Still, Zack nodded.

"Let's do it. But we have to hit it with enough magic to freeze an entire lake in summer. Look at how well it moves even in this environment. If we hit it, we have to hit it *hard*."

The section of the lake from which the dragon had broken free had already frozen over. Just how cold was it down there?

"We freeze it up to the neck," Zack decided. "We'll put all the mages on it, and have them fire at the same time. Then we take the head off the old-fashioned way."

Everybody was in agreement—they'd already exhausted all their other options.

“Linus,” he continued, “let everyone know that the target is likely fire-aspected, and we’re going to attempt a full freeze up to the neck.”

“I’m on it!”

The archer bounded across the battlefield. When the message was delivered, the adventurers and knights let up and, for a brief moment, halted their attack. The dragon, too, stopped moving, confused by the sudden change in tactics.

“Nadia, now!” shouted Zack.

“Cast away!” shouted Nadia.

In the next instant, a huge open pit swallowed the dragon, and it fell to the bottom with a loud thump. The monster quickly lifted its head up and out of the pit, very disgruntled by its sudden fall. It bared its fangs and regarded the surrounding humans venomously. But in that same instant, the mages and the mage knights were already casting their freeze magic in a vortex, with the giant magical beast at its center.

Crackling sounds echoed through the air as the ice dragon—which had now been revealed to be a fire dragon—was suddenly encased in a giant slab of ice. It cried out viciously, shuddering as the humans’ strategy revealed itself. The dragon writhed and struggled with everything it had to break free, but its efforts were in vain, and its movements dulled as it began to be lulled into a sleep that was near impossible for it to resist.

With another deafening roar, the dragon fought against encroaching slumber, and magical energy burst from its being. It was a toxic, darkly colored magic that seemed to well up from the very pit of the dragon’s heart like a scream.

I’m so sad, so alone. I don’t want to be here, I just want to be somewhere warm. I don’t want to go back to the bottom of that lonely lake. I refuse!

The wills of the humans were shaken, withering before the outburst.

“Stand strong!” barked Zack, his words like a flame in the darkness. “Pity has no place on the battlefield! Sympathize with your enemies and death awaits!”

His fiery red hair was a mess as he shouted, and if one had been watching closely, they would have seen the hint of tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Save your sympathy for when we’re done!” shouted Alec. “Focus on the task at hand! The dragon must be slain!”

Zack's heart went out to the dragon, but he shut those emotions out. Alec, too, fought through his own pity to rouse his fellow adventurers.

The dragon was truly a sorrowful, pitiful thing, but if left to its own devices, it would cause irreparable harm. They simply could not allow that to happen. The adventurers and the knights knew now what the dragon longed for, looking past the darkness of its own heart. It wanted freedom. It was a deformed creature—a patchwork monster that longed to be free of the body that tied it down.

And so the humans would take it upon themselves to free it from the nightmares of the fallen Empire. They would grant the dragon eternal freedom.

But the instinctual will to live was no simple thing to resist, and so the monster continued its struggle. Filled with the terror of being dragged back down into that abyss of solitude and despair, the dragon took to melting the surrounding ice with searing flame, but found new ice sprouting up each time. Terrified to discover that it might not escape death's clutches, the dragon fell into panic. It screamed as it unleashed a rain of fire over the surrounding humans.

Those who could not escape the flames fell, one after the other. Some dropped to the ground, motionless**,** while others screamed, writhing on the floor as agony racked their bodies. Medics and physickers dashed around seeing to the wounded, and those who made it back to their feet then prepared themselves for another round against their foe.

From the forest that spread out from the lake, a man watched all of this as it happened. He had extricated himself, crawling as necessary, from a small cave hidden by the roots of one of the giant trees. Through those labyrinthine tunnels, in the depths of that cave, was a hidden facility in which the man had awakened the dragon. When he emerged, however, it was to the sight of his partners being mercilessly and brutally eaten.

And from there, he had observed as the Storydians fought desperately to face down the rampaging beast. He had expected as much, but the state of the battlefield filled him with despair.

"So it could not be controlled after all…"

The might of the Empire itself had failed to rein in the beast—what hope did a few fleeing Imperial nobles have? And yet they

had persisted, clinging to the dragon in a desperate attempt to see their lands recaptured.

The man watched on, disgusted by what he saw, and it was then that his gaze fell upon one adventurer in particular—a magical swordsman battling with the suppression forces.

“He looks familiar…”

The man felt he’d seen the swordsman once before, at a hunting meet sponsored by the royal family. He looked awfully like the husband of a woman who was the daughter of an arms merchant. He hadn’t seen the swordsman up close, and so it was simply that, from behind, there was something similar in the way he held himself to the husband the man had seen but only once. If the man had been coming from a place of common sense, he would have realized that the chances of them being one and the same person were extremely low.

But the man had lost the majority of his sanity to the cold, to starvation, and to the endless march he’d trudged to reach the lake—and thus, he could not take his eyes from the swordsman.

“The elector’s half brother, who sold his own employer to the allied nations, and betrayed us all, indirectly causing the Empire’s destruction…” he uttered.

This swordsman now stood directly across from the man, holding himself as though he had *always* been Storydian, now intent on seeing the dragon—the Imperials’ last chance to regain their home!—dead. The man was only barely aware of the fact that he was nocking an arrow to his bow—an arrow laced with the venom of the swamp snake, which had been meant for the dragon in the event they lost control of it. In truth, however, the man had never believed for a moment that these arrows would have their desired effect on such a creature.

But a man? A man hit by such an arrow would face unbearable, excruciating pain, and be dead in less than a half an hour.

And so it was that the man’s target was decided—the swordsman, the betrayer. The Imperial pulled on the bowstring—a weapon that had been approved by the now-deceased Imperial princess herself—and set his mind on seeing the swordsman dead. He needed to see blood, to taste vengeance, were he to ever satiate the cries of his fallen comrades.

Lost in his delusional obsessions, the Imperial drew the bowstring back and aimed.

What is that?

Clemens was catching his breath and wiping the blood from his dual blades when he noticed a shadow among the trees. The figure was behind the dragon, on its left, and looked like a man watching from the shade of a giant tree. He was dressed like a hunter, one whose attire had seen better days.

It was mostly coincidence that Clemens had happened to look that way. There was no way he would have noticed the man in the midst of battle otherwise. Clemens wondered if he was someone who hadn't fled in time, or perhaps a hunter who had ignored the order to stay clear.

What bothered Clemens was that the man was pulling back on a bowstring, but the direction he was aiming in didn't make sense. His bow wasn't pointed in the same direction as the other archers'. As Clemens narrowed his eyes to ascertain where the man's arrow was headed, Frol noticed too.

"He's an Imperial," he said, his voice tense. "I saw him at the refugee camp a number of times. He didn't like it much, however, and didn't stay long."

Goose bumps covered Clemens's body as he realized what the man was pointing at—the bow was aimed at Alec.

"Alec!" he shouted. "An archer is aiming at you!"

He bellowed the words with everything he had, but his voice was drowned out by the fiery explosions. Nobody else could sense the murderous hatred wafting from the man because of the confusion of the battlefield.

"Damn it all!" Clemens spat.

Clemens did not know if he could cover the distance in time. The man already had his bowstring pulled to its limit. But all the same, Clemens could not bear to do nothing.

Please let me make it in time...!

He took off running, his hat lost to the whims of the wind, his silver hair trailing out behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man loose the arrow.

"Alec! Watch out!"

But his shout was drowned out by the dragon's roar.

Am I too late?!

He knew that he could not stop such a high-speed arrow with the blades in his hands, but all the same, Clemens leapt towards Alec's back. In an instant, there was the sound of his blades as

they scratched against something. Immediately after came the shock of an explosion.

As Alec spun, he was met by the sight of fresh blood and silver strands.

7

"Clemens!"

The cry, akin to a scream, sounded as though it had come from Zack. Clemens had crumpled to the ground, struck by an arrow from an unknown assailant. Dark red drops of blood stained the ground near his left arm, forming a small pool.

"He was shot?! But how?!" cried an adventurer.

"Was it a stray arrow?!" cried another.

Shock ran through everyone in the immediate area as it hit them all that the injury had not been caused by the dragon. Confusion rippled across the battlefield.

"Stand strong!" shouted Alec, bringing his comrades' focus back to the task at hand. "I'll see to Clemens! The rest of you keep up the attack!"

His voice roused his comrades from their distress, but he was all too aware that he was perhaps most shaken of them all. Based on where his friend had fallen and the direct line he could draw to the suspected shooter, Alec knew that Clemens had likely just saved his life. He also saw that the shooter himself had fallen, his shoulder pierced by an arrow from Linus's bow. Frol sprinted to the attacker, enraged, and took him by the collar, barking abuse. Based on the man's appearance and Frol's reaction to him, Alec surmised that he was an Imperial.

And when that fact hit him, everything came together in Alec's mind. He had never met the shooter before, but he knew then that he was not the man's target for no reason. This was no coincidence. Clemens had taken an arrow meant for Alec, though perhaps it was more accurate to say that the arrow was meant for Allen Schrigeena, the false identity that Alec had left behind in the Empire.

"Let the gavel of death fall upon the betrayer!"

The man was dressed like a raggedy, filthy hunter, and he cackled as a group of knights held him down.

"Long live the emperor!" he shouted. "Eternal glory to

Dolgast!”

He continued to cackle as though he were out of his mind, and it was for this reason that none took note of his use of the word “betrayer.” All simply assumed he was an old stalwart of the Empire, and that his actions were spurred by the loss of his sanity.

As Alec held Clemens in his arms, he felt the strength leave his friend’s body. The sudden weight of it as Clemens slipped out of consciousness left Alec almost unable to breathe. He *knew* this weight. He’d had to see friends pass on a number of times since having become an adventurer, and when they breathed their last in his arms, it had felt just like this.

“You damned idiot!” Alec cried, holding back his tears. “You fool! Why would you do that?!”

“Need you even ask?” replied Clemens, smiling even though he could barely speak through the pain. “You finally…have…the happiness you…always wanted. I could not…let it end…here… Not like this…”

“But what about you?! What about Nadia?! Would you put her through such tragedy a second time?!”

“Yeah, that first time…wasn’t…me, though…”

Clemens tried to muster another smile, but could only manage a pained moan, his breath suddenly coming in sharp gasps. He shuddered as he fought for oxygen. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down his face. He reached a shivering hand to his chest as he struggled. Clemens was as tough as nails, and it was not like him to writhe and cry out in such agony—Alec knew that it was no ordinary arrow they were dealing with.

Could it get any worse…?

It was poison, of that there was no doubt, and it had likely coated the arrow’s tip. With Clemens’s blood racing due to all the exertion, the poison would be quick to spread through his body.

“Clem…” uttered Nadia.

She was as pale as a sheet as she looked down at her lover bleeding on the ground. The fear of once again losing the man she loved brought the woman known as fire incarnate to her knees. There was still no sign of a physicker, nor any herbalists. The timing was awful, and even the medics all had their hands full. Medicine was an option, but it wasn’t going to help while Clemens still had the arrow stuck in his arm. That said, if they

weren’t careful about removing it, it was possible they’d only cause greater bleeding, or otherwise make the situation even worse.

But we can’t just leave him like this!

Clemens wasn’t just poisoned—he was also steadily losing blood. Left unattended, he would most certainly die. A shadow fell across Clemens’s handsome face—the specter of death was at hand, and it did not wish to leave without him. Time was running out.

Suddenly, Shiori was at Alec’s side, carrying styptics, antidotes, and bandages. Her eyes showed her resolve—she was ready to go as soon as Alec was. He made up his mind and tore through Clemens’s bloody clothes to reveal the arrow wound. It was so grotesque a sight that he could not help but gasp.

The arrow had entered at a shallow angle above Clemens’s elbow, threading through the flesh across the surface of his arm and burying itself in his shoulder.

This wound… It will need an experienced hand…

But even given the severity of the wound, Alec wanted to at least stop the bleeding. He reached out gingerly towards Clemens’s arm, but it was at that moment that a panicked voice cried out angrily to stay his hand.

“No! Don’t touch it unless you know what you’re doing!”

Ordinarily, none could have ever imagined Linus shouting so fiercely. He leaned in to get a clearer look at the wound before speaking again.

“Damn it—it’s just what I thought!” he spat. “It’s a contraband poison! If you pull that arrow out, the head will stay lodged in the wound—the arrow is designed so that doing as much will release the rest of the poison. If we aren’t careful, pulling the arrow free will only kill him!”

The arrow had been cunningly crafted to ensure that even taking emergency measures would shorten the target’s lifespan.

Linus explained that the last time he had seen such an arrow was when he was a child, and his great uncle had died due to an accidental shot. The poison arrows were meant for magical beasts, but such had been the casualty count among its users that they had then been prohibited. As such, the arrows were no longer commonly traded.



The Imperial, then, had fired this arrow with a clear intent to kill. Alec held back his urge to march over to the shooter and slay him where he stood, and instead fed Clemens an antidote potion.

"In which case, what can we do...?" asked Shiori, her voice trembling.

Until they removed the arrow, Clemens would continue to suffer and bleed. Even now, his blood stained his clothing and armor. Shiori had a pleading look in her eyes, praying that Linus—himself an archer—might know how to handle such an injury. But to her dismay, Linus only shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't do anything. I'd only leave the arrowhead in there if I tried. The arm has to be cut open to remove the arrow, and that means we have to wait for Nils or Ellen. Until then...we just have to hope the medicine will suffice."

But everyone already knew that there was only so much an antidote potion could do while the source of the poison remained in Clemens's body. The arrow was also lodged inside him at an awkward angle, which made bandaging the wound extremely difficult. Even just applying a styptic to Clemens's shoulder wasn't as simple as it seemed, given that any excessive movement might cause the arrowhead to move.

"Rurii," said Shiori, fighting to remain calm. "Can you put pressure on the wound until Nils and the others get here?"

The slime had arrived at some point during the proceedings, and it wobbled in the affirmative. The slime then reached out a cautious feeler to clean the wounded area of dirt and ice magic before pressing itself against the open wound.

"What about the poison?" asked Linus.

"Rurii says it will be fine as long as it doesn't absorb any of it."

"I see. Thanks, Rurii."

With the bleeding now temporarily stopped, the adventurers took to giving Clemens more of an antidote potion. It wasn't long before Ellen arrived on the scene, but for the adventurers with Clemens, it felt like an eternity.

"I'm sorry I took so long—now please, stand clear!" said Ellen, pushing Alec aside. She inspected Clemens's wound, then gasped. "Oh no... He needs to be operated on immediately. But..."

Ellen scanned the battlefield, her expression suddenly hesitant. The physickers, herbalists, and medics were all rushing

about. She knew that taking even one physicker from the battle could impact the outcome. And though she wanted nothing more than to make Clemens her priority, it would mean putting off the healing of several who could still be put to use in the fight against the dragon.

On one side were her friends, and on the other, her responsibility as a battlefield medic. Ellen felt hopelessly trapped between the two.

"It's okay," said Nils, giving his friend the push she needed. "The rest of us can share your load between us. Please, see to Clemens."

Eir ruffled its leaves in agreement.

"You're sure?" asked Ellen.

"We're not knights," replied Nils, smiling as he placed a sedative made from Eir's root into her hands. "Your priorities are yours to decide. Once, you told me that you chose adventuring over the knight corps because you did not want to be bound by the orders of your superiors. You told me you wanted to save those you care about, remember?"

"Nils..."

"We do things *our* way. Just like the guild master said. So don't worry. Do what you must."

Ellen nodded, but Nils was already heading back out to the battlefield.

"Thank you," she said. "Now, leave Clemens with me. The rest of you head back out there."

But for a moment, Alec faltered. His heart told him to stay with his friend, but he forced himself to bury those feelings, at least somewhat. Clemens had been shot because of him, and so *he* would see things through on behalf of his friend.

"Got it," he said. "Nadia, stay with him."

It was no exaggeration to say that it would be an even harder fight with one of their best mages on the sidelines. Still, Alec knew it was best to keep the two of them together. Clemens, however, saw things otherwise.

"I'll...be...fine..." he whispered, reaching up to stroke his lover's neck. "Take...Nadia...with you..."

He had wanted to touch her cheek, but could raise his arm no higher.

"No more talking," warned Ellen. "You must conserve your strength."

But Clemens paid her no mind. With his eyes, he begged her to let him be until he said his piece. Alec bit his lip, knowing that his friend had already accepted that his life now hovered on the precipice of death.

“I won’t let…something so…minor…keep me down…”

His breathing was labored, but still he smiled. He was a man whose good looks had charmed countless ladies over the years, but now he smiled for one woman, and one woman alone.

“I *will*…make it…through this. So go…they need you…out there…Nadia. And I…later…in your…wedding dr…”

His words grew muddled as he went on, ending mid-sentence as his hand fell by his side. Alec lurched forward, suddenly panicked, but Ellen held him back.

“It’s all right, he’s just unconscious,” she said.

“Even *poisoned*, you insist on playing things cool. Ugh, you’re such a keeper I can barely stand it.”

So saying, Nadia took Clemens’s hand and placed a kiss upon it. It was perhaps the first time that Alec had ever seen her being vulnerable in front of others, but even then, she spoke powerfully, with great resolve.

“Fine. We’ll fight so hard it’ll be like you’re there too. So wait for us.”

Nadia put her fingers to the lips of her unconscious lover, then turned away and strode back to the battlefield. Alec, too, put a hand to his friend’s own. They had fought side by side since the day he’d become an adventurer. Clemens was a rival who had pushed him to new heights, and an irreplaceable friend. Alec said a silent prayer for him, then looked to Ellen.

“We’re counting on you,” he said.

“I’ve got it.”

“Shiori, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll help Ellen out,” said Linus.

Together with the support of a few medics, the archer helped to carry Clemens away. Ellen was both a physicker and a licensed doctor, and Linus was resolved to help however he could. As Alec and Shiori were about to head back, they noticed Zack standing before them. He looked down at Clemens without a word, and with his eyes he let Ellen know he was putting his hopes in her. Then he joined Alec and Shiori as they once more left for battle.

“They’re all waiting on your return,” Ellen said to Clemens. “So

you have to fight. I'll be right here with you."

She knew that life-and-death battles were not waged only on the battlefield. Doctors like her had their own battles to wage, in which lives hung in the balance just the same. The medics and Linus brought Clemens into a tent, where one used earth magic to craft a makeshift operating table. The use of Shiori's housekeeping magic had found its way to the medic troops too.

And I couldn't be more thankful.

Once Ellen had sent Rurii back out to battle, she quickly prepared herself for the surgery ahead. She took her tools and medicines from her pouch, then widened the tear in Clemens's clothing to expose more of the wounded area.

"Can you secure his arms and legs?" Ellen asked.

"Got it," replied Linus.

The archer held Clemens's arms, while two knights at the other end of the table held his legs. One of those knights had his legs in bandages, while the other had one arm in a sling. Compound fractures had kept them both from returning to the field, but they were intent to help out where they could.

"Thank you," Ellen said. "Let's get started."

She injected the wound with a local anesthetic, then took the sedative Nils had given her in hand and examined it.

Just as I thought, it will only have a light effect.

The sedative, made from and by Eir, would help to deepen Clemens's sleep, but due to his tenuous condition, it was bound to put some strain on his body.

Still, if it helps to relieve the pain, even a little...

Both the anesthetic and the sedative, however, could not numb the pain entirely. This was the most that could be done under the circumstances, and Ellen wanted to believe that it was at least better than nothing.

Ellen proceeded to open Clemens's wound, taking great care not to disturb the arrow and unleash the rest of its poison. Clemens moaned as dull pain worked through his body, but this was unavoidable—the wound had to be opened if he were to be helped. Ellen couldn't help thinking how wonderful it would be if such injuries could be healed through physicking alone, but she knew that if the foreign object in Clemens's body wasn't removed, his wound could not be closed. She also knew that physicking could actually harm patients when their bodies were in an especially weakened state.

People envied Ellen for her ability to heal, and yet she was plagued by the knowledge that her skills were not a cure-all.

Clemens's temperature rose as his body fought against the poison. If it rose any higher, it would sap his will to survive. Ellen had to hurry. She sensed Linus biting his lip as he silently held Clemens down.

"You'll cut yourself if you bite any harder," she said to him.

"Won't be anything compared to what Master Clemens is going through."

"I don't think the two are at all comparable."

"Yeah, true enough. But I can't help it—this isn't easy to watch."

"Yes...I know. I know all too well."

It was a conversation held without even a moment of eye contact between the two.

"In times like these, I can't help but wonder why physicking can't heal everything," Ellen said.

"Yeah."

"I've thought about it countless times. How wonderful it would be if a single physicking spell could reset broken bones, neutralize poison, lessen pain, or remove foreign objects. Sometimes patients go through such suffering, and yet we cannot treat them in an instant. I've seen many die while surgeons are preparing to see them, before any surgery can even take place. And some have attacked me too, asking why my physicking couldn't work any faster. It's frustrating, and vexing, and it wears on the mind."

"Yeah."

"But simply closing a wound isn't everything. You can stitch a wound up, but if there's still something in there, or if it's dirty, then you can get adverse reactions or bacteria can spread, and in the worst cases that results in death. Before we knew about such things, many patients died even though their wounds were 'healed' through physicking. Healing magic simply isn't almighty. It's why people like me have to always increase our medical knowledge and stay abreast of new techniques."

"But that's why you took a sabbatical from adventuring, right? You went and studied with a distinguished doctor."

"Indeed I did, that's right. The powers I was born with simply weren't enough. They meant nothing without knowledge and skills. I was made to realize this all over again when I saw Shiori

working so hard; people said that her efforts were pointless with her severe lack of magical power, but through knowledge and creative skill building, she became an excellent adventurer in her own right. When I saw that, I realized that there was yet more that I could learn."

Ellen worked as the Guild's resident physicker whilst attending open lectures and studying medicine at various clinics. Even then, however, she had felt herself at an impasse. It was as though she were stuck in a rut. It was then that she had come to see the astounding work that Shiori was doing in her support role. This had left a great impression on her.

"Aha," said Linus with a chuckle. "So you were inspired by her too."

"I was. It just so happened around that time that a distinguished foreign doctor was visiting the royal capital, and was in search of a short-term assistant. It was too good an opportunity to pass up, so I put in my application and was accepted."

The guild master at the time, Ranvald Lumbeck, wasn't particularly happy to be losing a precious physicker for such an extended period of time, but Ellen experienced and learned much over the months she spent under the watch of an excellent teacher, and in the end she even acquired her doctor's license.

"I am now capable of so much more," Ellen continued, "and where once I had to wait for doctors to finish their work before I could see to physicking certain patients, now I can handle such cases entirely on my own."

Though Shiori herself had no way of knowing it, she had in fact been the source of encouragement that Ellen had needed.

"Had I not achieved what I had, I would've had no choice but to rely on Nils for an operation such as this one. And that would mean seeing to Clemens would be a slower process. But not now—now I can handle it myself."

Ellen carefully removed the arrow and arrowhead from the wound, and cleaned the injury site. She cast an antidote spell for good measure, then applied an antibacterial medicine that only those with licenses were allowed access to. Fortunately for Clemens, there was no major damage to any of his blood vessels—all that was left now was to close the wound.

He barely has the strength to handle any physicking—however...

Physicking was not really "healing magic," but rather magic

that boosted a body's natural healing abilities. In essence, it condensed a natural process that compressed what would otherwise take several days into less than a minute. That was why, when a wound or poisoning was especially bad, physicking took a heavy toll on the injured person's strength and endurance. Clemens no longer had the energy to handle such magic. Even minor physicking would still require a great deal of time.

"Yep," said Linus, taking a closer look at the arrow that had been removed and sniffing what still remained in the arrowhead. "This is swamp snake poison."

Though the creature was known as a swamp snake, it was in fact a type of small dragon with a venomous tail. Its poison was incredibly effective and had once been used in times when the lands were not as affluent, allowing for precious prey to be caught quickly in otherwise dangerous environments. To put things into perspective, the poison could render a snow bear dead in just a few hours.

"I've heard that it puts the body in such agony that people are left screaming," uttered Linus. "But Master Clemens just handled it."

Perhaps it was his toughness and his iron will that had seen him bear the poison as he had. In holding out so long, however, he'd used up every last bit of his strength.

"Unfortunately, he can't handle any physicking at present," said Ellen. "So we'll close his wound and nurse him back to health, healing him slowly."

Clemens's breath was shallow and weak, and his fever had yet to subside. His pulse was steady, however, and the strain in his features had relaxed. He looked at peace.

"So that means...?" asked Linus.

"That we're probably past the worst of it," replied Ellen. "But we can't completely relax just yet."

Linus cried out with joy. The two knights by Clemens's legs smiled too.

"All that's left now is the dragon," said Ellen.

There was still work to be done on the front lines, and Ellen intended to see to it. She restocked her pouch, left Clemens in the care of the knights, and made to leave. It was then that she saw Linus before her, hand outstretched.

"Thank you, doctor," he said. "We're almost there."

She took his hand in her own, nodded, and then they left the tent.

8

"Clem..."

Nadia called her lover's name as she stood before the ice dragon, which still struggled against its icy chains. Since having lost her first love, Nadia had remained in an extended state of mourning until Clemens had taught her what it meant to once again find love. However, while the two had nursed feelings of mutual affection for one another, they had not immediately come together as a couple. As a young man, Clemens had been unable to bear the weight of Nadia's past and her true identity, while Nadia had been unable to let go of her guilt from the past, even with Clemens there before her.

A decade had passed, and then some, before their hearts had finally found a harmony of being. Yet now, the man she had come to love hovered in a space between life and death. He had put up a strong front, and promised to survive, but the odds were at best fifty-fifty. Through the uprising that had destroyed her home, Nadia had seen countless lives lost, and she understood the reality of Clemens's situation.

Would she lose him? The pain of the thought wrenched at her heart, the fear of that potential reality gripping her. And yet she remained eerily cool and clear of mind.

"Never forget your feelings, but always remain calm."

It was a lesson she had learned as one destined to marry into the royal family, and it was still carved into her person even twenty-six years later. It was a necessary mindset to survive harsh environments, and indeed, it was how the young Nadia had survived even after she had lost everything—her identity, her family, and the nation she had once called home. No matter how terrified she felt, and no matter how enraged she became, she never lost her cool. Now was not the time to be crying over the body of her lover. Nor was it the time to be hunting down the man who shot him to mete out vengeance.

Clemens had promised her he would survive, and that promise bloomed like a flower to give her hope as she faced down the dragon before her. Magical energy swirled around her person, sending her hair, her earrings, and her cloak whipping

all around her.

The magic Nadia was capable of had been hidden from the royal family when she was a child, then known as Nadianna. Her nation and its king had conscripted even young children into its military as it looked to invade its neighbors. Bribery, betrayal, and assassinations had run rampant as the nobility stood opposed to this conscription, and many had fled across the border with their children.

Nadia had wielded magical power that was among the greatest in the nation, but even then, she was otherwise powerless. To fool the royal family, Nadia's family had lied about her abilities, and so children like her were never taught to fight. To use magic was to reveal your secret, and so parents had to hide their children's magic in order to protect them. But for Nadia, who as a member of the nobility was tasked with one day leading the general populace, being powerless and under someone else's protection was a near unbearable humiliation.

Had it been her choice, she would have fought alongside her father and older brother.

However, over time, the uprising, which had been intended to free the nation from the grip of the royal family, became twisted. The focus of it shifted from fighting against the royal family to purging the entire ruling class. The nobles who fought alongside the general populace found themselves betrayed by their former allies, and many were put to death. Nadia was a sheltered daughter of the nobility, and there was almost nothing she could do—after all, she could not even tell friend from foe.

It was for this reason that Nadia's father and brother decided to send her and her older sister across the border, together with many of the nation's young people. Defending their nation was one thing, but defending their people—and defending the future of their children—was far more important. Thus, the country came to ruin, and the nation which rose in its place fell under the rule of a dictatorship, its leader the past hero of the revolution.

And to this day, those who had fled elsewhere were still trying their hardest to make the most of the lives they had.

Nadia's father, her brother, and many others like them had sacrificed themselves for their people and their children. But what of the Dolgast Empire? Even in the aftermath of its fall from grace, it still menaced so many, even going as far as resurrecting an age-old monster in its attempts to wrest back the future.

“But I will not let them have their way,” uttered Nadia. “We live our lives for ourselves, and I will not let anyone take that freedom from us.”

She was no longer the young girl she’d once been, lacking in knowledge and completely helpless. She was a mage with the power to control and wield the powerful magics within her. She saw Alec then, a fire blazing in his dark magenta eyes, and the hint of a smile rose to her lips. If she had wed as had long ago been intended, he would have become her younger brother-in-law. That day would never come to pass, however, and now he was simply a firm friend. He, too, knew how to fight his own battles—he was no longer a powerless young boy who knew only how to run from his troubles.

“Let’s end this! Now! I’ve had enough of tragedy!” he shouted.

“Agreed!” she called back.

The hood of Nadia’s cloak blew free, her tie coming loose and her hair streaming out behind her.

“Playtime is over!” she cried. “Now be a good child and go to sleep!”

Countless glittering spears formed from the magical energy that overflowed from her fingertips, and they came raining down upon the dragon as it shook its head in protest. The ice spears streamed down upon the beast mercilessly, stabbing into flesh unprotected by scales. Blood streamed out from the wounds and sparks flew through the air as shocks ran through the monster. The dragon let out a high-pitched scream not unlike that of an infant.

In the dragon’s roar was its deep-rooted despair, and Nadia’s heart ached to hear it. She knew such feelings far too well. At the same time, she knew that it was not her place to comfort the dragon, and so while there was a modicum of sympathy in her heart, she did not hold back.

The ceaseless rain of ice spears and electric shocks soon changed to giant stakes of ice, which struck at the same time as thunderous lightning. The deafening roar of the attack forced the dragon’s head low, its scales sent flying in every direction as the stakes ran through the soft flesh and nailed the dragon to the ground. For one brief instant, Nadia’s magical power overwhelmed the dragon’s own. Nearby adventurers cried out in astonishment.

“Whoa!”

“She’s crushing it!”

“Now! Cut it down!”

Adventurers and knights alike raised their weapons to strike, but the dragon was still not ready to sleep, and it roared like a child throwing a tantrum, even as it remained pinned to the ground. Fire swirled around it, melting the icy bindings that held it in place.

“What…?!”

“How can it still fight?!”

“Keep the freezing spells going!”

But fewer than half the mages were able to respond. Many had exhausted their magical reserves several times over, and this exhaustion had robbed them of their focus and mental fortitude. The few that did cast spells gave it their all but, as a result, were barely able to remain standing. With their recovery potions almost completely used up, there was every chance that a prolonged battle might leave all of them dead even before their reinforcements arrived.

The dragon roared once more, and its magical energy formed a fireball in the sky that came hurtling towards the adventurers like a searing comet. With their magical energies dwindling, the mages’ barriers were useless, and an explosion rocked the battlefield along with pained cries.

“Master!”

“Zack!”

The source of the cries revealed that Zack had thrown himself in front of his companions to protect them. His greatsword had not been enough on its own, however, and the clothing covering his right arm drifted away in the form of ashes, revealing the burns he’d taken head-on. His body wavered, supported by his sword, and his shoulders heaved as he let out a deep breath. He was *the* dragon slayer, but with his right arm so badly scorched, he would not wield his weapon again.

This was the true power of a dragon.

It was the king of magical beasts. It was proof that it was not humans who stood at the peak of all things that lived, but dragons. A darkness began to creep into the hearts of the adventurers and knights, sapping at their will to fight.

But then…

“Don’t give up!”

Alec’s voice echoed clearly across the battlefield, slicing

through the despair and defeat that had begun to darken the hearts of those who fought.

“If we fall, then so, too, do the hundreds of thousands of innocents that call Torisval home! Stand your ground! We cannot let the Empire have its way!”

Under Alec’s bloodied chestnut hair, his dark magenta eyes took in the men and women who stood with him in battle.

“The dragon only has its magic left! It’s badly hurt and on its last legs! Do not let up the attack! We can win this! It will not be us who wake at the feet of the goddess today!”

Alec was a man who lived quietly. Such was his nature that he dressed himself in the plain and boring colors of the earth itself, as if it were his hope that perhaps it might hide his person from those around him. But in these words, in the voice that echoed across the battlefield, those around him heard hope.

If Alec’s younger brother, the king of Storydia, were the sun that shone brightly upon its people, then Alec was the earth upon which they stood. Nadia smiled and shed a single quiet tear—in Alec’s bearing she saw King Olivier, and the silhouette of her past fiancé, whom she would never meet again.

“It’s in his blood. There’s no escaping it,” said Zack, gripping his sword with his left hand. “Everyone in his family has that in them.”

Only Nadia heard these words, and though Zack had deliberately omitted saying a name, in his eyes was a nostalgia for a time lost.

He was a strong, stern man, and yet he was also sensitive and kind.

The kind lands, *frenvary*, that watched over its people.

Alec’s words buoyed his comrades, and together they found the strength to stand—the strength to fight once more. They drank what stimulants and recovery potions still remained, readied their swords, and cast their spells to keep the dragon down.

The monster howled. It cried out in hate at those who had forced it into darkness. It wailed at the sheer depths of solitude into which it had been forced. It roared with everything it had, refusing to return to that darkness.

Above the dragon’s head, blue and white sparks burst in a blinding flash of light, splitting the skies. Lightning sped across the dragon’s body, entering the wound at its neck and burning it

from the inside.

The dragon convulsed, its pain beyond any utterance. Beneath it, Alec thrust his sword into the base of one of the stakes and imbued his blade with the strongest ice magic he was capable of. His giant makeshift weapon in hand, he forced open the dragon's wound until finally, all those who stood upon the battlefield heard it—the sound of a joint breaking.

No longer able to hold up its own head, the dragon slumped to the earth.

It did not move again.

For a moment, there was only silence.

"Is it...over...?" asked someone.

"Did we win?" asked another.

"We did! We took out the dragon!" cried someone else.

The voices across the battlefield turned to cheers, spreading through all the people gathered. But as the dragon sank into a pool of its own blood, the booming voices felt suddenly distant, and its own rampage felt like something out of a dream. The magical beast was calm. Its blood, wafting with a magical chill, leaked from its body; it was as if the dragon were being released from the freezing cold of more than two hundred long years of torture. The magical beast waited, silently, for its time to finally arrive, and it was then that it felt itself gently wrapped in a quiet blend of fire and wind magic, which together formed a warm breeze.

To the dragon, the breeze felt like the epitome of spring, though it had never once in its life experienced the season. But even then, it imagined this warm, gentle sensation to be exactly like that of a spring breeze. The beast raised its hazy eyes to look upon the woman at the source of the warm gust of wind. It took in her black hair as it danced in the air. In her eyes was the wavering light of pain.

"You had it so tough," said the man by her side.

He had not meant for the dragon to hear him. His words were like a whisper, so quiet it was as though his thoughts were simply slipping out of him. And yet, even among the joyous cries, the dragon somehow caught his words clearly. They were the only words of kindness that the dragon had ever known—words of comfort to go with the pained sympathy in the man's gaze.

The words were so simple, and so fleeting, but the dragon

had never once been shown such sympathy until now, no matter how much it had longed for it. And so, in the kindness that this man and woman shared with it, the dragon saw a vision of the parents it had never met. It saw its mother and father, their tender care, and the warmth of their kind words. Oh, how the dragon had longed to play under the sun, soaring the skies as its parents watched over it. How it had longed to sleep, to be at peace, with not a worry in its soul. Such were the dreams of a kind, compassionate world that swirled in the heart of the dragon—a dragon which had, from the moment of its birth, been made to live completely and entirely alone, as a test subject.

"Oh, you're..." uttered the woman, her magic lifting some thought and emotion from the dragon's heart. "You're still just a child, aren't you?"

The dragon had been locked away under the frozen lake when it had still been in its infancy, and asleep in that darkness, it had grown into its adult body. So while outwardly it was a fully grown adult, trapped within it was a tragic child, forced into the depths of solitude, where it would never have what it had most desired.

The woman brought her cheek towards the dragon's, rubbing her skin against its own the way a loving parent might do for their child. Her hand rubbed the dragon's face gently, the motion that of one lulling a child to sleep. And with her hand was another, a larger one, rubbing the dragon's head in much the same way.

This warmth and comfort the dragon had only ever known in dreams. And yet here, now, it was reality. The dragon had believed it would meet its end trapped in the despair and solitude that had colored its entire life. But instead, it was being sent off with warmth and love.

There was nothing—nothing at all—that could have made the magical beast happier.

Now incapable of any utterance whatsoever, the dragon mustered the last vestiges of its strength to scrape free the scale beneath its jaw—the scale of an infant dragon, unchanged over all this time. It was a scale that dragons presented to their parents upon adulthood, when they were ready to leave the nest. In that scale was the dragon's ardent wish that, in ending its story and returning to the flow of life, it might return once

more to its parents.

Barely even aware of its actions, the dragon presented the scale to the man and the woman kneeling before it.

“It’s for us?” asked the woman.

Please, take it. Keep it safe. In it is a wish—that should I ever be born into this world again, it be into a place of warmth not unlike the one that the two of you share.

“Thank you. We’ll treasure it always.”

Upon those words, the dragon closed its eyes, and as it drifted into a peaceful slumber, it took two more kind words as its final memories.

“Sleep well.”

The darkness, once so freezing to the touch, felt warm now, and it was all-encompassing as it took the dragon into its embrace.

“May your dreams this time be bright.”

Shiori clutched the scale to her chest as she and Alec watched over the dragon on its journey into eternal slumber. Rurii and Violid stood silently by their sides.

And just like that, the echoing cheers of victory faded. Those who had been watching the dragon, and had seen it finish the rites that allowed it passage into a new world, offered their former enemy their prayers. They prayed for peace in the dragon’s next life, and they prayed that such a tragic story would never play out again.

And as they prayed, a small light danced in the clear blue sky for a moment before vanishing completely.



Chapter 2: A Celebration of Blessings and Prayers

1

Shiori and Alec stood in silence for a time. The dragon had finally been laid to rest, and around them, people had begun the work of tidying the battlefield. The dragon was of such size that it resembled a small mountain, and it had nearly overwhelmed a party of experienced veterans. It was a blade to be held at the throat of Storydia Kingdom, and perhaps, in a different world, it might have done exactly as the Imperials had hoped, and crushed the kingdom into subservience.

Inside of that monstrous dragon, however, was the heart of a child. A heart that had been starved of love and freedom. None of the adventurers or knights regretted having slain the magical beast, but all were caught in a swirl of helplessness, sympathy, and misery.

“To think that a young dragon’s scale is so fragile,” uttered Shiori.

In her palm was the scale of an ice dragon, fractured into two pieces.

“And to think that a fully grown dragon’s scales are so tough,” said Alec, gently touching one of the scales in his lover’s hand. “It grew up…to be very strong.”

He thought of the bottom of the frozen lake, and the cold darkness in which the dragon had matured, ever alone. He said another silent prayer, hoping that—were the magical beast granted another chance at life—it would be rewarded with one filled with warmth and kindness. It was all he could think as he watched their familiars placing snow violets upon the dragon’s body.

“Treasure those, you hear?” said Zack, giving both adventurers a pat on the shoulder. “It’s a very rare thing for a dragon to give its scale to someone it doesn’t have a familiar contract with. It might come see you again someday, and you never know…it could well need those scales to find you.”

His right arm had been healed with physicking magic, and

was as good as new, save for old scars he'd acquired long before the burn. Behind Zack was the person who had done the actual physicking: Ellen.

"Ellen…" Shiori uttered.

If she's here, that means…

"The surgery is done. He's safe," she said, smiling.

She didn't mention a name, but she didn't have to.

"He's probably still sleeping, but please, go check on him."

Nadia was already gone; she'd likely gone to Clemens's side as soon as it had all ended.

"I've got to oversee cleaning this place up," said Zack. "You two go on ahead."

Shiori and Alec didn't need to be told twice—they were off in a heartbeat. Clemens was still in pain—he was exhausted and still reeling from his wound—but this was nonetheless better than the worst-case alternative.

"Clemens!"

The two adventurers rushed into the medic tent, where Clemens had just woken. He was lying in bed, only barely conscious and unable to properly focus, but even then he smiled when he saw his friends. He was gently stroking Nadia's back with a hand as she buried her head in his chest, her shoulders trembling.

He's alive.

So relieved was he to see his friend safe that Alec could barely remain standing, and he approached Clemens on wobbly feet.

"I'm so glad," he uttered. "I thought…maybe I'd never see you again."

His voice wavered and his vision blurred as hot tears threatened to stream from his eyes.

"Always the crybaby," whispered Clemens, still smiling.

"'Always'?! What do you mean, always?!"

"You just cry a lot. It's surprising. Oh, you hadn't noticed?"

Clemens's voice was husky and weak, but his jab was a salve for Alec's heart, and Alec dropped to his knees by his friend's side.

"Who *wouldn't* cry?" he said.

"I did what I did because I chose to," Clemens said. "Don't let it bother you. Yeah, it was a bit thoughtless, but I don't regret it."

"Well you *should*," retorted Alec. "How could I have gone on if I'd lost you to that?"

His words were blunt, but true. He had taken on this job for his country and its people, but he did not think he could overcome the loss of a friend under such circumstances.

“And knowing you,” said Clemens, choosing his words carefully to keep certain secrets still hidden, “you’re beating yourself up over the potential reasons it happened in the first place.”

Though it had all happened very quickly, Clemens could still recall the immediate aftermath of his being hit by the arrow, right down to the words that the crazed Imperial had shouted afterwards. It was very possible that the Imperial had targeted Alec because he knew who Alec was. Alec had disappeared for four years on a confidential request, and upon his return, he had a suspiciously detailed knowledge of the Empire—all of which had led Clemens to surmise that there had potentially been intent behind the attempted shooting.

That was how long Clemens had spent fighting by Alec’s side. He knew the man like a brother. Still, he refrained from saying anything aloud, knowing that it would draw suspicion, and that it was not a topic to delve into with so many others around. The Imperial attacker, too, would likely receive judgment at the hands of one who knew the circumstances more thoroughly. And so Clemens said only what he truly wanted to convey.

“Overthinking things is a bad habit of yours,” said Clemens. “I made it out alive thanks to our talented colleague, I protected a dear friend, and that same dear friend went on to become a heroic dragon slayer. Could anything be more satisfying? I’m as proud as they come. So quit it with the regrets and the moping, and take pride in those you call your friends.”

“I didn’t slay that dragon on my own,” replied Alec. “The only reason I could land the final blow was because of everything that led to that moment. I was in the right place at the right time.”

“Yeah, that might be true, but when everybody was ready to throw in the towel and hang up their gloves, it was *you* who boosted their spirits. I heard you even received a dragon scale in the aftermath. Even the dragon, your foe, recognized your efforts. If that doesn’t make you a hero, then what does? Hold your head high, Alec, and take more pride in your work.”

“All right, you got me,” said Alec, his expression somewhere between tears and laughter. “I had all these things I wanted to tell you, but here I am getting propped up by an injured friend.

Thank you, Clemens. I slew that dragon because *you* saved my life. That makes you a hero among heroes."

"A hero among heroes, huh? I like the sound of that."

Clemens chuckled, but his brow quickly creased at the pain this caused him.

"Until just moments ago, *you* were at the brink of death," said Nadia, frowning as she put a finger over his lips. "You're talking too much. Do you have any idea how worried we all were…?"

Her cheeks were wet with tears. Clemens had no regrets about his actions, even if they'd put him right at death's doorstep, but when it came to having plunged his lover into the depths of despair, he had no words. Nadia had lost a fiancé before, and had things gone differently, his actions would have put her through that nightmare a second time—of that there was no doubt.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Nadia's head stayed down as yet more tears fell from her eyes.

"I'm so, so sorry," Clemens whispered, wiping her tears away with a finger. "When I recover, I want you by my side. Forever. I've prepared a wedding dress already. It's a traditional Storydian gown, just like the one you said you always wanted."

A traditional Storydian wedding gown was made from undyed cotton, and embroidered with snow violets. The gown Clemens had bought was not embroidered; Nadia had said she wanted to do the embroidery work herself.

"Clem… You…" she uttered.

Her smile was like flowers blooming. It was not the bewitching smile of Nadia the mage, but of the young girl who had long remained dormant in her heart since that tragedy of twenty-six years past. It was an honest, pure, and innocent smile.

"Then I'll see to the embroidery while I wait for you to fully recover."

In every stitch she would place her hopes and dreams, waiting for their fateful day. Nadia was an expert when it came to the craft, and a gown adorned with her embroidered snow violets was sure to look stunning on her.

"Yes, you do that. And I…I just can't wait to see you in your wedding dress."

Clemens raised his uninjured arm and gently pulled Nadia in

close. He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and pulled her head to his.

“I love you,” he said.

“As I you,” she replied.

Their kiss was gentle, and accented with the lingering taste of tears. A moment later, they found themselves the subject of applause, then joyous whoops, and even a few whistles.

“That’s so wonderful,” said Shiori.

“Yeah, it really… It really is,” said Alec, his eyes welling with tears.

“It’s true… You really are a crybaby.”

“So what?”

Alec wiped roughly at his tears, then pulled Shiori close and kissed her. It was a deep kiss, and he did not hold back. He took away her chance to squeal, and even any breath she’d thought of drawing. The cheers grew louder behind them. When Alec finally released her, Shiori was flushed and dazed, tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

“Guess I’m not the only crybaby,” said Alec.

“Oh, you!” said Shiori, pouting.

She spun away, but it was no use trying to hide with her face so red, and the gesture only spurred Alec on. With a chuckle, he pulled her to him once more and kissed her all over again.

“Us too!” cried Ludger from afar.

But as he drew closer to his bandaged wife, he was met only with rejection.

“It’s not a competition!” Marena snapped.

Rurii looked upon it all with a joyful wobble: *“All’s well that ends well.”*

Violid, meanwhile, woofed to say, *“You’re all so very passionate.”*

“I told you to check on him, but I don’t recall giving you permission to party! And that goes double for you, Clemens! You’re supposed to be resting! You can save all your romancing for when you’re in full health and back home!”

Having heard all the revelry in the tent, Ellen had come storming in like the god of the underworld, a fearsome look on her face that would bow to none and expected complete compliance. It was only then that the cheering and the celebrations came to an end.

2

There wasn't a cloud in the sky as early summer sunlight showered down upon the forest of giant trees. Around the perennially frozen lake, however, it was always winter, and the lands were painted in the very colors of that season. The frosty air that blew from the lake's surface made it all too clear to Shiori that this place would never truly be cultivated.

It was amidst this eternal winter that the body of the giant dragon was beginning to freeze over.

"It's a pity it has to be like this," said Alec, "but in terms of preserving the beast, this really is the only way."

He touched a fleck of frost on the dragon's cheek, a slight grimace creasing his features. There was no way to transport such a huge body all the way to the Royal Institute of Bioengineering, and so a temporary facility would be erected here by the lake until the dragon's body had been properly analyzed. Only then would the body be given a burial, and properly laid to rest.

"But I'm glad too," he continued. "I hope its sleep is one of pleasant dreams."

"Yes. Though that said, the dragon clearly didn't like being alone. Maybe it would like some company. When everything is finished here, let's bring some flowers and pay our respects."

"Good idea. We can bring all the others and make a day of it."

The two halves of the scale in their palms glittered as if responding to their idea.

There was no longer anything left for Shiori or Alec to do on the battlefield, and so they opted to leave with the medics, the injured, and the reinforcements when they arrived shortly.

"You'll spend the night at the main camp," said a knight. "Rest your bodies for a night, then make the slow trip home tomorrow."

The adrenaline and the joy of victory had faded from the adventurers' bodies, and such was their exhaustion that, for some, even walking took considerable effort. For Shiori—and many others too—just the thought of the long journey back to Tris left them with a far distant look in their eyes. The knights' generosity in this regard was something they were all beyond grateful for.

Shiori did not remember very much of the carriage ride back to the main camp. She sank deep into the swampy depths of slumber, and awoke covered in a blanket, staring up at a tent ceiling. Someone must have carried her from the carriage and to the adventurers' tent. Someone had also taken off her cold-weather gear and folded it neatly by her side.

"Finally awake, huh?" said Alec.

"Yes. I think I overslept."

"Don't be surprised. We were quite literally fighting for our lives out there."

Alec had been awake for some time before Shiori, and had taken to cleaning his sword to pass the time. He'd cleaned off the dirt, grime, and dragon blood, and polished it to a shine—it was hard to believe that not so long ago he'd been fighting a dragon with it. When Shiori said as much, Alec shook his head.

"It's got a lot of chips and scratches on it now," he said. "I'm going to have to take it to Solveig again."

The woman was a famed swordsmith and a well-known hero in the neighborhood, but even *she'd* be surprised to hear that they'd gone toe to toe with a dragon. The thought of her shocked expression made Shiori giggle. She took her cold-weather gear in hand to inspect it and suddenly gasped.

"It's so dirty," she exclaimed. "And it's all torn too."

Her erve foure cloak was covered in dirt and blood, frayed in places, and torn around the sleeves and hem.

"Hmm..." she murmured. "I'm going to have to take this to a specialist, I think."

"I'm quite certain I'm going to have to buy all new gear," said Alec. "I don't think there's any way to mend all the burns."

"That's a good point. So I guess we're going shopping when we get home, then?"

"That we are."

There wouldn't be much in the way of a winter lineup during the early summer months, but both adventurers nonetheless wanted to have cold-weather gear at hand in case the situation called for it.

"Where are the others?" Shiori asked. "Rurii and Vio aren't here."

It was quiet in the tent, and besides her and Alec, there were only a few others in the tent. Daniel was asleep nearby.

"Little Elin, your grandpa won..." they heard him mutter.

“They’re outside playing,” Alec said. “Nadia is with Clemens. She might not be back tonight. Shall we visit them?”

“Yes, let’s.”

“The others have gone to the bath, I think.”

“The bath? There’s a bath?” asked Shiori.

If there was indeed a bath, and a way for her to get to it too, then Shiori was ready to beg. Alec chuckled at the hungry look in his lover’s eyes.

“You remember the class you held in the spring? Seems like they’ve mastered the spell.”

“Wow. I can’t wait to see it.”

“In which case, let’s head there together. We’ll soak in the bath for a little while, then go and see Clemens.”

They left the tent with towels, soap, and a change of clothes. Outside, they spotted the familiars at play, with Violid at the heart of things. Rurii waved hello with a feeler. The slime should have been as dirty as Shiori’s winter gear, but it looked as though someone had been kind enough to give it a wash, because it was practically sparkling under the sun. Violid had received a thorough brushing too. The familiars were all relaxed as they played, and Shiori suspected someone had fed them some snacks.

“A young knight fed all the familiars,” explained Kai, who was playing with the group. “They were curious about slimes and Fenrirs.”

Violid gave Kai a nudge with his nose: *“Who are you calling a Fenrir?”*

It seemed that the young knight, curious about the rare magical beasts, had prepared the necessary bribes to get a closer look.

“What about their duties?” Shiori asked.

“Apparently the guy flew out here as soon as his break started.”

“Oh…”

Alec looked a bit put off, but Rurii and Violid were clearly having a great time. The two familiars told them they’d be playing until dinner, and so Shiori and Alec gave them a wave, then weaved off through the tents in search of the bath. It wasn’t a great distance, but getting there wasn’t easy with all the people calling out to stop them on their way.

“Hey, it’s the hero of the day! I hope it’s not rude of me to ask,

but would you shake my hand, sir?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Instructor Shiori! When you’ve got some time, I’d love to talk to you! And if possible, perhaps get a magic demonstration?”

“I-Instructor…?”

“Sir Alec! Can I have your signature?!”

“A signature? I don’t think you need to go *that* far…”

“Miss Shiori! I really want to eat your karaage again someday!”

“Where did that come from?!”

To many, Alec was a dragon slayer and Shiori a quiet starlet. To others, they were a pair—the hero and the holy woman who had saved a tragic dragon’s heart in its final moments. That was the picture that had come to form in the minds of the knight corps, and they were clamoring for handshakes. Among them were a few more troubling knights who were practically begging, but they were a trifle compared to the sheer number of fans hounding the adventurers.

“I know I said we needed to take some strides to strengthen our position in society, but I never meant for it to result in hero worship…” uttered Alec.

“And honestly, I don’t think I’ve done nearly enough to be put on such a pedestal…” added Shiori.

“No, you can rest easy on that one,” replied Alec. “You very much have.”

“Huh… Huh?” exclaimed Shiori.

The two adventurers were always rather modest, and the attention left them quite embarrassed. By the time they made it to the baths, they were mentally exhausted. In front of the baths stood Leo Nordman, talking to one of his knights. He greeted the two adventurers with a wry chuckle.

“Receiving a scale from the very dragon you fought… That’s a first in the kingdom, that’s for sure,” he said. “And saving its heart from the depths of darkness in its final moments? That is truly the work of heroes, if you ask me. You should accept the praise.”

Shiori and Alec both touched their chests, where each had half of the dragon scale, hidden behind the folds of their clothing. A gentle warmth seemed to pulse from the location.

“Providing people with hope and salvation, that’s a story of heroes all right,” Leo continued. “So don’t think about it too hard.”

The two adventurers had, in their actions, woven a tale of legend.

“I see. I guess if I think of it like that, maybe I can accept it,” said Alec.

“That’s the spirit. Now don’t let me keep you. Head on in. And, Miss Shiori, I’d love your thoughts when you’re done. If you think there’s something we could improve, by all means let me know.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

The entrance was divided into two halves, beyond which the tent was further separated into two rooms: a changing room and the bath proper.

“Well, that’s the scale of the knight corps for you,” uttered Shiori to herself. “You could never do this in an ordinary tent.”

Shiori stripped out of her dirty clothes as she thought about how a tent like this might be used during disaster aid. She looked at the other clothing and equipment in the changing room, and it struck her that it was only adventurers using this bath. The knights perhaps had a bath of their own.

“Wow, this is really something…” Shiori uttered.

The bath itself was easily big enough for ten people, and made use of waterproof material made from magical beasts to prevent leaks. Shiori knew the material, and knew that it had antibacterial effects. This, too, was possible thanks to the knight corps’ funding and its ability to transport supplies, which in turn put less pressure on the caster of the bath, because it afforded them room for error.

“Oh my. They’ve even provided a washing area outside of the bath proper.”

The small tub in the middle of the washing area contained a sink and soap. The refreshing scent of Rose Dvol drifted through the air as Shiori cleaned herself and shampooed her hair, then relaxed into the tub. The water was a touch hotter than Shiori was used to—likely the preference of the caster—but she could feel it working wonders on her tired body.

“It really *is* so nice to relax in a bath that somebody else prepared for you…” Shiori uttered.

Taking a bath like this reminded her of just how thankful she felt to be on the receiving end of things. There really was nothing better than knowing she wouldn’t have to take her exhaustion and dirty body home with her the next day. These thoughts flitted through her mind as she played with the

medicinal herbs floating on the bathwater's surface, and after a time Ellen poked her head in.

"Oh, it's you, Shiori. Hello there."

"Hi, Ellen."

Ellen had taken a short nap in one of the medic troop's tents, and had come to the baths after looking in on all her patients. After doing the same as Shiori and thoroughly washing the grime from her body, she sank into the bath with a deep sigh. It was a sigh of such depth, in fact, that it perfectly encapsulated how exhausted she was.

"You must be so tired," Shiori said.

"You have no idea," said Ellen with a chuckle. "Marena's break was really quite bad, and so she'll be sent to the capital for a more in-depth look. I fear the rehabilitation process for her will take some time..."

"I... I see..."

"But there's one more reason that her return to the field will be delayed," continued Ellen with a knowing smile. "She kept saying she was sleepy and lethargic and hungry, and none of that struck me as stemming from her injury. And as it turned out, my hunch was right."

"Oh? You mean..."

"She's about three months in. And Ludger couldn't have made more of a racket about it if he tried. It was so bad I had to ask Eir to put him to sleep."

Shiori's eyes were still wide with shock as Ellen smiled and went on.

"Outside of the sleepiness, Marena didn't suffer any morning sickness, so she didn't even realize it herself. So honestly, I'm just glad she's okay. Can you imagine, going into a dragon suppression request three months pregnant?"

And if luck had swung the other way, Ludger might well have lost his wife *and* future child in the same instant. It was perhaps no surprise, then, that upon learning of his wife's pregnancy, Ludger had summarily burst into tears.

"Clemens is stable too," Ellen said. "He still has a lingering fever, and he lost quite a lot of blood, but he has his appetite back, so I expect him to recover fairly swiftly."

"So he *will* be back, then?" Shiori asked.

It was a worry she could not rid herself of—he had survived, yes, but his injury had put him at death's door. Would he ever

regain full functionality in his arm?

"Fortunately, there wasn't any nerve damage, and he was lucky to escape without too much major damage to his muscles. He can move his fingers just fine...which means the rest is up to him."

Clemens had said that he'd been able to knock the arrow slightly off its path before impact. According to Ellen, that was a silver lining of sorts.

"I'm really... I'm just so glad..." said Shiori.

She had seen things go the other way with Leo Nordman, and the worries had played on her mind. She also knew firsthand just how hard it was to have to give up an old life and start again from scratch.

"We're truly lucky that everybody returned unscathed," Ellen said.

"Yes, truly."

Shiori would never forget the darkness that had befallen her, and the moment she'd thought that it was all hopeless. When she had fallen into this world without any knowledge of where she was and how to survive, it had been Zack who looked after her like a brother. Now he was among her most cherished friends, and so she still could not completely rid herself of the fear she'd felt when she'd thought she might have lost him. That was the nature of the battle they had fought—it was a battle in which any one of them could have lost somebody important.

But nobody had been lost. Everybody had emerged alive. What could such a thing be called, if not a miracle? The fight was over, and Shiori was calm, but still a tingle of fear sent a shiver through her body.

"This was not a battle that could have ever been fought alone," said Ellen. "It took everybody working together, strengthening one another, to find victory."

Ellen slid over to Shiori's side and shot her a bewitching smile. For Shiori, it was almost blinding.

"By the way, Shiori," she said. "You should know that it's thanks to you I saved Clemens."

"Huh? Me?"

"Since you came to Tris, I've been watching how hard you work. You didn't even know how to read, write, or speak, but you gave it everything, and slowly people took notice. Your efforts inspired me to do more. Physicking is helpful, but it also has

many limits. At some point, I found myself standing before those limits, and at an impasse."

She brought some water up before her in cupped hands, and let it drip out from between them as she went on.

"And it was you, working so hard, that gave me the push I needed to become more than I was. That's why I took a sabbatical and went to study in the royal capital. My teacher there was very strict, but I learned so much in the short time we spent together. If I hadn't made up my mind to study all the way back then, perhaps I wouldn't have been able to save Clemens the way I did. So what I'm trying to say is..."

Ellen's beautiful green eyes focused on Shiori's own.

"*You* played a part in saving Clemens's life."

"Ellen..."

"Zack always keeps us going, and his presence alone makes us feel safe. Alec has an unyielding courage that makes him a natural leader. We all aid one another in our own ways. We encourage each other. In our past battles, we've all learned from one another, and all of that played a part in our battle with the dragon. But it was *you* who led me to this point, Shiori. So...thank you. Thank you for inspiring me when I most needed it."

One person's efforts could inspire another and become their strength. That strength could then be used to save others. Shiori now believed that the tale of human history was woven by such moments. Right now, she, too, was weaving these moments herself, as a part of this world.

"Then it looks like my continued efforts were worthwhile," said Shiori, her teary eyes hidden by the steam as she giggled.

"But no working too hard, okay? That means you *and* Alec. I think you've both pushed yourselves enough. You've earned a break."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Shiori shrank under Ellen's very doctorly instructions, and all of a sudden, she found herself on the receiving end of an impromptu massage. She left the bath looking so flushed and enraptured that the men outside the tent could barely bring themselves to look her in the eye. The slight sweat on her brow, the light crimson of her skin, and the dewy look in Shiori's eyes was suggestive beyond any doubt—every fiber of her being told the world that she had just been through a most incredible experience in the bath.

“There really is nothing like a big bath,” she said. “I’ve no complaints whatsoever.”

“Uh… Oh. I see,” replied a somewhat awkward Leo. “I am…very glad to hear that.”

Alec swooped in to take his lover in his arms and turned his gaze on his blonde-haired adventuring colleague.

“Ellen…” he muttered. “What in the world did you do to her?”

“I just gave her a shoulder and back massage, nothing more. Is something wrong?”

“A massage… No, nothing’s wrong, per se, but…how do I put this? You should know better.”

He couldn’t quite find the words he was looking for as he hid Shiori’s face and carried her away. Naturally, he did not return to their tent either; instead he opted for some place quiet, away from prying eyes, where Shiori could cool down in private.

“Hm? What did I do?” uttered Ellen.

“Miss Ellen…” said Leo, looking exasperated. “You really must make an effort to better understand the fragility of a man’s heart…”

Ellen remained perplexed.

3

Shiori followed the strangely panicked Alec to the shade of a tree where a gentle wind blew, and fell into a light doze as her body cooled to its natural temperature. When she next opened her eyes, it was past six in the evening and she woke with a start to find she’d been asleep in Alec’s arms.

“Yeah, we might have overslept,” he said, grinning as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

Even then, it was still light in the sky thanks to it being early summer, and the knights’ base camp was very lively. The knights were very excited, largely because the evening’s meal was set to be something of a modest celebratory banquet.

“A victory dinner…” said Shiori. “So they’re preparing food for us too?”

“Looks that way…” replied Alec.

The two still remembered Nils’s and Ellen’s past dining experiences with the knights, however, and found it difficult to muster much enthusiasm. Neither Nils nor Ellen could have been called picky in their tastes, but the knights’ fare was apparently

nigh unpalatable. Shiori and Alec would have preferred to avoid such a meal entirely, but circumstances being what they were, it wasn't like they could easily turn the offer down either.

As they walked towards the medic tents with shoulders slumped, Nils informed them that Leo was overseeing the meal preparation that evening. He was quite talented as a cook, and Nils was hopeful that his past nightmare was now just that: a thing of the past. The news came as quite the relief.

"He's handed out recipes to the crew and he's making sure they're made properly. Seems like he wasn't particularly pleased with how the knights were cooking for themselves either," said Nils.

"I...I see," uttered Shiori.

"One of the reasons he first learned to cook was so that he could at least eat something decent on his days off."

"Wow, that bad, huh?" commented Alec.

Rumors didn't travel very far when they concerned the support unit, but it was true to say that, with the baths and the food, that which impacted the morale of the troops was finally being addressed.

"But you know, food is so important to health that I really think that's what they should focus on. Putting taste aside for the moment, undercooked dishes are just bad for you, and if you don't know anything about removing scum or bitterness or unwanted tastes from your ingredients, you might end up eating poison."

"Hear, hear..."

With some ingredients, the harmful effects weren't immediate; instead, they sapped at your health over time. This was not to mention the many ingredients that needed to be properly prepared to ensure they didn't cause any detrimental effects.

This deeply rooted problem—and lack of knowledge—in the knight corps apparently stemmed from the fact that so many of them hailed from the upper classes, where they simply ate what was prepared for them. Many had been calling for the importance of better education on such matters for quite some time.

"It's a culture that hails from a time when only the nobility could become knights, and it was commonplace for all to have their own servants," said a nearby medic. "Many knights in the

corps don't even know how to acquire ingredients, let alone cook them. There are training courses on outdoor cooking, but many pay them little mind. But if you rely only on the rations you carry with you, you'll be at a complete loss when you find yourself needing to fend for yourself without them."

Some of the knights being treated by the medic were clearly guilty as charged—they made a point of avoiding any and all eye contact.

"We had a roasted cockatrice incident that has since become the stuff of legends," continued the medic. "It was cooked as it was, feathers and all, and they didn't even take out the innards. The end result was practically toxic, and I think the stench alone could have killed a man."

"The scent was the real killer," added another. "It got into our uniforms and our tents. Oh man, it was *so* bad."

"The whole time, we just stank to high heaven."

"And a whole wild cockatrice was completely wasted, just like that..."

Alec slumped dejectedly. It was a pain he knew all too well.

Clemens—the man with whom Alec had ruined an attempt at a game bird roast—was at the back of the medic tent. He was dropping in and out of wakefulness and was currently asleep. Nadia was watching over him.

"He was awake not so long ago," she said, wiping the sweat from his brow, "but he drank his medicine and went straight back to sleep."

Her fingers traced the outline of his face and paused at his cheek. She rubbed it gently before cupping it in her palm. She was checking his temperature and the softness of his skin, but even in that simple gesture, Nadia's feelings for Clemens were clear.

He's warm. He's alive.

"Do you know what's next for him?" asked Shiori.

"Nils is going to look after him," replied Nadia. "At first, there was some talk of having him go to one of the knight corps' medical facilities, but eventually we decided it would be best for him mentally to be with someone he's already comfortable with."

Nils's dispensary included basic hospital facilities, and Clemens would stay there while Ellen visited him for his treatment.

"Well, that's a relief," remarked Shiori.

“And having him at the infirmary means I can watch over his nutrition as well,” said Nils. “The porridge recipe in my herbal cuisine repertoire is just about ready.”

“Yeah, but…what about the taste?” asked Alec, looking a little worried. “Is it like that nutritional tonic you gave me?”

Alec cringed as he thought back to the taste—like withered leaves and mud boiled in cheap wine. Nils chuckled.

“Not to worry, it’s well past that. And anyway, what I gave out today wasn’t *that* bad, I’m sure of it.”

“If that’s the case, I guess we can relax,” muttered Alec.

“Well, I hope so… No matter. Shiori, do you think you could help me sometime? I’d like to ask you about the nutritional benefits of a few select ingredients.”

“Sure. Just say the word.”

Shiori and Alec didn’t want to stay too long, so they left the tent, where they breathed yet another of many relieved sighs.

“I’m just…so glad he’s okay,” Shiori said.

“Yeah. I’m done with losing the people important to me,” said Alec.

The day would of course come when they would finally have to part, but Shiori prayed that it would be a long, long time into the future.

For a time, Shiori and Alec simply walked in silence, hand in hand, as they listened to the sounds around them. The chatter of people, the blowing of the wind, the rustling of the leaves, and the chirping of birds. Gone was the tension they’d felt when they’d first arrived—the natural world was back to its rightful state.

“Oh, they’re back,” remarked Shiori.

“Ah, you’re right,” added Alec.

The birds that had been frightened off by the dragon’s awakening were now coming back; some from the north, others from the south. Above the main camp flew vidopnirs, and Shiori wondered if the one who’d taught them about the dragon was among the flock she watched.

“It’s so fascinating,” she remarked. “They traveled so far away, but even then, news of the dragon’s defeat still reached them.”

“Indeed,” said Alec. “I bet their communication network far exceeds our own.”

With peace having returned to the area, the animals that had

escaped the stampede would gradually return to their usual habitats. But some would remain wherever they'd ended up, and yet others would bring new creatures with them from afar, creating different ecosystems than that which had existed before the stampedes began. The dragon had slept at the depths of the Dima Frozen Lake for almost two hundred years—it was only natural that its passing would have an impact on the immediate area.

"This is the fate that befalls the locations caught up in stampedes," said Alec. "It is not something we can fight against or change; it is something we have to accept."

"I suppose so... Hm?" uttered Shiori.

"I smell it too," said Alec. "Something...raw..."

While the two had been musing about the dragon of the lake and the surrounding forest, a scent had crept up on them. Their brows furrowed as the smell grew stronger, growing closer with each moment.

"Ah! Shiori! Perfect timing!"

At the source of the smell was a man, who waved to them as he called out, bright and cheerful. In his other hand was a tub filled with game bird meat. Behind the man was Joel, his hands full of the same bird meat, though his expression was noticeably less cheerful. One might have even called it unsettled.

Shiori felt a sudden déjà vu, and knowing what was coming next, she burst into laughter.

"This is for karaage, isn't it?" she said.

Linus grinned.

"Yep!" he replied. "But I won't twist your arm or anything if you're exhausted. We can always do them grilled yakitori style."

"I'm fine," Shiori replied. "Oh, but we'll need flour and oil..."

"We traded bird feathers to the supply unit for that stuff. We're all set!"

"Never one to skimp on prep, are you...?"

"There's nothing I won't do for a good meal!"

"Where did you get all this meat, anyway?"

"When I woke up, I noticed that the gullinkambi were coming back, so I beat them to their nests and hunted some!"

"You are amazing..." muttered Alec.

"What about me...? I got dragged out on a hunting trip half asleep..." whined Joel.

Gullinkambi were a golden game bird, not unlike a chicken,

that existed only in the northern part of Storydia. Their delicate golden feathers had ornamental value and were a valuable trade commodity, and their meat was considered a luxury for the depth of its flavor and mouthfeel. However, the reason they were so valuable was because they weren't exactly something you just woke up and hunted.

Still, it made Shiori happy to know there was yet more to look forward to for dinner. At the same time, the thought of the gullinkambi finally returning home only to realize there was an intruder waiting for them was nothing less than a cruel tragedy...

"I remembered that back when we were all in Brovito, you made a soup for all the injured people. It isn't red meat this time, but I recall hearing that liver is good for people who have lost a lot of blood."

"Oh, you remembered," remarked Shiori.

"Yep. And besides, eating delicious meat and speeding up the recovery of the wounded—that's a two-birds-one-stone situation if there ever was one."

Among the now-dressed birds, Shiori noticed that all the livers had been kept separate. Linus had also picked a bundle of watercress leaves.

"In which case, I'd love to cook it all up," said Shiori. "Liver isn't so good for women in the early stages of pregnancy, so we'll just have to make sure Marena doesn't eat too much."

"Huh? Pregnancy? Marena? What what?"

"You didn't know? I heard that Ludger made a real racket about it, so I thought word had gotten around already..."

"WHAT?!"

Shiori had mentioned the fact offhand, thinking it old news, but Linus had literally fallen over.

"Wow, okay," he gasped. "I mean, I'm just so glad she made it out of the battle safe..."

"Yeah, that's why we're all going to celebrate our safe return tonight," said Alec.

"And don't I deserve just a little extra...?" uttered Joel. "Don't I deserve a reward?"

Joel was practically muttering to himself as he stared off into the unknown distance, and Shiori promised to give him a bottle of liver paste before sending him off to the bath with a smile.

"Well, let's get started, then," she said.

She hadn't brought most of her usual camping equipment for

this trip, which meant she had little more than the basic array of condiments and spices. The rest she could likely borrow from the supply unit.

“Looking for soy sauce? You can use mine if you like.”

Shiori had begun to think they’d have to go without the soy sauce karaage, and was grateful for Leo’s offer.

“The knights use soy sauce?” she asked.

“A friend recommended it to me,” Leo explained. “Told me it’s all the rage at home in Lovner. The smell is a bit strong, but it’s priceless for seasoning. Tastes good in a sauté as well.”

The use of soy sauce was taking root in Lovner, and Leo was surprised to learn that most of the popular recipes in which it was used had originated from Shiori.

“Amazing…” he uttered. “You never know how people are connected to one another, do you?”

“Indeed. I feel like I’m always in awe of the bonds that connect us.”

The group chatted as they worked. The menu was gullinkambi karaage, liver meatball soup, and liver paste. Leo offered to help for his own personal reference, and Shiori had him slice the onion and watercress while she took to preparing the liver. She removed the fat and other unnecessary parts, cut it into smaller bits, then washed them with water.

“Let me help,” said Leo.

“Okay. Can you drain the blood from these? You just have to soak them in water, then refill the water when it gets too dirty. You could also run water over them, though that’s a little more difficult.”

“In which case, let’s use magic.”

Leo quickly filled the pot with water, then kept a steady flow of it going to drain the blood from the liver pieces within while also creating a quiet, thin stream of water. Rurii and Bla, likely drawn in by the scent, began to drink the spilled water, which made everyone chuckle.

“It’s not too raw?” asked Shiori.

The slimes wobbled to say it tasted just fine.

“Well then, just make sure you don’t drink too much before dinner.”

The slimes were already well aware of the bucket of offal that was waiting for them, and trembled to indicate they’d be careful.

Violid was perhaps a little worn out, and was dozing under the

shade of a tree, while the other familiars waited by his side. Alec couldn't help but smile at the sight; there were no walls between the familiars.

"Okay... Next, let's do the meat," said Shiori.

Linus had already neatly cut the meat for the karaage, so Shiori separated the meat for the meatballs and flavored the rest. Half of it she soaked in a mix of soy sauce and ginger, and the other half she covered in salt, pepper, and herbs.

"Wow, it smells great already," said Alec. "Can't wait."

"Yep," said Shiori.

"We're going to do our best so that people will say the same about our food too," said Leo.

"Wow, okay," said Alec.

"How's it going so far?" asked Shiori. "I heard that things have improved."

"We only really got started last month," admitted Leo. "But over that time, the mindset of the supply unit has really changed. Even without detailed instruction, the troops are capable of cooking up pretty satisfying meals. The rest we still have to work on. Ideally, we want to make it so that every knight is capable of basic cooking, or if not that, then at least basic gathering skills. That's easier said than done, however..."

"I see," said Shiori, who then realized something and gasped. "Oh, is it okay for me to ask about that kind of thing?"

She was worried that she'd stepped into confidential territory, but Leo smiled.

"All I've told you is within the sphere of what's public. Nothing to worry about."

"Ah, that's a relief."

The work continued even while they talked among themselves. Shiori put oil in a large pot, to which she added onion, garlic, herbs, and freeze-dried celery. Once this was fried together, she put aside some watercress for the liver paste and added the rest to the pot. Then she added water and brought it all to a simmer.

While that was going, she pounded and ground some gullinkambi meat, chopped up the liver, and mixed them together with salt, pepper, and flour to make meatballs. Alec and Leo also helped, along with Rurii, because the slime was deft with its hands...or feelers, as it were. It wasn't long before they had a mountain of meatballs.

“Sir Alec, Rurii…you’re both quite good at this,” remarked Leo.

“As are you,” replied Alec.

Wobble-wobble, added Rurii.

A peculiar fire of competition had lit up between the two men and the slime as they put the meatballs in the pot.

“Now onto the liver paste and the karaage,” said Shiori.

Shiori took the onion she’d put aside, which she now fried together with liver and butter. She added a dash of white wine and salt and pepper, and simmered it until it was steaming. All that was left after that was to use her food processor magic to turn it all to paste, then stir it until it was nice and smooth.

Once it was done, she took a small spoonful for each of the others to taste.

“Mm, it’s a little different from the last time you made it,” commented Leo, “but it’s sublime.”

“The flavor is a little stronger than with snow birds, but the aftertaste is quite refreshing,” said Shiori. “It goes down a treat.”

“Gullinkambi are carnivorous, but they like eating quality water grass from pristine streams,” said Alec. “That might be why. I’ve gotta say, though, it really makes you crave some wine to go with it…”

“I feel like someone said that the last time I made liver paste…” muttered Shiori.

The meatball soup was going well, though Shiori added a touch more salt and pepper to perfect the flavor before deciding it was actually ready. Once they bottled the liver paste, that would leave only the karaage.

“I’m sorry about the unit commander… I mean, at the strategy meeting.”

Leo uttered these words as he was putting liver paste in clean bottles. It came up so suddenly that Shiori didn’t know what he was talking about at first; after all, so much had happened in such a short time. When it did click for her, however, she wasn’t immediately sure how to respond. Her reaction let Leo know that the experience had not been pleasant for her.

“He wasn’t ill-intentioned, and there was meaning to what he was doing. All the same, the truth is that it *did* hurt you. So on the commander’s behalf, I want to apologize. I’m sorry for what happened.”

Leo knew they were surrounded by adventurers and knights, and so to avoid drawing attention to them, he didn’t lower his

head or bow apologetically. But in his downcast eyes and face, Shiori saw that he was sincere.

"It's all in the past now," said Shiori. "The margrave apologized to me too."

"Yes, but—"

"You mentioned there was meaning in what he was doing," said Alec, who until then had been silently helping fill bottles with liver paste. "It wouldn't surprise me at all if it was the margrave who put the commander up to it. He probably wanted to get a clearer sense of which of his subordinates was up to something."

Alec's eyes remained on his work, which made his words sound all the more casual. Anyone nearby would have seen them at the kitchen and assumed they were talking about nothing of any real importance.

"I don't know the details, but I suspect you're right," said Leo. "Did someone tell you already?"

"No, I haven't heard anything—I just sensed that was the game while the discussion was happening. I know the margrave personally, and I know the sort of person he is."

"Ah, I see," said Leo, wide-eyed for a moment before he chuckled. "All the same, it left you unsettled, Miss Shiori. The unit commander was worried about it too. I'm sure he'll be around in due time to apologize in person."

"I was certainly surprised," admitted Shiori, "and most worried at the time. But if there was a method to all the madness, then please, try not to let it bother you."

Shiori, too, could sense that if the margrave had felt compelled to put on that act under already pressing circumstances, then he'd likely felt forced to move preemptively. She passed Leo a bottle of liver paste.

"For your commander," she said.

"Oh, thank you," he said, smiling with surprise. "The guy'll love it, I'm sure of it."

"And be sure to tell him thanks from me when you give it to him."

"You have my word."

In Leo's referring to his superior as just another "guy," Shiori could tell the two had a close relationship.

And perhaps Leo, like me, was also saved by those around him.

Shiori could imagine what it would have been like for Leo,

forced to change divisions due to his injuries, but she made no mention of whatever past hardships he might have faced, and merely took to filling the last bottle.

While the karaage was frying, Linus returned. He'd been out somewhere while they'd all been cooking, and now he had a basket full of pearl trout and berries.

"Where in the world did you get those gathering senses of yours?" joked Alec.

"Well, y'see, after my bath, I just thought there'd be nothing better than a drink with some grilled fish. I did it on a whim, really. The berries are just a bonus!"

"People don't gather this much on just a 'whim,' Linus..."

"Well, at least with Sir Linus around, we need never worry about starvation," laughed Leo.

So, while Shiori watched over the frying karaage, Linus took all the fish out of the basket. He dressed them, washed them, then salted a selection and put them on skewers. The rest he filleted and put in a frying pan.

In this season, pearl trout scales glittered just like actual pearls. And while they looked placid and like any other delicious river fish once dressed, they were in fact carnivorous magical beasts—they were known for aggressively using ice magic to hunt smaller fish and wildlife.

As fat began to drip from the skewered trout, the wonderful scent of grilled fish filled the air. The filleted trout, meanwhile, were sautéed with salt, pepper, and butter, then generously heaped on a plate.

"These filleted fish are for the injured," said Linus. "I have a feeling some of them might not be able to stomach heavier meats."

Rurii and Bla happily ate all the fish gizzards. Violid was now up and awake too, but wasn't a big fan of fish, and instead stared inquisitively at the frying gullinkambi meat.

"Oh, right," said Linus, remembering something. "Let's grill these too."

Linus sliced the fat from the gullinkambi hearts he'd put aside, took out the blood vessels, and washed them with salt water. After seasoning them with salt, pepper, and herbs, he skewered them and put them over the fire.

"They taste great simmered in oil, but a simple salt-and-pepper job will do here."

“Ugh, more stuff that could do with a glass of wine or ale…” muttered Leo.

Shiori laughed.

“You used to get people telling you to eat beef or drink Alphan bison soup if you lost blood to an injury, but back home people ate chicken giblets,” said Linus.

“They probably knew on some level that it was nutritious in that way,” remarked Shiori.

“Yep, they probably did. Growing up, we used to think it was just superstition, but you sure did feel lucky when you were injured, at least for the feast you were served. Every meal you’d have some cut up into little pieces instead of medicine. It wasn’t much in terms of the amount, so I don’t know if it actually had much of an effect, but still…”

Linus’s gaze grew distant as he spoke, thinking back on the village he’d once called home. Once his elderly parents had passed away, he’d left, but he often talked of where he’d come from, and it was clear it was a place filled with fond memories.

“Okay, I think these are done,” he announced. “If Master Clemens can stomach them, he gets first dibs. And Marena can…skip them this time?”

“A little won’t be a problem, I don’t think,” said Shiori.

“Great, that’s good to hear.”

“The karaage is done too, so let’s take it all to the medic tents, shall we?”

The adventurers put some of the food on a plate especially for the medic area and took it over.

“Oh my goodness, this all looks amazing!” screamed Marena.

She’d built up quite the appetite, it seemed.

“Don’t overdo it,” warned Ludger from nearby, though he couldn’t seem to tear his gaze from the karaage.

Shiori and the others handed out food to the injured, the people with them, and the medics looking after them all. Clemens had some trouble sitting up, but was able to do so thanks to the help of some extra pillows, and enjoyed some soup. His appetite was back, just like Ellen had said, and Nadia would later inform them that he ate his entire bowl of meatball soup.

“He couldn’t stomach any of the meat,” Nadia would add, “and he looked so very heartbroken about it.”

“And gullinkambi isn’t all that common on the market either…”

When Shiori mentioned that perhaps they could ask Linus to hunt one as a wedding present, Nadia looked delighted.

By the time the adventurers had brought their food out to the center of the main camp, preparations for the celebration were almost finished. Folding tables had been lined up, on which were grilled meats, stews, skewered fish, fruit pies, nuts and berries, and bread. When everyone realized they also had karaage, meatball soup, and liver paste to enjoy, cheers rang through the air.

For those who knew of the victory celebrations hosted in the royal capital, the main camp's celebrations were a simple affair. However, when one considered that the flow of goods had been badly hampered by the magical beast stampedes, it was quite the luxury.

The adventurers—who had been the stars of the show, so to speak—gathered at the center of the camp, while members of the suppression unit were set to come and go as they worked their usual guard shifts. When most of the party's attendees were assembled, the Torisval Margrave arrived with the leaders of the northern knights corps. Unlike the strategy meeting before the battle, however, the intimidating air that had once surrounded them was gone, and Kristoffer's affable smile had returned to his face. It even deepened for a moment when he met Shiori's eyes.

And yet, in that instant, she couldn't help noticing the corners of his eyes were damp.

"Yeah, I, uh... I made him cry a little..." muttered Zack.

When the margrave had seen Zack upon his return, covered in blood, with his right sleeve burned off completely, he had been stunned speechless.

"You did it..." he'd uttered at long last. "You survived..."

Here at the celebration, Kristoffer raised a hand to quiet the crowd. The chatter around the main camp settled down, and in its place there was only the wind passing over the nearby plains and the chirping of birds. For a time, this was all that could be heard, because the margrave said nothing. The gathered adventurers and knights waited, but no opening speech came, and after a while, whispers could be heard among the crowd.

"I... I apologize," Kristoffer said, finally. "In my old age, I fear I'm growing soft. Tears come to me far more quickly now. I had imagined myself standing up here before you all and giving a

grand speech, but now, as I gaze upon all of you, those grand words are lost to me."

His voice was husky, and he looked down at his feet for a moment, rubbing his eyes as he chuckled wryly.

"Your valor shone today," he continued. "You fought off the threat of stampedes, and you defeated the legendary dragon that was the cause of them. More importantly, not a man or woman was lost in your efforts. This, more than anything, brings me tremendous joy."

These words brought smiles to the faces of those gathered there, and they spread across the crowd like a gentle wave in the sea.

"I know that all of you—those who fight with weapons, those who fight with magic, and those who support your teams from the back lines—made the most of your skills today, when it mattered most. In doing so, you brought about total victory. We accomplished our task and we lost not a single person. You have my deepest gratitude."

Here, the margrave paused to look out upon all those gathered at the center of the camp. He looked out at all his soldiers, dressed in their northern knight corps uniforms, then all the adventurers, then Alec, Shiori, and finally, his best friend, Zack. It was some time before he spoke again. None knew exactly what emotions welled in the margrave's heart, but as he looked down at the ground and bit his lip, all knew that he was fighting back tears.

"This is not a formal event, so let us do away with the formalities," he said finally. "We have prepared a modest party, to celebrate the defeat of the ice dragon and the birth of a hero. Naturally, I will pay for these expenses out of my own pocket, so I expect you all to enjoy yourselves to the fullest."

The margrave gestured to some of his people, who brought out barrels of wine and began filling cups. The nearby town of Dima had also had some mead delivered to commemorate the occasion, and this was poured for those who didn't want wine.

"I guess the good news has reached the nearby towns already," said Shiori.

"Yeah," said Zack. "I heard that a number of messenger birds were all sent out at once. Those who evacuated are now on their way back."

Many of the local residents were already gathering the

magical beast corpses left behind by the suppression units. Shiori was struck by how hardy the people of Torisval were under such circumstances, but she knew that without that plucky spirit, none could make a home of a place as merciless as the nation's north.

"There is no need for formal etiquette tonight!" announced the margrave. "Enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content! Tonight we celebrate victory! Cheers!"

"Cheers!" shouted the crowd in reply.

The adventurers and knights were all smiles. It was the joy of victory that buoyed them, along with their safe return.

"Oh, that reminds me," said the margrave. "To my knights: The Adventurers' Guild has no shortage of beautiful, charming women, but I implore you all to have some grace and tact about you. Do not forget that this is not *that* kind of party."

A number of knights shrank suddenly at Kristoffer's words, while the others around them chuckled.

"That's the margrave for you," said Alec. "He sees everything."

He grinned, his arm wrapped around his lover while he sipped at a cup of wine. The northern knight corps were a conscientious and gentlemanly lot, but some among them were womanizers with looser morals, so to speak. While some of them, of course, longed for what might be termed pure romantic relationships, not all were so innocent in their desires.

In fact, a number of knights had already gathered around Shiori—now well-known for her development of various support spells—to "get to know her better." The housekeeping mage was especially grateful for the margrave's warning to his troops, as it was all too clear that some had her in their sights. Ellen, too, who looked not unlike a fairy or goddess from a fairy tale, was already cringing under the pressure of a number of young knights who'd gathered around her person.

"Get Ellen riled up, and you are bound to regret it..." muttered Alec.

Violid seemed especially intrigued by it all, noting the way in which male humans were no different from male magical beasts in their converging on attractive females—but Shiori and Ellen shared no such fascination with the phenomenon. Linus, who could see how uneasy the two women were, saw an opening and swooped in casually.

"Doctor, doctor!" he said, smoothly sliding in to take Ellen's

hand. “Come look at the pearl trout and berries I gathered. You just *have* to try some!”

This happened in but an instant, and the knights were left staring blankly, their prey having suddenly vanished.

“That guy is like a ninja…” Shiori uttered.

“I bet that’s exactly how he goes about his hunting too…” said Alec.

Even Rurii, who excelled when it came to sneak attacks, trembled with surprise as it clutched skewers in a feeler. All who knew Linus understood then that when he had his eyes on his prey, it was caught before it even knew what had happened to it. And so, while they were astounded by Linus’s unique talent, Shiori and Alec strolled the tables and indulged in the food on offer.

Thanks to the margrave’s warning to his less well-mannered subordinates, Shiori and Alec were able to walk without fear of being hounded. A few people asked for handshakes and some simply wanted to say a few words, but that proved enough. Perhaps it was also simply that the good food and the good company were more than satisfying on their own.

Some of the adventurers breathed sighs of relief as they sipped at bowls of soup, while a group of young knights gorged themselves on the selection available at the meat table. As they chased their meals with gulps of wine, their older superiors looked on with smiles.

The party was very much a portrait of peace, and the celebrations would have looked like any other standing party had it not been for the chipped equipment, the torn and bloodstained clothing, and those whose heads or arms were bandaged.

“The karaage is as popular as always,” remarked Alec, eyeing the knights and adventurers hovering around the dish while he tried some himself. “And yep, it’s as tasty as always too. So rich in flavor.”

“Looks like it was a good idea to make it, then,” replied Shiori. “We owe Linus our thanks for that.”

“Yep. With you and him on a team, every meal is practically guaranteed to be a feast.”

Shiori giggled.

“Thanks,” she said.

Shiori had some soup and some fruit, then decided she

wanted something a little heavier. Her gaze followed the plates of food until someone held a sandwich out to her, one filled with grilled meat, pickles, and cheese.

"You've earned it."

The smooth voice belonged to none other than the yeast hunter and baker, Bertil Nilsson, who winked a charming greeting.

"Bertil," remarked Shiori.

"You're here too?" asked Alec.

"I was worried that all you lovelies might come home starving, so I hitched a ride with the reinforcements."

Bertil was built like a warrior, though his demeanor was anything but. He'd been waiting here at base camp, busily baking bread since his arrival.

"This is delicious," said Shiori. "So soft and fluffy."

"Trust you to bake top-class bread with only a campfire and pots," commented Alec.

"What better time to display my new skills, wouldn't you say?"

Bertil laughed and told them he'd recently been experimenting with baking good bread outdoors. As for Violid, he was stunned by the baker and his expression, and set about carefully observing him. Shiori and Alec spent some time answering all of Bertil's questions about the battle earlier. People began to close in and gather around, curious to listen to this story of Storydia's newest hero. At the end of the story, however, when all learned of the solitude that had been forced upon the dragon, the gathered adventurers and knights offered quiet prayers for the magical beast, hoping it might find peace in the afterlife, or whatever it encountered next.

Shiori and Alec then broke from the group and looked to move away from the excited crowds. On their way, they bumped into Rud Svenden—Leo's superior and the man who had looked to recruit Shiori at the strategy meeting. He offered his apologies.

To anyone who was passing by, Svenden looked very much as though he'd been chewed out by the margrave and been forced to say sorry—a fact he did little to hide—but after sharing some words with the man, Shiori got the sense that he was not really such a bad type at all. Perhaps it was just one of many masks he wore. Regardless, she did not feel any of the same pressure or attitude that he'd exuded at the strategy meeting. In fact,

Svenden was so polite when it came to thanking her for her contributions to the combat support unit, the instruction she'd given to his old friend, and her gift of liver paste that Shiori almost felt apologetic for her earlier impression of him.

"I'm going to share the paste over a few drinks," Svenden said. "Especially now that I have a friend to share it with."

Svenden's smile showed his joy. Regardless of how they'd come together, he was grateful and happy to have a like-minded friend like Leo around.

"There aren't very many that I can open my heart to," he said as he was about to take his leave, "but with him, I can just be myself."

The words impressed themselves deeply upon Shiori. Svenden spoke of Leo as someone he did not have to play the role of regimental commander with. And while Leo had said that he felt a debt of gratitude to Svenden for encouraging him to move to the combat support unit, in his own way Svenden was just as grateful for Leo.

"Such friends are priceless," said Shiori.

"Indeed."

The battle's aftermath had made the bonds of friendship around them clear to Shiori and Alec in a number of different ways, and along with the lightness the wine had imbued their footsteps with, it felt as if they were floating across the main camp.

It had been a very long day, but finally dusk was falling. Magical lanterns at the periphery of the forest kept things lit while the revelry continued and the food was thoroughly enjoyed. In a quiet corner of the proceedings sat Frol and Julia, clearly a little hesitant as they sipped at cups of wine. Shiori and Alec approached them with food in hand.

"What are you doing here alone? You two were important to today's success," said Alec.

"I..." uttered Frol. "We do not feel it our place..."

Knights and adventurers alike had come to pour the two Imperials drinks, but Frol and Julia still refrained from joining the festivities, and had chosen instead to drink quietly by themselves. Shiori and Alec offered them the food they carried, which Frol and Julia accepted with wry smiles and thanks.

"Everybody knows what happened to your friend," said Frol. "They tell us it was not our fault, that we had nothing to do with

it, but all the same it will not leave our minds."

"We insisted on playing our part in the battle against the dragon to repay in some small part for the crimes of our own people," added Julia, "but in the end, it was one of our own people who saw your friend so close to death. I do not know how we can ever apologize..."

Clemens had fallen victim to the arrow fired by an Imperial loyalist, and both Frol and Julia knew him well. When they had been rendered powerless by their fevers in Silveria, Clemens had helped to carry them back to town. In doing so, he had played a part in saving their lives. Thus, the guilt they felt at how he had been made to suffer was deep.

"The margrave showed concern for us," said Frol. "He says he will not let anything bad happen to us. However, perhaps our immigration to the mining village may be delayed because of what happened... Or perhaps now it may never even come to pass."

"The margrave said that?" asked Shiori.

"No, he did not. Still, I feel it best we prepare ourselves for banishment all the same."

When everybody had returned from battle, the apprehended Imperial had immediately been interrogated. Frol, too, had been questioned. It had already been made clear to the knights that Frol and Julia were in no way connected with the group that had resurrected the dragon. Everybody knew this. And yet, even then, the two innocent Imperials feared that the greater public would not forgive them.

Frol and Julia had turned their backs on their former home and now relied on the kingdom for support. If they were to lose the refugee camp they now called home, they would only be shunted back to a life of wandering once more. This thought was near unbearable for them—all they wanted was a safe place to call home.

"Now that you fall under the care of Storydia, I do not believe such an outcome is possible," said Alec. "Even if the relocation plans do fall through for some reason, you will be assigned to another location, I'm sure of it. The government, too, knows that this is an issue that won't be solved simply and easily."

"I... You think so?" asked Frol.

"I have heard that the king despises making life hard for the hardworking. He will see that no harm comes to you. If the

margrave speaks to him of the issue, face-to-face, it is all but guaranteed."

"I see... You might well be right. Thank you."

Frol and Julia found some solace in Alec's words, and it showed in their smiles. The government did not see fit to leave the refugees and their problems unattended, and was working on a number of plans to aid them. It was by no means a problem that would be solved overnight, but Shiori wanted to believe that things were moving in the right direction. She and Alec made sure to get the Imperials' address for future contact, then left for a quiet spot away from anybody else.

The wind rustled through the plains and gently shook the leaves in the trees. Higher still, in the northwestern part of the sky, a red star glittered—Mars, perhaps.

"How are things, really?" Shiori asked Alec, her voice low.

Alec turned his gaze to the sky and allowed a sigh to escape his lips.

"Well," he said, "I *do* know that there's talk of annexing the protectorate area."

"Yes, that was in the *Tris Times*," said Shiori. "Or at least, rumors of it anyway. They say that Nordia could move as soon as next month."

"Indeed," said Alec. "Elector Ulanov was set to lead the establishment of a new government, but the place is in far more dire straits than any expected. It looks like there is no other choice but to split the Empire between its three neighbors, each section of which will fall under its protectorate area."

He continued, "Unfortunately, the area that falls under the care of Nordia Kingdom is especially bad. It's in economic tatters, and may be well beyond any help at all. Storydia's area is comparatively better off, but that isn't saying much. That's why it'll likely be annexed before the end of the year. Once it's officially territory of the Kingdom of Storydia, there will at least be a light at the end of the tunnel with regards to finding people places to live."

"And that'll be that?"

"It won't happen overnight, but in truth, most of the refugees want to return home anyway. The rest are those with a deep-rooted aversion to the Empire; for them, the uprising was the last straw. But they, too, may find themselves wanting to return if all traces of past leadership are scrubbed and replaced with a

properly working society, complete with employment opportunities, medical care, and education. And in truth, a number of the refugees willingly returned home not long after the dust had settled anyway."

"Yes, that's true."

"People like Frol and Julia have been living the wandering life for a long time, so it's natural that they're hesitant about returning. They would also have to face those who stayed behind and struggled while they were gone. Even Marius was worried about that very thing when we last saw him."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I remember that. I suppose even if someone had their reasons for leaving, if you were left behind by them, then your feelings on the matter would be complicated."

Marius and his family had left without saying anything to anyone at home. Naturally, he had been worried that someone might snitch to the authorities, but all the same, he had taken his family and abandoned home to seek greener pastures. As such, he was not sure what to say or how to behave if he were to meet anyone from his former home.

"I just hope they can all live somewhere safe and secure sooner rather than later," said Shiori.

"You and me both. But we're all going to have to work for that future too."

They looked back at Frol and Julia to find that more people had come to offer them drinks. Those people shared some words with the Imperials, then left. Another person arrived soon after, this one offering fruit. These interactions showed Shiori that Frol and Julia had built strong bonds of trust with the knights and leadership of the refugee camp. More people came to speak with them, and in the end, a group of knights playfully forced Frol and Julia up and back to the camp to join the festivities, where they were met with smiles, arms around shoulders, and more drinks.

The future was still uncertain, but the scene that played out before Shiori's eyes was one that glimmered with the light of hope, and both she and Alec smiled at the sight of it. They drank together for a time, then returned to chat with their friends, at which point Zack called out to Alec.

"Sorry, Alec, but do you have a minute? His Excellency is calling for you."

4

"He wants a word with you in private," Zack continued.

His tone and manner were casual as he gestured to Alec. Bla wobbled at his feet.

"Hm? Oh, sure," replied Alec. "I'll be right over."

He replied with an easy grace, and even smiled. And while the expression was forced, anybody watching the back-and-forth would have assumed immediately that the margrave simply wanted to praise the new dragon slayer in person.

"What do you want to do, Shiori?" Alec asked.

Though she was with Rurii and their fellow adventurers, he was nonetheless worried that a knight might get pushy with her.

"I think I'll take a bit of a break and spend some time with Nadia and Clemens," Shiori replied.

Violid, too, sensed something between Zack and Alec, and wagged its tail: *"You'll only draw more eyes with me around, so I'm staying put."*

Alec thus withdrew from the rowdy group with Shiori and Rurii, who parted with him to visit the medic tents while he headed towards the far side of the camp. There, he arrived at a tent kept strictly private and watched over by armed guards. Inside the tent, the ground was layered canvas flooring, save for a hole in the floor—a soundproof jail built from earth magic, which was currently being used as an interrogation room. Inside was the man who had masterminded the ice dragon's resurrection and had attempted to kill Alec. His shoulder had been cleaned and bandaged since Linus had stopped him, and though he looked gaunt, he still had the energy to struggle and resist.

"You!" he screamed the moment he saw Alec. "You backstabbing son of a bitch!"

"Backstabber? What are you talking about?"

Alec shrugged. He showed not an iota of guilt. This infuriated the Imperial captive.

"How dare you?! In your veins runs the blood of the Empire!"

He lurched forward but was held down by the knights at his side.

"Enough. Show some manners before the king's elder brother."

The margrave's voice held a quiet authority, and the Imperial

—who until that moment had been struggling in vain against the knights who restrained him—froze.

“The king’s…elder brother…?” he uttered.

It was as if he needed to speak the words himself to put meaning to them. And as that meaning dawned upon him, his expression turned to one of shock.

“No, you mean to say…the one who vanished from the face of the…”

News of the third prince, and his disappearance in the midst of a power struggle for the Storydian throne, had naturally been so shocking it had even crossed the borders into neighboring states. This was no surprise, however—illegitimate or not, it was still a member of the Storydian royal family disappearing into thin air.

“I see that even an ignorant noble like yourself kept up-to-date with scandals from across the border.”

Alec looked down at the man with a sarcastic grin. The Imperial’s glare bored holes into Alec’s skull, and in that moment he put it all together—the disappearance of the king’s elder brother, and then that same brother pretending to be the younger half brother of Elector Ulanov…

“The…royal family…was behind it all…?” he spat.

“Indeed it was. All three of the royal families among the nations that surround the Empire were involved, all to remove a poison that ate away at our very continent. Elector Ulanov was a great help.”

Ulanov had begun by throwing his own personal resources at solving the problem. With hoe in hand, he had attempted to save his people. In the end, however, they had been left with nothing but the last of their seed potatoes, and with all other options exhausted, Ulanov had risked his life to crawl across the border and beg Kristoffer for help.

When Ulanov had appeared before the margrave, he was gaunt, his rough hands and sunburned skin a far cry from a typical noble’s appearance. The hardships the man had suffered were written into his very body. At the same time, this was the chance that the three nations surrounding the Empire had been waiting for—a chance to read the nation its last rites.

The uprising within the Empire had not started naturally—it had been an elaborately planned scheme, put into place by the Empire’s neighbors. When the Imperial realized that it had

practically amounted to an invasion, he was outraged.

"You can't possibly think you'll get away with this! None among the international community will let this stand!"

"Your nation was utterly merciless in its attempts to invade the countries around it. Would you wake up and listen to yourself? The Empire was originally nothing more than a far northern city-state, one that intimidated, stole, crushed, and absorbed its neighbors to rule over the continent. And you—a noble who built your wealth on the backs of countless deaths—*you* would dare talk of what the international community will allow? Don't make me laugh. We have done nothing more than return things to their original state."

Alec's voice was cold, but his heart ached with each word he spoke. A bloodless coup would have been ideal, but things had not gone that way. The uprising had its victims. And while the vast majority had been among the military under direct rule of the emperor and the military men of Imperial noble descent, not all were in cahoots with the Empire. The rebel army had also suffered casualties. And even if those losses were far lower than the typical uprising of such scale, lives had nonetheless been lost, and Alec felt the weight of them. It was, after all, the duty of the royal family to bear the strain of such losses.

"The nation of the fallen hero, Dolgast, is gone," said Alec. "The Imperial lineage ended more than twenty years ago. You know this. The Empire is dead. It has been for decades."

And everything you've done since then has been meaningless, Alec thought.

"But as members of the Imperial nobility, it is our duty to see the nation restored to glory!" shouted the man. "We must save the emperor, so that the Imperial family might live on in perpetuity, their legend spoken of into eternity!"

"You would pledge allegiance to a man like *that*? And then what?" asked Alec, his face taking on, for the first time, a touch of pity. "The man who impersonated your emperor indulged in pleasures that his nation paid for with blood. And when everything was crumbling around him, he scraped together what money he could and tried to flee across the border, together with the chancellor who masterminded the whole thing."

The emperor and the chancellor had known that the Empire was on its last legs, and so they had sought to save themselves. They had thought nothing of the nation's citizens, they had

abandoned their families, and they had taken fake names as they looked to live out the rest of their days in an affluent, temperate nation.

"They were not leaders worth staking your lives on," Alec continued. "And deep inside, you've always known that, haven't you?"

The Imperial's head sank between his shoulders.

It was true—he had always known.

No noble could have watched the lands dying before their eyes and felt nothing. And yet, they had abandoned any idea of doing the good and proper thing centuries ago, and so they were left helpless. They'd looked the other way, pushed their responsibilities on their retainers, and fled to the Imperial capital, where they could do little more than simply cling to past glory.

"Do you know why the Empire's downfall suddenly accelerated, two centuries ago?" muttered the man, his question purely rhetorical. "The emperor at the time wanted to place himself among our hallowed ancestors by rebuilding our fallen nation. He tried to play the hero, and that meant making a dragon. Yes—I speak of the ice dragon of legend."

Countless lives had been lost in efforts to steal an egg from a dragon's nest, and more still in attempts to tame the dragon born of that egg. Surgery had been conducted to make the magical beast more like that of the dragon of legend, and in taming it, the emperor had striven to recreate the second coming of an almighty hero. The dragon, however, which longed for freedom, could not be reined in, and after countless more losses, the beast had to be locked away at the bottom of the Dima Frozen Lake.

"The dragon, however, was far stronger than anyone expected for a fire dragon," continued the Imperial. "It could not be killed, and so the only option was to force the beast into eternal hibernation. Can you guess what happened next? Magic ice crystals were gathered from all across the nation and beyond, and these were used to plunge the frozen lake into even colder temperatures. It was a project of such magnitude that it literally transformed the weather, and so naturally it required an equally exorbitant amount of coin to achieve. So much money, in fact, that it sent the Empire on a downward spiral."

The man knew this because records of it still remained in his

family, written by the lord—his own ancestor—at the time the events occurred. The Imperial now laughed at the thought of it all.

“It is ridiculous, is it not? Think; all that time in the past—two hundred years ago!—our Empire was already broken beyond repair, and by its own emperor, no less.”

It was not something the Imperial ever wanted to admit. Accepting the fact was, in and of itself, near impossible. This was why the man had instead gathered together patriots in an effort to restore the former government. His refusal to accept the truth had led them all down a path of great violence.

“Many suffered, and many died, just to accompany you on your journey of ignorance. They believed you, and they followed you, and their fate was to be killed by the dragon.”

Those who had survived were now in custody. They had escaped the death penalty, but none would ever see the light of the sun again.

“Kill me. I have nothing left,” muttered the Imperial.

“What would you do, Your Highness?” asked Kristoffer.

The man had told them everything they needed to know. He, too, had seemingly accepted his fate, and confessed to it all. And so, in Kristoffer’s gaze there was a message: *“You are free now to take revenge for your friend.”*

“That is not my decision to make,” replied Alec. “He will see a just sentencing for his crimes, and he will meet with his deserved punishment.”

All knew the crimes the Imperial had committed. It was Alec’s wish that he be judged through official channels. Kristoffer and Zack lowered their heads.

“Understood.”

And with that, Alec left without a second glance.



All that could be heard in the room after were the Imperial's wails.

In the 1997th year in the history of the continent...

Upon being relegated to little more than a nation in name only, the Dolgast Empire met an abrupt and ignominious end when its territory was split between the nations of Storydia, Nordia, and Swomia following the uprising within its borders. Once the world's most powerful military force and the ruler of the entire northwestern continent, the Dolgast Empire was not even a shadow of its former self when its lands were finally absorbed into its three neighbors, marking the end of a nine-hundred-year-long history.

5

A week after the adventurers and northern knight corps successfully combined forces to vanquish a legendary ice dragon, two topics were the talk of the capital of Torisval. First was the summer solstice festival, which would start the day after tomorrow and was scheduled to run for two days. Second was the birth of a new S-rank adventurer at the Tris Adventurers' Guild.

In the annals of the Guild's history, it was exceedingly rare to ever see two S-rank adventurers at the same branch. It was no surprise that the promotion was big news. After all, the new S-rank adventurer was none other than Alec Dia, hero in the battle against the ice dragon, and master of the mythical Fenrir (in truth just a snow wolf variant).

Nadia Felice, an adventurer who had inflicted a fatal wound that had opened the way for Alec's finishing blow, had also been considered for S-rank promotion, but had declined the opportunity, citing a change to her living circumstances. It was her wish that she maintain the current status quo as she adapted to the new changes in her life.

Shiori, Ellen, and Joel were all promoted to A-rank, news that was cheerfully reported by every news organization in Tris. For those with deep ties to the Tris branch of the Guild, it was an ongoing topic of discussion.

"This is astounding, Alec."

With Violid by his side, Alec stood out. Even people who didn't know him recognized him at a glance. Passersby called out to him on the street, and Shiori looked up at him in wonder as she commented on it.

"It hasn't been like this since I lived in the castle," he said in a tired whisper, flashing her an equally exhausted smile.

"Oh?"

"Whenever I'd be out on official business somewhere, everybody would wave at me. I always smiled and waved back, but now, just as back then, I can't get used to all the attention."

"Oh…"

That was just who he was. He wasn't particularly comfortable being the center of attention or playing the role of the amicable star.

"Still," he added, "I'm going to have to get used to it, especially since I've decided to someday go back to using my real name."

Since the battle with the dragon, a letter had arrived from Alec's brother, Olivier, by way of the margrave. Olivier had thanked him for his valiant effort, congratulated him on his promotion, and informed him that he was the talk of the royal capital. Even then, however, it was unlikely that anybody in the royal capital would have believed that the hero of the day was actually the missing third prince who had vanished some decades ago.

"But it's not just me—you've gotten very popular of late too," said Alec. "Don't think I haven't seen all those guys striking up conversations with you. It's making me nervous."

"Ah… They're mostly just curious, I think."

Shiori's A-rank promotion had been awarded to her for her efforts at Dima's frozen lake, but a promotion to such heights was exceedingly rare among support classes. It wasn't quite so rare among herbalists and physickers, whose work and efforts could be more easily measured, but in Shiori's case she was an entirely new class altogether. Her promotion was about as rare as rare got.

"Your advancements have helped stop the spread of stampedes, and improved support efforts among the knight corps' medic and supply units. What is it they call you? Holy woman, saver of dragon souls? I've even seen a newspaper write you up as the Holy Mother."

"Erm… 'Holy Mother,' 'holy woman'… All these strange titles

are all a bit much," said Shiori. "People in this world really love their nicknames, don't they?"

"Strange? Shiori..."

Don't forget "merciless witch" and "the dark magenta lone wolf," thought Rurii and Violid as Shiori cast some illusion magic to shield them from excess attention. Any dedicated knight or mage would have seen through the spell in an instant, but here among the ordinary citizenry, the spell worked a treat. The adventurers thus continued on their way down main street and to the Aulin Dispensary.

The dispensary was run by Nils, and it seemed it was closed for lunch, because the place was deserted save for old Hailard, who was chatting with Eir. The familiar greeted Shiori and Alec with a wave of its leaves.

"What are you doing here, Hailard?" asked Alec.

"Nadia asked me to come," he said. "She gave me a change of clothes and a book to deliver."

Nadia was out working on a request, and she'd asked Hailard to deliver some things to Clemens on her behalf. Clemens was seeing a guest, however, and so Hailard had taken to shooting the breeze with Eir while he waited. Their respective ages perhaps made it easy for the two to chat, and both were quite engaged in their gestural conversation.

"Apparently Clemens's younger brother is here to visit from afar," explained Hailard. "They've been talking for a while now."

Clemens's younger brother, Paul Holewa, was the director of the Enandel Trading Company.

"Oh, he's here too, huh?" said Alec.

"You all know each other?" Hailard asked.

"We're acquainted, yes," replied Shiori. "So would you like us to deliver Clemens's things?"

Hailard deliberated for a moment. He wasn't sure whether to stay or go. He'd come to check up on his old pupil, after all.

"All right, I'll leave the stuff with you, then," he said finally, saying goodbye to Eir and the adventurers and taking his leave.

Aulin Dispensary was part of a row of terrace houses, and it was designed to be both a storefront and Nils's home. At the far end of the dispensary was the guest room, which also acted as a patient's room. Violid realized that it wasn't a particularly spacious room, and elected to stay by the counter with Eir. Rurii, too, wobbled by the wolf's side—the familiars were happy to wait

outside.

The two adventurers approached the guest room door, but paused in confusion when they heard the noise coming from it.

“Pretty noisy for someone visiting a patient, don’t you think?” mused Shiori.

“Yeah. Surely they haven’t broken out into an argument, have they?”

Alec hesitantly knocked at the door.

“Oh, hello,” said Nils, poking his head out. “Sorry, Clemens is a little busy at present. Family is here.”

Behind the herbalist, they saw a silver-haired gentleman clinging to Clemens and wailing loudly.

“Wow, that’s not the Paul I know,” muttered Alec. “He’s really out of sorts.”

“Oh, you’ve met, then?” asked Nils.

Clemens’s younger brother, Paul Holewa, had gotten word that his brother was seriously wounded and had immediately left to see him. According to Nils, he had burst into the dispensary still completely clad in all his traveling gear.

“I *wrote* you,” they heard Clemens say. “I *told* you it wasn’t fatal.”

“But it was in the newspapers on the way here!” cried Paul. “Imperial supporters attacked an adventurer! He lost consciousness! He was in critical condition! He was poisoned and his life hung in the balance! They said there was no telling whether or not you’d make it another day! As soon as I read the description, I knew they were talking about you! What if your condition worsened, I thought… What if I don’t make it in time, I thought… I was utterly beside myself!”

This was a far cry from the graceful, refined director they had met on their visit to the Enandel Trading Company, but that just showed how worried he was.

“The papers always go overboard with that kind of thing,” explained Clemens. “You *know* that, Paul.”

“Yes, I do… I do, but still!”

Paul wept as he clutched at Clemens who, sitting up in bed, simply patted his brother’s back gently.

“I was lucky,” Clemens said. “My injury was treated straightaway. It’ll take some time before I’m fully recovered, but the wound was closed as of yesterday. Now I just have to rest and build up my strength. Nils even gave the okay for me to start

on rehabilitation as of tomorrow. So come now, enough with the tears."

Paul replied with only a wail. Shiori couldn't help but smile at the sight. The brothers were close-knit, and she saw something of her relationship with her own brother in them.

"And more importantly, I'm getting married. So if you're going to cry, it should at least be in celebration."

"You're WHAT?!"

It was as if a bomb had just dropped on Paul. His mouth was agape as tears streamed down his face. Clearly, maintaining his reputation as the esteemed director of a trading company was the last thing on his mind.

"What?! Getting married?! But to whom? Miss Nadia? Wait—but last time we talked it sounded to me like you were still trying to woo her. It's only been four months since! Four months... Isn't this all a bit sudden?!"

"Okay, calm down, Paul. Deep breaths. I think you might be in shock."

"Is it not understandable that I might be SHOCKED by such news?!"

As far as Paul knew, his slow-moving brother had only just found a girl he liked enough to really try for. Then he'd been suddenly injured and at death's door, unsure if the light of tomorrow was something he'd ever bear witness to. But not only was Clemens going to recover—he was also getting married.

Shock was perhaps the only natural reaction. Paul had been so worried that he was now well beyond such trifles as embarrassment and reputation.

"Okay, okay," said Nils gently. "I think that's enough of that for now, don't you? How about we all take a break and then come back to the topic again later, hm? Let's not forget that Clemens is still injured."

Nils's calm and ease of being brought Paul back to his senses, and he spun to look at the others in the room.

"I, well..." he uttered, his face blushing red. "You've caught me in the midst of a most embarrassing moment..."

"No need to worry, such reactions are all too common in these circumstances," said Nils. "How about staying the night? I'm sure you and Clemens have much to talk about."

Paul was a touch hesitant about the idea at first, but eventually accepted the herbalist's suggestion.

“I’m going to head out for a moment to send word to my family,” he said, but on his way he stopped to whisper an update to Shiori: “We’re almost done and will have some test products for you to take a look at.”

The freeze-dried food production which she’d left to Enandel to manage was finally taking shape.

“I’m so glad to hear that it’s all coming together,” she said.

“You and me both,” added Alec, smiling as he dropped a kiss on his lover’s forehead. No doubt many others also felt the same way.

“By the way,” whispered Nils as Paul was heading out the door, “I feel as if I’ve just been made witness to a most unbelievable secret…”

He held in his hand Paul’s business card. Paul had introduced himself with his Holewa surname, and his business card clearly stated that he was Enandel’s director. Working out Clemens’s identity from there was a piece of cake.

“You know, a *long* time ago, I *did* hear the rumors that the founders of Holewa and Co. were a family of three brothers, the middle of which disappeared in his teens…which makes Clemens, well, a rather important fellow.”

Shiori couldn’t help but chuckle a little at Nils’s reaction, as it reminded her very much of her own when she’d found out.

“And hasn’t Clemens known the guild master since they were both kids? Family business connections or some such thing? That would make Zack part of some equally important noble family too, wouldn’t it? Oh my, oh no, I feel like I’m seeing a web of connections I’m far better off not knowing about at all.”

Nils knew how to keep a secret. He was a doctor, after all, and he was not the type to go spreading gossip about his patients. Paul and Clemens had both understood this, which was why they’d made the herbalist privy to the truth. Nils, for his part, let out something of a dry chuckle.

“And speaking of which, didn’t the third prince go missing around the same time? He, too, was never found, so you have to wonder if he’s just prancing around out there right under our very noses…”

As the thoughts coalesced in Nils’s mind, he turned to look at Shiori and Alec, his sentence trailing off into silence. He took a long hard look at his friend Alec, the magical swordsman. He thought things through—the name, the chestnut-colored hair,

the dark magenta eyes, and his age being just right, if you calculated the years…all of which pointed to the missing prince.

"No. No, no, no," said Nils. "There's just no way. That hair and those eyes are everywhere. And Alec is a hugely popular name here, regardless of age."

He paused a moment to chuckle.

"Yes, utterly impossible," he said, negating his own hypothesis until he became aware of the silence emanating from his friends. "Oh. What is it? Why are you two so quiet all of a sudden?"

Even Rurii spun so as to avert its gaze from the herbalist. Violid saw to cleaning his fur, its expression saying something along the lines of *"Well, I knew he was anything but ordinary the very day we met…"*

"You've always been a good friend," said Alec, sighing as he rested a hand on Nils's shoulder. "I trust you to keep a secret. In truth, I feel I can trust you with anything. And I trust now that in sharing the truth with you, I won't lose your friendship."

"Huh?" uttered Nils.

"It's going to come to light eventually, but I hope you'll keep it secret until it does."

The blood drained from Nils's face.

"Of course I will," he said. "And yes, you can trust me with anything. I won't let you down."

The herbalist watched the two adventurers and their familiars leave, and a twitchy smile crept to his face.

"Huh?" he uttered. "But didn't Alec say that his father and Zack's father were friends through work, and that's how they met? That *is* what he said, isn't it? But that would mean…that the guild master's own family are at the very least royal aides, no? Oh no, I hate this! I'm stuck in this web of connections I'm far better off not knowing about at all!"

Learning a patient's secrets was part and parcel of Nils's job. He was also well aware that it was not at all uncommon for people to become adventurers to escape their pasts. Nils was a certified doctor, an herbalist, *and* an adventurer—certain secrets were simply bound to make their way to him. In this case, however, the weight of those secrets would require some time to be fully comprehended.

"But he did say…I'm a good friend… He *did* say that, didn't he?"

Alec had said he trusted Nils, and that he did not want to lose their friendship. Thinking back on the words made Nils smile.

“I guess it’s not that bad after all,” he said, as he looked out at the people walking by the window.

The threat of the Empire and its dragon was gone, and so the expressions on the faces Nils saw outside were bright and happy. Everybody was looking forward to the summer solstice festival. That light, easy feeling in the air was one that he and his friends had helped to secure through their actions, and a surge of pride swelled in Nils’s chest.

“May your friends and your home bring you happiness.”

He uttered the words of a prayer as his familiar, Eir, watched over him.

6

Two days later came the eve of the summer solstice festival. The skies were clear and a refreshing breeze drifted upon the air; the weather couldn’t have been more perfect. Shiori, Alec, and their two familiars boarded a carriage from the Guild, bound for the northern border. Today they were visiting the site of the battle with the dragon, and attending the festival being held at the refugee camp nearby.

The magical beast corpses that had littered the roads had now been cleared away, and all the people who had evacuated to safety were now back in their rightful homes. The villages the adventurers passed through on their travels were all bustling and lively, their residents actively rebuilding their lives.

“Everybody is so resilient,” Shiori remarked.

“That’s how we’ve gotten this far,” replied Alec.

“Indeed.”

The main camp at which the knight corps’ top brass had overseen the battle was long gone, and not a trace of it remained. Now there was only the temporary research center, built at the Dima Frozen Lake for the purpose of investigating both the dragon and the lake itself. It was in the direction of this very research center that Shiori and Alec traveled.

They alighted from the guild carriage at a temporary knight station and boarded a transport carriage bound for the lake. With travel to the frozen lake having been more frequent as of late, the roads were well maintained, if rather basic.

“I read in the papers that a huge amount of magical ice stones were discovered at the bottom of the lake,” said Shiori.

“Do you think they’ll be recovered?”

“Count on it,” replied Alec. “There’s an Imperial installation at the end of an underground waterway nearby. It seems that if they enter through there, it’s possible to slowly gather the stones. All things going well, they may be able to recoup some of the losses to the area.”

“I hope it goes well, then.”

Their carriage came to a stop at a familiar hill—it was the site of the first defensive line on the day of the battle. Unauthorized entry past this point was forbidden, and the two adventurers were no exception.

“I don’t imagine it would be very nice to see a dragon being dissected anyway,” said the knight accompanying them. “Best to pay your respects from here.”

The two adventurers were allowed to walk to the top of the hill, which offered a view of the frozen lake below. The dragon was still where it had fallen in battle, and was now covered in ice. Knights and researchers worked busily around it. Upon closer inspection, however, it was clear that everybody was treating the dragon’s body with great respect.

“They’ll take tissue samples back to Tris and the royal capital for safekeeping,” explained the knight, “but the rest of the dragon will be buried here once the examination is concluded. Felled dragons are usually taken and dissected for use as materials, but the northern knight corps made the decision to leave as much of the dragon intact as possible, and bury it near the lake. It’s understandable, given what the creature went through.”

Plans were also being put in place to build a memorial park at the site. The location would act as a balm for the dragon’s departed soul, but also as a way to inform future generations of the tragic history of the Empire. The construction of such a location would mean more work in the area, and the locals were grateful for the income—especially because magical beast numbers had fallen sharply after the stampedes.

“The regiment commander of the magic unit wasn’t happy about it,” added the knight. “He said we were just letting precious materials go to waste.”

That very commander, Appelberg, had tried to recruit Shiori into his ranks. Apparently his unit had been short on manpower. The fact that this knight was willing to speak openly about him

seemed to indicate that he wasn't particularly well-liked among the knights.

"What does that mean for the dragon?" asked Shiori. "Is it possible that someone will come to dig it up later? Or will Appelberg try to have the decision overturned?"

"I don't think there's anything to worry about," replied the middle-aged knight. "The other day Commander Appelberg was apprehended near the research center. He was stumbling about in just his underwear, and summarily dismissed. I guess he must have been sleepwalking or something."

Shiori and Alec stared at one another in silence, then looked down at Rurii by their feet. The slime wobbled.

"Wasn't me."

In which case, it had likely been Bla. The slime was Zack's familiar, which meant it often met with the margrave and the knight corps. It must have had some thoughts on the matter of the dragon, and acted on them.

"Nothing worth worrying over," continued the knight. "He was never popular with the female knights on account of his...loose morals and disrespectful manner, so the timing was perfect, really."

"Oh, so there was sexual harassment, then..." muttered Shiori.

"If it had all been kept quiet, everybody would've just thought of him as a handsome man popular with the more mature crowd. But it is what it is."

"I... I see."

Shiori couldn't help wondering if she'd have become another of Appelberg's victims, had she ended up in his unit. By her side, Alec was fuming, a vein pulsing at his temple. Shiori took a moment to calm him down, and then, with the dragon's scale clasped in hand, she offered the magical beast her prayers.

"We'll see you again," she said as they left.

Perhaps the words reached their intended recipient, because the air around the dragon's body wavered slightly, as if a gentle light were dancing around it.

The two adventurers went back the way they came and met with Zack and some others at around eight in the evening. The northwestern mountains were dyed a deep red, and a first-magnitude star glimmered in the dull purple sky. Still, the air was anything but lonely, and the border area was lit by magical

lanterns and filled with smiling faces. Merchant tents were set up around the stronghold, and many refugees hovered around them hoping to get a good deal with the money they'd made.

"I'm so glad," said Shiori, taking in the sight of it all. "There are even more merchants here than I was expecting."

In the aftermath of the dragon attack, and with many places still recovering, some merchants had been unable to attend the usual summer solstice festivals. For a time, the festivals themselves had been in danger of being canceled. The fact that the festival here was open at all was a sign that things were stable.

"The Empire was involved, after all," she continued. "It seems that some people were up in arms about it."

"Well, after what happened..." mused Alec, "I can understand people getting emotional."

Even then, most of Storydia's citizens took everything in stride, and many felt that the refugees and the Imperial supporters shouldn't be lumped together under the same umbrella. Doing so would only mean that the ordinary Imperial citizens would be made to suffer for the crimes of the nobility. Shiori and Alec discussed the matter as they looked around, but were taken by surprise when one tent in particular caught their eye.

Among the tents and merchants was a tarpaulin-covered cart, around which was a group of people in foreign dress. The flowery design on the cart's tarpaulin was an Eastern family seal —the mark of the Yobai Trading Company. One of the Easterners noticed Shiori and her pointy hat, and ran back to the cart to inform somebody inside. A moment later, a woman in full martial uniform emerged.

"Miss Shiori! You're here!"

"Miss Yae!" replied Shiori happily. "It's been so long!"

Yae Yamabuchi, head of the Yobai Trading Company, burst into a smile the moment she saw Shiori's face. She leapt from the cart to greet her, followed by her bodyguard, Shonosuke Goto, who struggled to keep up. Hugs and handshakes were shared, and Yae explained what she was doing at the festival.

"When we heard that there was a festival to support refugees, we simply had to take part, and hustled to make it happen. I sent you a letter, but it looks like perhaps it has yet to arrive."

Yae had sent a letter telling Shiori of the Yobai Trading

Company's participation, but it seemed that the dragon attack had impacted the postal service too.

"I'd heard the rumors of a hero and a holy woman vanquishing a legendary dragon, and it would appear that those rumors are in fact true."

Yae had noticed the dragon scale pieces they wore around their necks, and the beautiful giant wolf waiting placidly behind Alec.

"Well, we didn't do it alone," said Shiori, "and it's a bit embarrassing to have people get the wrong impression from these new nicknames."

"You find the title a bit much, then?"

The sudden question took Shiori by surprise, and for a moment she dropped into thought.

"I did at first," she replied finally, "but now I've come to think that it's perhaps necessary. It's good for me, yes, but it might also act as something for someone to aim for, or a source of support for others. I don't mind it so long as it doesn't devolve into just idol worship."

A title was a heavy weight to bear. But it was also a necessary part of spreading a message and leaving a legacy. Shiori understood this. Yae listened to the housekeeping mage's answer and nodded to herself.

"It is a title you have built with your achievements," she said with a smile, "and it will allow you influence. I see you understand this, and I trust that things will go well. You may find less trustworthy types crawling out of the woodwork to find you, but you can always have your knight in shining armor drive them away."

Yae had seen much on her travels, and so Shiori took her words to heart.

"Yes, and I will endeavor to see that I do not sully the reputation I build for myself."

"Just don't try...*too* hard, yes?"

Yae did not know Shiori so well as to be aware of all her past troubles, but she seemed to sense something in the housekeeping mage, and saw fit to caution her. With this topic out of the way, the women got down to discussing their lives of late. Yae and Shonosuke were shocked to hear about Clemens's injury, his recovery, and the fact that he and Nadia intended to marry. All of it left Yae deep in thought, and worrying as to

whether or not it was rude in Storydian culture to send a get-well-soon present and a congratulatory gift at the same time.

"And how about you?" asked Shiori afterwards. "I was so surprised to see that the northern knight corps have begun using soy sauce."

"Yes, sales are quite good, but at present much of the interest in it amounts to little more than a fad. We'll need to work on getting a clearer view of the big picture."

"I see..."

It was very much like Yae to temper her joy when it came to recent successes. That said, business relations with the Lovners were good. And when Yae hinted that she and Walt Lovner were now a romantic couple, Alec and Shiori couldn't hide their shock. When they heard that it had all come about thanks to rare Eastern sweets, however, they laughed—that seemed just like them, and *especially* like Walt.

A relationship between the heir of one of the esteemed Lovner branch families and the daughter of an Eastern trading company made for a potentially complicated and difficult road ahead. All the same, Shiori hoped that talks would head in a favorable direction.

"Oh, by the way," said Alec, "we're putting on a weapons performance as part of the entertainment. How about joining us, Shonosuke?"

As part of the Adventurers' Guild's entertainment, Zack and Alec were going to display their skills in battle. Kristoffer had suggested it, saying that seeing the two heroes in action would be sure to instill hope and courage into the hearts of all who watched. At least, that was his official reasoning. There was another reason for the performance too—that of displaying the power of Storydia's finest, so as to intimidate any remaining Imperial fanatics and stay their hands. In this sense, the summer solstice festival, too, was not a purely charitable event; it also served as something of a conciliatory act for those who would now live their lives as Storydians.

"Me?" asked Shonosuke.

He blinked, unsure how to react to the sudden request.

"I won't force you, of course, but it'll be all the more exciting with you in the mix."

"Ah, I see..."

"Go on, do it," said Yae, giving her hesitant bodyguard a

verbal nudge. “It’s not every day you get such an opportunity.”

“Sounds exciting,” said Shiori.

“Yeah,” said Alec, “*and* it gives us a chance to spar under the handy pretext of it being nothing more than a performance.”

“Oh, I see.”

Once he’d agreed to it, Shonosuke was all in, and they agreed upon a time to meet and prepare before parting ways.

“They seem to be doing well, and just talking to them really energized me,” said Shiori. “It’s a bit like the refreshing feel of a pristine breeze, if that makes sense.”

“In the end, we’re all very similar; we get along well.”

“Yes. I feel so nostalgic seeing them again.”

The lands of the East were Shiori’s home, even if that only went so far as official documentation. She hoped to visit someday.

After meeting with Shonosuke to discuss the planned performance, Shiori and Alec turned in for an early night. With all the people around and all the excitement in the air, Shiori wasn’t sure she’d be able to sleep, but perhaps thanks to the long journey, she slept straight through to the morning.

When she awoke, there was already a liveliness in the air. The merchants who had risen early already had their stalls and shops open, and they bustled with shoppers. The refugees had decorated their tents and temporary homes with woven flower decorations, and kids played and ran among them. Many were dressed in traditional clothing donated by Storydians. The vibrant colors and embroidery were beautiful—the patterns varied from material to material, and all the embroidery and designs were unique, perhaps representing different localities.

“I was worried that this sort of thing might hurt their feelings, and their sense of place and home,” said Shiori, “but it looks like that’s not the case.”

Alec’s eyebrows drooped as a sorrow draped itself across his features.

“Over many long years of poverty, just as many traditions were slowly lost throughout the Empire,” he said. “Song and dance have somehow endured to the present day, but many were forced to sell their traditional clothing and craftwork… Only a small portion of such items remain now. Even bright paints and dyes became luxuries, meaning that new items could not be

made to replace the old. Think of the material you usually see the refugees clothed in and it makes sense—undyed cottons, browns, and sometimes deep greens. For the most part they simply wear the materials as they are."

"Now that you mention it..."

This was a culture that had not been lost to the invasion of foreign tribes, but rather at the hands of the nation's own government. Perhaps when a country began to erase its own culture, it started on a path that ended in its own demise. Thinking of it all struck Shiori with an acute sense of melancholy.

"Will it just fade away, then?" she asked.

"As long as artifacts and records still remain, there is a chance for recovery. It's likely that when the situation calms and people have more time on their hands, some will endeavor to reclaim their lost past."

"I hope so..."

"Nadia knows a lot about such things. Her homeland put a great deal of effort into its arts and culture. Even now that it is gone, she continues to hone her embroidery skills because it is her wish to inherit that part of her nation's past."

"I see... Hmm. I'm so in awe of all these people," Shiori remarked.

She was, it had to be said, overwhelmed by it all.

"But you're no different," Alec said. "You have taken the wisdom and technology of your home and adapted it in such a way that it fits with us here in Storydia. That much was crystal clear in the battle we fought not so long ago. It might not always be very noticeable, but there's no doubt your work is having an effect."

"Thanks, Alec."

Skills and traditions were passed on. Stories were told from generation to generation. And as it all traveled from one person to another, it shifted and changed and found a place of being. In this way, the hopes and feelings of humans were inherited, always changing shape as they traveled. This was no different for meetings and encounters between people. As lives intertwined and overlapped, new threads were woven.

"And perhaps we too..." muttered Alec.

"Hm?"

Shiori looked up at her lover's dark magenta eyes, which glittered like amethyst in the light of the sun.

“In our life together, perhaps we, too, will someday weave a new thread all of our own.”

“No, not perhaps,” said Shiori, smiling as she ran her fingers along Alec’s cheek. “We will. I’ll be waiting for the day.”

Alec’s eyes widened with surprise, then softened as he smiled.

“I’m sorry I’ve made you wait so long.”

“No, I know how you feel. I understand you wanting to put things behind you and start fresh.”

“But it won’t be long now. Once I settle things with Olivier and Rebby, it will be time…”

He took her hand and planted a kiss on her left ring finger. He spoke a few words as he did so, but they were lost among the boisterous chatter that surrounded them. The words did not reach Shiori’s ears, but they did not have to—the feelings that filled them made their way to her heart all the same.

The men hoisted up a summer solstice maypole decorated with seasonal flowers and lush greenery, and when it was secured in place, the people cheered. Traveling performers and musicians put on shows and entertained the crowds while they danced. Rurii and Bla, too, wobbled to the music, and Violid chose to sway.

It was a vibrant scene, one of light and great happiness.

Shiori and Alec watched it with a smile and shared a silent kiss.



The summer festival held that day at the refugees' border camp was lively like no other before it. The people felt freed of a cursed past, and with the hope of new days ahead, their expressions were bright. It was a celebration of blessings and prayers, and it lasted well into the night.

Marius the grocer had a stall open at the refugee camp festival, and it was at this festival that he miraculously reconnected with a childhood friend—one he had assumed he would never see again. Unable to find words for the depths of their emotion, the two embraced while those around shed tears of joy and cried out happily.

The place Marius called home had seen many lives lost over the last ten years, and its survivors had made their way across the border thanks to the rebel forces and the allied military's informants.

Following the summer solstice festival, Marius helped his friend and many other families to find work and put down roots in Tris. Some eventually returned to their villages once they became part of Storydian territory, while others left for the colony being built at the border, where they found a new place to call home.

Frol and Julia, who had fought in the battle with the ice dragon, also became residents of the colony founded not far from the Dima Frozen Lake. There, they led the other villagers in cultivating the new lands and recovering the magical ice stones that had sunk to the bottom of the frozen lake centuries ago.

Upon the burial of the ice dragon, Frol and Julia worked as the grave's caretakers and sources of knowledge regarding the Empire's past. In later years, the margrave would even appoint Frol the chief of the colony, where he led his people with his wife, Julia, ever at his side.

The Adventurers' Guild's weapons display was such a success that stories of it were passed down for generations. The fierce power of the two dragon slayers was such that all who witnessed it were pulled into its vortex.

On the one hand was Zack, who deftly wielded a greatsword as big as a fully grown man, and on the other was Alec, who moved and fought with an agility far beyond that of most men

his height and build. A reporter from the *Tris Times* would later say the performance was like “bearing witness to the dance of the War God and the Dragon God.”

The performance by the Eastern swordsman Shonosuke, too, was received with great excitement, even though his addition had been rather sudden. The samurai was dressed head to toe in black cloth, his blade flashing through the air like the sharp light of the crescent moon over the evening twilight.

Observers said it was akin to watching a light illuminate the dark roads ahead. For many of the refugees, who were still uncertain of what the future held in store for them, the Easterner struck them as the incarnation of the God of Guidance.

“That’s a bit much, isn’t it?” the samurai had commented, his face red with embarrassment.

“You’ve given them the hope they so desired,” said his master, Yae. “Just accept it, would you?”

The samurai thus made his peace with the high praise heaped upon him.

Shiori’s “narrated pictures,” cast by way of her illusion magic, were another popular topic of discussion. As one would have expected of the holy woman who’d brought peace to the heart of a tormented dragon as it left this world, her illusion magic filled hearts with tenderness and hope. The images of the beauty of the wide world—complete with soaring musical accompaniment—soothed the souls of all who watched, many of whom had endured much hardship.

And when the new hero finished his weapons display only to kneel before the holy woman and pledge to her his love eternal, it brought on a round of cheers and applause.

Many hundreds of people worshipped the hero and the holy woman, but in truth they, too, were simply human. The *Tris Times* reporter acknowledged this, but closed their article by stating that it was on nights like these that legends were made and passed on through the ages.

The early summer sky was a startling blue, and it looked down upon the people earnestly singing and dancing, and praying for peace in the days ahead.

Interlude: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ June XX

Recently, the days have been really long and the nights really short. I even heard that if you go farther north, it's daylight all day. Literally! But in the winter it's the opposite, and always dark. It's so strange.

But it's the season when the days are their longest, and all the humans hold festivals. They dance, they sing, they eat delicious food, and they pray for a good harvest in the fields and lots of bounties in the mountains. All the humans are getting ready for such festivals and they're really excited about it.

Slimes, meanwhile, live that kind of life every single day. Literally! I wonder if humans think we slimes are eternally festive?

■ June XX

Everybody *was* looking forward to the festivals, but in the Blue Forest they spotted a Fenrir. Now everybody is worried. When I heard about it, it sounded to me a lot like a purple snow wolf. There aren't many of them, and they're a rare magical beast, but I've bumped into them a few times.

The humans are all bent out of shape because they don't know what kind of magical beast it is or what it's up to. They're so scared, in fact, that lots of people who were planning to visit Brovito for the festival aren't coming anymore. That's why a knight in Brovito Village sent a request asking for adventurers to investigate.

But the purple snow wolves are never very rough or violent, so I don't think they need to be so terrified. The snow wolf is probably more scared than any of them. That's why they've run away whenever they've seen people. Also, the last purple snow wolf I met was really talkative. A bit of a weird one, sure, but still lots of fun.

Speaking of Brovito, my slimekin have been hanging out there a lot recently. They're all friendly with the locals now, so every day's a blast. When did *that* happen?

■ June XX

We took a carriage to Brovito. I talked to the eight-legged horses pulling it, and they told me *all* the best spots to look out for. They told me that when you cross the first bridge, the pearl berry tree there *always* has one golden berry, and that past the next village there's a big white phasmid that always pretends to be a washing line, and that the ravines look like a cute horse when seen through the forest.

And they were right about everything!

I was really surprised when we got to Brovito, because it really *is* filled with all my slimekin. They were all friendly with the humans and having fun going for walks with them or helping them at work. Some of the villagers had even made slimes their official familiars. I really wanted to talk to everyone and play, but I'm a slime with a job to do.

Let's talk later, bros!

The knight who requested our help was Caspar, who we met during the snow wolf attack. Everything had finally started to calm down after that, and all of a sudden he had to deal with a new Fenrir problem. He really had his hands full, always supporting the worried villagers, and he wasn't sleeping much because of it. He was rubbing his eyes a lot as he talked to us.

Shiori and Alec were worried that we might be searching for a long time, but that wasn't the case—the Fenrir actually came to us. And you know what? It was that really talkative purple snow wolf I met a while back. Shiori and Alec were shocked by the sight of him, but the Fenrir was beyond overjoyed. He was all huffing and puffing with excitement, so I asked if he was okay.

"I think this might be my soulmate! Oh my goodness, of course I'm excited!"

That made so much sense! That's totally a good reason to be excited. Even Bla was excited, but that was because it loves rare creatures!

The Fenrir became Alec's familiar, and is now named Violid. It's the name of a snow violet knight, apparently. Vio was *so* happy about it. According to the village's old hunters, Vio is actually just a snow wolf variant, and not a Fenrir after all. But because of the color of his fur and eyes, variants like Vio aren't liked in snow wolf packs. Vio has lived almost entirely alone his whole life, and he's been really lonely. I think that's why he was so happy to chat with the locals and eat with them.

Also, Vio reminds me a whole lot of Bertil for some reason. Same vibes or something.

■ June XX

Fenrir crisis averted! False alarm! Phew! Glad that's done and dusted.

We were all ready to breathe a sigh of relief, but that's when something really big happened to the north. It scared all the humans and the magical beasts. Turns out it was a dragon, and all the birds nearby were so scared they came flying south. Shiori and Alec received an emergency call to gather with the other adventurers, so we hurried home as fast as we could.

Zack was waiting at the Guild fully decked out in his armor. The Guild had received a request from Kris, and Zack was set to lead the attack on the dragon. The margrave's request was calamity level, which is the biggest *ever*. That's why Zack was going—he'd slain dragons twice before.

Still, it was the kind of battle that maybe you wouldn't come back from. So only the most capable went. Shiori, Alec, Clemens, and Nadia for starters. Ludger and Marena decided to go too, as did Nils and Ellen. It really was a collection of Tris's finest. But even then there was no guarantee that everyone would make it back home.

It was the first time for all of us to be on such a dangerous job.

I'm going to have to really give it my best too.

■ June XX

We departed for the north late that same night. Small magical beast stampedes were already breaking out, but the knights were fighting them back. There weren't nearly as many losses as everyone had expected, and as it turned out, that was on account of Shiori's search magic. Using search magic meant the knights could see the flow of possible stampedes and nip them in the bud before anybody got hurt.

But that also meant that some of the knight corps' commanders wanted to take Shiori for their own units. She turned them down, though. She was really great, and I was really glad.

She's not just some tool for you guys to use.

I didn't want Shiori to ever be put in that kind of situation

again, so I wanted to give Kris a bit of a “warning,” if you will.

“Not now, please,” he said to me.

But “not now” also means “maybe later.”

■ Early Morning, June XX

After a short rest, we left to take on the dragon.

The Imperials we helped way back at Silveria were fighting alongside us. I remembered carrying them from the tower back to town. The one named Frol thanked me for my help. Back then, they were both so weak they were practically already ghosts, but now they’re healthy.

Still, Frol and Julia were sad and angry because the dragon was an experiment that the Imperials sealed away, and their own countrymen had gone and woken it up. They were really troubled by the fact that their own people were the culprits. Storydia had been really good to the refugees, but then these nasty Imperials went and spat in their faces. That’s why Frol and Julia were so sad and angry.

But at the same time, I didn’t think anyone blamed Frol and Julia, so I didn’t think they had to feel so awful about it. Bla tried to cheer them up by giving them a glitter star ladybug wing. They were shocked at first, but it brightened them up and made them smile. Apparently glitter star ladybug wings are a good luck charm, and something good happens to people who carry them.

I sure hope lots of really good things happen!

■ The Battle with the Dragon, June XX

Ugh. The closer we got to the dragon, the more I got this creepy feeling crawling all over me. Everybody else felt it too, and it made some people sick. Some knights who touched it with their search magic even collapsed. That’s how creepy the dragon was. But also it was totally massive.

And we have to fight it?

I was a bit worried, but everyone was really cool. It made me think that maybe they’d never even needed to show their full potential until now. The battle was *that* amazing.

Zack, Alec, and Clemens—they all looked like warring gods out of a picture book. Nadia even went toe to toe in a magical battle with the dragon. Shiori did as she always does, and supported everyone with her housekeeping magic. When she

scrubbed the dragon's wing clean with her laundry magic, all the familiars trembled with fright.

"Behold, the infamous merciless witch! She treats even dragons as mere items of laundry!"

Hmm...

Just how far is that rumor going to travel—I mean, really?

But what's *really* amazing about Shiori is that she's helpful all over the place and she doesn't even know it. I mean, Nils and Ellen both used search magic to locate the dragon's weak points, and the medics all made makeshift beds for patients just like Shiori had. They were even ready to make more if it was necessary. Then you have to remember the stampedes, which were cleaned up and handled before they grew out of hand because of Shiori's magic.

I heard someone say that even though her work doesn't always seem groundbreaking, making everybody's job easier and more effective isn't nearly as easy as it looks. And you know what? I think that's exactly what Shiori's power is. I'm so proud of her.

The battle raged on, but right when I thought we had the dragon on the ropes...Clemens was struck by a poison arrow. He threw himself in front of Alec to save him from some Imperial guy. Clemens said he would be fine, but even *he* knew it looked pretty bad. He was in lots of pain. Shiori, Alec, and Nadia all went pale, and Linus looked madder than I'd ever seen him as he shot the Imperial with his bow. Frol ran over and hit the man too; he was so mad.

Thanks to Ellen and all her hard work, Clemens was saved. I heard later that Ellen had seen how hard Shiori worked, and it inspired her to study further. If she'd never done that, then maybe she wouldn't have been able to save Clemens like she did. Shiori's always inspiring people and we just never know it!

And at the very end of the battle, when it was all over, Shiori and Alec saved the dragon too. They couldn't save its life, but they totally saved its heart. It had been lost and all alone since it was born, and they gave it all the warmth it had ever wanted. It told them before it left for the afterlife that if it was ever born again, it hoped it would be to people just like Shiori and Alec.

Everyone prayed that the dragon would find happiness in its next life, and some offered it flowers. Shiori and Alec even got the dragon's scale, which according to Eir—who is very

knowledgeable about things—means some promised thing is supposed to happen.

I wonder what *that* means?

■ June XX

After all the dragon-slaying business, lots of good things really *did* happen, and everyone was really happy.

Clemens was in a bad spot, but he's set to make a complete recovery. Yay! Everybody thought he was maybe going to die, so they all cried with joy. Clemens and Nadia are going to become mates when he gets better. He even has the dress ready!

"When that guy makes up his mind, he's full steam ahead, every time," said Zack with a chuckle.

It turns out that Marena has a baby in her belly, and that shocked everybody. We were all glad just to hear that she was safe after the battle. It was a whole ordeal, though. I heard that Ludger was so surprised that he collapsed, but actually he was so *loud* that Eir had to *put him to sleep*.

I mean. That's pretty shocking.

Everyone started calling Alec and Shiori "the hero and the holy woman." And they were both promoted! Alec is S-rank now, and Shiori is A-rank. It's almost impossible to make it to S-rank, and it's super rare for support classes to ever make it as high as A-rank. Naturally, everybody is super happy for them.

Shiori and Alec don't really like standing out, but apparently they might need special ranks because they've both got special circumstances to navigate. Sometimes ranks like the ones they have now actually protect them in some ways. I mean, some people might try to take advantage of their positions, but Shiori and Alec can handle that much.

I thought that maybe it was time I raised my game, but Shiori told me to stay just the way I was. So I'm just going to wobble like always and keep a close eye on things!

■ June XX

I received a long-distance message from Bla, who went with Zack to talk with the knight corps. Bla melted the pants off some knight called Appelberg. He was one of the knight commanders who wanted Shiori in his unit. The guy tried to get up to some mischief with a girl who'd taken a liking to Bla, so Bla made sure he wouldn't do it again. Or ever. I was worried that maybe Bla

went too far, but actually Appelberg was trying to do stuff that you're only supposed to do when you actually mate with your mate, so I guess it's a case of just deserts.

Even Kris was all like, "He brought it on himself. Let it go."

Kris and the other knights said that they'd handle the rest. Which is good to hear.

So don't any of you go trying any more funny business, you hear?

■ June XX

Today was the summer solstice festival, and it was *so* much fun! Human festivals are full of delicious food, song and dance, and all sorts of fun stuff. People had gone through some tough times and some sad times too, but everybody had a great time at the festival. All the bad times were over, and so it was time to let the good times roll. Or wobble.

Frol and Julia decided to help build a new village to live in, and they looked like they were having a great time talking to their soon-to-be fellow villagers.

Shiori and Alec were all smiles, and were both glad to bump into Yae and Shonosuke after such a long time. Violid was happy too—he got to talk to lots and lots of new people and magical beasts. He's having a great time in his new life, and every day is full of new, refreshing experiences.

Gosh, I'm having a great time. I'm just so happy.

I really hope this kind of thing can just go on forever.

And you know, when those thoughts crossed my mind, I felt like the dragon scale pendants around Shiori's and Alec's necks glimmered. That made me think that the dragon was having a good time with all the rest of us.

And that made me happy too.

Side Story: To Pledge Eternal Love upon a Snow Violet

It was the middle of the night, a few days after the summer solstice. It was the brightest season in the whole year, and one that buoyed the spirits of the people. Many were still out enjoying the evening, their laughter and mirth echoing from their houses or local eateries and pubs. Even as one day changed into another, a dull light still covered the sky as friends, family, and lovers alike passed the time in one another's company.

A light breeze drifted through the window as Shiori looked down at the people still walking the streets. The couples huddled close together—the romance obvious in their very gaits—stood out to her the most. The time of the summer solstice festival was one of praying for bountiful harvests, but it was also said to be the season of love. And perhaps the lovers walking the street stood out because their love was so fresh, having bloomed on account of the festivities.

Some outside wore newly bought or crafted traditional dresses decorated in snow violet embroidery. In times past, such clothing was for weddings, and perhaps even now the dresses marked pledges for the future. Shiori turned her gaze from the smiling couples and to her own dress. She placed a hand upon it, feeling the vibrant snow violet embroidery woven into the otherwise unadorned cotton fabric.

The dress had been a gift from Alec, and the words he'd spoken to her then were akin to a proposal. That had been half a year ago, and where once the material was stiff and new, over the nights that Shiori had worn it to bed, it had softened. She adored the dress, and Alec, too, took great joy in her love for it.

Alec had been called to meet with the margrave that night, and was absent from their apartment. He'd told her he might not be back that evening, which meant the first night in a long while that Shiori would spend alone. The thought brought with it a hint of loneliness.

"Alec…"

She called his name, tracing the shapes of the snow violets on her dress.

"Call your lover or your husband's name as you trace the shape of the snow violets, and it is said they will always return to you."

Nadia had told Shiori this as she ran a finger along the snow violets she had just embroidered herself. It was a folktale of sorts, passed down since times of old in Tris. More recently, it had become a popular chant among young women to stop their partners from cheating, but in the past it was used to ensure a lover's safe return.

Shiori wondered what thoughts ran through Nadia's mind, and what prayers she spoke in her heart, as she spoke of this folktale, her finger tracing her embroidery. But hidden in the vine-like pattern that bordered the snow violets were two names, and Shiori knew that they stirred deep feelings in her older sister.

Nadia's life was now split between her continued work as an adventurer and her regular visits to Clemens at the dispensary. When she wasn't doing either of these things, she was often embroidering the dress he had bought for her, and patiently waiting for them both to be able to return to daily life.

Snow violets symbolized lifelong fidelity and eternal love. Vines, meanwhile, represented prosperity and longevity. The motifs had arisen from the worship of the natural world, and now reflected people's hopes and prayers. When such plants decorated clothing or other items, they acted like talismans. This was why Shiori couldn't help but smile as she thought back to the embroidery Nadia had done on the sash belt for her future husband.

And I, too, hope for Nadia and Clemens to live happily forevermore…

Shiori spoke this prayer in her heart as she once again touched the snow violets on her dress. It was then that strong arms pulled her into an embrace. She was taken completely off guard and entirely defenseless as Alec kissed her. She stared up at his mischievous gaze with a look of blank shock.

"Looks like I've still got the advantage over you," he said. "You didn't even see me coming."

"Oh, Alec…"

She'd been convinced that he was not coming home, and so

she'd never expected such a sneak attack.

"Kris suggested I stay the night," said Alec, "but I thought I could still make it home before midnight."

At the time of the summer solstice, a dull light hung over the skies even after midnight. This was why many chose to stay up late, enjoying the seemingly endless summer evenings. Alec, too, had chosen to bask in the light breeze of early summer as he strolled home.

"And while I might have underestimated how long it would take, seeing you still awake makes me think I made the right decision."

"It's so lively outside, I couldn't sleep."

Shiori could not bring herself to admit that the thought of sleeping alone filled her heart with a certain loneliness. But she didn't have to—Alec could see hints of it in her expression, and he grinned as he pulled her close. His voice lowered to a whisper as he spoke into her ear—low, seductive, and dripping with passion.

"We have tomorrow off from work, and you're still awake. A perfect night for an all-nighter, wouldn't you say?"

Rurii and Violid had fallen asleep while they chatted in the living room.

"They're both deep in the land of dreams," Alec said, reading Shiori's gaze. "They won't wake if you raise your voice a little."

"But will 'a little' be enough for you?" Shiori asked.

But she already knew the answer to her question.

"I very much doubt it," Alec replied, a trace of guilt in his voice.

His fingers touched the snow violets at her collar, then slid up towards her neck. The two lovers smiled as they came together in an embrace and fell upon the bed. Their eyes locked as their faces came together in a kiss, and Alec's fingers moved from the embroidery of her dress to the skin beneath.

There was a line that the two did not cross, but all the same, they indulged passionately in one another, their kisses deep and heated to the point that Shiori felt herself melting, the lines that separated the two of them fading as two bodies merged into one.

"Soon," Alec whispered as Shiori drowned in him. "Soon everything will be settled, and when it is…"

Shiori moaned softly. Her answer to her lover was there in her gaze as she looked up at his dark magenta eyes—their color so

like that of the snow violet—and smiled.

The weary summer night was as sweet and heartfelt as it was hot and passionate.

Afterword

Hello, this is You Fuguruma. Thank you so much for reading volume 9 of *Housekeeping Mage*.

This series began with the theme of reclaiming what had been lost. We started at a point where both Shiori and Alec are "in the red," so to speak, having both come out of torturous experiences that have left them mentally battered. In meeting one another, the two heal each other's wounds and, in the adventures they share and the people they meet, climb back to a point we might think of as "zero," or the starting line.

Now, however, we see that Shiori and Alec are striding from zero into "positive" territory. As of the last volume, we see them actively working towards a new future, and showing gratitude to the people who looked after them in the past. Neither of them could have imagined that their actions would lead them to being called "the hero and the holy woman," but coming to accept their new reputations is, in and of itself, a big step forward for them.

In the story of the housekeeping mage, there are maybe two or three arcs left to go. I'll be doing my best to see everyone to a happy ending, and I hope that you, too, will follow the story of these two adventurers (and their two familiars) to its conclusion.

I'd like to end with words of thanks.

Thank you to Nama-sensei. I cried out with joy when I saw the cover, laughed at the inside cover (the poor guys), and grinned at the sight of the wobbly slimes and the pillowy wolf. The insert illustrations filled me with such awe and excitement that my voice came out funny. I'm forever thankful for the incredible work you do.

To my editor: Thank you for sticking with me as the plot of the ice dragon story shifted in a big way, and for all your detailed advice regarding the dragon's movements. Your thorough checks, too, are always appreciated, and I'm always in your debt.

Thanks also to Akito Ono-sensei, your assistants, and your editing staff. I simply cannot express in mere words how taken I am by your work, but whenever I receive your drafts, I am left rolling around on the floor in sheer joy. Thanks to your efforts, *Housekeeping Mage* has reached even more readers, and you

have my heartfelt thanks.

Finally, thanks to all the people who work on the production of the books, and to all of you readers who continue to support my efforts, both online and in print.

I hope to speak to you all again soon.

You Fuguruma





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by You Fuguruma

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