Lucia and the Loom

Weaving Her Way to Happiness

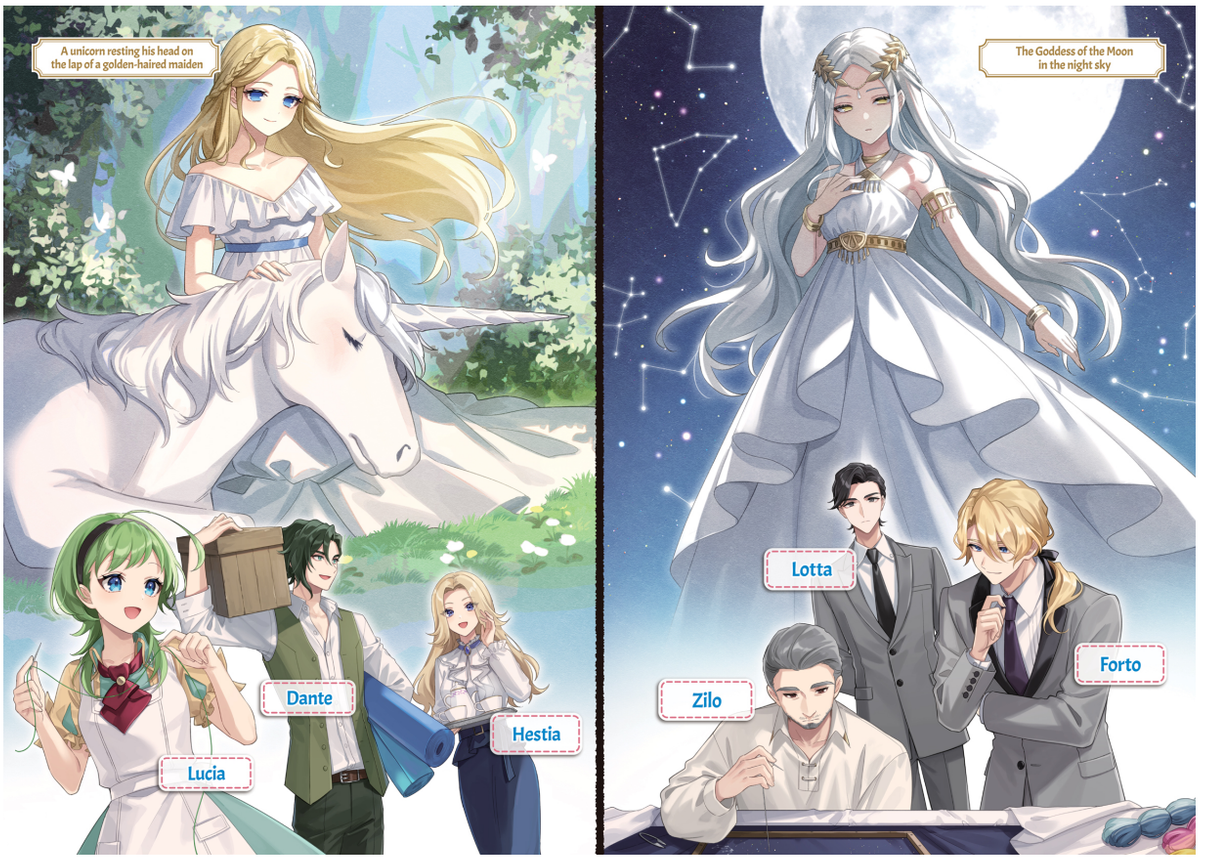
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Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Esora Amaichi
Character Designs: Kei


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Jonas
Enrica
Jessica


A unicorn resting his head on the lap of a golden-haired maiden
Dante
Hestia
Lucia
The Goddess of the Moon in the night sky
Lotta
Forto
Zilo


"I fully understand if you wish to refuse my request."
Frandine
Noemi
Tiziano
"The method you choose does not matter, as long as you protect the Tailors' Guild and the Magical Garment Factory."
"I'm glad Forto is finally giving it some thought..."
Minerva

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Hisaya Amagishi



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The Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory and a Certain Someone's Back

Lucia was blessed with good luck. She was where she was thanks to her connections and the opportunities she'd received.

Under the rays of the afternoon sun, she walked toward a white brick building located on a busy street in the Central District.

"Good afternoon, Head Manager Fano!" the guard standing in front of the door to the Tailors' Guild greeted her.

Head Manager Fano—so she, Lucia Fano, was now called; that was her title at the Magical Garment Factory, an establishment managed by the Tailors' Guild. By vocation, she was a couturier, one who designed and created clothes.

She was short, with a childlike face, green hair, and blue eyes. Some might have considered her plain, and as a child, she'd had an inferiority complex about her appearance, but now she was quite fond of it.

Until a few months ago, Lucia had spent every day making socks and gloves in the workshop operated by her family of five. Then she had happened to help her magical toolmaker friend Dahlia make a prototype toe sock enchanted with a mild drying effect. It was through that connection that Lucia had begun working for the Tailors' Guild, which had led in turn to her being appointed the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory.

However, the position of head manager—a role that included handling business with the castle and nobles—presented several difficulties for a commoner like herself. But even bearing in mind the inevitability that she would someday be replaced by another head manager, she worked to the best of her ability alongside her colleagues.

"Good afternoon! Another sunny day today, huh?"

"Yes, but we were just fine. All thanks to those toe socks and zephyricloth you gave us!" the guard replied with a broad smile.

Zephyricloth was one of the magical tools made by the Magical Garment Factory. It was a coarse fabric enchanted to

produce a gentle flow of air. When used for undergarments, it kept them from getting sweaty and sticking to the wearer's skin, making it the optimal fabric for summer. Incidentally, Lucia's friend was the one who had invented zephyricloth.

The front of the Tailors' Guild building was exposed to the sun, so the guards stationed at the entrance sweated a lot during summer. Lucia had given them toe socks and undershirts with zephyricloth sewn into them, asking them to tell her how they felt wearing them outside. The guards had praised the tools highly, saying that they halved the summer heat and got rid of their heat rash. Now, every time she entered the Tailors' Guild, they greeted her with smiles.

Summer was turning into autumn, but the afternoons were still warm enough to make one sweat. The zephyricloth would continue to be greatly useful, which Lucia was very happy about.

"We're working on making more so that by next year, you'll be able to wear zephyricloth undershirts and underwear every single day," added Dante Cassini, the young man standing at Lucia's side.

"I look forward to that, Assistant Manager Cassini!"

Dante was the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory and a couturier like Lucia. He had a wealth of knowledge about fashion and great design sense, and he was skilled at sewing. His dark green hair framed his handsome face and ice green eyes. He was quite attractive when he wasn't speaking, but he regularly displayed a sharp tongue.

As the son of a viscount, Dante was an expert on noble etiquette, and before becoming the assistant manager, he'd been in charge of monster materials at the Tailors' Guild. Lucia believed he would make a better head manager of the factory than herself, but any time she brought it up, he laughed her off.

"Boss, let's do everything we can to fill the warehouse full of zephyricloth by next year!"

While the other factory personnel called Lucia "chief," Dante alone called her "boss." She'd tried to correct him at first, but eventually, she'd gotten so used to it that it no longer bothered her. It was terrifying what one could get accustomed to.

"Yeah, let's!" Lucia nodded in agreement as the two of them stepped inside the Tailors' Guild.

The first thing Lucia did whenever she entered the guild was survey the people in the lobby. The guild had a varied clientele,

from nobles to commoners, so Lucia was able to get a glimpse of numerous people wearing gorgeous clothing, stylish uniforms, and unique outfits.

In front of the reception desk was a young lady wearing a coral dress and a white lace shrug.

Nobles often had their own personal couturiers, but they sometimes came to the Tailors' Guild for outfits in vogue or to seek consultations about things like evening wear and gowns, with the latter being especially commonplace. Even wealthy commoners such as business owners often came to the guild to request formal wear or clothing on par with what nobles wore. The guild also received orders for company and shop uniforms and requests for consultations about formal attire for weddings and matchmaking meetings. That young lady was probably here in search of a dress for her next ball or celebration. Lucia hoped she found something wonderful to wear.

As Lucia and Dante walked through the lobby, Lucia caught sight of even more outfits—a man wearing a royal blue three-piece suit, a woman wearing a dark green knight's uniform, a person wearing a hooded auburn robe, someone in a black leather jacket carrying a sword on their back, and more.

The bodyguards of nobles were their masters' shields, so not only was their clothing made to be sturdy, it was frequently enchanted with defensive magic as well. The clothes of knights, mages, and adventurers were similarly enchanted to be made more durable as well as more resistant to heat and cold.

Lucia recalled that information as she passed by the person in the auburn robe. The hood slipped off, revealing the face of a young girl wearing earmuffs—an odd choice for such a warm day. The girl gave a slightly awkward laugh, and Lucia saw the flash of a long canine tooth before the girl concealed herself under the hood once more. The people next to the girl, presumably her colleagues, continued their conversation as if nothing had happened, but some of the surrounding people quietly placed some distance between them.

Lucia was a bit curious about the group but continued walking. Dante whispered in her ear, "They're a group of skilled adventurers. Some of them are blighted. They have their clothes made for them here at the guild, and they also bring us quality monster pelts."

On rare occasions, when someone destroyed the magical core

of a monster, they would acquire the monster's magical power and characteristics. They were called "blighted." In some cases, they became stronger and gained the ability to use magic, and there were quite a few of them among adventurers.

"Oh, so they're like both clients and trade partners?" Lucia asked.

"Exactly."

When it came to clothing, everyone had their own needs, be they beauty, cuteness, stylishness, elegance, or function.

The urge to return to the lobby to look at everyone's outfits was strong, but Lucia managed to resist it. She decided instead to draw what she could remember in her sketchbook when she returned home later that day.

Reluctantly leaving the lobby behind, Lucia and Dante continued down the hallway at a brisk pace. Their destination was the temporary storage room at the very back of the floor. Yesterday, two ships had arrived from the neighboring nation of Ehrlichia, bearing high-quality yarn and cloth spun from baphomet wool.

Baphomets were sheeplike monsters that could use body strengthening magic and had powerful legs. One kick from a baphomet could cause serious injury, and they ran as if flying through the air, making them very difficult creatures to raise. Nonetheless, baphomet wool was lightweight, warm, and pleasant to the touch. Above all, it was durable. It was for those reasons that it was a popular material not only for clothing that protected against the cold but also for knight and adventurer uniforms. Lucia and Dante had come to the guild precisely for that yarn and fabric, which they would be using at the Magical Garment Factory.

"Pardon us."

They knocked before entering the storage room. Inside were the room's supervisor and a head of shiny blond hair.

"Lucia, Dante. Perfect timing. Take a look at this cloth and yarn, please. They have an even nicer luster and quality than the baphomet wool from last year."

"Thank you, Mr. Forto!"

The person Lucia thanked was the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, Viscount Fortunato Luini. He was their dependable boss and a well-known couturier.

Forto stood in front of a silver magically sealed box, inside of

which was white fabric wrapped around a board. The hue—which seemed to be emitting a gentle glow—was unlike that of either silk or sheep's wool. With Forto's encouragement, Lucia took the sample fabric in her hands and, for a moment, felt a slippery sensation against her fingertips.

Next to her, Dante did the same. His ice green eyes widened. "This has...even stronger magic than the wool from last year."

Even the monster materials expert was surprised. He stroked the fabric with his fingers several more times.

"That it does," Forto said. "I have been told the baphomets on this particular ranch are larger in size and, as such, have proportionally stronger magic. I am unsure if it is due to their breed, their diet, or what, but raising them must certainly be difficult."

Larger baphomets' legs were even more powerful, meaning they could jump even farther. That must have made things more challenging for the herders raising them.

Even so, Lucia couldn't contain her excitement at the sight of this high-quality material. "Winter socks knitted with this baphomet yarn would be amazingly warm!" she exclaimed.

Forto smiled at her elegantly. "We have also been receiving requests from castle guards stationed outdoors for warm socks with good ventilation for wintertime. Please use this yarn to make some prototypes. We have plenty in stock, so feel free to ask for more if you run out."

"Understood! We will aim to make a pair of warm, breathable socks."

The best socks for guards stationed outdoors in the wintertime were ones made of sheep's wool, which could effectively protect against the cold. However, the leather boots that knights wore were made to be sturdy above all else. On top of that, they were waterproof, which meant their interiors easily became musty. And while they did have the insoles with the mild drying effect, it was unclear how much those alone would help.

They had made some prototype socks with regular sheep's wool, but baphomet's wool was said to have better insulation and ventilation, making it a very desirable material.

Humans were creatures who did not easily let go of comfort and convenience once they got hold of it. And the better the product, the more of its outstanding effects they would get to experience after just one use. Lucia wanted to make the most

comfortable possible pair of warm, breathable socks.

"Boss, we should probably get started on those prototypes right away. That way we can make a decent number before winter."

"Yeah! Let's do it!" Lucia agreed, thinking of the guards' smiling faces. The Magical Garment Factory's schedule was already packed, but she definitely wanted to finish the socks before winter.

"By the way, Mr. Forto, I heard that the price of sheep's wool increased by ten percent compared to last year. Did the price for baphomet's wool increase too?"

"It's about the same as last year. I ordered three times more this year, though, which contributed to the expense."

Forto handed some documents to Dante, who held them down low so Lucia could see too. *Talk about pricey,* Lucia thought bluntly. It was five times the price of top-quality sheep's wool—not something a commoner could readily afford.

Baphomet's wool was said to be warm enough to make the wearer "impervious to frostbite," but at that price, it was one's wallet that would be feeling the chill.

"It'd be nice if it were a little more affordable…" Lucia muttered before she could stop herself.

The supervisor smiled at her. "Unlike the land of herders, Ordine has few baphomet pastures as of yet. But if their benefits become better-known, then I believe there will be more in the future."

"I really hope so!"

The neighboring country of Ordine was commonly called the "land of herders," while Ordine itself was called the "crystal kingdom." Ehrlichia raised many animals, such as cows, horses, and sheep, but also monsters, such as baphomets and monster silkworms. Their knights' order also had nearly twenty wyverns.

Ordine had its own thriving livestock industry, but not on the level of Ehrlichia. Instead, its main industry was magic crystals. The kingdom controlled and exported all kinds of magic crystals, such as red ones that held the power of fire and blue ones that produced water.

The people of Ordine proudly called their country the "kingdom of magic." The proportion of the citizenry with magic power was higher in Ordine than in other countries, and there were also many of noble lineage whose power was exceptionally

high. However, that sentiment didn't quite resonate with Lucia, who was a commoner with low magic.

As they stood in the storage room, the others continued to tell Lucia about the yarn and fabric made from baphomet's wool and about the other monsters that were raised in Ehrlichia.

"Well then," Forto said at last, "I will arrange to have everything delivered to the Magical Garment Factory."

"Thank you."

"Oh, could we actually take one box of yarn now?" Dante asked. It seemed he was unable to wait for the delivery.

"That is no problem, but it is quite heavy—"

"That's fine," Dante replied as he wrapped the medium-sized magically sealed box in a white cloth and easily picked it up.

Dante possessed body strengthening magic, allowing him to lift the box as if it were filled with cotton. Lucia probably would have wobbled on her feet if she'd tried to pick up something that heavy. She was slightly jealous.

"All right, should we head back to the factory, boss? We need to hurry up and take care of our other work first."

"Yes, let's get ahead of schedule!"

She and Dante looked at each other and grinned. *Let's finish our scheduled tasks as fast as possible so we can use the baphomet yarn!* It was palpably clear that was what both of them were thinking.

They said goodbye to Forto and the supervisor, then left the temporary storage room. From there, they walked down the hallway that led to the lobby. Lucia felt like skipping. The Ehrlichian baphomet wool and yarn were of the highest quality. Lucia couldn't contain her excitement to knit and sew with it. She wished she could go to Ehrlichia someday to see as much of it as she could in the shops and markets there.

However, although she had a longing to visit Ehrlichia, as a couturier, she felt immensely fortunate to have been born in the Kingdom of Ordine. Here in the populated capital, she could freely create a wide variety of clothing.

Black clothes for funerals and formal wear for nobles had their own set standards, but unlike other nations, Ordine had no strict gender- or age-related rules for clothes. No styles were off-limits, and there were no restrictions on the colors that could be used. Makeup and hairstyles were also at the discretion of each individual.

However, long ago, even Ordine had once had ideal rules regarding clothing, such as the idea that men should avoid brightly colored clothing and that women's skirts should reach their ankles. The nobles and commoners of the time who loved fashion had upended those "ideal rules," which had led to today's fashion freedom. It was an inspiring history of fashion that Lucia had learned about once she'd joined the Tailors' Guild.

The freedom to choose one's preferred clothing, hair color, and makeup style—for a fashion lover such as herself, this was the ideal kingdom and the ideal era to be in.

When she stepped into the lobby in high spirits, a loud voice called out, "Lucia!"

Lucia turned toward the voice and saw a young man with light chestnut brown hair. She wished she could have pretended not to notice him, but he was already rushing over. Perhaps sensing her tension, Dante moved a step closer to her.

"You look so pretty, I almost didn't recognize you."

"It's been a while," Lucia replied tersely, keeping her expression professional.

The man narrowed his light brown eyes, looking at Lucia as if appraising her. Then, he said quietly, "I've heard all about your accomplishments as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. Viscount Luini must have taken quite a liking to you."

This again? was the only thought Lucia spared for that comment. She'd become painfully accustomed to these types of ridicule and misunderstanding ever since she was promoted to head manager.

A young commoner woman had become the manager of the Magical Garment Factory, an establishment that conducted business with the castle itself. Even the factory personnel had found it hard to believe she'd been chosen for such a position.

It was thanks to that incredulity that rumors had started flying around as if they'd sprouted wings—rumors that she was only here because of Forto's fondness for her. There were competing theories that she was his mistress or his father's illegitimate child. Lucia wished the people who came up with those theories would redirect their overactive imaginations into writing pulp novels.

Lucia forced a broad smile and waved her right hand. "You've got it all wrong. My father was indisposed, so I joined the

Magical Garment Factory in his stead. It's only a temporary thing."

Nothing that she said was a lie. The day Forto came to her house, her father had fainted from shock. Technically, that could be called being indisposed.

"Is that right? The duties of a head manager must be considerably difficult, though, no?"

"Everyone at the factory treats me very well, and the work is interesting," Lucia answered with an artificial smile.

The man responded in an oddly gentle voice, "Say, Lucia, why don't you let me help you out?"

"In what way? Aren't you busy with your own job?" Lucia asked, even though she knew the answer.

A few years ago, this particular couturier had been a member of a workshop where Lucia had been working as an assistant. He was fairly skilled and quite personable. Lucia had heard from the others in the workshop that he was dating the manager's daughter and would likely marry her and inherit the workshop.

Lucia had spoken with him only when they'd first introduced themselves and when briefly exchanging small talk during lunches with the entire staff. They had never become particularly close before Lucia's assignment ended. Lucia had never returned to that workshop, but she'd heard about what had happened next from others who had remained employed as helpers there.

A noble who had made use of that workshop had taken a liking to the man and enticed him with gold to work as their private couturier—a common story. Lucia could understand wanting to transfer to a job with better working conditions and prospects.

But it was another matter entirely to break up with his girlfriend, the daughter of the workshop manager, via a short one-page letter and quit without helping to hand over his duties to a replacement. Leaving one's former employer and coworkers high and dry like that was simply unacceptable.

It was possible the noble had forced his hand, but Lucia felt that those light brown eyes, now fixed on her, held more self-interest than compassion for her.

"No, I'm actually looking for a new work opportunity right now."

"The Tailors' Guild is hiring," Lucia informed him.

That was the truth. They were currently short-staffed, so

much so that they were conducting exams several times a month. They were especially seeking people who were fast at knitting and sewing. Lucia knew this couturier was skilled at the latter. She could even see him starting as a stitcher before eventually coming up with designs and becoming a couturier for the Tailors' Guild.

"I did come here to inquire about their openings, but don't they hire on a probationary period?"

Even someone who had worked at a well-known workshop and as a couturier for a noble still had to go through probationary period when joining the Tailors' Guild. Lucia, who had become the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory with no such probationary period, was a very rare exception.

"Besides, the Magical Garment Factory sounds interesting. Don't you want my help over there?"

Just as she'd predicted, he wanted to use his connection to Lucia to get into the Magical Garment Factory.

The man smiled amicably at her—his face had pretty nice features. But if Lucia were pressed to give her true opinion, the side of his shirt collar was wrinkled, the creases of his center-pressed pants were slightly off, and there were faint stains around his cuffs. That wouldn't do.

And one more thing—he had been poached from his previous workshop to work for a noble, which meant either things hadn't worked out at his new workshop or that noble was still pulling his strings. Therefore, there was also the possibility that he'd been sent here by that noble to gather information on the Magical Garment Factory.

Forto and other colleagues had informed Lucia about how nobles often used people like that to gather intel, but it was hard for her to judge for herself whether that was the case here. She was wondering if she should just tell him to take the Tailors' Guild exam when Dante spoke up.

"Are you knowledgeable about monster materials?"

"And who might you be?" The man looked at Dante like he was disturbing them.

Dante, who carried out physical labor in addition to his work as a couturier, usually dressed comfortably. He wasn't wearing a jacket that day, just a pale olive green vest over a white cotton shirt and a pair of slightly tight-fitting pants. He was also carrying a cloth-covered package in both hands. At first glance,

he probably looked like a staff member of the guild or factory who was carrying Lucia's things around for her.

"I am the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I am Dante of the Viscountcy Cassini," Dante introduced himself with a faint smile.

"I-I am terribly sorry!" the man said, bowing his head low.

Sometimes Lucia almost forgot that Dante had been born into a viscountcy with a long history and was a noble among nobles.

"We handle a lot of monster materials at the factory. If you have some familiarity with them, then please indicate that you would like to be assigned to the Magical Garment Factory when you take the Tailors' Guild examination. You will be given priority, I believe."

Rather than putting on an act of friendliness, it was like he was putting on an act of nobility—the smooth way Dante spoke and his composed expression made him come across like the very picture of a true nobleman.

Moreover, Lucia could tell that Dante was shutting the man down in a roundabout way. There were a limited number of places where one could learn about the monster materials used for clothing, so the average couturier was unlikely to have in-depth knowledge about them. Dante was implying that it would be impossible for the man to be assigned to the Magical Garment Factory without such knowledge. It could be acquired *after* joining the Magical Garment Factory, but Lucia decided to just watch and see how things unfolded.

"Thank you for the explanation. I've remembered I have something to attend to, so if you'll excuse me..."

Pale-faced, the couturier bowed his head once again and cut through the lobby toward the exit. He seemed to have completely forgotten about Lucia. After Dante watched the man leave, he looked to his left and right, sighed, then turned to Lucia.

"Boss—"

Dante looked a little worried, so she thanked him before he could say anything. "Thanks, Dante. That was nice of you."

Dante tightened his grip on the box, and they walked out of the lobby together. Fortunately, no one had been paying attention to them.

"He was acting friendly toward you, but you looked a little troubled. I noticed he called you by your first name, though. Did

I do the right thing?”

“We know each other. He was an employee of a workshop where I worked as a helper once. Also, commoners call each other by name at work, regardless of gender.”

It seemed Dante was worried that the man was a friend or an acquaintance of Lucia’s. She wished he wouldn’t be; even if there were someone she wanted to recommend for the factory, she would go to Forto and Dante first for advice.

“So you know him through work? Then did you also hear why he left that workshop?”

Apparently, Dante knew about it too. The world of fashion was a small one indeed.

“Yeah, more or less.”

“And about what happened after?”

“After? Didn’t he go work for that noble?”

“I heard he caused some trouble for the people who poached him and was thrown out with just his suitcase.”

“Huh? Did they not like the clothes he made?”

Could that really be the reason, after the noble had gone through the trouble of poaching him from the workshop? Had the noble’s taste in clothes changed? Lucia had asked her question with those thoughts in mind, but Dante shook his head lightly.

“No. He was apparently a little too greedy with the number of flowers he admired. In the workplace.”

Passionate love affairs were abundant in the capital, so much so that it was said love and romantic conflicts were always in bloom. However, a love triangle in a new workplace was certainly not okay.

“Yeah, workplace romances are tricky things…”

“Boss, I just want to say, not all men are greedy, and there are a lot of workplace romances within the Tailors’ Guild,” Dante told her in a whisper. It wasn’t something that pertained to her, though.

Outside the Tailors’ Guild, the sky was tinged red—the sun had just begun to set. Shortly, the cityscape and the people heading home would all be dyed scarlet.

“Ah…”

Across the street, Lucia saw the back of a tall figure walking in the opposite direction, their black cloak flapping in the wind. The

figure had slightly long hair tied back casually in a ponytail. Suddenly, Lucia was reminded of a man with reddish-brown hair, and before she knew it, she was following the figure with her eyes.

"Someone you know, boss?"

"Nope. That cloak just caught my eye."

She found it hard to say out loud that she'd been reminded of the back of Mr. Sunset, someone she'd met as a child.

"Oh, that cloak? Yeah, I do like that diagonal cut. It creates a nice shape. Looking at its luster, it's probably baphomet leather enchanted with volcano fish. A lot of adventurers who go to volcanoes wear them."

"Really..." Lucia responded absentmindedly as she ruminated on her memories.

That day from childhood when she'd been distraught over her own plainness and cried about not being suited to wear ribbons and lace. There had been someone there who had told her she was like a nemophila flower, and who had guaranteed she would look nice in ribbons and lace, and who had told her she shouldn't give up on being who she wanted to be.

Mr. Sunset, the boy with reddish-brown hair, whom she'd only met once—he had instilled in her a wealth of courage. The sight of his back when he'd walked off into the sunset had really been amazing.

"Boss, are you interested in enchanted baphomet leather too?"

"Yeah, I am, but...I was just thinking, a cool-looking back really leaves an impression, don't you think?" Lucia replied before she could stop herself.

Dante nodded and said, "Ah, I get it. You think a man should let his clothes do the talking."

"Man or woman, whatever, anyone benefits from having a nice back view!"

She would never be on the same level as Mr. Sunset, but Lucia wished she could look cool from behind too. There was no one she would show that side of her, and she wouldn't be able to see it herself, but she still wished for it.

"Okay then, how about for our next design, we put a little more effort into styling the back? Ribbons could work for a dress, but we could also play around with the panel lines, add some lace or even leather. If we go for a trendy suit, we could

challenge ourselves by adding a design on the back."

"That sounds like so much fun! Oh, and while we could do that for a suit jacket, why don't we try it with a shirt first? It'll be more affordable, and the design will be hidden by the jacket. That way, it'll give the outfit a completely different look when the jacket is taken off."

"Oh yeah, then it would be easier to wear casually. I'd like to try making something like that soon, but..."

"Right, first we need to take care of what's on the schedule!"

The two of them hurried over to the carriage stop. The sunset dyed their surroundings another shade darker.

A Bite to Eat with a Bodyguard

There was a sizable crowd in the downtown area of the capital's Central District.

Today, Lucia had gone shopping for clothes with her friend Dahlia. Afterward, they had met with someone else to have their fill of tea and cake at a café, where she'd eaten too much. Still, the three of them had had a great time filled with animated conversation.

The young man who had accompanied them was now warmly smiling at her and Dahlia as they stood in front of the carriage stop.

"Thank you for today. I had a very fun time."

The towering young man's name was Randolph Goodwin. He was a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. Lucia and Dahlia had run into him by chance near the café. Since Lucia had met him before, they'd exchanged greetings, and that was when she'd unconsciously looked over his outfit.

He wore an olive brown jacket and a pair of muted dark brown wide-legged trousers. Underneath his jacket, he wore a white cotton shirt and a thick, austere brown vest. The outfit was paired with a pair of glossy three-joint black leather shoes, very stylish and dressy.

Randolph was a head taller than anyone else in the crowd, and he had a broad, bulky physique. All his clothes must have been custom-made. Each piece looked to be of high quality and fit him just right. But there was so much wasted potential, Lucia couldn't stop herself from intervening.

"Excuse me, Sir Randolph, but may I make a suggestion?"

His collar was buttoned up all the way up to his throat, which looked a bit too constricting for his day off. Also, compared to his sophisticated, fashionable pair of shoes, his trousers were an outdated wide-legged style. They would look much more stylish if they were taken in and made a slim fit instead.

Worst of all were the colors. His suit jacket, vest, and pants should have been the same color—though in fairness, all three pieces were brownish colors, so their combination wasn't too unusual. However, those colors weren't doing Randolph any

favors. His hair was a coppery red, and his eyes were maroon. Olive and dark browns weren't a bad match for him, but Lucia felt that a color with more red would look even better.

"About the color of your clothes, I think that instead of the greenish-brown you're wearing now, something like burnt umber...or another reddish-brown color, like russet or chocolate, would suit you much better."

He had his clothes custom-made, after all, so they should look flattering on him. Reddish-brown wasn't the only option; he'd also look great in something like rose gray or sand beige.

Lucia suddenly realized she'd been talking passionately about all the colors that would look good on Randolph. Fortunately, he hadn't taken any offense and was giving her his full attention. Apparently, he'd just been telling the shop to make something in black or brown and left the rest to them. Randolph was from an earldom, so the couturier making his clothes probably prioritized a subdued look over a youthful one.

"Ah, I see. I hadn't considered those colors. Could you tell me what colors would make me appear smaller or less overwhelming?"

"I think you have a very trim physique already, Sir Randolph."

"Well, I wear my everyday clothes in the castle barracks, but the recruits are often wary of me..."

Randolph was taciturn and muscular, which made it hard for others to approach him. That being the case, Lucia wanted to recommend even lighter colors for him.

They ended up talking at length in the middle of the road, so Dahlia suggested they head into a café to continue their chat. Once they were seated at a table together, Lucia and Dahlia learned that Randolph had a sweet tooth. He said that even though he loved sweets, he was never able to buy pastries or go to cafés.

Randolph had spent his school days in Ehrlichia, where people had certain ideas about what types of foods men and women should enjoy—spicy foods were for men, while sweet foods were for women. It was more masculine to pair spicy jerky with a strong ale, and more feminine to have a sugary cake with tea and milk. Anyone who strayed from those norms would be called effeminate or unladylike. The men with a sweet tooth and women who liked spicy foods must have had a hard time living over there. Lucia sympathized with them.

Lucia and Dahlia told Randolph there was nothing strange about a man enjoying his desserts and that, indeed, they knew plenty of men who did. The three of them proceeded to order one of everything from the dessert menu—apple pie, sweet potato pie, chestnut cake, chocolate cake, pear tart, pumpkin pudding, custard pudding, and others. As they ate, they had a lively discussion about Ehrlichia and fashion.

Once they left the café, they walked through the Central District and browsed a few shops. Lucia picked up some leather shoe polish, Dahlia found a pair of red high-heeled shoes, and Randolph bought some new shoelaces. Afterward, Randolph escorted the two of them to the carriage stop, where they were now. The capital's Central District was safe and full of people, so they told him he needn't worry about them, but his response came with a serious expression.

"It's only a matter of course to escort women to a carriage stop. Or perhaps I should say, please allow me the honor of escorting you beautiful ladies."

Noblemen complimented women as easily as breathing, and Randolph was clearly a nobleman.

They thanked him, and after he left, Dahlia boarded an open carriage. They promised to have tea again next time their schedules overlapped. Lucia waved goodbye as Dahlia's carriage pulled away.

Lucia, however, did not board the next open carriage. She walked to the edge of the carriage stop building, put her back against the wall, and looked out over the sea of people. No matter how much she strained her eyes, she couldn't see him, but she had a strong suspicion he was around.

"Umm, Lotta? Are you there?" Lucia said quietly.

Right in front of her, she saw the air change color. A young man with loose, wavy black hair and dark gray eyes materialized before her. No, not materialized—she simply was able to perceive him now. Lotta possessed concealment magic, which made him nearly imperceptible to others, but had dropped it as he walked toward her.

"You called, Head Manager Lucia?" he asked her in a low voice, his eyes slightly narrowed.

His outfit today consisted of a white button-down shirt, a matte charcoal vest, and slim-legged pants. It was an inconspicuous outfit of a style common among attendants, but it

looked very handsome on Lotta due to his long, slender arms and legs.

“Thank you, Lotta. You were guarding me all day today again, right?”

“Yes.”

Lotta was primarily the bodyguard and attendant of the Tailors’ guildmaster, Forto, but he took on the role of Lucia’s bodyguard on her days off. He was always magically concealed nearby, so it never felt like they were going around together, but she knew full well of his abilities as a bodyguard. Not long ago, he had even saved her from being abducted.

Ever since that attempted kidnapping, more guards had been stationed around the Magical Garment Factory, and not just within the building. A female bodyguard accompanied her carriage to and from the factory.

Lucia had also informed the office clerk ahead of time that she would be going out today. She’d figured someone would be assigned as her bodyguard, and since she couldn’t see anyone, she’d guessed it might be Lotta. It was for that reason that she had tried calling his name when she was alone at the carriage stop.

Lucia had been out for quite a while at this point, and she suspected Lotta had been nearby that entire time. Concerned, Lucia asked him, “Where were you while I was in the café?”

“I was outside. I would have attracted attention had I entered by myself.”

“Outside… So you were waiting there without eating or drinking anything the entire time?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry! I should have called for you before going into the café instead of making you stand that whole time.”

He might have felt awkward sitting at the same table with Dahlia and Randolph, but she could have reserved a nearby table for him. She felt bad for not thinking of that earlier.

Lotta’s face was impassive as he responded, “You needn’t be concerned. I am used to waiting outside, and I normally refrain from eating while I am on duty. I have breakfast and dinner.”

So Lotta usually skipped lunch when he was on bodyguard duty. That must have been the norm for the guards of nobles. Still, the fact that he’d been standing outside on the street while she was tucking into delicious pastries made her feel incredibly

guilty. Perhaps this was a difference in sensibilities between commoners and nobles.

She had a feeling that Lotta would decline even if she asked him to eat something now, but maybe he would accept the proposition if it were part of his bodyguard duties. With that thought, she asked, “Lotta, do you have any plans after this? Do you have some time?”

“Lord Forto has no plans for outings today. He will be at the Tailors’ Guild all day.”

Lucia had asked about *his* plans, but he’d responded with Forto’s. Still, now she knew he had some time. She continued, “Would you come with me to a café? I’m alone, so it’d be nice if you could sit with me, for safety’s sake.”

“Certainly.”

With Lotta’s approval, the pair entered a nearby café.

The spot Lucia chose wasn’t the café she’d just gone to with Dahlia and Randolph but an eatery near the carriage stop that also served light meals. She’d chosen it for its safety; there was a guard station nearby.

The eatery wasn’t crowded, perhaps due to the hour. Lucia let Lotta choose a table, and he picked one a little farther back against a wall. He sat down across from Lucia as she opened the menu.

“Is there anything you’d like to eat, Lotta? This place has a large selection of salads.”

“No, nothing in particular. What will you have, Head Manager Lucia?”

“I think I’ll have some herbal tea. I wouldn’t feel comfortable if I were the only one eating, so please get something too.”

“Very well…”

Lucia handed Lotta the menu, and his brow furrowed slightly as he examined it. He was probably trying to be mindful of what he ordered.

“Don’t be shy! Order whatever you want, just like when you’re out with friends.”

“I have no friends.”

Lotta’s immediate reply threw Lucia off. Before continuing the conversation, she took a small, silver, pyramid-shaped object from her pocket—a magical anti-eavesdropping device. Lucia deemed it necessary; she was about to ask some questions

regarding nobles.

“Lotta, tell me only what you can, please. Is there a rule that the bodyguards of nobles can’t make friends?”

“No, not in my case. But because I am blighted—cursed—the conditions are not right for me to form friendships or even to socialize.”

Lucia already knew that Lotta was possessed by a bicorn. Blighted individuals’ physical appearances were usually affected by the monster that possessed them, and the blighted occasionally exhibited violent behavior, which led to people calling them “cursed” out of fear.

It was common for someone to have their blight removed at the temple if it posed some danger to them or if they simply wished for its removal. However, blights also came with their advantages—such as higher magic and new magical abilities—so some people chose to keep them. That was especially common among adventurers.

In fact, Lotta himself was strong enough to break the wheel of a carriage with his bare hands. Still, his appearance wasn’t frightening, nor was he difficult to communicate with. Despite that, for some reason, he apparently found it difficult to make friends.

“The conditions aren’t right?”

Was a friendship something that required conditions to be met in the first place? Friendships just formed spontaneously or over time, didn’t they? Lucia had tilted her head, not quite understanding, when Lotta spoke up again.

“Head Manager Lucia, do you remember when I used strengthening magic?”

“Yes, I do. That was when your eyes turned into that pretty gradient color, right?”

When Lotta had used strengthening magic, the black pupils of his dark gray eyes had become long and flat. The gradient of those pupils—blending from gray to jet-black—had been marvelously beautiful.

“Most people are afraid when they see my eyes like that.”

“Well, I wasn’t scared. You saved me that day.”

Lotta was a man of few words, but he was always polite and engaged during their conversations. And he had fulfilled his duty as a bodyguard by saving Lucia from that kidnapping attempt. There was no reason for her to be afraid of him when he was on

her side.

“There have been past incidents with blighted individuals going on rampages. I have a contract with the temple allowing my master to stop me in the event that such a thing should happen, but I suppose some still feel an aversion to me.”

“Then doesn’t that mean you’re safe to be around? That you can be relied on, even.”

Lotta offered no response. He simply blinked at her. Those round, black pupils—no longer the gradient they had been the other day—were looking straight at her.

“Ms. Lucia, you are quite a peculiar person… Ah—”

Lotta ended his utterance awkwardly. Lucia wondered if he’d spoken those words aloud by mistake.

She could understand why he would call her a peculiar person. Lotta was usually surrounded by nobles and their companions, not commoners like Lucia. Nobles and those involved with nobles were more highly concerned with safety and risk control than commoners were. The idea that Lotta—who, although a competent bodyguard, was also a blighted—should avoid personal relationships seemed like the sort of judgment a noble would make.

It wasn’t the sort of judgment Lucia intended to make herself, though. Lotta had the faith of his employer, and he had protected Lucia. He had her trust and gratitude, and she was curious to know what he wore on his days off.

“I understand now that you’re not used to these types of restaurants, Lotta, so would it be all right if I handled things?”

“Yes, please…” Lotta responded, his voice slightly quieter.

Lucia rang the small bell on their table to summon the server.

“Could we please have herbal tea, orange juice, an assortment of sandwiches, green salad, fried kraken, and…a grape cake set?”

After the server repeated her order back to her and left, the table fell silent. Lotta was sitting up straight as a pin and not saying a word. Lucia wondered if he was feeling self-conscious about what he’d said earlier.

It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, but since they had the opportunity to sit together at a table like this, Lucia decided to change the topic.

“By the way, you mentioned earlier that you usually don’t eat while stationed outside, but what about water? Do you stay

hydrated?”

“I drink as little as possible, so that is not an issue.”

So not only did Lotta skip lunch, he also barely drank anything. That couldn’t be good for his health.

“That sounds very hard. Are you really okay in the summer months?”

“It’s not much of a problem for me. I have done this for a long time, so I think my body is used to it by now.”

“For a long time? Did you begin training to be a bodyguard that long ago?”

“No, as a child, I—”

Lotta stopped himself from saying more and cast his dark gray eyes downward. That wasn’t the look of someone lost in fond reminiscence. Lucia jumped in to stop him.

“Lotta, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I’m sure bodyguards go through intense training. I only asked because I was curious.”

It had been a question to satisfy Lucia’s own curiosity, not a work-related question. If Lotta had undergone harsh training as a child, then Lucia didn’t want him to have to relive those memories. As she was about to steer the conversation elsewhere, Lotta removed his black gloves and folded his hands on top of the table.

“I grew up on a ship. I was given the bare minimum of food and water, and I got a lashing if I soiled myself. I believe that’s why my body has gotten used to it.”

Hearing that Lotta had suffered such cruel treatment, Lucia couldn’t hold herself back from saying, “Excuse me for saying so about your parents or guardians, but that’s a horrible thing to do to a child!”

Lotta responded plainly, “The people who raised me belonged to an organization that turned children into blighted to sell them. They only did enough to keep us alive.”

“Huh? They turned children…into blighted…?” Lucia repeated, bewildered.

Without batting an eye, Lotta continued, “When I was very young, I was forced to eat a magical core so I would be possessed by a monster.”

“Hold on a second! Lotta, those people *sold* you? Wait, is that organization still around?”

“On the way to Išrana, where I was being delivered to a buyer,

our ship was attacked by a kraken. I was rescued as I was adrift at sea. As a result of that incident, the kingdom learned of the organization, so it no longer exists."

Lucia had almost assumed that such a criminal organization was still in operation in the Kingdom of Ordine, but it seemed that wasn't the case. She was really glad they had been exposed. Still, child imprisonment, human experimentation, human trafficking—it was all too cruel.

"That makes my blood boil! I want to make everyone who was involved in that organization go without food and water and then put them on a raft in front of a kraken!" Lucia exclaimed, her fists balled up in anger. She realized too late that she'd completely dispensed with the polite front she'd put up for Lotta.

Across from her, his eyes opened up wide—then he chuckled. "Yes, I agree."

As if on cue, the food arrived. Lucia encouraged Lotta to try some while she picked up her cup of herbal tea. But when one of the sizzling plates was set down on the table, Lucia realized something with a start.

"Oh! Now I understand what you meant when you said you were scared of krakens. I'm sorry, I recommended you try eating fried kraken..."

That had been the other day at the Magical Garment Factory party. Even though Lucia hadn't known, she'd assumed he'd been scared of them for the same reason she had—seeing them in storybook illustrations—and had carelessly encouraged him to try eating kraken. And she'd ended up doing the same thing today.

Lucia was the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. To Lotta, she was a superior and likely someone he felt he couldn't say no to. Only now did she realize that. She felt sorry for being so insensitive. Just as she was about to tell him that he didn't have to eat the fried kraken, Lotta picked up one of the steaming skewers.

"It's okay. Now, they're delicious," he said in perfect imitation of her voice, repeating the words she'd said at the party. His dark gray eyes were smiling cheerfully. Lucia had been under the impression that Lotta was a serious person, but it seemed he also had a playful side. *Maybe it's okay to be a little more myself around him too.*

And so Lotta got a proper meal, polishing off all the plates without another word. The final dish that was delivered to their table was the tea and grape cake set.

“That green looks so appetizing, doesn’t it?” Lucia remarked.

The cake was piled high with whipped cream and topped with large, peeled grapes that shone like jewels. The young man sitting across from her, however, was staring at the cake uneasily.

“I have never eaten this type of cake before. Won’t it give me cavities?”

Lucia remembered Lotta’s negative experience getting a cavity treated, so she offered him some peace of mind. “You’ll be fine as long as you brush your teeth when you get back home.”

Lotta gingerly picked up one cream-covered grape with his fork, brought it up to his mouth, crossed his eyes slightly to inspect it, then popped the fork into his mouth. He took his time silently chewing. Judging by the subtle way his eyes lit up, he must have liked it. He ate, again without saying a word. Once his plate was empty, the corners of his mouth rose.

“That was delicious,” he said.

“They taste best when they’re in season.”

“In…season?”

“Yes, grapes are in season from summer to autumn.”

There were methods to preserve the grapes after harvesting —such as using magic or freezing them with ice crystals—but nothing beat their taste when they were in season. Lucia explained as much to Lotta, who nodded deeply.

“I see. So that is why vegetables differ in taste from season to season too.”

It was just the sort of comment she’d come to expect from him. He was a fan of salads.

A short time later, during a lull in the conversation, Lotta cleared his throat. “Head Manager Lucia, the man you went into the café with earlier—was that Sir Randolph Goodwin of the Order of Beast Hunters?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Lucia answered promptly. It wasn’t anything to hide. Lotta often accompanied Forto to the Order of Beast Hunters’ wing in the castle, so it stood to reason he knew who Randolph was.

“What is he like?” Lotta asked in a monotone.

Lucia gave it some thought. Randolph was very well-built. That meant his clothing required more fabric, but it seemed like

it would be very rewarding to sew an outfit for him. Moreover, a suit would certainly look attractive on his sculpted knight's physique. Actually, a casual outfit would look equally good on him—something like a close-knit wool sweater for winter. As for the color, something like beige, white, or even rose gray might be nice.

"He's a very handsome man, and I think it would be rewarding to make an outfit for him!"

Lotta blinked wordlessly. Lucia thought back on what she just said. She had unthinkingly responded with fashion in mind, but that was evidently not what Lotta had been asking about. Randolph was a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters and the son of an earl. Maybe Lotta was concerned about whether Lucia had behaved respectfully toward someone of his status, or whether their conversation had gone smoothly.

Since Dahlia had been with them too, Lucia had felt comfortable speaking openly, and Randolph had courteously listened to all her fashion advice. He had even told her he wanted to consult with her about his spring and summer clothing too, which she had happily agreed to.

As she remembered all that, Lucia smiled. "We were able to talk about all kinds of things, so it was a lot of fun. I'll have the opportunity to talk to him again soon."

"...I see," Lotta said with a nod. He seemed to accept that answer.

After finishing his tea, Lotta pulled his black gloves back on, the leather squeaking slightly. Lucia took that as a signal that Lotta was returning to his bodyguard mode.

Hearing about his childhood had stirred some sympathy inside her, but she also felt that she shouldn't try to offer him words of comfort. Lotta was now Forto's skilled bodyguard, and Lucia was grateful to him for protecting her as well. Therefore, she decided to ask something completely ordinary—something that she wanted to know purely out of her own curiosity.

"Lotta, what kind of clothes do you wear on your days off?"

"More or less the same thing. I wear what I've been given for work."

Apparently, he owned no casual wear, only work uniforms. *What a shame.*

"Then, when you're in your room, do you wear nightclothes?" she asked.

“I wear the same thing in my own room too, but I wear a robe after I take a bath. I wear nothing when I get into bed.”

So Lotta slept in the nude. Lucia wasn’t that surprised, since she had friends who did the same, but the weather was soon to get chillier. She was a little worried that he might catch a cold sleeping that way in the winter.

“Aren’t you cold not wearing anything in the winter?”

“In the winter, I either wear my bathrobe to bed or wrap myself in a blanket.”

“Then wouldn’t it be better to wear warm pajamas, even if only for the winter?”

Wearing a bathrobe to bed sounded comfortable, but depending on his sleeping posture, his front could be exposed or he could get tangled up in his robe when he tossed and turned. Wearing pajamas to bed was also the best way to stay warm.

However, Lotta’s voice fell quiet as he responded, “My tail gets in the way when I wear pajamas.”

“Your tail?”

Tail, tail, tail—Lucia repeated that short word internally. It wasn’t visible outside his clothing, so she hadn’t noticed it, but Lotta *was* possessed by a bicorn. It wasn’t so odd that he had a tail.

“Can you be more specific about that?” she asked. “I don’t see your tail when you wear regular suits. Do you use concealment magic to hide just your tail?”

“No, I do not. My tail is thin and short, so I keep it wrapped around my waist and tucked inside my underwear. But if I wear pajamas, my tail is pressed against the fabric, which is uncomfortable and makes it difficult to sleep.”

So the position of his tail affected his sleep. That was a serious issue.

“And that’s why you wear a robe or use a blanket.”

“Yes, though they usually come off by morning.”

“That’s not good…”

If he kept sleeping that way in the winter, he really would catch a cold. *A pair of pajamas that doesn’t get in the way of his tail…* It shouldn’t be that difficult to add a vertical slit or hole in the pajamas for his tail to go through.

The Tailors’ Guild produced clothing for blighted individuals, such as garments with sleeves of differing thickness and shirts that didn’t snag on scales.

Lucia's first thought was that if he just went to Forto for advice, he could surely whip up a pair of pajamas perfect for Lotta, but she quickly rethought that idea. Forto was a viscount. Lotta was a commoner and Forto's bodyguard and attendant. Even though they lived in the same residence and were together every day, they weren't equal in status.

Plus, when she thought back on things, she realized there seemed to be some distance between them as master and servant. Their relationship probably wasn't close enough for them to lightly discuss a personal matter.

Then what about Lucia herself? Lotta might be her occasional bodyguard, but he wasn't her subordinate. And they were both commoners. They didn't have to worry about the sorts of things that vexed nobles, such as the nuances of gift-giving or the risk of falling into conversational traps.

In that case, surely it would be okay for her to design and make a pair of pajamas that wouldn't bother Lotta's tail? The other day, when he'd saved her from being abducted, she'd offered to thank him in some way, but he'd declined on the grounds that he'd just been doing his duty. But even if he wouldn't accept a thank-you gift, she could circumvent that as a couturier.

With a smile, Lucia asked, "Lotta, would you let me make you a trial pair of pajamas for blighted individuals that won't bother their tails?"

***

"I have returned, Lord Forto."

Lotta stepped into the guildmaster's office in the Tailors' Guild. He was back a little later than usual today.

"Thank you for your hard work," Forto said, putting down his paperwork and placing his quill pen back in its holder. *Just two more documents to go through. They shouldn't take long,* Forto thought as he raised his eyes to look at Lotta. The bodyguard, whose demeanor was usually impassive, had a slight wrinkle between his brows.

"I will now give my report. Today, Head Manager Lucia Fano __"

As he listened, Forto straightened his posture. Normally, Lotta gave a general overview of Lucia's actions of the day without

going into details. However, Forto had instructed Lotta to report if she had gotten into any sort of danger, or if she had interacted with a noble or stakeholder. It seemed his report today would deal with some episode of that nature.

Lucia had gone shopping with her friend, the magical toolmaker Dahlia, then entered a café with a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, Randolph Goodwin. They had spent three hours in the café, but since Lotta had not entered and kept a certain distance from the shop, he had not heard the particulars of their conversation.

In any case, Forto was concerned about why they had spent three whole hours in a café and what they could have possibly talked about. As he was mulling over those questions, Lotta continued with his report.

"Afterward, Head Manager Lucia invited me to have a meal."

After Lucia had seen Dahlia off at the carriage stop, she had apparently had tea at an eatery where she had also encouraged Lotta to eat something. She had possibly done it out of concern for Lotta, who didn't eat lunch. That was very much something she would do.

"I took the opportunity to inquire about Sir Goodwin, and she said, 'He's a very handsome man, and I think it would be rewarding to make an outfit for him.'"

It seemed Lotta had engaged in conversation with Lucia and even asked a question. That was rare for him.

Still, it was true Randolph had a brawny physique, and any couturier would find it a worthwhile challenge to make clothes for him. Forto could understand that.

Lotta went on, "Head Manager Lucia also said, 'We were able to talk about many things, so it was a lot of fun. I'll have the opportunity to talk to him again soon.' I believe they made arrangements to meet again."

"...I see," Forto said, unable to stop his voice from growing quiet.

It sounded like their meeting wasn't strictly about clothing, but a personal meeting. The fact that Lucia had promised to meet him again after a simple conversation must have meant that they already knew each other, or that they'd really hit things off today. Forto's head and chest ached at this sudden conundrum.

"...Did she seem to enjoy herself while she was speaking to

this son of Goodwin?”

“Yes, it seemed that way. Although, Head Manager Lucia always looks to be enjoying herself.”

“Yes, I suppose so...”

Lotta was right about that. Whether she was at the Tailors’ Guild, the Magical Garment Factory, or even—despite her nervousness upon her first visit—the castle, Lucia always seemed to be having the greatest time when she was doing something related to fashion.

However, even when nobles found companions with whom they could pass the time pleasantly, things did not always progress smoothly. Randolph was the second son of a march earl, a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, and was often away from the capital on expeditions. He wasn’t someone who could fully protect Lucia. It was possible this relationship could be connected to the scheme of another family. Forto didn’t want her to get dragged into something like that.

On the other hand, if the matter was settled quickly, Randolph retired from the Order of Beast Hunters, and Lucia was whisked away to the earldom on the border, then Forto would no longer be able to speak to her, let alone work with her—no, that wasn’t the issue here. It would be a huge loss to the Magical Garment Factory and to the Tailors’ Guild.

“Good work today, Lotta. You may take it easy now. I still need to finish up some paperwork.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lotta’s presence abruptly grew faint. He must have used concealment magic and then sat down in the chair against the wall in order not to distract Forto.

Lotta’s contract of employment only stipulated that he act as a bodyguard and attendant. It did not include the role of interrogating Lucia. And yet Lotta, for whom conversation was a weak point, had taken it upon himself to do just that for Forto. It was understandable that he’d be a bit tired.

Forto dropped his gaze to the left side of his desk, where there was a bundle of letters of offers for arranged marriage and adoption for Lucia as well as letters of introduction to the Magical Garment Factory.

So far, Forto had been dealing with those letters as brusquely as if he were cutting them up with sewing shears, but a string had appeared where he hadn’t been expecting it. He had never

imagined that the magical toolmaker Dahlia would connect a son of Earl Goodwin with Lucia. Randolph was a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, and the Earldom Goodwin was a family that shouldered the responsibility of protecting the nation's borders. Neither he nor his family should have had any connection to the world of fashion.

And anyway, wouldn't Dahlia want her friend, who was involved in making the toe socks and zephyricloth that she herself had developed, to stay in the capital? Or perhaps the possibility of Lucia leaving hadn't even crossed Dahlia's mind. Once she decided to do something for someone else, the toolmaker had a tendency to push right on ahead without thinking of her own interests.

The same could be said for Lucia. That was precisely why he could never predict what move either of them would make next. He was better off not taking any roundabout means but just asking directly.

"I'll need to check in with her as soon as possible—"

Forto lifted his pen out of the inkpot, and a drop of black liquid fell from the tip, leaving an ugly stain on his shirt cuff.

***

"You seemed to be in a great haste yesterday. Have you been busy with the changing seasons?"

A man with hair the color of mustard smiled at him from across the glossy table. His name was Ivano Mercadante—a shrewd businessman and the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, which was currently taking the city by storm.

"A bit, yes. Though we have already made it over the hill," Forto responded with a smile, pouring white wine into Ivano's glass.

They were in a private room on the third floor of an establishment in the nobles' quarter that Forto frequented. Ivano had come to the Tailors' Guild for a meeting, so Forto had invited him out for dinner.

Forto *had* been in a great haste yesterday—Ivano was right about that. The other day, after hearing Lotta's report, Forto had taken a break from his work to visit the Rossetti Trading Company at their office in the Merchants' Guild. He'd wanted to confirm that Dahlia had introduced Lucia and Randolph Goodwin

to each other.

Dahlia had given him a flustered explanation. They had chanced upon Randolph in the street, where Lucia had told him his clothes didn't suit him and begun recommending garments and colors that would look better on him. Since they were blocking the road, Dahlia had suggested they enter a café. They'd spent three hours there, during which time Lucia had given a lecture about fashion and agreed to give Randolph advice on his spring and summer clothing when the time came.

To sum it all up, Lucia was just forging ahead on the path of the couturier as per usual. That was all there was to it. Viewed another way, Lucia, an employee of the Tailors' Guild, had jumped at the opportunity to sell an outfit to the son of an earl. It was also clear that Forto had been grossly mistaken. He decided to send Randolph a complimentary voucher for the Tailors' Guild.

Ivano had been present in the room during Forto's conversation with Dahlia. He had been watching Forto with an indescribable expression, as if he had read the panic on Forto's face at the unacceptable idea that his dear subordinate would be taken away from him. However, this matter with Lucia was deeply connected to the Magical Garment Factory and the Tailors' Guild. Forto didn't think he had gone too far.

"I am sure I inconvenienced you by dropping in out of the blue yesterday. How about I send Chairwoman Rossetti a dress by way of apology?"

"We would have cleaned up the room a little if we'd had advance notice of your arrival, Mr. Forto. And I believe the chairwoman has enough dresses at the moment."

His question was an attempt to gauge how Ivano had taken his visit yesterday, but the man's reply implied that he hadn't particularly minded it.

Forto could almost forget that Ivano was a commoner with that carefully controlled voice of his. It had only been a few months since Ivano had become the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, and he had begun holding his own with nobles almost immediately. Now he was fully accustomed to the way they spoke and thought, a testament to his capabilities as a merchant.

Forto wished he could bring Ivano under his employ, but that was likely out of the question. The man himself seemed to have

not even the slightest desire to leave his post. Moreover, Forto couldn't imagine anyone else handling the Rossetti Trading Company in his place.

As they drank their white wine, their appetizer arrived at the table. It was a dish of chicken and assorted vegetables in a jellied consommé. Forto's mouth relaxed into a smile as he remembered Lucia's fondness for this dish.

"Am I correct in assuming you want to prevent Lucia from going somewhere else, Mr. Forto?"

It was an obvious question, so Forto gave his response without hesitation. "Naturally. She is the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, after all. She's very important."

"Has Lucia received a deluge of invitations to discuss arranged marriage? The chairwoman has been receiving bundles of letters as well."

"Yes. I have been replying to them with standard rejection letters."

Normally, this would have been the job of Lucia's father, but the letters were coming from nobles and business owners. Forto had decided to send the rejections in his place to prevent anyone from forcing Mr. Fano's hand or trapping him in some commitment. It was only a matter of course that Forto, as her boss, would do this for her.

"By the way," Ivano said, "what do you think of my outfit today?"

Forto occasionally gave Ivano fashion advice. Although Ivano was a commoner, he frequented the castle and interacted with high-ranking nobles, so Forto was unsparing in his critique, down to every last detail.

"The points of your shirt collar are curling up half a finger. You might need more starch. The creases on your pants—they're not as centered as they should be in front. If that happens with your other trousers as well, you might be better off sending them to a different launderer who can iron them correctly."

"Duly noted."

Ivano jotted Forto's comments down immediately. Forto waited for him to finish, then continued. "As for the width of your lapel, the more closely it matches the width of your necktie, the more harmonious your outfit will look. Your lapel today looks a little wide, but the navy color sharpens it up a bit, so it's passable."

“I see. I will be mindful of that. Also, I was thinking of getting another suit tailored. I’ve been trying to think of what would be acceptable, but is there anything I should keep in mind?”

“What would you consider an acceptable suit? When, where, and with whom do you plan on wearing it?”

“I apologize for my vague question. What I am looking for is something that would not offend the person I’m meeting. I won’t be doing so often, but I’ve been given the opportunity to meet face-to-face with a certain marquis…”

Ivano shifted his right hand to his stomach. He seemed rather troubled.

“I’ll offer some suggestions that you can bring to either the Tailors’ Guild or your usual place,” Forto told him.

Ivano’s expression finally relaxed, and they moved on to some friendly chitchat. Forto talked about current fashion trends, such as patterned vests and jacket linings, as well as the marriages newly uniting various noble families. Ivano spoke of the candied apples and other treats that were popular in the lower city, and of the price of legumes, which had gone down now that supply was up.

They continued to converse without pause after the rest of their orders arrived—onion soup, creamy beef pasta, and grilled sea bream fillets.

This exchange of information was mutually beneficial. Forto gained knowledge of commerce and matters related to commoners, while Ivano learned about fashion and information regarding nobles. No matter the setting or the company, knowledge of a wide array of topics could serve as a weapon. Forto often interacted with nobles, and it was easy to hold the other party’s interest when he spoke of commoners and their milieu, since they rarely knew much about those. He also genuinely enjoyed his conversations with Ivano, though he wasn’t sure if the other man felt the same about him.

Once they were finished eating, they requested that the server bring them coffee. From here, they would talk about their respective work.

“The Magical Garment Factory personnel have taken care of the inventory issues. Now they just need to keep up a consistent supply, and if they have the capacity to, they will start working on building up stock and on developing toe socks for the winter,” Forto said, changing the topic fluidly.

“Is there a lot of demand for winter toe socks?” Ivano asked.

“Yes. It can get quite warm indoors during wintertime. Take, for example, the winter boots worn by guards, who frequently move in and out of doors. They are made to be more waterproof, which makes them incredibly stuffy inside.”

“Ah, yes. For the same reason, the socks could also be marketed to staff of the Couriers’ Guild or sellers who go door-to-door—or really, to anyone who wears winter boots.”

“Precisely. Ideally, people want to spend winter warm, not sweaty.”

Lucia and the others at the Magical Garment Factory were currently tackling that very issue. Their first prototype—toe socks made from baphomet wool—seemed promising, but the material cost was unfortunately very steep. Forto thought to himself that, if anything, they might make a good gift for the one who wore the golden crown.

“How is the zephyricloth coming along?” Ivano asked.

“It has entered production, and we anticipate that it will be ready for next year. There are no particular issues on that front. Oh, and apparently the green slimes have been multiplying much better. Did you receive the letter?”

“Yes, I did. The researchers of the slime farm are investigating as to why.”

One of the materials used to make zephyricloth was powdered green slime. A large quantity was required, so the slimes were being bred by the slime farm under the management of the Adventurers’ Guild.

If they continued to multiply at a good rate, then that naturally meant a higher supply, and the Tailors’ Guild would be able to secure a decent stock. If all went well, the price would decrease too. For the guild, which was already preparing for next year, that was very much appreciated.

“As I understand it, green slimes multiply more when they’re in direct sunlight. Unlike other slimes, they have some plantlike properties.”

When Forto had asked the lead researcher about it during their meeting, her eyes had lit up and she’d explained everything in great detail. She had digressed into talking about how wonderful slimes themselves were. Forto knew he did the same thing when he spoke about clothing materials, so he’d just listened quietly until she was finished.

“I thought all slimes were the same regardless of color, but it seems they are quite different,” Ivano commented.

“Yes, from waterproof cloth to zephyricloth, each slime has its own uses. I wish there were some way I could thank those slimes at the farm.”

Back when he was studying chivalry in college, he never would have imagined that one day, he would become the guildmaster of the Tailors’ and want to express gratitude toward the slimes he was then practicing combat against.

As he was staring off into the distance, Ivano called his name. “Mr. Forto, if I may make a suggestion—why don’t you send white robes to all the researchers there?”

“Oh no, do they have problems with wear and tear?”

The Tailors’ Guild supplied the white robes and work clothes that the researchers at the slime farm used. Slimes could be affected by magic, so, with a few exceptions, the robes were not enchanted. No one had informed him of such, but perhaps the garments weren’t durable enough and were prone to getting dissolved or torn.

“No, not that— Isn’t the slime farm a bit far from the capital?”

“That’s true. It takes some time to get there, even by carriage.”

“The diet for slimes includes ground up scrap vegetables and meat. Also, some of the researchers get very absorbed in their work once they arrive… There seems to be a facility for the farm staff to do laundry, but…” Ivano trailed off and lightly rubbed his index finger under his nose. It was then that Forto finally understood.

“We shall send them some robes and work clothes as a thank-you for their hard work. I will also speak to Director Tasso at the Tailors’ Guild and recommend that there be regular carriages going to and from a laundry.”

No matter how passionate about their work that they were, the researchers couldn’t continue wearing their robes until they became noticeably smelly. They certainly needed a change of robes, but it would be best to have their clothes regularly laundered as well.

But how could they overlook something so basic? Forto wondered before he realized something. Adventurers often camped in the wilderness and were unable to bathe as often as they might like. The researchers had become accustomed to

similar conditions due to their connection with the Adventurers' Guild. Some issues were apparent only to those on the outside.

"That would be very much appreciated, Mr. Forto. Also, I suppose we should thank the slimes in some way?"

"Yes, quite right. It was the slimes that gave us waterproof cloth and zephyricloth. After we've taken care of the researchers, we should consider supplying the slimes with some quality feed," Forto replied seriously. Ivano gave him a bemused smirk.

It was the chief researcher herself who made the nutritional water that the slimes favored. Forto wished he could slip some high-quality alcohol in there, but he had a feeling that would incur her wrath.

Also, there was someone else whom Forto needed to thank more than the slimes.

"I've been continually blessed since this spring. From the toe socks to the drying insoles to the zephyricloth—I believe it is the Rossetti Trading Company whom I must thank most of all."

"You have been doing much more for us these days, so there's no need for that. However..." Ivano hesitated for a moment before continuing. "There will likely come a day, Mr. Forto, when I really will need to ask a favor of you."

"By all means. I will do whatever is in my power."

Does he already have an idea of what he'll need help with? Even if Ivano didn't come to him for help, the Rossetti Trading Company should be able to solicit the aid of some earl or marquis. However, if what they sought was fashion advice, it would be more expedient to go through Forto. He would drop everything and do his best to make anything from an engagement dress to wedding attire.

"Even a personal favor?" Ivano asked, dropping his polite register.

Has the wine gone to his head? Forto wondered. The man's downcast face worried him a little, but Forto responded readily, "Of course."

"...Do I have your word, Mr. Forto?"

Ivano's navy blue eyes suddenly looked straight at him. There was no drunkenness to be seen in those eyes. *Have I fallen into a trap?* Forto wondered, but he would never have been so uncouth as to take back his word. He couldn't imagine that this man would be in any true trouble. But if Ivano was putting his trust in him, then Forto would gladly lend him his hand.

“Yes, I won’t forget it, Ivano.”

Ivano gave a quick nod, then, after a moment’s pause, continued. “There probably isn’t much that I can help you with, but if there’s something you want to gripe about that you can’t with anyone else, please let me know. I’ll forget it the day you tell me.”

“Very well. I will count on you when that time comes,” Forto replied smoothly with a smile.

Couturier Dating Stories

“Finally, we can take a break…”

“Yeah, we checked off everything listed as ‘urgent’ on the schedule…”

The large conference room in the Magical Garment Factory was currently being used as a cafeteria for the staff. Today’s lunch was pizza from a food stall. Everyone also had their choice of beverages, such as sparkling or fruit-infused water.

“Lunch will be twice as long as usual today, so feel free to take your time eating!” Lucia declared loudly.

Recently, many of the staff had been working overtime or into their lunchtime. Now the day had finally come that everyone would be leaving work on time, and Lucia wanted them to eat properly, without feeling hurried.

“Thanks!”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

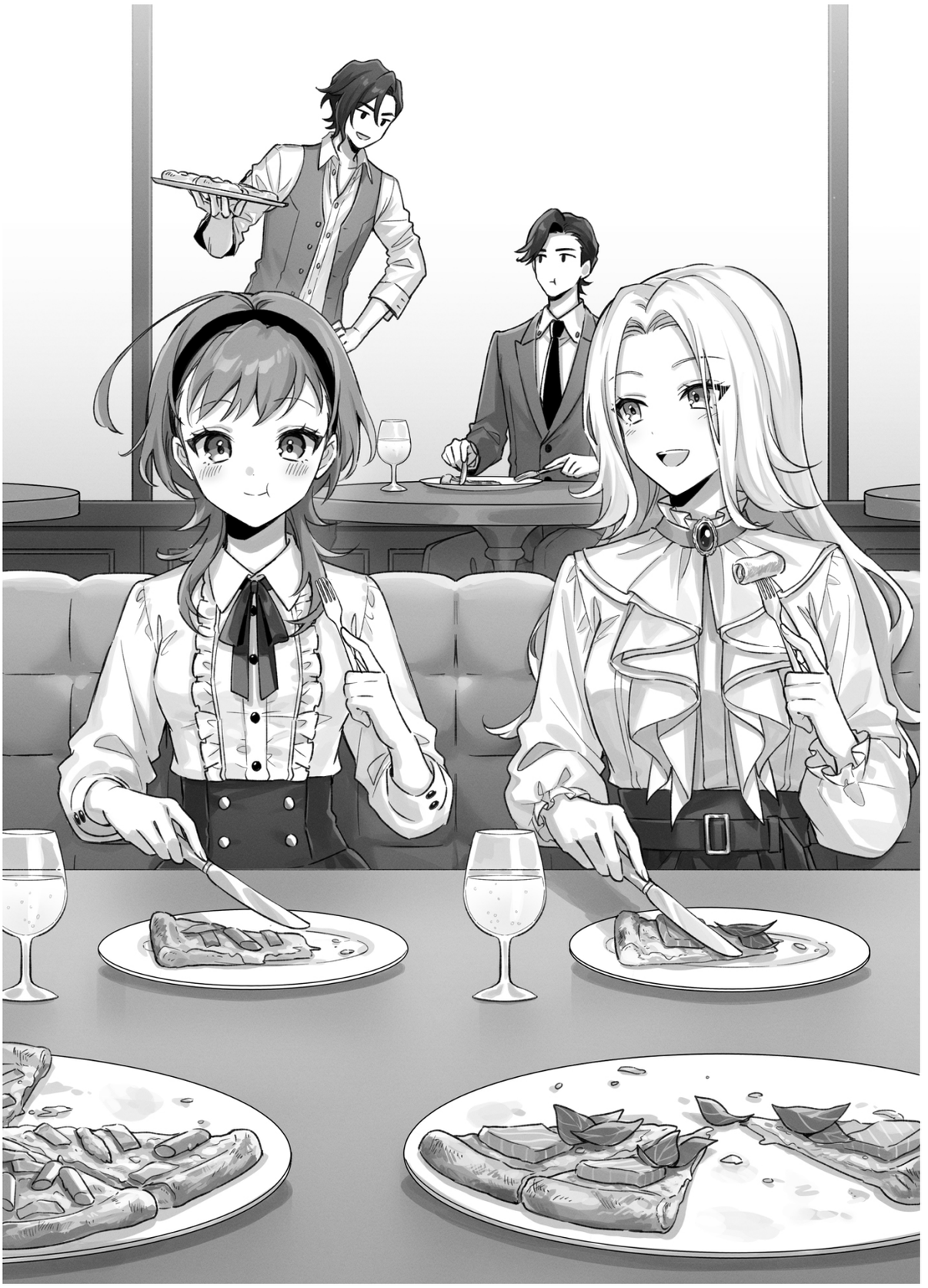
The staff took their spots at the table and dug into the pizza. There were four types on offer today: a standard cheese and tomato sauce, one with bacon and asparagus, one with smoked salmon and arugula, and one with mushrooms and assorted vegetables. The food stall usually operated out of the park in the Central District, but Lucia had asked that they come to the Magical Garment Factory today.

The pizza was freshly baked and piping hot. Its appetizing aroma made Lucia’s stomach growl. She joined everyone at the table and sunk her teeth into a slice of the bacon and asparagus pizza. It was light on cheese, but there was an excellent balance of saltiness from the bacon and fresh sweetness from the asparagus.

“This one’s super tasty!” she exclaimed.

“This smoked salmon one is really good too. You should give it a try next,” Hestia said, placing a slice on a plate for her.

Lucia washed her pizza down with sparkling water and then aimed her fork at that slice. The softness and distinctive smoky flavor of the salmon were really delightful paired with the bite of the arugula. Together with the garlic mixed into the sauce, they made for a pizza so delicious that it kept her wanting more.



“This one’s tasty too! I want another!”

“Chief, how do you stay so skinny when you eat like that?” one of the stitchers sitting across the table asked with a glare.

“I’m not skinny, but I do try to move a lot every day. I also try not to overeat for breakfast and dinner.”

“I knew it. That kind of figure isn’t sustainable without a lot of hard work…”

The stitcher had only one slice of pizza on her plate, and she hadn’t even taken a bite yet. She just sighed with her fork in hand.

What a shame, Lucia thought, then said, “I try to keep my figure so I can wear clothes that I love, but I won’t hold back from eating something tasty if that’s what I want to do in the moment. It’s not like I only live for clothes.”

“Boss, are you okay?” Dante asked with a straight face. “That’s not like you to say.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Dante?” Lucia shot back with a pout. It was true she loved clothes, but she also loved eating delicious foods and chatting with friends. She refused to live an austere and monomaniacal existence.

“What chief means is that she’s content with her figure, right?” Hestia suggested.

“I try not to wish for things I can’t have. Though I wouldn’t mind growing a bit taller even if it meant having to buy a whole new wardrobe…”

While she obviously hadn’t gotten drunk off the sparkling water, she’d accidentally let her true feelings slip out at the end of her sentence. The factory staff laughed awkwardly.

“Chief, are you sensitive about your height?” Hestia asked.

“I’m not sensitive about it, but sometimes I think if I were taller, my clothes would look better on me.”

Lucia had finished growing, so she wasn’t getting any taller. But occasionally, while she was designing clothes, she would think, *If only I were ten or at least five centimeters taller!*

“But it’s not like anyone can change their bone structure. We all have our own fundamental body type, right?” she added.

“Fundamental body type… What a cruel phrase…” the stitcher lamented with a sigh. But it was true—no one could change their height or the body type they were born with.

“It’d be scarier if everyone looked the same. Then you couldn’t tell anyone apart. Plus, I think it’s better to find clothes that

appeal to you and flatter your own unique shape. Some like slender people while others like people who are curvier, right? Everyone has their type, like someone tall or muscular," Lucia said.

Everyone started agreeing and talking among themselves about their own preferences.

One of the knitters raised his hand slightly. "I like curvier women. I think they're very elegant and attractive."

"Really...?" the stitcher murmured.

The knitter picked up his plate and walked over to her. "Um, would you like to try a slice of this pizza?"

"Th-Thank you..."

It seemed the stitcher's supply matched the knitter's demand. Lucia had no desire to be stomped on by a sleipnir, so she discreetly looked away. In her line of sight was a middle-aged stitcher with a dark gray beard.

He was narrowing his amber red eyes. "Well, having a type means practically nothing anyway."

"Maybe you just aren't choosy enough, Zilo?" Dante quipped.

Zilo laughed. "That's also true, but what I mean is that humans fall in love with the whole package. Even a man who says he prefers women with long, glossy hair can fall for a woman with short, choppy hair in a single evening."

"Isn't that what happened to *you*, Zilo?" Lucia asked.

"It certainly is. Everything I used to say was washed away, and now I proclaim with all my heart that no one is better than my short-haired, suntanned wife."

Those were the words of an experienced man.

Zilo's wife was a city guard. He always described her as a tall, stunningly handsome woman with short hair. *I'd love to meet her someday and ask her all about the clothes Zilo makes for her,* Lucia thought.

Hestia let out a long sigh and said, "What a romantic story. It's like that opera song that goes, 'Love is something you fall into...'"

Zilo laughed and nodded. "It sure is. Like a bird getting knocked out of the air."

That sounded very catastrophic. One step away from a fatality.

"Oh?" Lucia said to herself. While Zilo was going on about his love life, she noticed that a young man sitting at the edge of the table still hadn't had anything to eat. He was the manager in

charge of the general affairs of the Magical Garment Factory. “Um, are you not feeling well? Or do you not like pizza?” she asked him.

She had asked beforehand if anyone was opposed to having pizza for lunch, but now she worried that maybe he hadn’t been in the room at the time.

“No, that’s not it…” the man responded, sounding apologetic. His blue eyes wavered. Now more confused, Lucia scrutinized the man’s face.

“If you’re not well, just say so,” Dante said before Lucia could. “And if you’re worried about the pizza giving you an upset stomach, you can order something like a vegetable sandwich instead.”

“No! I really have no issue with the food. Yesterday, I… Well, I broke up with my girlfriend…”

The man was heartbroken, of all things. No wonder he didn’t have an appetite for pizza.

There was one particular aspect of his situation that especially concerned Lucia. “Was it because you’ve been so busy with work lately that you haven’t had time to see her?” she asked.

That would be a big problem. As the head manager, she wanted to apologize if the couple had broken up because he had been working overtime without taking many days off; it might have contributed to some misunderstandings.

“No! That’s not it at all. I haven’t been overdoing it at work, and I made sure to see her when I was free. I just realized that we have different values…”

The man looked down as if he found it difficult to say more. Lucia decided she shouldn’t press any further.

Meanwhile, Zilo pulled a stretchy piece of cheese from his mouth and asked, “Do you mean in a financial sense?”

“No, not exactly…” the man replied.

Other people had started glancing curiously in their direction. The general affairs manager took a gulp of his fruit-infused water, then his blue eyes scanned the crowd.

“Everyone, I apologize for springing this question on you, but would you be willing to show your partner your date book? And would you want to see your partner’s date book?”

That’s a hard question. Lucia gave it some serious thought. Her date book held important information, including dates of deliveries to the Magical Garment Factory and appointments at

the castle, Merchants' Guild, and the estates of various clients. She wouldn't even be able to show that to her partner.

And she couldn't imagine looking at her partner's date book either. She wouldn't even open it if she found it lying on the ground—though she didn't have a partner in the first place, with no indication that she would get one soon.

"I wouldn't show mine. I have work-related stuff written in there. And for the same reason, I don't think I'd try to look at my partner's date book either. If I was worried about something, I'd just ask," Lucia said.

"You can count me as another vote for not showing," Dante chimed in. "I write down client addresses in code, so I don't think she'd find out anything, but she shouldn't know the dates of my appointments at the castle. I wouldn't want her to read any notes that might cause trouble either. And I'm sure my partner would feel the same way about her own date book."

"If my wife asked, I'd show her," Zilo said. "Though, to be fair, I don't go out to meet with clients, and I don't have anything to keep secret. Also, my wife shows me her date book. City guards work early and late shifts, so it's helpful to know when to cook."

"I don't have a partner, but if they were worried I was going out with someone else or something, I'd show them. As for seeing my partner's, I can only say that it would depend on the situation."

The general affairs manager looked at each respondent in turn. Once there was a lull, he cleared his throat and said, "I had nothing written in my date book about work that I didn't want her to know, but I can't be with someone who would just look through someone else's things without asking."

"What do you mean?"

"We were eating at a restaurant, and when I got back from the bathroom, I found my girlfriend looking through my date book. She took it out of the inner pocket of my jacket while I was gone."

Lucia and Dante responded in unison.

"Gosh, the nerve!"

"Ah, yeah. I couldn't stand that either."

That behavior was crossing the line, at least for Lucia.

"Did you quarrel?"

"No, she apologized then and there. She said she was worried about whether I was actually working long hours or seeing

someone else. But what she did really didn't sit right with me."

"Huh? It sounds like she was just feeling insecure. Couldn't you have talked it out and patched things up if she promised not to do that again?" a young stitcher asked.

But instead of the young manager, it was Zilo who responded. "It's better to break things off when something like that bothers you. It's hard to get over a difference in values..."

Several people nodded in agreement, while others crossed their arms in deep thought or tilted their heads to the side. A difference in values was clearly an apt way to put it.

One of the stitchers raised her right hand and said, "I think once you get a feeling in your gut that your partner's not right for you, that's the end. Last month, my boyfriend searched for my wage slips under the pretense of helping me clean. I couldn't stay with him after that."

"Jeez..."

"Why go through such a complicated scheme...?" Lucia could understand wanting to know about a partner's financial situation, but she couldn't understand why the woman's boyfriend would have gone about finding out that way.

"He probably found it hard to ask. But searching through your house is a bit much," someone said.

"He should have just asked you how much money you make."

"Well, he did ask me a short time ago, so I told him then. And it was obvious then that I made more money than him..."

The Magical Garment Factory paid slightly better than the Tailors' Guild. Individual earnings were based on one's role and work hours, irrespective of gender. That meant skilled stitchers could earn quite a lot of money if they worked overtime. Moreover, everyone had been working a lot of overtime lately, which had probably exacerbated the difference in earnings between the erstwhile couple.

"So did he break up with you because of that? Did it hurt his pride as a man?"

The stitcher shook her head and continued, with a hardened smile, "No. He told me, 'I wanted to see if you really did make more money than me before we got married. The amount you make gives me peace of mind. I'll show you my wage slips later too.'" The stitcher clenched her fists tightly. "But he hadn't even proposed to me yet! So it's not like I'd said yes!"

"Uh-uh, no way, not good!" Lucia cried, unable to form a

coherent sentence.

Zilo stepped in to say just what she was thinking. “No trust, no apology, and a joke of a proposal for the punch line.”

“Exactly! I couldn’t stay with him after that, so I dumped him that very day!” the stitcher exclaimed, not a single shadow crossing her face. The factory staff started clapping. Lucia joined in wholeheartedly.

“Right, on to the next one! And on that note, shall we go get another freshly baked pizza?” Zilo proposed brightly.

Several people stood up. It seemed lunchtime would continue for a while longer.

Lotta was silently chewing his pizza as the others enjoyed a lively conversation. He wasn’t part of the Magical Garment Factory staff, but he had come here to give Lucia some paperwork from Forto and been invited to stay for lunch. Forto was having lunch with a client at the Tailors’ Guild today, which meant Lotta had some free time, so he’d accepted the invitation.

But when the conversation turned to love and relationships, Lotta activated his concealment magic. He wouldn’t be able to give a good answer if someone tried to include him. Nonetheless, thinking someone might notice if he used it for too long, Lotta wolfed down his pizza and lifted his concealment. As he brought his glass of water to his lips, he gave a start. It tasted of grapes.

He thought of the exquisite green grape cake he had eaten with Lucia the other day. He had never had such a delicious cake before. He felt he understood what Lucia had meant when she’d said food tasted better in season. It was something he’d never given much thought to before, but it seemed exceptionally important.

The moment he set his empty glass down on the table, Dante came over with another plate.

“Still hungry, Lotta?”

Dante seemed to have taken Lotta’s tastes into account. He was offering him a slice of the asparagus pizza and a slice of the mushroom and vegetable pizza. Lotta thanked him and accepted the plate.

Dante sat down in the empty seat next to him. “Pizza’s great, but what other foods do you like?” he asked.

Lotta replied with what he’d just been thinking about.

“…Grape cake, I suppose.”

Dante chuckled. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a sweets guy.”

“I suppose I am. Head Manager Lucia recommended a cake that was very good.”

“Boss did?”

“Yes. She treated me to it the other day.” Lotta himself hadn’t even known that he liked sweets until then.

“Yeah, right!” a voice squealed from another table. It appeared the relationship talk was still going on.

A stitcher and a knitter were divided in their opinions about what to look for in a romantic partner. One was insisting their partner had to be muscular, while the other was holding forth on the importance of a deep voice. It sounded like a difficult, unanswerable question. Lucia, who was between them, had her arms crossed in thought.

Dante was watching them with slightly narrowed eyes. “They’re really getting rowdy over there. By the way, Lotta, what kind of person makes *your* heart skip a beat?”

“Makes my heart skip a beat?” *That’s what people say when talking about someone it’s exciting to be with.* Lotta had recently started reading books about the art of conversation. Remembering what he’d read, he answered with the first thing that came to mind. “Horses. I run side by side with them in the morning to train.”

Perhaps running with horses didn’t literally make his heart skip a beat, but it did get it pumping, and he found it very exciting. The horses knew him, so they made space for him to run next to them and avoided running into him. Sometimes they let him ride on their backs, but he preferred to run beside them.

“You run *with* horses…?” With his sparkling water in one hand, Dante turned his gaze on Lotta. There was a troubled look in his ice green eyes.

Lotta had a feeling he might have given the wrong answer. “Did I answer mistakenly?”

“No, I think I phrased my question wrong. Um, I meant to ask what sort of person you want to date romantically, what your type is. I’m sorry if it’s a rude question,” Dante said, as if forcing out the words.

Lotta understood what he meant now. A romantic partner—someone he wanted to be his lover or mate. That was easy enough to answer. “I don’t find it rude. I do not rut, after all.”

Dante spewed out his sparkling water. “Uh… That’s, um, quite a direct answer…”

Another response off the mark, it seemed. Dante wiped off the table with a napkin.

Just as Lotta had thought, it really was difficult to take part in talk about romance. He didn’t understand other people’s preferences. In the past, someone had once confessed to Lotta, but telling that person that he was a blighted had sufficed to put an end to that.

He knew people had preferences for certain physical features, but outward appearance was like wrapping paper. And besides, weren’t personal tastes conditional anyway? Lotta could understand wanting to be with someone who was kind to you, gave you a place to belong, and protected your livelihood, but it seemed that was different from being in love with someone. There were those who initiated romances only to discover later that the conditions weren’t right or they were incompatible with their partners. Lotta found that nothing short of mystifying.

Suddenly, Lotta recalled his first employer, a blonde woman. Back when Lotta wasn’t as tall as he was now, the woman had posed a similar question to him. “Lotta, are you in love with anyone?”

“You,” he replied, and she patted his head and gave him a graceful smile.

“Thank you,” she said. “But that’s not what I mean by love. I hope that someday, you meet someone who is more important to you than anyone else in the world.” Her words were like a hopeful wish, but a shadow crossed her face.

Someone more important than his employer, the one he served and protected—he had never met anyone like that, and he doubted that he ever would. *It must be something a blighted like me will never understand.* So he had thought at the time, and so he thought now.

Lotta realized his conversation with Dante had stalled. He remembered from his books that at times like these, he should ask a similar question in turn. Lotta opened his mouth to speak.

“What type of person do you wish to have a relationship with, Mr. Dante?”

Dante had been about to fill Lotta’s glass with sparkling water, but at that question, he paused for a beat. Then he smiled and continued pouring, as if nothing had happened. “A woman who

is bright, strong, and kind—someone who's not boring to be with," he said over the sound of the fizzing bubbles.

One person who fulfilled those conditions instantly came to mind. A green-haired woman who was as bright as the sun, strong enough that she feared no kraken, kind to everyone, and so unpredictable that he could never guess what she would say next.

Lotta wasn't sure if he should express that thought aloud, so he took a bite of pizza instead. He chewed slowly, so as not to make the lull in the conversation feel awkward. Next to him, Dante took a bite of his own pizza and said nothing else to carry on the conversation. The occasional ring of bright laughter felt very comforting.

I hope Dante and Lucia both find the partners who best suit their conditions, Lotta thought simply.

Request for a Dress and Observing a Ball

“I very much appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with me, Mr. Luini and Head Manager Fano.”

Thus a young lady politely greeted them in the drawing room of the Tailors’ Guild. She wore a bright navy blue dress with a white collar and cuffs. The dress had a narrow-pleated skirt that didn’t fan out much, and a row of small golden buttons from her collar to her waist provided a nice accent. Her long, shiny, blonde hair was tied back with a matching navy blue ribbon and swayed behind her. She wore light makeup and beige, low-heeled shoes. Altogether, she looked the very picture of a prim and proper young lady.

“I welcome you to the Tailors’ Guild,” said Forto. “That neat and trim outfit looks very becoming on you, Miss Frandine.”

“Thank you for reaching out to us, Ms. Elnora.”

The young woman standing across the coffee table was Frandine Elnora, daughter of Earl Elnora.

Why did she ask for me by name? And what’s with this sudden change in attitude anyway? Lucia’s thoughts were a swirl of question marks. She hoped the two of them would give her a pass for being slower to speak than usual.

“I deeply apologize for the trouble I caused with my inexcusably rude behavior earlier this year,” Frandine said, lowering her head in a deep bow.

Not long ago, Lucia’s friend Lunetta had made her debut as the daughter of a baron. The Tailors’ Guild had made her debutante dress, and Lucia had also helped with the sewing. The young woman sitting in front of them now had purposely poured wine on that precious, precious dress.

Forto had joined Lucia in doing everything he could in holding Frandine accountable, and she had been made to pay three times the cost of a luxury designer dress. Frandine had later sent a letter and gift of apology, but knowing what she’d done that day, Lucia had no trust in her. But for a young noblewoman to bow her head not only to Forto but even to a commoner like herself was frankly unsettling.

“I have no qualms, considering we received compensation for

the dress," Forto said. "And you, Lucia?"

"You apologized for the incident afterward, so I have no concerns." Lucia gave her a smile fit for a noble, but she couldn't stop her voice from coming out strained.

With greetings and apology out of the way, the three of them finally took their seats on the sofa.

Forto spoke up first. "So, you have come here today to request a consultation with Lucia for a ball gown, yes?"

"Yes, if I may. If you are uncomfortable in granting my request, I fully understand your refusal."

"You came here even knowing that you might be refused?"

When Forto asked for confirmation, the young woman nodded firmly.

"Yes. I believe it would be reasonable for Head Manager Fano to refuse me, but I came here today in hopes that I could at least meet with you and offer my apologies."

Frandine was acting so humbly that Lucia wanted to ask if she really was the same person as the young woman at the debutante ball. Nonetheless, considering Frandine's earnestness, Lucia felt that she, as a commoner, couldn't reject her apology.

"Please, you don't need to worry about me anymore. Although, I can't speak for Lunetta."

Lucia was Lunetta's friend first and foremost, and she had been involved in making the dress Frandine had ruined. Even though she had been made to pay for the damage, that didn't change the fact that she had spoiled Lunetta's important day. It wasn't Lucia's place to absolve her of her guilt.

"I have already paid a visit to Baron Calega's domain with my father to apologize for my actions."

Father and child had done the right thing—Lucia saw them in a new light.

"Baron Calega and Lunetta were both generous enough to say it was all water under the bridge..." Frandine's blue eyes dropped, as if they couldn't bear the weight of her guilt.

Lucia noticed that Frandine had referred to Lunetta by just her first name, which meant there must now be some degree of friendship between them. In short, Lunetta must have forgiven her—although a baron didn't exactly have the choice *not* to forgive an earl and his daughter who had come to give their apologies in person.

For now, Lucia kept her expression composed and listened as

the conversation continued.

"And how was Baron Calega's domain?" Forto asked. "I have heard that it is a place of lush greenery."

"Yes, the pasture is quite spacious... Lunetta kindly gave us a tour of the grounds. My father very much loved the horses there and ended up purchasing some for himself."

"Is that so? What sort of horses?"

"Two chestnut horses, one black horse, and a gray pony that Lunetta recommended. We will be getting that one after it has grown a bit more."

"Oh my, it sounds like...it sounds like your family's stable will be quite bustling," Forto commented, a hint of surprise coming through his voice.

Lucia had heard that Baron Calega's horses were smart and healthy but also fairly expensive. *Buying four of them would be—* Suddenly, Lucia thought of Lunetta's sunny smile. It seemed she was a shrewd businesswoman already. Her future as a baron's daughter would be terrifying—no, exciting to witness.

"Actually, Lunetta was the one who encouraged me to come to Head Manager Fano for my dress..."

"Really?" Lucia asked in surprise.

Now it all made sense. Lunetta wanted to foster a more positive relationship between Lucia and Frandine. Perhaps she had judged that it was unwise for Lucia to have bad blood with the daughter of an earl. Lucia still had her reservations, but accepting this request was probably the best course of action, for the sake of the Tailors' Guild too.

"Lucia, it's up to you whether you want to take on this request or not," Forto said, as if reading her mind.

It was a job she should accept in order to uphold Forto's reputation as the guildmaster and a viscount. But now, out of respect for her wishes, Forto had told her she was under no obligation to accept if she preferred not to.

Lucia couldn't deny that she had more than zero distrust for Frandine. But she had shown that she had reflected and felt sorry for her actions, so Lucia decided she would accept Frandine's request as a couturier.

"I would like to help you. However, I do still have to do my work at the Magical Garment Factory, so I will need some time. Will that be a problem?"

"No, not at all. The next ball I plan to attend is one my family

will host at the end of the year. There is no rush."

So Lucia would have quite a bit of time. In that case, she would move on to asking her for details.

"What sort of design do you have in mind for your ball gown?"

"Something befitting an earl's daughter. Something in a subdued color that won't make me appear as if I am trying too hard, please."

Lucia hadn't expected that response. She recalled the bright red dress Frandine had worn when she last saw her: a mature design, with a plunging neckline and dazzling gold beading. It had been undeniably stunning, but on reflection, it would probably look better on her in a few years or so. Still, Lucia found the sudden turn in Frandine's tastes to be a bit strange.

Maybe that red dress was the outlier, or maybe it was a present from her fiancé or something, Lucia thought.

Then, Forto spoke up. "That is quite different from the dresses you have worn previously, Miss Frandine."

Forto frequently attended soirees and banquets, so he must have been familiar with outfits she'd worn before.

"Previously—it is embarrassing to admit, but in my desire to be like my late mother, I tried to act like someone of higher station than I can rightly claim."

"I see..." Forto murmured in understanding.

But that meant nothing to Lucia, so she decided to go ahead and ask. "Pardon, but do you mind if I ask what your mother was like?"

"She was kind, beautiful, a wonderful conversationalist... She played favorites, but always dressed gorgeously and looked just like a noblewoman should," said Frandine.

"She was as beautiful as a ranunculus," said Forto. "She was well-informed about many topics, and she had deep knowledge of opera and music. I regret that I won't be able to enjoy another conversation with her."

A vibrant, beautiful noblewoman with wonderful people skills. Lucia could see why Frandine would aspire to reach her level. Still, she was having trouble envisioning exactly what Frandine wanted to wear for her next ball gown.

"Would you like your ball gown to be subdued in the same way as the dress you're wearing now? Or would you prefer something fresher and more youthful?" Lucia asked, wanting to get an idea of what direction she should take the design.

Frandine frowned slightly. “I…”

“Please, don’t hold anything back. Nothing you say here will be shared with anyone else.”

“Um, I’m not sure what I want to wear…but I do know what I *don’t* wish to wear.”

It was an odd response, but perhaps she was still in the process of finding a new style.

“Then could you tell me what that is?”

Frandine seemed to be searching for the right words. At last she responded, “Anything flashy, anything that makes me look foolish, anything that would make others uncomfortable…I suppose.”

Lucia was reminded of when a friend of hers had come to her for advice on her outfit for taking an employment exam. The complete opposite of a fancy soiree.

“A stable, dignified noble, then… Do you have in mind an outfit befitting the next head of the family?”

Lucia was a little taken aback by Forto’s sudden question, but the woman before them didn’t look the least bit perturbed.

“Unfortunately, it will be some time before I am prepared to assume that role. For now, I am resuming my etiquette and language lessons and attending night classes at the business school. I have not begun learning how to be a family head.”

Lucia was surprised to hear that Frandine, a noble, wasn’t learning from a home tutor, instead attending the business school, which many commoners also attended, and that she was even taking classes at night.

That was when it hit her—the outfit Frandine was wearing today was probably what she would be wearing to school this evening.

“Part of knowing about business is being able to handle paperwork and accounting books,” Forto said.

“Yes, those skills are necessary for handling the affairs of a home. As long as I am unable to check over figures, I will not be able to help my father. I want to be able to understand his paperwork as soon as I can.”

“By that, do you mean you think there will be ‘auspicious occasion’ before long?”

“No, as there are still many areas in which I am lacking as a noble, I am not currently considering engagement. I hope my studies will prove fruitful for the future, but if I am inadequate, I

plan to ask my father to adopt another member of our kin."

Apparently what Forto meant by an "auspicious occasion" was a betrothal. But according to Frandine, that was not the driving force behind her studies.

Frandine had declared that from here on out, she would restart her studies and aim to succeed her father, or, if she proved unable to do so, have her father adopt another member of her family as his heir. From Lucia's point of view, she seemed like a true aristocrat.

Then Lucia realized something. She had no idea what would be an appropriate ball gown for a woman who was aiming to be the next head of an earldom. She had gleaned some information from books, but there was only so much that she, as a commoner, could know. If she tried to create a dress, the gaps in her knowledge could cause trouble for Frandine and the Tailors' Guild.

"You'll have to forgive me, Ms. Elnora. With my lack of experience, I am unsure if I would be able to sew an appropriate dress for someone aiming to be the next head of a noble household..."

Forto picked up where she had trailed off. "Would you allow me to add my name as a couturier as well? I won't ask for a reservation fee. Here at the Tailors' Guild, more experienced couturiers often work together with less experienced couturiers for their development. I will compensate for any inexperience on Lucia's part. And—" Forto placed his right hand over his heart and continued in a slightly lowered voice, "Miss Frandine—no, Madam Frandine, this will be your first dress as a woman with the goal of becoming the head of the Earldom Elnora. Would you allow me to support you in that endeavor?"

"Mr. Luini..."

Forto's enchanting smile made Frandine's cheeks blush crimson. Forto had a killer smile, and it was clear that it had ignited a passion in Frandine's eyes. Lucia personally preferred the boyish smile he showed at other times, like when she had handed him a profiterole at work.

"I-It would rather be a great honor to have you both make my dress," Frandine said, trying hard to keep her voice and expression composed. She looked very adorable.

"Thank you kindly. Then we shall draw up some designs for your ball gown to present to you later. Is that agreeable to you,

Lucia?”

“Yes, it is!”

In the end, Forto was once again supporting her in all respects. It was true she was less experienced, but she felt guilty for being deficient in so many things.

“Madam Frandine, are there any accessories you would like to wear for this end-of-year ball?” Forto asked, likely trying to form a mental picture.

The woman sank into thought. “If it is possible, I would like to wear my pearl necklace from the Eastern Kingdom. It’s only a single strand, and the pearls are not that large, so it may look plain, but my mother gave it to me for my debut.”

“That sounds lovely. In that case, we will create a gown worthy of your mother’s gift.”

We—Forto and Lucia, working together to design a dress, for someone who wanted to be the next head of an earldom. It would take all her effort, and her heart was pounding, but still—she wanted to see the project through to the end.

Lucia clenched her fists, smiled, and said, “We’ll make you a wonderful dress, Ms. Elnora!”

Afterward, Frandine left to attend her evening class at the business school. In the afternoon she studied etiquette and language, and in the evening she attended school before returning home to do her assignments. It sounded like quite the hectic schedule, and yet compared to the first time Lucia met her, she seemed much livelier.

Lucia and Forto both reflected as they took a breather with the tea they’d been served.

“I guess people really do change…” she murmured.

“Yes, they do…” Forto agreed.

However, Frandine’s transformation made Lucia a little concerned about one thing—namely, her family.

“Um, excuse me for asking, but is Earl Elnora doing well?”

“You needn’t be concerned about that, Lucia. Earl Elnora is quite healthy.”

Lucia had tried to ask in a roundabout way, but Forto had known right away what she’d meant. She had worried that Frandine was preparing to take over for her father because he was unwell.

“I heard that after the incident with the dress, Earl Elnora

rejected all of Frandine's suitors," Forto continued. "Regardless, it seems none of them was a particularly good match. Although they may have had the high magic and other capabilities necessary to assume the title of family head, they lacked character."

He seemed to already have a decent grasp of the situation. His appraisal sounded a bit harsh, but it was probably the truth.

"Miss Frandine has high magic as well as the ability to use both water and wind magic. Perhaps because of that, her mother wished for her to find a husband who was suited for the family business and would sire an heir with high magic. If her mother were still alive, Frandine would likely already have been married quite some time ago."

"Her mother?"

So that was what Frandine's mother, whom she greatly revered, had wished for her. Still, Lucia found it hard to imagine Frandine living that life.

"I hear that Earl Elnora frequently travels overseas for the family business. Since Miss Frandine is an only child, it's possible that the reason her mother didn't want her to become the head of family is that she wanted her safe and close by, where she could have an easy life..." Forto trailed off quietly.

A safe and easy life by her side—her mother's wish might very well have become a curse binding Frandine. She had tried to imitate her mother in appearance and failed. Now, though, Frandine had chosen a new path for herself. Her outfit today suited her much better than her previous look.

"I believe she has started receiving some training from her aunt as well. The fact that she is going to business school suggests she is serious about walking the path toward becoming the next head of the household."

"It must be a difficult role, right?"

"Yes, it is. In my own case, it required a great deal of effort to become a viscount. Miss Frandine would be the head of an earldom, and moreover, she is a woman. Far fewer women than men become family heads, and they are often the target of criticism. I am sure it will be more difficult for her."

How should she design a dress for Frandine, who had chosen such a precipitous path? Lucia wanted to find some way to show her support for the young woman, but she was coming up blank.

"Lucia, you have ample time for this project. You are not

under a time crunch as you have been with the others. Try sketching out several designs, and we can discuss each one."

Forto had seen through her uncertainty, and she was grateful for it. Then she suddenly recalled the clothes she'd made thus far.

"Now that I think of it, I really had to rush to make Dahlia's dress, Lady Jasmine's dress, Lord Arturo's suit, and Ms. Cassandra's costume…"

"Yes, you did…"

Forto seemed to be thinking back on those garments as well. Once again, they both reflected as they drank their tea. Lucia had begun to stare off into space when Forto called her name.

"Lucia, I have some notes about etiquette for family heads as well as books on formal dresses for nobles. Would you like to read them?"

"Yes, please!"

"You are free to have any other documents or reference materials that you'd like. I will gather them together for you. I must support my junior however I can."

"I'd love to see references of actual ball attire if I could! It'd be even better if I could sketch people wearing them…"

Lucia hadn't meant to respond so candidly. She knew it was an impossible request. The clothes loaned out by the Tailors' Guild weren't the latest styles, and they needed to be tailored to fit the client. Even if she could borrow them and ask Hestia and other stitchers to wear them, it was probably too much to expect them to dance on the spot for her.

If she were to be honest, what Lucia really wanted was to see people dancing at a real ball in their gowns. However, opening up a sketchbook in the middle of a ball to draw nobles would not only be disrespectful but suspicious. Even sketching the attendants and maids would be obtrusive.

She really, really wanted to, though.

Or, as another option, could she find a noble with a walk-in closet filled with ball gowns and ask for the indulgence of touring it? As for how someone would look dancing in them, she could rely on her power of imagination.

Meanwhile, Forto, deep in thought, put a hand to his chin. "Yes, it *is* important to see people dancing in the gowns. You might end up being placed far from the action, but what if you were to observe a ballroom from a separate room? Although you

wouldn’t be able to leave the room, you would be able to sketch.”

“Yes, that would be amazing!”

Lucia wondered if Forto planned for her to discreetly peek down at a ball from the rafters. It sounded a bit criminal, but Lucia would have no complaints if it meant getting to see all those outfits. She’d even befriend any mouse that approached her. Though she did feel slightly guilty at the thought of spying on everyone having fun dancing.

“Dance venues often have back rooms—hidden adjoining rooms where guards are stationed. The back rooms of some mansions offer a clear view of the dance hall to make it easy for them to keep watch. You should be able to observe everyone dancing in their formal attire from a room like that. There would also be guards present, and you wouldn’t be able to leave the room, but if you don’t mind those conditions, I could ask a friend of mine if it would be possible?”

“That’s absolutely fine! Please and thank you!” Lucia replied, beaming. It was a good thing she’d expressed her wish aloud.

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“Now then, let us go say hello,” Forto said, leading the way into a great hall.

This venue belonged to an acquaintance of Forto’s, Earl Riedinger. Before them was the back room adjacent to the great hall—the knights’ waiting room.

Lucia’s ever-dependable boss had made her dream come true in a matter of days. *I can’t believe I get to see a real ball!* The day she found out, she’d jumped up and down all around her house until her entire family told her to stop.

The attendees of today’s ball were viscounts and their successors as well as people from earldoms and even higher peerages. This event was mainly an opportunity for them to meet and exchange information. Lucia had been told those present worked with fashion and jewelry, so everyone would be dressed to the nines, which only made her even more excited.

Even still, Lucia was surprised by just how large the hall was. Privately, she wondered how difficult it must be to clean this room under the glittering, magical chandeliers.

Meanwhile, inside Lucia’s mind, the ball had already begun.

“Everyone looks nice from the back too… The shaping and

stitching really makes a difference…" Lucia murmured to herself as she walked behind Forto.

Tonight he wore a glamorous black tailcoat, perfect for a ball but a bit more slim-fitted than the clothes he normally wore. The collar of his shirt was winged, meaning that the edges stuck out slightly. His loose tie and the vest underneath his tailcoat were embroidered with the same dark gray and blue flower pattern. Since the shades were all close matches, his suit didn't appear overly gaudy, but up close, it looked festive and exquisite. Pinned on his wide tie was a gray spinel stone set in gold, superbly cut so that it sparkled brilliantly.

So this is how noblemen dress up. Lucia had been buzzing with excitement from the moment she saw Forto's outfit.

"Lucia, are you okay?" Hestia asked in a whisper.

No, I'm not okay, Lucia almost responded, but she managed to hold herself back.

Hestia was wearing a dress with a cropped jacket in a deep navy that was close to black. It had been designed by Lucia and sewn by the artisans of the Tailors' Guild. Lucia had wanted Hestia to wear a gown, but since they were just here to observe today, Hestia had decided against it.

The jacket's hem and wide, frilly collar were made of lightweight material to reduce the bulk. The skirt was long and tight, yet similarly lightweight, with cascading three-tiered ruffles starting at the knee. Despite the frills, it was a sleek design that enhanced Hestia's lovely figure and struck a good balance between pretty and cute.

Hestia had once told Lucia that she wished she could wear frills but just didn't look good in them. She'd recounted how she and her sisters had once worn matching poofy, frilly dresses, and she'd been keenly aware that she was the only one who hadn't looked good. Lucia suspected that Hestia's misconception stemmed from the fact that she was more of a dignified beauty.

There's not a single person in the world who looks bad in frills—that was Lucia's pet theory. There were so many different ways to play around with frills to make them look good, like changing their color, length, volume, thickness, and placement. Though of course, she wouldn't suggest frills for someone who simply didn't care for them.

Frills had also become trendier in the capital recently—not just frilly blouses and skirts, but also frilly shirts and sleeves for

men. Zilo had once told her, much to her awe, that noblemen who were recovering from illness or who had lost weight in their old age wore frilly shirts to make themselves appear healthier.

Lucia had also dressed up tonight. The top and bottom of her dress were made of different fabrics, switching under the bust. The top was a white blouse with an atypical design; it featured a standing collar that exposed a little more of her neck than the norm and ruffles that fell over her shoulders and bust.

The waistline of the dress sat above her natural waist and was adorned with ribbons and pearls on either side; it flared into a light blue overlay skirt. The exterior chiffon had a faint flower pattern and looked to be floating above the fabric underneath.

Neither the blouse nor the skirt was a particularly unique design on its own, but bringing them together into a dress like this meant that no fabric had to be tucked into the waist, which made Lucia's waist look slimmer without the need for a corset. The dress stayed in place even when she moved around, and it was nice and refreshing.

When she had gushed about the greatness of mixed-fabric dresses to the artisans, the women in the room had nodded deeply. Three days after the completion of the dress, it was decided that mixed-fabric dresses would be one of the recommended styles for the coming season, so Lucia had started filling pages of her sketchbook with new designs.

"The guards' waiting room is through here," Forto said as he came to a stop. But the only things in front of them were a painting of two beautiful goddesses and, to the left of that, a large mirror. There was no door to be seen. Lucia was tilting her head in confusion when the painting suddenly split open.

"Ack!" she squeaked in surprise. The painting consisted of two halves that connected seamlessly in the middle; apparently it had been constructed in this way so that it would not be immediately recognizable as a door.

Lucia followed Forto into an impressively large room. Inside were eight men and women standing in a row—the bodyguards of the earls in attendance this evening. Half wore gray knights' uniforms, and the others wore metal armor. Lucia felt a little nervous.

"The Tailors' Guild will be borrowing this space for training. Please excuse us for intruding upon your important duty."

Lucia felt she should follow Forto's polite greeting with her

own. “I am Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. Thank you very much for allowing us to use this room too. We’re very happy to be here today!”

“My name is Hestia Tonolo, and I will be assisting the head manager today. Thank you for having us.”

“You are very welcome to be here. It is an honor to meet the renowned Viscount Luini, not to mention two beautiful ladies,” a white-haired guard responded cordially.

“Now then, I must go make my rounds,” Forto said. “Lucia, Hestia, take good notes.”

“We will!” Hestia and Lucia replied in unison before watching Forto return to the great hall. The painting appeared as a double-leaf door from this side.

“You should have no trouble seeing things from here,” one of the guards said, leading them to a spot next to the doors where there were tables and chairs.

“The mirror…”

The large mirror by the entrance had a surprising trick to it. While it simply looked like a mirror from the other side, from here, they had a full view of the great hall. The color was slightly muddled, but thanks to the bright magical chandeliers, everything was clearly visible. From their location, they could properly observe everyone’s evening wear.

“You will have to excuse us, but since we need to keep watch as well, we will be looking over your shoulders.”

“That is no problem at all! Thank you so much for letting us use this amazing spot!” Lucia said gleefully. The guards smiled warmly at her.

On the other side of the trick mirror, they could see attendants and maids lined up along the walls of the great hall, preparing the drinks and snacks as the orchestra started tuning their instruments. Meanwhile, Lucia placed two of the sketchbooks she received from Forto on the table along with charcoal and colored pencils.

Beside her, Hestia was also getting ready. Lucia had asked Hestia to record the attendees’ small accessories; Lucia was unfortunately unable to differentiate glass from jewels, and since she was still learning the names of jewels, she often got them wrong. Hestia had a discerning eye, so Lucia had asked her to focus on how people had accessorized as well as their shoes. After the two of them prepared everything, they sat restlessly

waiting.

At last, the orchestra began to play, and the well-dressed ladies and gentlemen came filtering in leisurely. The debutante ball for Lucia's friend had also been splendid, but this ball was even more so. There was more pomp and glamour, and the atmosphere was one of maturity.

"My master is over there," one of the bodyguards said, pointing to Earl Riedinger, who had just entered the hall.

Through the mirror, a man in an elegant charcoal tailcoat began to give a welcome address. The gray-haired woman in the black gown at his side must have been his wife. She looked to be about forty years old, but it was always hard to gauge the age of nobles. It was common for them to ingest powdered skybat, which was said to maintain one's youth, at the cost of a repulsive taste. That said, as far as Lucia could see, no one was trying to make themselves look younger than they were. They all looked entirely natural in their outfits.

After the host made his welcome speech, everyone toasted with the wine that had been distributed, then drank as they engaged in pleasant small talk. Then, finally, it was time for the much-anticipated dancing to begin.

The first to dance were Earl Riedinger and his wife, plus Forto and— *Is that woman in the azure gown his wife?* Lucia wondered. Hestia scribbled down a note at the edge of her sketchbook and showed it to Lucia: *Forto's partner is Earl Riedinger's second wife.*

Aha, thought Lucia. *How very aristocratic.*

The second wife's gown looked stunning on her. Lucia suspected the design and cut were Forto's handiwork. The woman had unique stone gray eyes that were full of light and matched the gray spinel pinned to Forto's tie. He must have been her stand-in partner for the evening.

The two pairs began dancing in the middle of the hall with exemplary grace. The Forto Lucia knew was a couturier and her boss who worked closely with her. But seeing him like this, she was keenly aware of the fact that he was in all respects a nobleman and a viscount.

But that was that, and this was this. Lucia gripped her pencil tightly in her right hand.

It was Forto, the boss she could always count on, who had made the arrangements for her to be in this room. This was a rare opportunity. *I have to do my hardest to engrave all these*

clothes into my memory! Lucia focused herself and began sketching the evening wear.

The great hall, illuminated by the magical chandeliers, looked like a world right out of a fairy tale. Paintings of goddesses and flowers were hung on the spotless white walls, and the orchestra played a slow dance piece in the corner of the hall. The noblemen and noblewomen joined hands and, in their evening wear, began to dance.

Most of the men, unsurprisingly, wore ivory shirts and three-piece suits, each consisting of a black jacket, vest, and pants. However, since attendees weren't required to adhere to formalities for this soiree, the men wore not only the standard black tailcoats but also navy, green, brick red, and, in the case of Earl Riedinger, charcoal.

There were also many men who were wearing something other than tailcoats. There was an array of suit styles and colors—vibrant salvia blue, sky blue, forest green, garnet, silver-gray, and more. Finely embroidered collars and vests, patterned vests, floral-patterned linings that flashed briefly as the dancers moved—each piece was stylish in its own way.

Some men wore ties or cravats that were brightly colored or patterned, and others wore chic thin ribbon ties in two different colors. Each pin had its own unique design, from single gemstones and gold and silver brooches to jangling silver chains.

Lucia wished she could see their cuff links in detail as well, but unfortunately, it was difficult to make out much during the brief glimpses she got of them. Ideally, she'd want to examine the lining of everyone's clothes, the designs of their cuffs under their sleeves, and their cuff links, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

As for the gowns, there was an even wider range of designs. The glamorous silk dresses were like a garden of flowers in bloom. There was a crimson design that billowed out like a rose, a rose-pink dress that was low-cut but still made the wearer look like a fairy, a tight-fitting crimson gown that showed off the wearer's gorgeous curves, and a deep blue gown studded with gold and silver, reminiscent of the night sky—each one was distinct from all of the others.

The women had paired their splendid gowns with gold, silver, and jeweled accessories; they had their hair styled and their

makeup immaculately applied. Lucia was nothing but dazzled in the face of these ladies' full efforts to look fabulous. Or, to put it more straightforwardly, she felt a nosebleed coming on.

Lucia had seen quite a few tailcoats and ball gowns in the Tailors' Guild, and she had accompanied her friend to a noble's estate for her debut, but the garments on display here were something else entirely.

No one here looked like they were being worn by their clothes. In fact, it was like they had dressed up so beautifully to say, "Take a look at *me*!" No one was holding back for fear of standing out too much or out of a desire to look modest. Everyone was in full bloom in garments that made them shine—*this* was what a noble's soiree was like.

Lucia threw all of her overflowing excitement into her sketchbook. After she'd been drawing for some time, a sight before her eyes made her shout.

"Aaah...!"

Right in front of the mirror, a gray-haired gentleman had taken the hand of a black-haired woman, and the two had started dancing. The gentleman wore a standard black tailcoat. While his only accessories were silver-rimmed spectacles and a white silk tie adorned with a black agate, the length of his coat to the hem of his trousers created a perfectly balanced outfit. As Lucia had been admiring the man's suit, the couple had spun right next to the mirror.

The woman wore a silver gown with a slightly high slit that allowed ease of movement while dancing. The slit afforded a glimpse of a silver chain, studded with glittering diamonds, around her ankle. Underneath the man's fluttering tailcoat, black lilies bloomed against the white lining, diamonds dotting their petals in place of dew.

Not only had they dressed in each others' colors, their outfits both incorporated hidden diamonds. That level of stylishness couldn't be topped. Lucia wanted so badly to ask them who had made their clothes and if she could talk to them. *Actually, I'll ask Forto later. Definitely.*



“How lovely…” Hestia murmured, taking the words right out of Lucia’s mouth. “The cut of that gown is marvelous.”

“…Yeah, it is.”

It seemed the two of them, a clothier and a cutter, had focused on different things. But that couple were undeniably lovely. The regrettable part was that no matter how detailed Lucia made her sketch, she couldn’t capture the perfection on display, and she didn’t have a clear view of the entire lining of the tailcoat.

Also, Lucia realized something as she was sketching.

There were some people whose dancing posture was excellent, but their movements were restricted, which ended up making them appear a bit plain. Meanwhile, other dancers had gowns with high slits that exposed their legs above the knee, perhaps to create a sense of movement.

The highest slits were accompanied by stunning accessories or lace at the top, which seemed like a calculated choice. A gown for Frandine, who was aiming to become the next head of her family, should look beautiful whether she was standing or dancing.

“That tail moves so nicely…” Hestia half sighed.

She was not referring to a physical tail of the kind that Blighted like Lotta had, but the hem trailing behind a man in a tailcoat who had passed close by. It was the part of the coat called a swallowtail. She must have been able to recognize the talent and skill that had gone into cutting and sewing that gently swaying tail.

Lucia was more interested in the area around the neck than the back. Her eyes were drawn toward the collar, tie, and curve of the shoulders. Everything was uniform, nothing was out of place—whoever had sewn it had immense skill.

It’s too bad Dante didn’t come with us today. He had gone home to his family to celebrate the birth of his older sister’s child. When he’d attempted to say he would just go home another day to celebrate, Forto had reprimanded him. There was only one day and time to celebrate a child’s birth. It wasn’t something that could be postponed. Besides, Dante was a noble. His family connections afforded him many opportunities to attend balls and see their formalwear up close. One of Lucia’s friends was pregnant, so she’d asked Dante to report back on his sister’s baby clothes for her.

“Huh?”

While Lucia was sketching a gown with a gloriously frilly hem, the music sped up. A couple started dancing close to the mirror—it was Forto and a woman wearing a dark wine red gown.

The woman had black hair that was unusually short for a noble and dark maroon eyes. Her slightly tanned skin and toned body made Lucia think she was a knight, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Hestia once again wrote a note in her sketchbook for Lucia: *That’s Lady Noemi, the former Earl Ariosto’s second wife.*

Tiziano Ariosto, a former earl, and the guildmaster of the Tailors’ before last. *Lots of second wives around,* Lucia couldn’t help but think, but the people here were nobles. It wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for them.

As soon as the pair started dancing, a good portion of the attendees turned their gazes toward them. Noemi’s gown accentuated her figure without being ostentatious. It was free of lace and ribbons, so it might have seemed simple at a glance, but once she started dancing, it took on a whole new look. With each movement she made, the fabric displayed various shades of wine. Lucia had a hunch the fabric was high-quality monster silk with some kind of enchantment on it.

With every spin, the bottom of the gown flared open like a delicately blooming flower. The long, sparkling diamond necklace that hung down over the gown’s plunging decolletage glistened like evening dew. That flower, perfectly crafted for this soiree, was like a work of art.

Lucia stopped sketching and let out a long sigh. “That gown really looks most beautiful while she’s dancing…”

The design and materials were both outstanding. Lucia marveled at the high technical skill that had gone into the shaping and sewing of the gown. It was as if it had been *made* for dancing.

“I believe that gown was designed by Lord Ariosto himself.”

Hestia’s comment reminded Lucia of when she’d met the former guildmaster in the hallway the other day. He’d been wearing a charcoal three-piece suit. The thin blue tie at the collar of his white summer silk shirt had been fastened with a silver pin.

His jacket lapel had been a different shade and his vest had sported detailed embroidery, but otherwise it hadn’t been a

particularly unconventional design. Still, the height of the collar, the width of the white cuffs peeking out from the sleeves, the length of the jacket, and the shape of his pants had all come together in perfect harmony. Lucia could see aspects of the same perfection in this wine red gown as well. She wondered what other gowns he had designed for dancing. If there were some copies of his sketched designs in the Tailors' Guild, would she be allowed to take a look at them?

Once she'd had that thought, she realized with a start that what she *should* be looking at was Noemi's gown, right in front of her. *I need to sketch as much as I can and note down everything I notice.* Lucia's charcoal pencil raced across the page.

Before long, the pair finished their elegant dance and separated, upon which Earl Riedinger, the host of the evening, approached them.

Lucia assumed he intended to ask Noemi to dance, but it was actually Forto's hand that he took in his own. Riedinger smiled and waved a hand at the orchestra, and they began playing a piece with a fast tempo.

He and Forto immediately took their positions and then began dancing as if it were completely ordinary.

"Wait! My heart can't take this!" Hestia squealed.

Lucia had heard that men sometimes paired up with men and women with women at balls as a way to show friendship, but this was her first time witnessing it. Earl Riedinger and Forto's dancing was fast-paced, and every time they turned, Lucia felt she could hear her heart clench. The two coordinated their irregular steps without breaking their form, and even though they weren't looking at their feet, neither one stepped on the other's toes.

At first, Forto followed and Earl Riedinger led, but halfway through the song, they switched roles. Lucia was taken aback by how quickly and smoothly they were able to make the change.

As Lucia watched on, entranced, she wondered just how much motor coordination the two of them possessed. The tails of their coats fluttered like living creatures. It was entirely different from the movements made by a gown.

For the first time, Lucia realized just how gorgeous tailcoats could look. Hestia hadn't lowered her hands from her mouth that entire time.

Once the pair's dance ended, the other attendees gave them

a loud round of applause. The music changed again to a slower tune, and many more pairs took to the floor. There were more same-sex pairs now too. Among them, Forto was dancing with a gray-haired gentleman, and Noemi was dancing with Earl Riedinger's wife.

Now that everyone's movements had slowed down, Lucia could see the details of their clothes even better. *Now's my chance.* Lucia took in the glamour and breathtaking beauty of the nobles on the other side of the mirror as she intently sketched them down.

When the end of the ball came, Lucia let out a long, contented sigh.

"Please, use this."

"Thank you."

A female knight handed Lucia a damp towel, which she gratefully accepted. After her fervent sketching session, Lucia's hand, from her right pinky to her wrist, was smudged black with charcoal. She hadn't even noticed until the knight prepared the towel for her.

As Lucia wiped her hand, she turned to the one-way mirror and watched the attendees of the ball exit the hall. Even though she couldn't see their faces, the view of their backs made evident their relief that the ball was over—many were hunched over with fatigue.

And of course, the backs of everyone's fashionable outfits left nothing to be desired. Metal plating on the backs of high heels, necklaces that hung down the backs of gowns, split tailcoat hems connected by gold chains—Lucia almost reopened her closed sketchbook, but she managed to restrain herself. She'd have to dig through her memories and sketch even more once she got home.

After all the guests had left the hall, it was time for the bodyguards to leave and guard the perimeter, which meant it was time for Hestia and Lucia to leave too.

"Thank you so much for today! Everyone was so stunning and gorgeous. I learned so much!" Lucia said, thanking them from the bottom of her heart. The guards all smiled at her.

"Every time, we just hope for the event to end without incident, but I suppose we've been watching something very special this whole time..." a knight muttered.

“I’d be so happy to watch this every single time!” Lucia responded, carried away by her excitement. Then she realized what she’d said and froze. Even though that might have been true for herself, it was probably rude to say to a guard on duty.

However, the white-haired knight smiled warmly at her and said, “You are exactly right. From now on, I will make sure to take in the beauty of the scene while I stand watch.”

Even though the event had just ended, Lucia already wanted to come back again.

Lucia and Hestia passed through the great hall and proceeded down the hallway. They came to stop alongside a wall where they could see the front door, and there they waited to meet with Forto. Most of the attendees had already left the ball, but there were several guards stationed around the entrance, so it was a safe place to loiter. Although, it wasn’t as if anyone would approach them to talk, considering they were dressed like merchants and not aristocrats.

“Aah, I’m so glad I got to come!” Lucia exclaimed ecstatically.

“Yes, me too. I can’t believe how splendid a real ball is…” Hestia murmured.

“Is there such a thing as a fake ball?” Lucia asked.

“Not quite fake, but college students and young nobles often have informal balls. The events are more focused on finding a romantic partner than dancing. Those are the only types of balls I’ve attended…” Hestia trailed off, her purple eyes dropping to the floor. Lucia could fill in the rest herself.

Hestia had been born into a noble family, but she had no magic, which was a great disadvantage when it came to noble marriages. Though she’d received proposals to be this or that noble’s second or third wife, or even someone’s mistress, those came with the condition that she would not bear a child.

Hestia had a glowing personality, and she was whip-smart, beautiful, and a talented cloth cutter. As a commoner, Lucia couldn’t help but wonder why anyone would care that she couldn’t use magic when she had all those other amazing qualities.

“Hestia, teach me how to dance sometime! I won’t be able to make tailcoats and gowns for balls until I know how to dance.”

“Of course, leave it to me—though Dante could probably teach you how men dance better than I can. He can show you how they dance at that rapid clip, like Mr. Forto did tonight.”

“His slim tailcoat did look really nice, but he was dancing so intensely I thought it would tear.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with the pattern and the placement of darts. The durability of the fabric must also play a role. Mr. Forto really is an amazing dancer…”

“I’ll need to ask Mr. Forto about dancing too, then! Not just Dante!”

As they were talking excitedly about tailcoats, a middle-aged man looked in their direction and broke into a smile. Lucia didn’t recognize him, but Hestia let out a small gasp. Still smiling, the man walked over to them.

“Why, if it isn’t Miss Hestia. This is quite unexpected,” he said in a bright, friendly tone.

He seemed to be about the same age as Lucia’s father, so she wondered if he might be a relative of Hestia’s or a friend of her father’s. However, Hestia shrank back slightly. It seemed like she didn’t like this man very much.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Viscount Bonato,” she said.

“I am pleased to see you looking so well. And who is this lovely young lady with you?”

Despite the man making an effort to acknowledge her too, Lucia could tell by the look in his eyes that he wasn’t the least bit interested in her. But like Forto, the man was a viscount, so she greeted him properly.

“My name is Lucia Fano. I am the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, managed by the Tailors’ Guild.”

“I am Ezzell, head of the Viscountcy Bonato. I have heard much of your achievements, Head Manager Fano.” The man’s reply was fairly standard, but he turned back toward Hestia almost immediately. “It must be fate that we have met again like this. Would you two like to dine with me tonight?”

He’d skipped right over an invitation to tea or lunch and gone straight for dinner. That didn’t sit right with Lucia. If they were noblewomen, his invitation would be considered improper. But Lucia was a commoner, and so, effectively, was Hestia; she’d been removed from her family register.

Moreover, now they had to figure out how to respond. On the one hand, it was a bad idea to bluntly reject a viscount’s invitation, but on the other, they couldn’t just heedlessly go with him.

“Thank you, it would be an honor,” Lucia responded. “However,

we are currently in the middle of working."

"Is that right? My apologies for bothering you on the job. Perhaps another day, then?"

The man seemed to have no intention of backing down. In difficult moments like these, Lucia would usually have relied on her boss.

"We are about to meet with the Tailors' Guild to discuss our upcoming schedule. We will remember your kind words."

It wasn't a lie. She *was* planning to discuss what sort of dress would best suit a young lady on the path to assume her father's peerage, and to determine the schedule to create said dress with Forto, the Tailors' guildmaster, on the carriage ride home tonight.

"I see. The two of you seem to have your hands quite full. Incidentally, Miss Hestia, could you provide me with your contact information? In the spirit of reviving an old friendship, that is."

The man sounded more like he was giving an order than making a request, which irked Lucia. And she knew Hestia felt not an ounce of desire to revive a friendship with this man. In fact, she looked very uncomfortable. Couldn't the man take the hint that he was being turned down?

"Um..." Hestia started. Lucia put her arm out to stop her.

Lucia had a feeling that if the man knew where Hestia lived, he'd send someone there to take her away. Remembering the day she herself had almost been forced into a carriage, Lucia took a half step forward.

"If you wish to get in contact with Hestia, please go through the Magical Garment Factory. She is very busy these days and spends more time at work than at home."

"...Very well, then," the man replied.

His voice was polite, but his expression had darkened. Not that Lucia cared if he took offense. She was the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory and a subordinate of Forto. It was only to be expected that she would protect her own subordinate, Hestia. And above all, she was her friend.

"Lucia..." said Hestia, her voice filled with dismay.

The viscount seemed to take that as another opening; he spoke up again. "Miss Hestia, you've left home and still live alone—do you have people in the city whom you can depend on?"

"I have friends whom I trust, yes. And I am employed. I live comfortably." Hestia's expression was composed as she

responded, but her shoulders were trembling slightly.

“But surely there are things that are out of reach for a commoner, yes? There is a way you could live your life in carefree leisure.”

The viscount’s voice was kind, but beneath his words, there lay an invitation to become his mistress.

How dare he? Hestia’s commoner status aside, where did he get the nerve to suggest such a thing in Lucia’s presence and in a place like this?

Then, finally, something clicked in Lucia’s mind. Hestia had once told her about how, before she came of age, the father of a close friend had professed his love for her. At the time, he was already married and even had a second wife. It was for that reason that Hestia’s relationship with her friend had soured and ultimately ended.

The man before them now was likely that very same man—the man Hestia had said she couldn’t even bear to remember. He had no tact; he was stubbornly persistent. All he had going for him was his status as a viscount. *Talk about the worst,* Lucia thought. Even though he was a viscount like Forto, the two couldn’t be any more different.

“I beg your pardon, but I’m not sure that’s appropriate,” Lucia said, taking care to keep the anger out of her voice as she slid in front of Hestia.

The viscount looked at Lucia as if she were a disobedient child. “There is nothing wrong with being approached for one’s beauty. It simply means she has a womanly allure. Isn’t that something to be proud of?”

All right, if it’s a fight you want, you got it! Lucia shouted in her head as she felt a rush of anger.

She could have punched the old coot, but she held herself back. Instead, she looked down, steadied her breathing, and tried to collect her thoughts. *Some way to fight a noble, a way that won’t make it impossible for Mr. Forto to back me up after the fact—* Lucia plastered her best professional smile on her face and said, “Oh, I see! You must be quite drunk, sir!”

“I am not *drunk*. I am sincerely—”

“Then please, allow me to ask you something, Lord Bonato. If an older gentleman approached your daughter in the same way, would you, as her father, be happy about it? Would you tell her she should be proud to have such womanly allure?”

The man made a strangled noise. That was answer enough.

Moreover, had he replied in the affirmative, Lucia would have used every avenue at her disposal to make sure his wife and daughter heard about it.

Lucia continued, trying to suggest with her tone that this whole thing was terribly amusing to her. “I suppose you really *are* drunk, then. Now I understand. You, the renowned Viscount Bonato, were trying to put me at ease with a joke. But I think that joke went a little too far for my taste, and my father’s face immediately sprung to mind… I apologize for reacting in such a rude manner.”

Lucia smiled at him as wide as she could, keeping her gaze fixed on him. He quickly averted his eyes.

“…No, I suppose I am a bit drunk. Excuse me,” he said in a low voice before hastily walking away.

Ugh, running away is all men like that are good at. Lucia had half a mind to take off one of her high heels and chuck it at him as hard as she could. Just as she had that thought, Hestia grasped her hands tightly. Lucia wouldn’t *actually* do such a thing. There was no need for Hestia to be worried.

“Lucia, please!” Hestia cried as soon as the viscount left the front entryway. “That man is a viscount! What if he does something to you?”

Hestia was the one who couldn’t even bring herself to call him by his name, simply referring to him as “that man,” but Lucia decided not to point that out now.

“It’s fine,” Lucia assured her. “He himself admitted he was drunk anyway. Besides, not backing off after being rejected is a no-no for commoners *and* nobles. I couldn’t stand the way he was making you uncomfortable.”

“Lucia, please…” Hestia repeated as tears spilled from her eyes in large drops.

Lucia’s hands were still locked in Hestia’s tight grip, so she couldn’t even wipe her tears away with a handkerchief. They’d at last caught the attention of the guards in the foyer. Lucia wanted to calm Hestia down before anyone approached the two of them, but—

“Lucia, Hestia. Has something happened?”

Lucia breathed an internal sigh of relief at the voice that called out to them. Forto and Lotta came rushing over and stood in front of them to shield them from others. Huddled together,

Lucia and Hestia simultaneously explained what had happened in hushed voices.

“Mr. Forto, I’m completely fine, but this man came over and said some obscenely rude things to Hestia!”

“I’m okay—the chief protected me!”

Forto asked for more details, so Lucia briefed him on the interaction they’d just had. Then, Hestia gave a concise yet detailed explanation of her history with the viscount. Forto listened quietly until she finished, his blue eyes growing colder and colder as she spoke.

“I understand perfectly. I will send a request through a more powerful family that Viscount Bonato not approach you again.”

“What?” While it seemed plausible enough that Forto was capable of such a thing, Lucia wondered if that was really okay for him to do, for several reasons.

“There is no need for that, Mr. Forto! I don’t believe he’ll talk to me again, and if he does, I’ll make sure he understands my refusal,” Hestia insisted vehemently.

But Forto, being who he was, wouldn’t let the matter go. “Hestia, I will arrange for you to have a bodyguard for a bit. If it’s possible, you should move residences. I will find a safe location for you and cover all the associated expenses.”

“No, um, Mr. Forto, it’s really quite all right.”

“It will be troublesome if he feels he’s been made to look foolish and attempts to retaliate against you. Until I have decisively settled this matter, you two must both take extra caution.”

The man needed to know that what he’d done wasn’t right, and Forto intended to make him understand. Although Hestia furrowed her brow deeply at his words, Lucia wanted Forto to do just that.

“Oh! Hestia, let’s get you one of those freezing rings for self-defense. I’m sure my friend Dahlia will be able to make you one that has a higher-than-normal output.”

A freezing ring or bangle was a magical tool meant for self-defense. The versions sold in the market were only capable of freezing an assailant’s limbs, but Dahlia had made an upgraded version that could do much more than that. When she’d tried it out in her yard, it had produced a chunk of ice that was two-thirds the height of a full-grown man.

A magical tool like that could freeze an attacker from the

chest down even while they were in motion. After using the freezing ring, the only thing left to do was run away; there was no need to think about how that ice would melt.

"Yes, a self-defense tool is a good idea," Forto agreed. "I'll ask the magical toolmakers of the Tailors' Guild to make one that you can use."

"No! I couldn't possibly take something so expensive... I'll buy one myself," Hestia insisted.

But Forto wouldn't hear it. He smiled his usual elegant smile and replied, "What good is a guild that's unable to protect its own staff? Workplaces that do right by their employees are likelier to attract talented people, you know."

"You're the best, Mr. Forto!" Lucia exclaimed.

Forto continued, still smiling, "You two must be parched. Shall we find a spot to have tea before returning home? And any pastries you'd like."

"Yes, that sounds great! Oh, Lotta should come too. I know he likes sweets," Lucia said.

"Of course," Forto said. Behind him, Lotta's eyes brightened, and he broke into a smile.

"Since we're going out, I'll go fix my makeup!" Hestia said. It had been smudged by her tears, and she probably needed a moment to compose herself.

"Take your time, please. It's only natural that you would be moved to tears after witnessing such a splendid ball!" Forto said, intentionally raising his voice. He really was thoughtful and considerate down to every last detail.

"Yes, it *was* quite moving!" Lucia responded, making her voice just as loud. Then, she took Hestia's hand and they walked down the hallway together.

Once they turned a corner, Hestia turned to her and said quietly, "Things you experience in youth are hard to forget. I thought that, since I'm an adult now, I would be able to refuse his advances, but I completely froze up..."

"There's nothing weird about that. It's completely normal that you'd be so scared."

"Now that I'm a commoner, I have the option to move out of the capital, but when I think about the trouble it would cause for my family or the prospect of leaving my job, my head starts spinning..."

"It'll be fine, Hestia! I'm sure Mr. Forto will be able to take care

of everything.”

He’d just said he would settle things. And if he made a promise, he was guaranteed to keep it. But Lucia could still feel her friend’s hand trembling in hers, so she wasn’t going to press the matter further.

Instead, she looked up at her tall friend and asked brightly, “Hey, what do you think you’ll get to eat? I’m thinking I’ll have some pudding, cheesecake, and black tea.”

“Lucia, that sounds like a lot of food… No, actually, I think I’ll have black tea, salted butter cookies, and a brandy cake,” Hestia said with her usual smile.

Tonight they would be eating pastries, comparing sketchbooks, and discussing all the outfits they’d seen at the ball. And in addition to the fashion, Lucia wanted to hear all about Forto’s dance with the other nobles in full, unsparing detail.

Lucia wanted Hestia to finish off the night with a fun memory. She squeezed her friend’s hand tight.

“What a shame for such a precious learning opportunity to be spoiled in this way…”

After escorting Lucia and Hestia home, Forto dropped his gaze and put his finger to his lips. At his side, he could sense Lotta raise his guard, but Forto couldn’t stop the dark swirl of magic raging inside him.

It seemed he was getting a bit emotional.

The moment he’d seen the anger on Lucia’s face and the tears on Hestia’s, he’d almost broken into a run to find out what had happened. The two of them were his employees. He had the right—and the duty—to protect them.

He had brought them to the ball tonight so they could study the outfits of the noble attendees. Since they wouldn’t have been speaking to anyone directly, he’d assumed there was no danger on the premises. That—and the fact that he wanted them to be less conspicuous—was why he hadn’t assigned them bodyguards. It had been an error in judgment on his part.

The encounter had ended without incident thanks to Lucia’s quick wit, but it was his responsibility to ensure their safety in the future. He needed to make sure to handle this matter so that nothing of the kind ever happened again.

Although, these sorts of encounters occurred frequently among nobles. It was normal for men to approach women

through family or work connections, seeking second or third wives; sometimes they even approached commoners with the intent to elevate their standing. Forto didn't see anything wrong with it when both parties benefited.

However, to approach a friend of one's own daughter, and to use one's status as an excuse to persist after several refusals, was simply disgraceful. It was unbecoming of a noble.

Perhaps Viscount Bonato was now too *old* to realize what a disgrace that was. Rather than dealing with the man himself, Forto had a feeling he could wait until the next Viscount Bonato took over.

"Perhaps I'll invite his eldest son out for a drink…" Forto murmured to himself. He took no notice of Lotta trembling at his side.

Heated Low Table Capriccio

“Lucia, when it comes to designing business suits, you must make sure the suit aligns with the client’s goal and the impression they wish to make. No matter how good the suit looks on the client, if it does not satisfy those two conditions, it could impact the client’s job.”

Lucia diligently took down notes in her sketchbook as she listened to Forto’s lecture. He had a small window of free time after his meeting, affording her a precious opportunity to receive instruction from him.

Today, they were in Forto’s office in the Tailors’ Guild, where he was teaching her about men’s suits, standard garments that all couturiers needed to know how to make.

“The most common color for professional suits for noblemen and businessmen is navy blue. Couturiers are often asked to make three at once, if they have the capacity to do so.”

“Three…of the same color?”

Now that she thought of it, she did see a lot of navy blue suits in the castle and the guilds, but she was still a bit surprised. *Won’t people think you’re always wearing the same outfit?* she wondered.

Forto quickly clarified. “While all three suits are generally navy, the designs and the exact shades will differ. The first type of suit is a standard three-piece in classic navy that can be worn anywhere. The Tailors’ Guild recommends that style for anyone who can only order one suit due to financial constraints.”

Lucia made sure to note all of that down in her sketchbook as well.

“The second type of suit is a light navy, either a three-piece or without the vest,” Forto continued. “It can be made with ornate buttons and the fabric can have a bit of luster. These types of suits can be worn to tea parties or when dining out without looking too formal. They are even appropriate for work parties. However, such a suit should not be overly shiny. If it looks like evening wear, it will appear tawdry.”

So it can have a sheen, but it shouldn’t be sparkly or shiny. I think I get it.

“I see,” Lucia said. “So there needs to be a balance.”

“Yes, precisely. Now, the third type of suit is a dark navy—it can even be close to black. The hue should complement the person wearing the suit. A lusterless matte finish can be suitable when apologizing for a mistake, hastening to the scene of an accident, or paying a sympathy call. Such suits are also intended for walking long distances or traveling for several hours, so I recommend they be loose and made of durable fabric.”

Even though all three types were navy blue, each one had its own purpose. Lucia felt she hadn’t given the different shades of navy that much thought. She’d have to be more observant from now on. Though of course, she couldn’t stare *too* hard. She didn’t want to be rude.

Also, this conversation made Lucia realize something. “You don’t usually wear navy, do you, Mr. Forto? Normally you wear something like the suit you’re wearing now or a black three-piece suit.”

As a nobleman and a viscount, and the master of the Tailors’ Guild, Forto wore a black three-piece suit when he went to the castle or to sign an important contract. But when she thought of Forto’s clothes, the first thing that came to mind was his silver-gray interwoven suit and white silk shirt. He possibly had several suits in a similar design but different fabrics. His suits were always spotless.

The next outfit that came to mind was his blue three-piece summertime suit and white shirt, with intricate embroidery on the lapel and vest. He must have reserved that suit for summer; she hadn’t seen it since the seasons changed.

Today, Forto wore a three-piece suit in fog blue—a pale, grayish-blue color with a hint of indigo. His vest, which could just barely be seen, was embroidered with flowers in matching color thread. Those details, only visible from up close, were so lovely that Lucia wanted to sidle up beside him to see them.

“I have few occasions to wear it, but I do own a three-piece suit in dark navy. Generally, however, I try to dress myself in a manner befitting a guildmaster of the Tailors’.”

“By that do you mean...something sophisticated and stylish?”

“You’re very kind to say so, and I hope I do come across that way. But what I mean is, I am technically a walking advertisement for the Tailors’ Guild. I try to dress myself in garments of high quality, in colors that give a sense of freshness

and are not too flashy or ostentatious."

"How would that even be possible? I mean, you're so gorgeous yourself."

"Lucia..." Forto said, his face looking deeply troubled.

But it was true—Forto was a tall, beautiful man with blond hair and blue eyes, and that alone was enough to make him stand out. It was probably harder for him to make himself look unremarkable.

Forto cleared his throat, then said, "Back to the suits—nobles have certain notions regarding how a two- or three-piece should look from the standpoint of rank and family. Also, unlike with suits for commoners, there is a minimum level of 'status' that must be expressed."

"Status?"

"Yes. A suit that doesn't give the impression of status is easily looked down on by nobles. For example, if you see someone wearing a black three-piece suit in the castle, you know immediately that they are a noble, yes? However, a certain man once showed up to a meeting wearing a gray rounded-neck shirt and frayed pants. He was assumed to be a commoner and perhaps the worksite supervisor, and consequently, he was seated at the end of the table reserved for persons of low standing—only for it to be discovered that he was, in reality, a marquis. Though in that situation, the one at fault was the clerk in charge of the seating, who didn't recognize him."

Lucia understood what Forto was getting at, but she wondered whether the marquis had done it on purpose or just hadn't had time to change clothes. Also, she felt sorry for the one who had seated him.

"Why did the marquis come dressed like that in the first place?"

"He was on the way back from hunting monsters, and he'd simply taken off his armor and come straight to the meeting in order to receive the budget for his squad. I understand his eagerness and haste, but he really sent the clerk into shock. However, in addition to saying he did not blame the clerk, the marquis sat with the workers and interacted with them in a friendly manner, which resulted in them working harder at their jobs."

A marquis who had been on his way back from hunting monsters—that must have been the current captain of the Order

of Beast Hunters, but Lucia didn't say so aloud. Also, she knew how those workers felt. She herself was keenly aware just how rare it was to have a boss who acted like a work colleague instead of flaunting his status.

"We've gotten a bit off topic, but there is a way to dress to purposely lower one's status and project an air of familiarity and friendliness. It is, however, quite tricky, and I do not recommend it for clients who are not accustomed to it."

Only a small group of people could pull that off, and those weren't the sort of garments Lucia could use as references when designing clothing for nobles.

"Mr. Forto, about this status thing—does that apply to knights as well?" Lucia asked, thinking of what she'd observed during her visits to the castle. "It seems like all the knights' uniforms in the castle have the same design."

"Yes, knight uniforms express their status as well. In the castle, depending on their affiliation, their uniforms have slight variations in style, but the most obvious difference is the color," Forto explained. "Do you recall that the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters wear black uniforms with silver trim?"

"I do. Are there other colors?"

"The First Knights' Regiment and such wear a variety of colors, but the most distinctive uniforms are the white ones with gold trim worn by the Household Troops, who protect the royal family. No other knights are permitted to dress in that fashion. The uniform makes the First Knights distinguishable at a glance, but it also serves to display their strength and their commitment to integrity. Their hearts are as pure as their white uniforms, which they are able to keep spotlessly clean even while protecting the royal family. That's what their uniforms symbolize."

"And here I thought they wore white because it looked nice. Like, it makes them look clean and noble. And I thought the reflections from their white uniforms brighten up the royal family's complexions," Lucia said.

Forto chuckled. "That may be the case as well, but make sure not to say that last part in public, Lucia."

"I won't!"

She'd accidentally been thinking out loud. It probably wasn't a good idea to compare the Household Troops to reflective material. She'd burn Forto's caution into her memory to avoid

saying anything irreverent.

“Do the bodyguards of high-ranking nobles wear white or light-colored uniforms too?”

“I don’t believe they wear white. They seldom wear light colors, but I have seen some wear gray, aqua, or light green uniforms.”

It was all fascinating to Lucia. Just as she was thinking it would be nice to see uniforms in those colors someday, there came a quick rap at the door. Forto gave the knocker permission to enter, and a member of the guild staff slipped hastily into the room.

“I have an urgent message from Mr. Ivano Mercadante of the Rossetti Trading Company!”

***

“Dahlia…”

“Yes. The Rossetti Trading Company…”

Lucia and Forto were in a conference room in the Magical Garment Factory, having a conversation that felt very familiar.

They had invited Ivano, the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, to the factory. He had been en route to the Tailors’ Guild, but they had asked the guild staff member to escort him to the factory, where they could talk more privately.

The Tailors’ Guild and the Magical Garment Factory had been working at full capacity to manufacture toe socks, drying insoles, and zephyricloth—all magical tools invented by Dahlia, a magical toolmaker and chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company.

The reason the Magical Garment Factory had been established in the first place was to mass-produce the toe socks and drying insoles. There was a chance that Dahlia had invented another unbelievable—or rather, another very effective magical tool. Judging that to be the case, Forto had redirected Ivano toward the Magical Garment Factory. After looking back on the work they’d done thus far, he and Lucia had steeled themselves and waited for Ivano in the conference room.

Then, Ivano arrived with what he called a heated low table and a heated table. The former was a wooden low table placed on top of a plush rug. On the underside of the table was a magical circuit powered by fire and air crystals to produce a gentle, warm stream of air. A blanket was spread over the table

and held down by a removable tabletop. In simpler terms, it was a magical tool that was essentially a combination of a low table, a blanket, and a dryer, with warm air circulating gently inside the blanket. The latter—the heated table—was a regular table with warm air blowing underneath; it was intended for use with chairs.

Ivano explained that Dahlia had just recently invented them. In a corner of the specifications document were the words “kotatsu” and “warm air table” written in small letters, each struck through twice. Dahlia must have been having trouble thinking up names for the products.

Unlike with fireplaces and heaters powered by fire crystals, there was no need to worry about getting burned. And since the air produced wasn’t very hot, the fire crystals would last a while, which made the tool economical. The tables also prioritized warming the feet, which tended to get chilly easily. It was a truly great heating tool.

Now, the guildmaster of the Tailors’ and the staff of the Magical Garment Factory were in the conference room testing out both types of heated table. It only took a glance around the room to see that they were both a hit.

“The heated low table, also known as the Table of Degeneracy… Yes, that is a very apt name for it…”

Forto, holding a mug of green tea in both hands, had removed his jacket and sunk himself deep into the heated low table. And yet he still managed to look perfect. The perks of being good-looking.

“Ahhh… My oh my…” Dante said in a funny voice. He was sitting next to Forto and had laid his torso flat against the tabletop.

Across from Dante, Zilo had his legs under the table and was lying down on the rug. “This is superb… It’s sapped all my motivation…” he sighed. These tables were going to create some problems.

In a spot slightly farther away, Hestia and a few stitchers were sitting under the heated table, engaged in a conversation about cold sensitivity. They were seated in chairs, so no one was sprawled out on the floor, but they looked happy and relaxed.

Lucia herself had already experienced the heated low table, so she knew how easy it was to relax under there. The mild heat meant there was no fear of getting burned even should one

move around. However, while it was all well and good to say it was comforting and relaxing, if she didn't take care, she'd find herself immobilized. And fall asleep.

It had felt like being nailed to the spot, or like her body had sprouted roots. That was exactly what happened to Dante, who was flopped face down on the tabletop, and Zilo, who had thrown himself on the floor. Lucia wouldn't have been surprised if they fell asleep in those positions. Forto had told them that since it was the middle of the workday, they'd have a meeting after testing them out—that was three green teas ago. It was only a matter of time before he sprouted roots too.

Had Dahlia actually enchanted these tools with a magic that *made* the user relax? She could just as well have called these the immobilizing low table or the thought-stopping low table.

In order not to fall into the heated low table's trap, Lucia had moved to sit at a table alongside the wall and opened up her sketchbook.

"Okay, you three, let's start planning designs for the covers for the heated low table and the heated table!"

"Yes, let's!" Forto said. He set his cup down with a loud clatter—unusual for him—then forced himself to stand up.

"Gaaah!" Dante groaned loudly as he peeled himself off the tabletop. It seemed to be taking both of them a great deal of effort to separate themselves from the table.

The two of them walked over to where Lucia was sitting. Zilo remained sprawled on the rug, giving no sign of movement. Evidently, he could not yet find it in him to detach himself from the heated low table. Lucia decided he could participate from where he was.

"Boss, the Tailors' Guild is going to be designing and making the rugs and covers for the heated low table and heated table, right?"

"Yep. But I think the covers will take up most of our time. These tables are just prototypes, which is why they have blankets, but we'll make the covers the right size for the tables, and they'll have patterns and embroidery and even stuffing inside. Also, we'll need to make replaceable covers for the tables that will be sold to commoners and restaurants, where they're more likely to get stained."

"It's sounding like we'll be racing against the clock until winter... I'm getting zephyricloth flashbacks..." Dante stared into

the distance.

“These may be prototypes, but the Merchants’ Guild has already started moving,” Forto said, getting them back on track. “Our guilds will be in competition.”

“A competition with the Merchants’ Guild…” Zilo murmured as he slowly sat up and stared intently in their direction. “Do you know what they’re planning for their designs, Mr. Forto?”

“The Merchants’ Guild is using ebony low tables, painting a design on the tabletops, and making blankets from silver fox and crimson fox pelts.”

“Is that so? Silver fox and crimson fox… Viscount Jedda should be able to procure first-grade—no, premium-grade fur…”

Zilo’s usual cheeriness was not present in his voice or expression. In fact, both held a hint of bitterness.

“I would like the Tailors’ Guild to finish their design off with multithread embroidery on double-weave monster silk, trim the edges with high-quality fur, and use a quartz tabletop to showcase the embroidery. Lucia and I have already discussed that plan.”

“Ah, that all sounds good,” said Dante. “Allow me to select the fur, please.”

“Please do, Dante. I will be making my rounds of the Adventurers’ Guild and some suppliers, so please accompany me.”

“Gladly!” Dante replied enthusiastically.

“Mr. Forto, what does our budget look like for this project?” Zilo asked.

“There is no limit to our budget,” Forto stated plainly. “We will be making use of the Tailors’ Guild’s advertisement budget and reserve funds. And if those prove to be insufficient, I will supplement them with my own funds. There is no need to worry on that front.” On the contrary, his reply was very worrisome. But the Tailors’ guildmaster continued speaking without pause. “A few years ago, the Tailors’ Guild fell grossly behind the Merchants’ Guild in selling raincoats made with waterproof cloth. Frankly speaking, we lost. This being a guild that deals in fabric, I cannot allow something similar to happen a second time.”

Forto’s profile resembled that of a knight reflecting on a lost battle. No one was able to offer any words of consolation.

“We will be making covers for both the Tailors’ Guild and the Magical Garment Factory. I will take the helm in overseeing our

progress, but Lucia will also be assisting me. Can I entrust you with that, Lucia?"

"Yes, of course!" Lucia responded wholeheartedly.

"I will secure two tables and the fabric we'll need, and two artists from the guild will take care of designing the embroidery pattern. We will also need additional stitchers. Zilo?"

"Leave it to me," Zilo said. He smoothly stood up and bowed in an uncharacteristically genteel manner. "I'll reach out to some veteran stitchers who retired in the last few years as well as skilled private contractors."

"Thank you. We can double their pay—triple it for the retired individuals."

"No need, Mr. Forto. The retirees' grudges run deep, so they will happily go to war for just twice the pay," Zilo said, a dark glint in his eye.

Since when is embroidery a war? Lucia wondered, but then she realized what he meant. She herself had heard quite a bit about the matter with the raincoats. Incidentally, that was also a product connected with Dahlia. The Merchants' Guild had sold a stupendous number of raincoats made from the waterproof cloth she had invented.

Part of the reason they had been sold through the Merchants' Guild was probably that, being more rain gear than coats, they had been primarily sold to the city guards and the Couriers' Guild. The number sold to those groups far surpassed the coats manufactured by the Tailors' Guild. The Tailors' Guild hadn't known about the waterproof cloth, leading to them getting a very late start. They had suffered a defeat—or so people said.

Raincoats were clothing. At the time, patrons and aristocratic clients had criticized the Tailors' Guild for losing to the Merchants' Guild in a matter related to garments. It had apparently been a source of very bad stomach pain for both the guildmaster of the time and Forto, then the vice-guildmaster.

This time, they weren't making clothing but covers and rugs for heated low tables and heated tables. Even though blankets and rugs could be made with fur, they were essentially textiles. And the Tailors' Guild couldn't afford to lose when it came to that.

If the Merchants' Guild was going to make their quilts with premium fur, then the Tailors' Guild would surpass them with high-quality fabrics and sophisticated embroidery. They would

exceed them in both number and quality of products sold to nobles and the general public.

"Let us secure a victory in the name of our guild's prestige!" the guildmaster exclaimed resolutely.

And the entire room responded, "Yes, sir!"

***

"I guess the best way to learn is by just doing it..."

"Boss, while you're on break, put these eye drops in and close your eyes."

"Thanks!"

The conference room next to the workroom of the Tailors' Guild had been repurposed as a breakroom. Lucia took the eye drops Dante offered her. She poured a few drops in both eyes, then closed them and leaned back in her chair. Next to her, Dante was also leaning back and rubbing his brow with his fingers.

They had started embroidering the covers for the heated low tables that morning. The stitchers, nervous and excited, had gathered in the workroom, where Forto had given his first instructions.

"This time, we will be working day and night, switching between two teams."

The system Forto proposed would first divide people up into groups by day. Those groups were further separated into two teams. The first team would sew for a certain amount of time, then take a break, during which the second team would work. Halfway through the day, new personnel would come in to take over. Embroidery was a task that required intense concentration, so this method was much more efficient than making everyone work long hours.

Incidentally, this had originally been devised by knights, or so Zilo told her. They alternated duty in this manner when guarding strongholds like forts. The Tailors' Guild, however, wasn't defending but attacking.

Lucia and Dante were part of the first team. After working steadfastly at embroidering the backdrop of the design, they had alternated with the second team and were now on break. Around them, several other stitchers were slumped exhausted in their chairs or over tables.

"I didn't think I was *that* slow at embroidering..." Lucia

grumbled.

“Boss, if you’re slow, then so am I. But there’s not much we can do about that, is there? Besides getting another twenty or thirty years of experience,” Dante said. He laughed, but Lucia remembered how frustrated he’d looked when they were working, and she had a feeling that she’d looked just as frustrated as he had.

Lucia thought back on her morning.

While Lucia was getting set up in the workroom, several people walked through the door.

“My, it’s been a while.”

“Good morning. We’ve been called here to earn some pocket money.”

There was an elderly man with a cane, an elderly lady with white hair, and an older gentleman with a monocle—most of the helpers Zilo had summoned here were older people who seemed to have retired from the front lines.

Forto immediately walked over and greeted them politely. “Thank you all for coming to help during this busy time.”

For a moment, Lucia wondered if they were all members of the nobility. However, after listening to their conversation, Lucia realized they had all previously worked as stitchers for the Tailors’ Guild.

“Don’t you worry yourself, Mr. Forto. All I do with my days is watch over my grandchildren. What’s important now is making sure the Tailors’ Guild doesn’t lose in a battle of fabrics.”

“I still regret what happened with those raincoats. I couldn’t back down from this.”

“Yes, exactly. If we don’t come out the victors this time around, Mr. Tino will lament terribly.”

“Mr. Tino is normally hard to read, but when he’s depressed, he stays that way for a surprisingly long time.”

“Is that right…?”

As the elderly stitchers expressed their readiness to help, their conversation veered toward Tiziano, the former guildmaster. Not even Forto could form a response. Lucia decided to keep her thoughts to herself as well.

“Mr. Forto, have you gotten the hang of threading six strands yet?”

“Yes, I believe I have,” Forto replied after a beat.

“Let me take a look when you’re done, please.”

Forto smiled a bit stiffly in response to the monocled man’s request to check his technique. However, Forto wasn’t helping out with the embroidery today. Instead, he would be procuring materials for the heated tables. He left the workroom with an air of reluctance.

“Now then, shall we begin?”

The cover for the heated low table—a beautiful special-grade double-weave dark blue monster silk—was spread out on top of two workbenches pushed together. The stitchers on shift began to take their seats in the chairs around the workbenches.

“How easy it is, working in shifts. Back in our day, it was common to spend one or two nights at the guild working without any breaks when we received multiple orders of gowns for noblewomen.”

“Those were the days, eh? I remember having to bathe in the room used for washing fabrics in the summer.”

“I remember—coffee and breadsticks were all we had from morning to night.”

The spectacled veterans commiserated over old times as they gathered around a corner of the cover. Once the other stitchers started to take their seats, Lucia sat down too.

The amiable atmosphere ended there. Everyone donned thimbles—some gold, some silver—to protect their fingers from needle pricks. Lucia herself slipped a silver thimble onto the finger of her left hand. Some people held embroidery hoops firmly in their hands and placed them on the fabric to keep it taut. Once everyone threaded their mythril needles with gold or silver thread, a hush fell around them.

“Is everyone ready?” one of the veteran stitchers called out.

“Ready!”

And with that, they started embroidering.

The skilled stitchers of the Tailors’ Guild made full use of not only their sewing techniques but also strengthening magic to embroider. Consequently, there were many stitchers who worked with precision and at a very fast pace.

Lucia tried to keep up. Dante was sitting across from her. In her hands was the shiny, dark blue cloth with an outline of the design faintly visible on the surface. Lucia’s job was to sew silver thread on top of the sketch.

Lucia loved embroidery. She had a knack for it ever since she

was a young child, and she was skilled enough to sell her work. She thought she'd be able to sew double-weave monster silk reasonably well, but that self-conceit crumbled into dust even before the hands of the clock made half a rotation.

The stitchers who were experts at embroidery worked much more expeditiously than Lucia. That fact was painfully clear as she worked side by side with them. Not even the retired veterans were working especially fast, but they progressed reliably and surely. They didn't seem to slow down no matter how much time passed. Their stitches were perfectly straight and uniform. They worked at a steady pace without making a single mistake, and before long, they had even made more progress than the other stitchers.

As Lucia worried she must be the slowest one here, her fingers started to tense up. But the more anxious she became, the more her pace fell and the more mistakes she made. Still, she wanted so badly to hold out until the shift change. She didn't know if that was due to her pride as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, or her ambition to be a couturier. Either way, once the time finally came to take a break, Lucia's fingers and eyes were entirely worn out.

Dante was seated across from her; sweat poured from his brow as he worked beside one of the bespectacled veterans. His lips were pursed tight and the frustration was clear in his eyes. Lucia knew she must look the same.

"Time to change shifts!" the person in charge of keeping the time called out. Everyone stood up, letting other stitchers take their places at the chairs. Zilo took Lucia's spot.

"I'm sorry, Zilo. I was embroidering so slow, this was as far as I could get—"

"Chief, you did just fine," Zilo said, cutting her off. "If you could keep pace with me at your age, then I'd lose my job, so please don't worry about it."

"He's right!" another stitcher said. "I've been sewing for twenty years longer than you, chief. I'd be in trouble if you embroidered as quickly as me. Please, go as slow as possible."

While they might have been telling her she could go as slow as she needed to, Lucia still couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment she felt in her own lack of skill.

Zilo and the stitchers rolled up their sleeves, put on their thimbles, and picked up their silver-colored needles.

“Is everyone ready?”

“Ready!”

The second team began stitching, and Lucia quietly left the room with Dante and the other stitchers.

That brought them to where they were now—resting in the conference room adjacent to the workroom. Their break was long enough for them to have tea and snacks, but Lucia couldn’t bring herself to touch anything.

“My, this black tea isn’t bitter at all.”

“It’s made with good tea leaves. The aroma is very nice too.”

“These salted butter cookies are great!”

Next to the exhausted junior stitchers, the veterans were having a fun tea party at a table by the window. They chatted about all the ways things had changed since the old days.

Lucia opened her eyes—which were feeling better now thanks to the eye drops—and hoisted herself to her feet. There were several white paper boxes on the snack table, but they hadn’t been opened yet. Lucia knew what was inside them—she opened one up and walked to the table where the veterans sat.

“Would you all care for some profiteroles?”

“Oh, may we? Isn’t that for lunch?”

“These are just snacks for tea. Sandwiches and soup will be delivered this afternoon for lunch,” Lucia explained.

The white-haired woman accepted a profiterole. Next, Lucia offered one to the man with the monocle, who looked hesitant. She knew from meeting Randolph the other day that many men liked sweets too, so she put one on a plate and handed it to him. He broke into a wide grin and thanked her, so he must have been one such man. The man with the cane declined, saying he’d already had cookies. Perhaps he didn’t have much of a sweet tooth.

“Thank you for the profiterole,” the woman said. “May I ask your name?”

“Lucia Fano. I am the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory.”

“Goodness, the head manager! The son of a relative of mine is a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. He absolutely loves those toe socks. Apparently, they have greatly improved his walking and his ability to chase after monsters.”

What a small world. Lucia couldn’t help but smile—she was

happy to hear the woman's grandson liked the toe socks.

While they were all introducing themselves to each other, Dante came over with more tea. They discussed the Magical Garment Factory and the Tailors' Guild of yesteryear. There used to be fewer staff members, which meant the workload had been quite burdensome during busy times. Apparently, since they were paid for their overtime, some people had pushed themselves to the point of jeopardizing their health.

"Back in those days, it was common for women to quit working after getting married. It was difficult finding someone to watch the children, you see... Nowadays there's a dedicated nursery, which makes things easier."

"Yes. There were even some men who worked while raising children, and Mr. Forto felt it was a loss to have skilled stitchers and knitters quitting."

Marriage was common in the royal capital, but so was divorce. As such, there were quite a lot of single parents, for whom a significant factor in choosing a place of employment was the presence of a day care on-site or nearby. The Tailors' Guild had its own nursery and even provided financial assistance to parents. The Tailors' guildmaster spared no expense when it came to procuring and keeping excellent personnel. He was the paragon of a boss.

That said, Lucia had heard that incompetent workers and slackers were mercilessly reassigned or fired. All she could do to avoid that fate was do her best.

"Excuse me, but how would I go about becoming faster at embroidery? Could you share any words of advice?" Dante suddenly asked the man with the monocle. It was a question Lucia wanted to ask too, but she was taken aback by Dante's formal tone.

The man put a finger to his chin, then looked at Lucia and Dante with his dark eyes. "Don't panic, don't rush, don't compare yourself to others, don't look at anyone else's work. That's a good starting point."

"Uh..."

"Ah..."

Dante and Lucia each let out a strange noise at the same time. The man's words were blunt, but they made sense.

"Assistant Manager Cassini, I noticed you have a bad habit of swinging your left shoulder when you're pulling your thread. Be

careful of that. Also, why don't you try changing out the thimble on your left hand from leather to a metal one?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

"Head Manager Fano, you may need to pull your fabric a little tighter. And you should use a smaller embroidery hoop that's a better fit for your hands."

"Understood! I'll start doing that next time!"

Although it hadn't seemed like the veterans stitchers had been looking their way at all, they apparently had been keeping an eye on their work. Other stitchers soon followed, bowing their heads and asking for the same thing.

"U-Um! Pardon me, but could you teach me too?"

"I would also like some advice, if you don't mind! Please!"

"Your thread was a bit long. Also—"

"You worked quite quickly and neatly. However, you should make sure you don't exhaust yourself—"

And just like that, the breaktime in the conference room turned into a short lecture for the stitchers.

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"Should we ask the veterans to return to work...?" Forto wondered aloud with some bafflement as he surveyed the workroom that night.

"That would be nice, but what if you asked them to come back as instructors?" Lucia, standing at his side, suggested sincerely.

During breaks, the veterans had given the younger stitchers a great deal of advice. And since everyone had followed that advice, the speed of the embroidery had undeniably increased. She and Dante had agreed that it was a waste for only one half of the shift workers to receive the veterans' instruction.

The following day, everyone, with Lucia taking the lead, bowed their heads to the veterans and asked them to inspect samples of embroidery by each of them. The veterans provided an extensive list of recommendations on needles and thimbles, the size of their embroidery hoops, their sewing posture, their pace, the position of their shoulders and elbows, the height of their chairs, and more. Some people puffed their cheeks out in annoyance at the torrent of suggestions, but the advice worked —they were embroidering faster.

The day after that, one of the stitchers received approval to

bring her husband's optician, who adjusted one of the veterans' reading glasses and made a new pair for the man with a monocle. The men were overjoyed at their improved vision, which helped them work faster as well. The stitchers also had their glasses adjusted, and everyone who needed new glasses received a pair. As a result, Forto's tight schedule was progressing faster than planned; it was truly an unexpected outcome.

"Instructors, you say? I'll propose that to them once we're finished with the heated low table. Still, it astounds me that things are moving this fast..."

Lucia understood Forto's surprise, but she wished he would just be happy about it. She took a look at the cover, then raised a shout.

"Oh, Mr. Forto! The goddess's eyelashes are almost done!"

Currently, the cover was lying not on a workbench but on a white sheet spread out on the floor. Zilo was working on applying the finishing touches in the center of the cover. He carefully placed the final stitch in the long eyelashes framing the goddess's downcast eyes, then gently leaned back. The stitchers wordlessly straightened the cover out so it was free of wrinkles.

"It's beautiful..."

It was like a giant piece of artwork spread out on the floor—the glossy, double-weave, dark blue monster silk was like a sparkling night sky.

The scene depicted twinkling constellations in bright gold, silver, red, blue, and yellow, as well as paler, more delicate colors. In the middle of the sky was the fair-skinned, silver-haired Goddess of the Moon. It looked more like a painting than embroidery. The details of the stitching shone brightly under the light of the magical lanterns. Lucia felt like she could stare at it forever.



“Who knew it would turn out so beautiful…” one of the artists from the Tailors’ Guild remarked, half sighing. Although it was one of his many designs, it was still impressive that the young man had turned his brilliant drawing into an outline to be embroidered in a single evening. He had wonderful sense and skill.

“What do you mean? This is your design, isn’t it?” Forto said.

The artist should have been proud of his work, but instead, he shook his head. “No, Mr. Forto. This is not my work. This is much, much more beautiful. And it’s all because of everyone’s embroidery.”

“In that case, this work of art belongs to *all* of us,” the guildmaster said with a bright smile.

The young artist covered his face with his hands and finally nodded. “Thank you…”

While everyone was quietly admiring the cover, the door slammed open.

“I brought material for the trim— Huh? Why’s everyone shooting daggers at me?”

It was Dante, carrying a large box. *Bad timing.*

“It’s nothing!” Lucia reassured him. “We were just admiring the finished embroidery.”

“Ah, sorry for ruining the mood. But we’re not finished yet,” Dante said as he gently put the large box down. Inside was a slightly thick padded insert that would be going inside the cover.

“The insert is stuffed with longicollis feathers, so please sew them in place!”

The feathers needed to be fixed in place in sections to prevent them from bunching up. Dante laid the insert down on a table so they could sew those sections, and the stitchers got moving at once. Lucia, however, went to check on Dante first.

“Dante, are your eyes okay? Do they hurt?” she asked.

His eyes looked bloodshot. She was worried that he had secretly stayed up all night.

“Oh, are they noticeably red? Maybe I pushed myself a little too hard choosing the longicollis feathers.”

The feathers of the longicollis, a magical beast, were lighter, warmer, and more comfortable than a migratory bird’s. Dante must have meticulously picked out the finest specimens.

“The feathers fly around, right? Did they hit your eyes?”

“No, they really don’t hurt much. They just sting a little.”

“Dante, were you wearing protective glasses?” Forto asked sternly from over Lucia’s head.

“Well, I was wearing them at first, but the feathers kept sticking to the lenses, so…”

“Go straight to the doctor at once. You are prohibited from returning to work until you do.”

“No, um, I’ll be fine after I rinse my eyes and put eye drops in, Mr. Forto. We’re very busy right now, so—”

“Dante, go right now. That’s an order.”

The uncompromising voice from behind Lucia made her shiver. *Forto’s scary when he gets like this.* If Dante refused, she could see Forto grabbing him by the arm and dragging him to the doctor himself. Dante offered no objection, but he looked reluctant as he left the room.

Once the stitchers were finished sewing sections into the insert, they slipped the Goddess of the Moon cover on top of it. There were still a few more touches they needed to make, such as adding more stars in gold and silver thread while checking the light balance and weaving in the ends, but it was more or less complete.

Nonetheless, it wasn’t time to relax yet. Next, they needed to get started on working on the cover, which needed to be longer and wider to fit over the table.

“Now then, on to the next table!” Forto announced. Everyone stood up straight.

“We’ve brought the fabric for the heated table!”

Two dyers from the guild walked in holding a silver magically sealed box. They took out the cover and spread it out on a workbench. Immediately, everyone’s eyes were glued to it.

“This dye for this fabric was made from the World Tree!” the gray-haired dyer explained, his eyes twinkling with pride.

The fabric was baby blue, like the sky on a clear day, but turned a darker blue or green when viewed from different angles. The colors changed like the leaves of a forest of trees swaying in the wind, brought to life on a simple piece of fabric.

“This looks magnificent!”

“Fabric made from the leaves of the World Tree! How mystical!”

“I’m speechless. What a lovely blue…”

After several utterances praising the fabric’s splendor, Lucia heard another, more pragmatic comment: “I can’t even imagine

what this might cost…”

She had heard valuable materials were sometimes harvested from the World Tree, but she couldn’t imagine they were suitable for use as a dye.

“Um, Mr. Forto, if you don’t mind satisfying my curiosity as a commoner, how much does it cost to use dye made from the World Tree?”

“Hmm, yes… In the form of powdered dye, it likely costs as much as pure gold by weight.”

“Pure gold…”

And how much is that, exactly? Lucia wanted to ask, as someone who didn’t know the price of gold. But the baby blue cloth in front of her spoke for itself, so she stayed quiet. This was undoubtedly ultra-premium fabric. It could even rival the cover made from silver fox and crimson fox pelts.

“It doesn’t stain easily. Please, feel free to touch it.”

At the encouragement of the dyer, Lucia gently laid her hand against the cloth. It was smooth, but it also had some springiness to it. The surface had the same slippery, smooth texture that was characteristic of other monster fabrics, but it felt like there was an invisible layer between her finger and the cloth, which she attributed to its strong magic.

“We’ll have to be extra careful when embroidering this,” Zilo said.

Lucia assumed Zilo was referring to the fact that it was an ultra-premium material and, as such, needed extra care, but the dyers’ follow-up remarks held a different implication.

“Those who use strengthening magic to sew will need to be careful. It’s slight, but you will feel some resistance from the fabric.”

“Yes, please be mindful of the points of your needles.”

As someone who sewed without using body strengthening magic, Lucia didn’t quite understand, but it sounded like there was a chance the magic would cause the needles to become unsteady. That would make things difficult.

“Also, since the dye is made from the leaves of the World Tree, the fabric does ease fatigue slightly. However, that doesn’t mean it will completely relieve fatigue in your eyes and fingers, so please make sure not to overdo it.”

How amazing! It relieves fatigue! Lucia thought to herself. If it weren’t so costly and scarce, Lucia would want one to keep at

home. That effect should also help them make good progress with their work.

"I imagine a cover like that will make it difficult for people to extract themselves from under a heated table…" Forto said, his blue gaze wavering. Lucia recalled how difficult it had been for him to get out from under the heated low table. With a few small modifications, the heated people would sew people to itself just as securely.

"Did this take all the powdered World Tree leaves we have?"

"Yes, but the vice-guildmaster did send a letter stating that he would be looking around for more," Forto replied.

Could leaves of the World Tree be found by simply "looking around" for them? Lucia was doubtful.

"Where is the vice-guildmaster now?" she asked.

"He is near the World Tree, so quite far south, but since he sent a package from the Eastern Kingdom the other day, I believe he must be back at sea," Forto said, a faraway look in his eyes. And it was no wonder—the vice-guildmaster, who was supposed to be the guildmaster's right-hand man, was not at the guild.

Speaking of, Lucia had never once met the vice-guildmaster. He truly was the "Visionary Vice," as they called him.

"Mr. Forto, since there can be two vice-guildmasters, don't you think it's about time you appointed someone else? What about Mr. Cassini?"

"This matter has made me seriously consider it. I've already spoken to Dante about it once before, but he declined on the spot."

"You can't take him away from the Magical Garment Factory! We can't function without Dante!" Lucia interrupted Forto and the veterans before she could stop herself. Even though it was thanks to the Tailors' Guild that Dante was part of the factory in the first place, they really would suffer without him there.

"Well, I believe it would be pointless to ask him anyway, Mr. Forto," Zilo said with a laugh, and the conversation returned to the Visionary Vice.

"Is the vice-guildmaster still gathering materials?" the monocled veteran asked.

Forto turned to face him. "Yes. He is capable of gathering some fascinating clothing-related materials, even more than an adventurer can."

“More fascinating materials than an adventurer can find?” Lucia asked, thinking he meant the leaves of the World Tree.

“So far, he has brought ten rolls of black silk and a bundle of moonlight spider silk from the Eastern Kingdom. In the southern islands, he has also procured rare purple dye made from seashells as well as scales from a mutant variant of fiendfish with a gradation from red to white. In Išrana, he’s found thrice-dyed crimson cloth as well as a long-lasting indigo dye. Oh, and he’s also brought back two bundles of giant crayfish antennae.”

“Those are all super rare materials…!” Lucia said in awe. She almost started drooling.

“When it comes to securing clothing materials, no one can hold a candle to him. Letting him do as he wishes is for the best. Besides, he’s able to use his title as vice-guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild to his benefit when he’s collecting materials.”

Even aware that it placed a burden on himself, Forto still found it in him to allow the vice-guildmaster his freedom. Lucia wouldn’t have expected anything less from him.

“Now then, let us start! Prioritize your safety as you sew by staying mindful of your strengthening magic!”

And so began another round of embroidering in shifts.

“Ow!”

As they continued to embroider, one of the stitchers pressed down on their finger. They must have stabbed themselves quite deeply with their needle.

“Why don’t you drink a potion?” Forto suggested.

“No, I’ll be fine until the shift change!” the stitcher insisted.

“All you need is a sip, so drink it now! A painful finger will slow you down, and you might get blood on the fabric,” Zilo chided the stitcher.

Casting strengthening magic on one’s fingers caused the cover, colored with dye from the World Tree, to slip to the side when sewing. That led some stitchers to accidentally prick their fingertips and sometimes even bleed. Wiping off the blood with a handkerchief and drinking a bit of a potion before the shifts changed kept things moving faster.

Fortunately for Lucia, she was sewing without using magic, so all she needed to do was hold her embroidery loop firmly in place to keep it from slipping.

Due to the nature of the sketch for this second cover, the

stitchers started embroidering from the center of the design. The sketch was incredibly detailed and had taken a lot of time just to draw. And since the dye used for the sketch vanished with time, the artist had needed to finish it without taking a single break.

The stitchers got to work threading the design with embroidery thread. The beautiful, pleasant, light blue fabric subtly changed color when it moved, giving the impression of a sky and forest, so the sketch also became hard to see at times. Everyone was squinting slightly, their faces scrunching up almost into scowls as they focused on sewing.

Once the time came to switch shifts, one of the stitchers cried out in agony, “This horse is taking forever...!”

“It’s not a horse—it’s a unicorn,” Zilo said, rubbing his brow. In his other hand he held a needle threaded with brilliant gold thread.

The faintly visible outline depicted a pure white unicorn and a golden-haired maiden. The unicorn took up quite a lot of space, and the maiden’s skin was also white. Lucia suspected that once they were done with the horse, they would then begin lamenting that the maiden was taking forever.

“Horses and unicorns are almost the same thing anyway...” a nearby stitcher mumbled as he put his needle away in his sewing box. He looked absolutely exhausted from sewing too.

Lucia rose from her chair after what seemed like forever. She met eyes with Lotta, who was standing in the corner of the room. She hadn’t looked at him because he was possessed by a bicorn; it had merely been a coincidence. Not wanting to be rude, she was about to look away when Lotta gave her a firm shake of his head, his face serious. He was wordlessly asserting that horses and bicorns were in fact *not* the same thing. Lucia had to fight hard to hold back a laugh.

Clear Crystals and Obscure Intentions

Aboard a carriage, Forto was adjusting the blue tie at his neck. He was headed for the villa belonging to the Earldom Ariosto, where Tiziano, the former guildmaster of the Tailors', resided.

The reason for his visit was to procure large slabs of crystal for the tabletops of the ornate heated low table and heated table that the guild was assembling. When Lucia had proposed the idea, it had seemed like the only way they would be able to compete against the Merchants' Guild. Glass was easier to obtain, and it was very clear, but using slabs of rare quartz would add value to the tables.

They were looking for quartz tabletops with high clarity and as few scratches as possible. With that in mind, Forto had reached out to several gem dealers and other companies that dealt with stones but had yet to receive a favorable response.

It was difficult for Forto—even with his position as the Tailors' guildmaster—to obtain materials not related to clothing, much less precious materials like ores and jewels. They weren't the type of thing that could simply be purchased as long as one had ample gold.

However, he had sworn on the prestige of the Tailors' Guild not to back down. Therefore, he'd written a letter to Tiziano and secured a meeting with him. Also attending their meeting would be Tiziano's second wife, Noemi, who was the chairwoman of a company that dealt in precious stones.

At present, Tiziano was living in a villa belonging to the earldom, to which he'd moved after passing his title on to his son. However, this did not seem like the type of place to live in quiet retirement. While the aristocracy normally preferred large estates with expansive grounds, the villa itself as well as its gardens, carriage stop, and stables were all modest in scale.

Black stones paved the road to the gray-bricked residence. The path from the carriage stop to the stables was enclosed in spotless white walls and rich brown wood—simple yet stunning. The garden was lined with perfectly arranged trees and blooming with flowers that looked very well cared for.

A male attendant welcomed Forto into the residence. He subconsciously straightened his posture as he walked inside. The white-and-black marble checkerboard flooring was polished to a shine, and fantastical reliefs of goddesses and monsters were spaced out in even intervals on the white walls. Each one was the work of a famous artisan.

The Aesthete Earl—the man's old nickname still held true even after he'd relinquished his title. In fact, perhaps the man himself was a work of art in some sense. Tiziano was Forto's teacher and benefactor, the man who had taught him everything he knew about fashion and how to navigate noble society.

"It's been quite a while since you've come to visit me here, Forto."

Inside the room Forto was shown to, Tiziano was sitting on a white sofa. He wore a black tailcoat that looked dark gray in certain light, a white shirt with a winged collar, and a wide, golden-beige necktie that had a black swallow tie pin fastened to it. The black vest under his tailcoat was embroidered with a floral pattern in golden-beige thread that matched the color of his tie.

A thought rose unbidden to Forto's mind: *Lucia would love his outfit.*

The man's ornate, exquisite attire might have suggested he was headed to a celebration, but Forto knew full well that Tiziano dressed himself up even more splendidly when he was home. Officially, Tiziano claimed he did so in order to test out the comfort of the clothes he designed, but the truth was that he just enjoyed it.

The man was not only a couturier, he loved dressing himself up. He even changed outfits twice a day when in his own home. Incidentally, Noemi also changed her clothes to match Tiziano's. She'd once gone so far as to complain that it was one of the hardest things about being married to him.

"Thank you for making time for me today. Your outfit today is very lovely and elegant. I hope to be able to make and wear something like that in another ten years."

"Your presence itself is flashy enough. You can give it another twenty years," Tiziano replied harshly.

Noemi, who was sitting next to Forto, gave him a strained smile. Her outfit today was a gown with sleeves that exposed her shoulders. The black fabric of the dress was stitched with shiny, dark gray thread and studded with small fiendfish scales. While

the gown appeared subdued from a distance, it revealed its splendor every time Noemi moved. There was no doubt it was one of Tiziano's designs.

"I understand that you would like to consult with me on a matter regarding jewels," Noemi said. "What do you have in mind?"

"I am searching for slabs of quartz crystal," Forto replied. "Two of them, as clear as possible, to be made into tabletops."

Forto placed documents with descriptions of the new magical tools on the table in front of them. Noemi inspected the documents with her dark brown eyes.

"When do you require them?" she asked.

"As soon as possible."

"I'll have them delivered to the Tailors' Guild in three days."

"What…?" Forto blurted, flabbergasted. It should have been impossible to have them ready so quickly.

"Three days is the earliest we can do. Polishing the surface of two slabs takes quite a bit of time," Noemi said simply.

The fact that her company was already prepared to polish the quartz meant that she had already procured and processed the crystals for use as tabletops, which meant she must have been expecting his request for quite some time.

Noemi owned a company and storefront that dealt in gemstones. She must have received reports, or else heard from Tiziano, that Forto was making his rounds to the suppliers in the capital. It wasn't a secret at the Tailors' Guild that Forto was searching for crystal tabletops, and Tiziano still had some connections within the guild; it wouldn't be surprising if one of them had reported as much to him. In either case, Tiziano had anticipated this moment and had acted to protect and help Forto. It was a bit frustrating.

"There's no need to look so disappointed about the wait. I have my best artisans polishing the quartz, and our mages will apply a hardening enchantment so that they will not shatter easily."

Though Noemi had attributed Forto's frown to the wait time, the playful glint in her eyes suggested she was kindly trying to help him save face. Instead, however, it just made him feel like he was still an amateur.

"No, that is quite all right," Forto assured her. "Thank you. I will pay whatever the asking price is."

“Oh goodness, I should be thanking *you* for your business. Here is the written estimate.”

Noemi produced a sheet of paper with a quote for two quartz tabletops. But the amount was far too low. The sheet did in fact list two slabs, but the price was barely enough for one.

“Madam Noemi, this—”

“This is the price for friends and family. I don’t do this for anyone else, so please keep it to yourself, if you don’t mind.”

Friends and family, she said, but Tiziano was his teacher, whom he held great respect for, and Noemi was Tiziano’s wife. Forto didn’t feel right about being treated as an intimate.

As his discomfort grew, Tiziano called his name. “Forto, just accept it. You can take the money you save and use it on other materials.”

“If I accept, I will be all the more deeply indebted to you.”

While it sounded like a wonderful offer, when it came to nobles, nothing came without a price. The one who had taught Forto that was the very man before him.

“Don’t talk about debt and such when it comes to a matter like this. You need to make use of your budget and staff to crush the Merchants’ Guild,” Tiziano said, an unexpected fire in his eyes.

Now Forto understood. Tiziano was the Tailors’ guildmaster before last, so he had been considering this situation from that perspective. Though they were making covers for the heated low table and heated table, cloth was cloth. Like Forto, Tiziano felt strongly that the Tailors’ Guild mustn’t lose to the Merchants’ Guild.

“I will do my best,” Forto assured him.

“Contact me should you ever need anything.”

“Thank you. I will take you up on that offer,” Forto said. He decided that on this matter, it would be better, in the future, to seek out Tiziano’s advice without hesitation.

“Hee hee, a competition between the Tailors’ Guild and the Merchants’ Guild? I can hardly wait for winter.” Noemi’s bright giggle made it sound as if she were looking forward to seeing a popular opera.

Forto was sure she was over forty years old, but she didn’t look a day over thirty. He suspected she ingested powdered skybat to maintain her youthful appearance. Her posture was straight as an arrow, and thanks to her training in horseback riding and self-defense, her muscles were nearly on par with a

female knight's. While there had been a time when noblewoman were valued for being dainty and elegant, nowadays there was also an appreciation for athletic women. Noemi fell into the latter category.

"I appreciate your generosity. Is there anything I can do for you in return?" Forto asked.

"Hmm... At the next soiree, dance with Noemi for as long as she likes. The pain in my knees prevents me from dancing for more than two songs."

"Very well. I'm sure people line up to dance with Madam Noemi, so I will keep them in check by dancing with her in your stead."

"Please do. You may dance with her for as many songs as you like."

"My, I can't wait," Noemi said, flashing Forto a charming smile. Forto couldn't help but smile back.

Normally, one danced with a close friend only for two consecutive songs; only with one's significant other, betrothed, or spouse did one dance three or more songs. However, no matter how many songs he danced, he would only be doing so as Tiziano's apprentice.

Noemi was not only beautiful but also had status and wealth as a chairwoman and, as such, was often approached by other noblemen. Forto vowed to carry out the duty of shielding her from those men.

Across from him, Tiziano adjusted his collar, which needed no adjusting, with his fingers. Then he said, "On another note, Forto, how are things faring with the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory?"

"In what sense, may I ask?"

"I'm asking if you've taken action yet. What else could I mean?" Tiziano said matter-of-factly.

Forto struggled to respond immediately. "No, I've yet to—"

"The time for waiting and watching is over, don't you think? I received news that she had a brush with danger the other day. And with quite a troublesome individual."

It was true: Someone had attempted to abduct Lucia. Tiziano had apparently been made aware of that as well.

Forto had tracked the men and carriage and had determined they had some connection to a certain merchant family, but he hadn't been able to find out any more than that. However,

Tiziano, with his far-ranging connections, had been able to identify the mastermind.

“There’s someone who knew of a past relationship—”

Tiziano proceeded to name a family belonging to a different faction. It seemed obvious now. Forto was ashamed at his own inability to trace the incident back to them, and he felt deeply relieved that Lucia was safe and sound.

“The method you choose does not matter, as long as you protect the Tailors’ Guild and the Magical Garment Factory. However, making her your wife would likely be the safest solution. You can’t afford to continue stalling.”

Forto, as a couturier and guildmaster, had no choice but to yield to his teacher. What he truly wanted was to ask for more details, but the preparations for the heated low table and heated table were down to the wire. He didn’t have time to spare.

“Thank you for your words of advice. Now then, it’s about time I leave—”

“Make sure you are diligent in carrying out your duties,” Tiziano said, his voice quiet yet strict. Forto uttered a word of acknowledgment and bowed.

Forto had known Tiziano for a fairly long time, but he didn’t think he had ever once seen the man’s collar out of place.

“Allow me to escort you out,” Noemi offered.

Together with Noemi, Forto left the room. Through the narrowed door, he could see his teacher’s face in profile, unreachable from where he was.

“Thank you for showing me out, Madam Noemi,” Forto said appreciatively. Noemi had taken the time to walk him all the way to the foyer of the villa.

“I’m looking forward to how popular the heated low table and heated low table will become this winter,” Noemi said, sounding sincere.

“Yes, I hope we can expect good things,” Forto replied with a smile. Unfortunately, he found it difficult to maintain his smile.

“The heated low table and heated table were developed by the Rossetti Trading Company. They really are moving at a breakneck pace, aren’t they, what with the magical compact stove, waterproof cloth, and zephyricloth? And do I understand correctly that Dahlia Rossetti, the inventor and chairwoman, is a close friend of the head manager, Miss Lucia Fano...?”

Forto hadn’t mentioned that they were, but it seemed Noemi was already well aware. Feigning nonchalance, he said, “Yes. Apparently they are childhood friends.”

“That certainly helps speed things up. The Rossetti Trading Company might be out of your reach, but Lucia’s family workshop, the Fano Workshop, is close at hand, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I would put it that way. They are merely one of the many workshops that contribute to the Tailors’ Guild,” Forto answered, trying to cloud the topic.

Noemi fixed her catlike eyes on him. “It’s essential that you establish some strings. You and Miss Lucia are close, aren’t you? Isn’t it about time you take hold of her? Or are you arranging for someone else to do so?”

“No…”

Forto found it difficult to respond once she brought up Lucia’s name. *I haven’t thought that far ahead; I’m planning on taking things slowly*—he was trying to think of what to say to dodge the subject when Noemi whispered something close to his ear.

“Fortunato. You can’t hand over a valuable asset—or your cute junior couturier—to a different faction,” Noemi said, her red lips curving into an excessively gracious smile. “You wouldn’t want to hand her over to the enemy, would you?”

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“You truly are kind, dear…” Noemi said with a sigh after returning from escorting Forto out.

Tiziano narrowed his dark blue eyes at his wife. “That doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

“Well, am I wrong? You’re still trying to protect the Tailors’ Guild, which you’ve long since left. Or is it your precious pupil that you’re trying to protect?”

“You won’t at least call me a villain for deceiving my apprentice?” Tiziano said with a smirk.

His wife responded with a smirk of her own. “A real villain wouldn’t have hired a bunch of incompetent nobodies to kidnap the princess, would he? You didn’t even have any intention of leaving a scar.”

“It was taking too long for the play to begin. I just wanted the curtain to rise faster,” he answered, though his words sounded a bit like an excuse.

Lucia Fano's kidnapping attempt—it was true that it had been the work of a different faction, but Tiziano himself had also been involved. He'd only hired disposable flunkies, and he'd never communicated with them directly, only through mediaries. Even if one of them had been captured and interrogated, the incident wouldn't have been traceable to Tiziano himself.

Furthermore, even if the kidnapping had succeeded, the plan had simply been to interrogate Lucia about the Magical Garment Factory, then return her safe and sound, if a little shaken. He had even secretly hired a guard to make sure no one took it any further than that. Although, as long as the girl's own guard—the blighted Lotta—was with her, she'd never been at any real risk of being abducted. That, too, had factored into Tiziano's calculations.

He hadn't divulged all the details to Noemi, but she seemed to have grasped the whole design. Her cleverness was appreciated.

However, she must not have found it terribly amusing. Her lips formed a pout as she said, "If you're in a rush, then ask the right noble to get her removed from her post by claiming she doesn't know the proper etiquette for interacting with nobles. Then you can replace her with a suitable nobleman from within our faction. If you want her to continue in her role, then hire some gang who won't give you trouble in the future and have them either threaten her or go after her family. That way, for her own safety, she'll be pressured to accept Forto's hand in marriage or an offer of adoption from someone connected to the guild. Wouldn't that be easier?"

It was a textbook aristocratic solution.

Noemi had a keen mind, and she'd been training herself to think like a noble even when she was still a commoner. Tiziano's first wife had been fascinated by Noemi and had insisted Tiziano make her his second wife. Though he had to admit that he had also been taken by her razor-sharp wit.

"I did consider that, but right now, I don't think it would be such a bad idea to make use of her and Forto's good relationship. Is that naive of me?"

"Incredibly so, I'd say, but Forto will be happier that way. Though I'd hate to see any more broken hearts."

"Well, Forto will have to continue improving himself to prevent that from happening."

"Yes, that's true. But in any case, that was merely the best plan

I could think up on short notice. Don't you think those from the 'opposite shore' will be making their move sooner rather than later?"

The opposite shore—she referred to another faction of the kingdom's nobles. This matter involved great interests, so they were bound to take action at some point. Perhaps they already had, under the surface.

"That is why I reminded Forto of what needs to be done," Tiziano answered.

"You're going about this in quite a frustratingly tedious way by your standards, dear."

"He needs to learn. I can shelter him while I'm alive, but I'm not a young man anymore."

"I'm envious. It's as if you're more concerned for Fortunato than me, your own wife."

"I'm very sorry I made you feel that way," Tiziano said with a throaty chuckle.

Underneath Noemi's words was a hint of playfulness. In a way, she was more like another one of his apprentices than his wife. Not in fashion, like Forto, but in business.

The plan had been for her to revive the Earldom Ariosto's business as his wife, but she'd gone one step further by establishing a separate company of her own and growing it alongside the family business; the two became sister companies, and the original family business was then passed on to Tiziano's second son.

When Noemi had first become his wife, there had been some fools within the family who had called her a money-grubber and a seductress. But in fewer than ten years, all those fools had fallen silent under her rain of profits.

"But it's true that you're more worried about him than me, isn't it?"

"I raised that man to become the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. He needs to stay in that post for another twenty years. And if possible, I want to raise him from a viscount to an earl."

"Won't that be difficult? His father's generation bears a great deal of responsibility for what happened to their family. He'll need to achieve some great things."

"I wouldn't mind conceding my achievements to him, but that won't be possible..."

Nobles were sometimes permitted to concede their own

achievements to others—say, to commoners whom they wished to confer titles upon, or to other nobles whom they wished to exalt. This was mainly done for children, particularly talented youths, by their fathers or grandfathers. And while such cases were rarer, there were also those who conceded their achievements to loved ones or apprentices.

Tiziano had no achievements that could be used to raise Forto to the level of an earl. Even if he did, his sons would not have been happy with him conceding them to Forto. He didn't want to create trouble between the two parties after he was gone. Thus, the only option was to count on Forto's own capabilities.

"Dear, why are you so fixated on him?"

"Because he will make my dream come true—that there should be even one more person in this capital dressed in beautiful garments. I wish to see it with my own eyes, but I don't know how much longer I can wait, considering my age."

For a couturier, it was simultaneously an ambitious and a rather humble dream. More people of all genders and ages wearing fine clothing—Tiziano viewed that as part of the richness of the human experience, just like artwork.

His wife responded to his romantic notions with a shallow sigh. "Could you say, rather, that you want to live a long life for your loving wife, or is that too much to ask?"

"I'll try better next time."

Noemi was much younger than he was. There was no denying he would be the one to pass on first. But even when that time came, he wasn't worried about Noemi. He knew that Forto would offer her his aid should she ever need it. That was why Tiziano had proposed that Forto dance with Noemi for at least three dances. However, even though Forto had resolved to serve as a protective barrier for his master's wife, Noemi was displeased that Tiziano thought she was weak enough to need his apprentice's protection. Nothing ever went as he liked.

"That's enough wine for today. Let's switch to sparkling water."

Though Tiziano had drunk only one glass, Noemi removed the wine from the table. He gave her a slightly reproachful look, and she responded with a radiant smile.

"I want you to live a long life, my dear husband."

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You wouldn't want to hand her over to the enemy, would you? Noemi's words from the other day suddenly rang in his ears.

Forto was in his home office. He placed the document in his hand back on the table.

It made sense that she would give him a warning. Though he could protect Lucia while they were at the Tailors' Guild together, various noble factions had influence there as well.

If Lucia were to develop strong ties with a different faction, then he'd have to consider distancing himself from her, and they might even find themselves in situations where they were enemies. That said, he didn't want to remove her from her position as head manager of the factory.

Lucia was remarkably talented. She absorbed knowledge of fashion like a sponge, and her technical skill was improving. She was young, which meant she was a bit rash at times, but she had a sense of judgment fit for a head manager and she was good at winning people over.

That was precisely why he was being told to hurry up and safeguard her, but something deep inside was stopping him from acting.

"...Is it because I still have some lingering attachments to knighthood?"

His words, a question to himself, fell to his desk.

Fortunato was born into this world as the second son of the Luini family. He was the only one of four brothers who resembled their mother. His father and brothers had blue hair, dark blue eyes, and masculine facial features. In contrast, he had blond hair, clear blue eyes, a fair complexion, and a soft face, all of which he disliked.

There was little difference in grade between his magic and that of his brothers; his water magic and strengthening magic was just as powerful as theirs. And yet he alone looked different. It used to be a source of endless frustration for him.

Nevertheless, since he was the spitting image of his mother and his parents had a good relationship, there was no suspicion of adultery, and though he and his brothers occasionally fought, they still generally got along with each other.

The Luinis had been well-known for generations as a family of knights. Forto's grandfather and grandfather were royal knights, and his older brother aspired to the same position. The same

went for Forto and his younger brothers. He had taken for granted that he, along with his older and younger brothers, would continue the tradition of becoming fine knights like their grandfather and father.

But as Forto grew older, he started being treated differently from his brothers. His grandmother often dragged him around to tea parties; she told him she had always wished for a granddaughter and dressed him in frilly shirts and shiny shoes.

His other brothers received shoes and tailored shirts in their favorite colors and styles, which elicited no complaints. His brothers looked at him with eyes that said, *Poor kid, being forced to dress according to his grandmother's wishes.* Forto occasionally had the same thought himself.

However, as he grew older, he came to understand that his grandmother was thinking about his future. If she could introduce her good-looking grandson to a higher-ranked noble family, then perhaps down the line he could find favorable work and marriage proposals.

In any case, as a young boy, Forto did not dislike tea parties. He liked the way his mother and grandmother dressed up. It was fun to see them shine beautifully in their glamorous gowns and sparkling jewelry.

Forto was taken to tea parties attended by noblewomen the same age as his grandmother and mother. They looked so elegant and beautiful that even with rows of pastries in front of him, Forto's eyes were on the women.

They must have found him amusing as a young child, as they often asked him about their outfits.

"Forto, what do you think of my new gown?"

"It's pretty! You look like a red rose... No, even prettier than that!"

"Ugh, if only I were thirty years younger...!"

Sometimes, he didn't fully understand the women's responses.

The noblewomen were used to receiving compliments, but it must have been different to hear a child's genuine praise. His words seemed to make them very happy.

Henceforth, Forto's grandmother began bringing him along even more frequently to gatherings of her circle of female friends, and he happily analyzed their garments. However, children were not known for holding their tongues. When asked

what he thought about their outfits, Forto gave his honest opinion—*that color suits you better than this one; that gown you wore before looked better on you; the style that you're wearing would actually look better on her.* Sometimes, his grandmother had to cover his mouth and apologize on his behalf.

One day, his grandmother stared intently at him and said, "Forto, you have a very strong vision of what you want others to wear... You're a bit like Tino."

Forto couldn't remember meeting anyone named Tino. He asked his grandmother who he was, and she simply smiled pleasantly and said he would meet him in time.

Then, just like she'd said, he met "Tino" a short while later. Instead of going to meet him at a noble's estate as he'd been expecting, they arrived at a large building he'd never been to before—the Tailors' Guild. When Forto stepped into the lobby, he was met with a wave of bustling men and women of all ages. His eyes lit up at the sight of the different garments. He wished he could stay there and observe all the outfits, but a member of the staff guided him and his grandmother upstairs.

Inside the room they entered was a glamorously dressed gentleman. He was Tiziano Ariosto, son of Earl Ariosto and the vice-guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. Forto managed to greet him properly, but he didn't hear a word of his grandmother's conversation with the vice-guildmaster. He couldn't take his eyes off of Tino—Tiziano.

The vice-guildmaster's glossy, gray hair was on the long side and loosely swept back, and he wore a silver-blue earring on each ear. His navy blue three-piece suit was paired with a lighter blue tie. The collar of his sleek white shirt had slightly pointed tips, which Forto found to be very peculiar. Tiziano's jacket lapel was embroidered with silver rambling roses, and the silver honey bee lapel pin fastened at the top glinted in the light. Instead of the loose pants that Forto's father and brothers wore, this man wore a slim pair of trousers. His choice of dark blue shoes over black made his legs appear longer.

"Fortunato," his grandmother chided him with his full name, snapping him back to his senses. He'd been taught it was rude to stare. Remembering that, Forto was trying to pull his eyes away from Tiziano's outfit when the man suddenly addressed him.

"I don't mind you staring if my outfit has caught your eye. It's not very manly, so I'm sure it must seem unusual to you."

“No, sir! It’s very fashionable!” Forto asserted, shaking his head from side to side.

Then, the man let him circle around him and scrutinize his outfit from top to bottom, front to back. Once he was satisfied, Forto finally went to sit down on the sofa, his excitement still lingering. Tiziano called out to him again.

“Fortunato, do you like this outfit?”

“Yes! It’s amazing!”

“What about it do you like?”

“I like the neat line of the shoulders, the part of your collar that sticks up and looks like cat ears, and your pants, which are slimmer than the ones my father wears! And your dark blue shoes! And the pretty embroidery and the silver bee!” Forto gushed, pitching forward with excitement.

“Thank you. I designed and sewed this outfit myself. And I picked out the accessories.”

“That’s so cool!”

He thought up this outfit by himself and made it? He must be a master of fashion! Forto stared at the man, blown away by his clothes, until his grandmother spoke up.

“Didn’t I tell you, Tino? Isn’t our Forto just like you?”

“Yes… I suppose…” Tiziano replied evasively as he scratched his cheek with a finger.

“He’s just like you were when you were a child.”

Forto’s grandmother was a childhood friend of Tiziano’s mother. She had even given Tiziano a present when he was born.

“When you were young, you often used to tell me when you thought my gowns didn’t suit me. You were especially nitpicky about color—”

As she was about to launch into a story about his youth, Tiziano cleared his throat and forcibly changed the subject. “Say, Fortunato! Why don’t you tell me if there’s anything about my outfit that you *don’t* like?”

“There’s nothing about it that I don’t like.”

“Let me ask a different question. What would you do to make this outfit even better?”

Forto examined the entirety of Tiziano’s outfit once again, from the top of his head to his toes. It was stylish through and through. There was nothing off about it, but Forto’s eyes were drawn to the silver honey bee.

“I think that bee should be on top of a flower instead of a

leaf."

"I see. That does look better," Tiziano responded as he removed the honeybee from his lapel and pinned it in the center of a flower slightly above the leaves of the rambling rose. It looked just like the bee had landed on the flower, giving a better effect. "Anything else?"

"Um..."

Forto was having trouble thinking of what else could be improved.

"Come now, Fortunato. Say whatever is on your mind. There's no need to be shy," Tiziano said, his voice light and cheery.

Forto examined the man's face. He noticed that the man's face was pale and he was on the thin side. He also looked a bit tired.

"I think you should eat a lot for dinner and go to bed early," Forto stated.

Tiziano burst out in unexpectedly loud laughter. "Aha ha ha! You're certainly right about that!"

Forto continued having tea with the noblewomen, but from that day on, he began occasionally visiting Tiziano as well.

As for his father and grandfather, they seemed not to have much interest in the man. "Mr. Ariosto will be the next Earl Ariosto, so mind your manners in his presence." That was all that Forto's father said to him.

The following year, Tiziano invited Forto to visit his residence once a month. The pretext for this invitation was that he wanted to borrow Forto to design children's clothes; in exchange, he promised to design dresses for Forto's mother and grandmother. There was no refusing that.

Each time Forto went to visit the earldom's estate, Tiziano greeted him in a different outfit. An azure tailcoat, a dark green suit, a shiny black shirt and red tie, striped or paisley-patterned vests, one of his hundreds of neck accessories... Each and every outfit was an eye-catching ensemble.

Tiziano also had the most interesting things to talk about. He told Forto all sorts of things, such as about how the shiny fabric known as silk was made of fibers produced by insect larvae called silkworms, how fabric could be dyed with seashells and butterfly scales, and how monster materials could be used to enchant clothing to make it more durable. Every time he came to visit, Forto admired Tiziano's clothing with sparkling eyes,

listened to him with rapt interest, and peppered him with questions.

One day, Tiziano brought back a golden feather lapel pin as a souvenir. Forto pinned it to the lapel of his jacket and returned home in high spirits. When his younger brothers expressed their jealousy, he asked his grandmother if they could all get matching pins.

His grandfather, however, shot down the idea. “Those on the path of knighthood don’t need such frivolous things! Dressing up is for women. Men have no need to preoccupy themselves with clothes.”

Forto’s grandfather, dressed in his worn-out knights’ uniform, did not look stylish in the slightest.

From the following day onward, their training and sword practice became even more intense. Forto’s father was of the same mind as his grandfather, and said to him, “What a knight requires is bravery, strength, loyalty to his liege, and virtue. As for your appearance, it’s sufficient to be clean.”

At the next soiree he attended, Forto’s father wore a tailcoat that didn’t fit him properly through the shoulders. He looked very unattractive.

As Forto grew taller, he began receiving many declarations of love at school in the form of letters and handkerchiefs. The social gatherings for children of their faction were always teeming with girls, and his family began receiving inquiries about having him marry into their family under fairly favorable terms.

Forto’s mother and grandmother were thrilled, but the same could not be said for his father and grandfather. For a knight, it was important to refine not only one’s exterior but one’s interior as well. They insisted that Forto could not marry into a family that did not understand that. As for Forto himself, he felt that it was too early for him to become engaged anyway, so he abided by their instructions.

However, Forto’s father and grandfather also wanted to tone down his appearance, even if only a little.

They ordered him to cut his long, blond hair short so it did not flutter in the wind.

They claimed his vibrant blue tie was vulgar and made him change it to a dark navy.

They forbade him from wearing the glass cuff links he’d

bought with his own pocket money, saying they looked cheap, and gave him round cuff links with the family crest to wear instead.

They threw away his sketchbook, in which he drew clothes and gowns, claiming that they were just a child's scribbles.

Mending one's uniform was one of the duties of a knight, but when he was sewing up some fabric as one of his school assignments, he was scolded and told, "You don't need to make it so neat! Your training comes first!"

Forto's mother and grandmother told them to stop, but he couldn't bear to see the couples quarrel. He convinced his mother and grandmother that it was all so he could become a knight, and he obeyed his grandfather and father as much as he could.

The only time they praised him was when he bested his older brother or one of the guards with a sword. Next to his brother, he had never once been praised otherwise, even when he wore a brand-new suit.

His father and grandfather told him that since he was going to be a knight, he was not to become the kind of man who cared about his appearance more than his substance. It was clear that the two of them disliked Tiziano, or rather, any man who dressed himself up like he did. Nevertheless, Tiziano's family, the Ariostos, were an earldom, while the Luinis were a viscountcy. And therefore, they could not forbid Forto and Tiziano from meeting.

Forto didn't share his father and grandfather's opinions with Tiziano, but the man seemed to understand anyway. One day, he told Forto to come to his residence to try out a test piece, and there he had for him a suit in his exact size. Forto passed his arms through the sleeves, then sat and watched as Tiziano drew a design in his sketchbook.

Eventually, Tiziano became the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. Forto saved up his pocket money and purchased an obsidian tie pin shaped like a swallow to give to him as a gift. It was only a cheap thing, but Tiziano put it on with a smile. The obsidian swallow looked perfect on his silver tie, and Forto caught himself thinking that he wished his father could be as well-dressed as Tiziano.

Naturally, Forto had no intention of ever speaking that thought aloud.

While Forto was studying in college, his grandfather passed away from illness, and his grandmother followed shortly after.

His grandfather was laid in his coffin wearing his uniform from the time when he was a royal knight, and his grandmother was laid in hers wearing her favorite gown. His grandfather's uniform didn't fit him right, so they placed several flowers in the coffin to hide that fact. All his knightly handsomeness was nowhere to be seen.

His grandmother's dress was the latest one Tiziano had designed for her. With her makeup done and her blue dress adorned in white flowers, she looked like a beautiful sleeping princess.

Then both of them were turned to white ash.

For quite some time after the funeral, Forto's parents wore looks of constant fatigue. Forto thought it was merely that his grandparents' deaths had been a shock for his parents, but from that point forward, their family saw a slow decline.

The first thing he noticed as being odd was the furniture in each room of the house. At some point, everything had been replaced with cheap goods. Next, the jewels his mother used to wear were replaced with glass beads. Forto was the only one who noticed, having learned from Tiziano how to distinguish real jewels from glass.

His brothers started to notice when the family stable was reduced by half. Equestrianism was essential for a knight, and yet their father had gotten rid of the best horses first. But there was nothing to be done about it.

One day, during a family meeting, Forto's father announced that at the rate things were progressing, they would have to give up their home. The Luinis had once been a respectably wealthy family. Forto's grandfather and father, being royal knights, left the family affairs to their wives and Forto's aunt and uncle—his father's younger brother and his wife. However, perhaps due to an inability to predict trends or a lack of business acumen, the company managed by the Luinis was now saddled with hefty debt.

When his father said they were going to relinquish the estate, rent a house, and employ as few servants as possible, retaining only their peerage, Forto was dumbstruck. He had never imagined the situation was so dire.

While their relatives expressed sympathy, not a single one offered their aid. Forto also heard that they'd received no assistance from distant relatives who were high-ranking nobles either. There was no sign of either noblesse oblige or the spirit of chivalry.

Once the meeting was dismissed with nothing resolved, Forto's father watched the family depart. His back looked very small. Forto wished he could do something, but as a college student, his power was limited.

Now that his family was in decline, the number of marriage inquiries he received dropped dramatically. The only ones that remained were offers for him to become a second husband or marry into a merchant family. Still, neither possibility would bring in enough money to repair his family. He had no hope of earning enough money even if he worked hard as a knight. And even if he tried to make a quick fortune as an adventurer, since he had no experience, that path held little promise. More than anything, he needed to make money right away.

Amid his worry, he went for his monthly visit to Tiziano. This time, however, he was instructed to meet him not at his estate but at the Tailors' Guild.

Once he sat down in a chair in the guildmaster's office, Tiziano spoke. "Forto, can you abandon becoming a knight?"

"What?"

Forto genuinely did not understand what Tiziano meant. He'd been born to the Luinis, a family of knights, and pursued chivalric studies in college. He had excellent grades and aspired to be a royal knight. Tiziano knew that.

Tiziano said, as if repeating himself, "Give up on being a knight and become a couturier for nobles. If you do that, then I will give the Luini family an interest-free indefinite loan."

Forto was shocked by the proposal, and he wanted to make sure he understood right. After all, it was the man before him now who had taught him that nobles did not offer anything without asking for something in return.

"Why would you do such a generous thing for my family?"

Even their relatives had forsaken them, assuming there was no hope of their recovery. Although the Earldom Ariosto belonged to the same faction, the two families were not particularly close, and the Ariostos would gain nothing from this.

"I am not doing this for your family. I am proposing this to

you, personally, Fortunato."

"To me?" Forto asked, growing only more confused. He couldn't fathom how a college student such as himself could contribute to the Earldom Ariosto or to Tiziano.

"Your eye, your sense, your aesthetic—all could be sold for a high price if you were to become a couturier for nobles. You would be able to pay back your family's debt in a few short years. However..." Tiziano paused, and Forto saw himself reflected in his dark blue eyes. "You cannot be a knight. A needle will be your sword, and thread your shield. You will not win honor or admiration, and you will be expected to sing the praises of others. You will not gain the respect of a knight, but the disdain of being no more than a couturier, and you may even find yourself soaked in your clients' perfume."

Though Tiziano was warning him that couturiers were looked down on and that there was a murky side to their work, the man looked excited.

"But couturiers—especially couturiers who work for the nobility—easily earn both money and power. All the more easily when the couturier himself has good sense and beauty. For someone such as yourself, it will be simply effortless to earn showers of gold coins and the support of high nobles."

Tiziano stated that as if it were already fact, but Forto had a lower estimation of his own value. His doubt must have shown on his face; Tiziano's lips tightened into a grin.

"Above all, if you become a couturier, then you will be able to work with clothes for your entire life, restrained by no one. You will be able to make whatever you like, from clothes for nobles to commoners, to even foreign attire. Shall I give you some time to consider your response, Fortunato Luini?"

Forto replied before he even realized what he was doing. "I accept."

From there, Tiziano moved quickly. He paid off the Luinis' debts and even furnished their company with working capital. He also referred them to personnel with keen eyes for business and accounting to prevent further troubles.

More than anything, it seemed significant that it was the Earl Ariosto, guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, who had provided assistance to the Luinis. Not only did the business get back on its feet, but it even grew, and the family began to return to normal,

as if nothing had even happened.

However, that was not to say that their hefty debt had disappeared. The one who had signed his name to the loan agreement was not his father, the head of the family, but Fortunato Luini himself. The amount of debt was more than Forto, a college student, could have possibly conceived.

“I’m very sorry you’ve had to sacrifice yourself.”

He received the same apology from his parents, his uncle and aunt, and his older brother. Each time, Forto responded the same way.

“It’s all right. I wanted to be a couturier instead of a knight, and Mr. Tiziano gave me a job at the Tailors’ Guild.”

He told them that he hadn’t made any sacrifices, that he hadn’t done this for the family, that it was his own wish—but no one would believe him.

His friends in his chivalric courses were sad to see him go. They had trained side by side on the path to knighthood. Forto couldn’t bring himself to tell them how much their time together had meant to him.

One of his friends, who came from a wealthy family, had even offered to shoulder his family’s debt if it meant they could become knights together. But Forto had refused to accept. He couldn’t say he held no lingering attachment to knighthood. He had genuinely wanted to become a knight and had earnestly pursued that path. Nonetheless, he had made the choice to become a couturier.

Unable to see eye to eye, his friend had punched him as hard as he could. Forto had nearly punched him back but then stopped himself.

No one would understand why he wanted to be a couturier. He finally realized that. His family endlessly apologized to him out of guilt, and his friends lamented and loathed him for his choice. Those days were nothing but exhausting.

Amid all that, a gift arrived from Tiziano. Forto opened it in his room. Inside were a silver sewing box, a length of white, smooth silk, and sewing threads in all different colors. Once he threaded a needle, Forto finally felt at peace.

And so Forto began studying under Tiziano while he was still in college. Once he graduated, he joined the Tailors’ Guild. Those at the guild were surprisingly kind to him for someone who had

changed paths from a knight to a couturier.

He learned the reason for that a short time later.

Forto had joined the Tailors' Guild at Tiziano's invitation, but rumors around the guild told a different story. The narrative was that Forto, wanting to be a couturier rather than a knight, had gone to the guildmaster to pitch his designs. Tiziano had acknowledged the quality of his work and hired him.

People loved moving tales about youths who struggled to overcome hardship in pursuit of their dreams. Fortunato Luini, one such youth, had suffered for a long time, unable to pursue his dream of becoming a couturier in a family of knights. However, prepared to be disowned by his father, and over his family's objections, Forto had fully committed himself to the path of a couturier.

Moreover, despite his aristocratic background, he was now working himself to the bone as a couturier for the sake of his ruined family. His new colleagues at the Tailors' Guild cheered him on, and their sympathy became a source of succor for him. Of course, that, too, was all Tiziano's doing.

Forto did in fact work from morning to night. He met with clients, sketched designs, sewed fabric, and learned embroidery—he found it all exciting. It delighted him to see the smiling faces of his clients when they donned their finished outfits.

Furthermore, even as a novice couturier who had yet to complete his own outfit, he began receiving direct requests from clients. They were the women he'd met through the tea parties his grandmother had brought him to. They were all about as old as his mother and grandmother, and they congratulated and expressed their support for Forto. He was truly grateful to them.

However, he gradually began to understand the meaning behind Tiziano's comment that he could not be a knight.

A couturier who made clothes for nobles was always balancing power and profit. He showered his clients with flowery words, went to them when they called for him, and accompanied them to tea parties and soirees whenever he could. Sometimes, he came away from those events with their perfume or face powder still clinging to his person.

While he had his reservations, he went along with everything. Forto's base salary was not enough to pay back his debt to Tiziano in a reasonable amount of time. He wanted money and power as soon as possible.

However, he often accompanied the noblewomen—who were married—out into society. Naturally, they attracted attention and garnered envy, so he was often the target of malicious gossip.

One day, at a ball, Forto got into a fight with a young, drunk nobleman who had laughed and told him he'd be better off working in the red-light district. The noblewoman at Forto's side, who was older than his mother, turned to the drunken man and wordlessly folded up her peacock feather fan. That action alone was enough to ensure Forto never crossed paths with that nobleman again. The malicious gossip that dogged him also drastically decreased.

That was when Forto realized something. It was said that noble society was patriarchal, but in reality, it was not. While men handled business and enterprise, it was often women who worked behind the scenes to manage families and households.

Connections within a family also played a role. Families flourished when everyone shared their burdens and worked well together, but if they did not, they would suffer the same fate that had befallen the Luinis. If a family were deemed incompetent or worthless, other nobles would mercilessly cut them off. Forto found himself learning new things about the aristocracy.

As he threw himself into his studies and his work, time passed in the blink of an eye. His father stepped down as head of the family, and there was a meeting to determine who would succeed him. His father nominated Forto for the role.

Forto was not the eldest son. Moreover, he was not a knight but a couturier. Wasn't he inadequate to take over as head of a family of generations of knights? But when several members of the family voiced the opinion that his father should leave the management of the household to Forto while passing the title to his elder brother, it was Forto's brother who spoke up in opposition.

"Fortunato is the one who saved this family. He is the strongest and worthiest of becoming the next head of the Luini family."

His brother spoke with the expression of a virtuous knight. He looked dazzling.

No one refuted his statement, and Forto became the next head of the Viscountcy Luini.

After several years and accomplishments, Viscount Luini, who had abandoned the path of a knight to become a couturier, was

appointed the guildmaster of the Tailors'.

Forto now sat in his father's old office in the Luini family estate. The first thing he'd bought after repaying his family's debt to Tiziano was this office desk. It wasn't the one his father had given away but a product of the same workshop that had made the desk Tiziano used in his own home. Forto had purchased it because he aspired to be like Tiziano rather than his grandfather or his father. That still held true today.

As he was reflecting on his memories, he heard a knock at the door. He answered, and a blue-haired boy entered, wearing the college uniform of those studying chivalry.

"Father, could I have a moment of your time?" the boy asked.

"Of course, Flavio."

Before long, he would have to call him a young man rather than a boy. He grew taller every day. At this rate, in two or three years, he might even surpass Forto himself in height.

On paper, Flavio was Forto's oldest son, but he was actually the biological son of Forto's older brother. Forto had asked his brother's permission to adopt his son in order to make him the next heir of the Viscountcy Luini.

Ever since Forto adopted Flavio, the boy had stopped calling him "uncle" and begun calling him "father." Forto's brother, now a knight, lived in the same residence, and Flavio continued to call him "papa"; their father-son relationship remained unchanged. That was how both Flavio and Forto wished things to be.

Forto rose from his desk and moved to the coffee table. Once he sat down on the sofa, he asked, "Is something the matter?"

Flavio stayed standing. His mouth was set in a hard line, and Forto could see strong determination in his dark blue eyes. He had some inkling of what the boy was about to say.

"Please forgive me. Next year, I want to take the examination to become a royal knight. I want you to make Fiona the next head of the family."

Flavio punctuated his request with a deep bow. Forto had been expecting as much.

"Raise your head, Flavio."

Flavio, who was already beginning to take on the countenance of a knight, looked a bit dazzling to Forto.

"It is still too early to decide these things. Could you not consider becoming the next head of the family someday after

becoming a royal knight?”

It wasn’t as if Forto would be stepping down soon. There was still time. And yet, despite his suggestion, Flavio’s expression remained unchanged.

“The Luini family’s business in clothing has expanded. Instead of having me, who will be a knight, inherit the title and be nothing more than a figurehead, it would be more beneficial to the family for Fiona to take a husband who is familiar with the fashion industry.”

He wasn’t speaking with only his dream of knighthood in mind, but with realistic judgment. Forto was deeply moved. The boy had developed a broad perspective.

“You can also take a bride who is an appropriate fit for the fashion industry, Flavio. If you wish not to do so, then I can assign an adviser who is knowledgeable about fashion or employ more aides. There is no need to fret—”

“I have neither the talent for fashion nor the business acumen. If I become the next viscount, I may very well fall down the same path as grandfather and granduncle. Instead, I would rather join the royal knights and work hard for the family in that way.” Flavio spoke with a voice belonging not to a boy but to a young man who had chosen his path. “You have done so much for me, father. I am very sorry that I am unable to meet your expectations…”

Forto knew that Flavio had read a mountain of books on fashion and tried to learn about business. However, he was not suited for such things. Objectively speaking, he lacked the necessary aptitude, and there was no other choice but for him to rely on others who were more competent than himself in both domains.

Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses. Even Tiziano’s two sons had become a royal mage and a merchant, respectively, instead of following their father’s path as couturiers. It was a difficult path to pursue for anyone who lacked a passion for and devotion to clothes.

Flavio’s heart would forever be moved by the sword and magic, and he had both the talent and ambition to be a knight. It would have been unfair to keep him from that path any longer.

“Flavio, you have nothing to apologize for. Follow the path you wish to follow. As your flesh and blood, I will support you.”

“Thank you…!” Flavio responded, his voice slightly wavering as

he bowed his head deeply. When he finally raised his face again, he looked exactly like Forto's older brother.

"However, do you mind waiting until Fiona comes of age before I return you to your father? It will be difficult to decline inquiries of marriage from high-ranking noble families otherwise."

"Yes, of course. I wouldn't want my adorable little sister to be tied to any unwanted marriage proposals," Flavio said, nodding deeply.

Fiona was Forto's only daughter. She was soon to be five years old and had golden ringlets and blue eyes. She was a lovely child, and that was not only his bias as a father speaking. She had made her initial debut not long ago, and she'd begun receiving letters asking about marriage the very next day. There were so many that Forto was tempted to gather them up and toss them into the fireplace without replying.

If little Fiona became the next in line to inherit the viscountcy, then she might even receive letters sounding out the possibility of marriage to the sons of high-ranking nobles. It would be quite troublesome to turn those down.

There was one other consideration: he didn't want to completely cut off Flavio's path to become the next viscount. The boy was still young, and Fiona was even younger. Forto felt it probably wise to keep the option open for him.

"Now then, if you wish to be a royal knight, you will need to prepare for the examination. You can learn your practical skills from your father, and I will find you a home tutor to supplement your studies. Make sure you pass with flying colors, Flavio."

"Yes! I will do my best, father," Flavio responded, a boyish smile returning to his face. Forto responded with a genuine smile of his own.

Shortly after Flavio left, a knock came at the door.

"Come in," Forto called out, thinking Flavio had remembered something else he wished to say. But the one who entered was Forto's wife, Minerva, looking quite comely in the gray silk dress of his own design.

She seemed to have something on her mind. Her brows were slightly furrowed.

"Forto, I just witnessed Flavio jumping about in the hallway. Did something happen?"

“Please overlook his behavior today…”

It seemed the boy couldn’t contain his joy at being able to pursue his dreams. Forto recalled that when his older brother had been accepted into the royal knights, he’d used strengthening magic to hop up and down the length of the hallway, and then had been scolded by their mother. *Like father, like son.*

“Flavio has told me he wishes to be a royal knight, and he requested that Fiona be made the heir to the viscountcy.”

“And you gave your approval, I presume?”

“Yes, but I do not intend to bequeath my title for some time, and I plan to watch over the choices Flavio and Fiona make for their future. I also requested that Flavio remain as my son until Fiona is of age.”

His wife fixed her blue eyes on him. “When are you planning to start Fiona’s education to become a family head and have her select a husband?”

“My plan is to begin once she enters college. What do you think, Minerva?”

“I believe that would be a bit late. Depending on what aptitudes she demonstrates, she might have to change what she studies in college. For a family head, the best choice would be civil service, but with her magical grade, she could also choose to study magic. Both courses would afford her opportunities to form friendships with high-ranking nobles. Also, her selection of advisers and aides will depend on what her marriage partner is suited for.”

“Yes, that’s true…”

The smooth, aristocratic manner in which she made her suggestions left Forto struggling to respond. Minerva, who was younger than Forto, was from an earldom, and her mother was from a marquisate. She was an expert when it came to matters such as these.

Meanwhile, Forto had received a crash course education *after* it had been decided that he would succeed his father. Compared to her, he lacked the proper knowledge. Still, there was something he held in importance regarding this matter.

“Can we allow Fiona to choose her future path and husband?” Forto asked, as if he were a student soliciting his teacher’s guidance. “Of course, we will make sure she chooses a suitable partner, but she should ideally be with someone she is

compatible with. And as for civil or magical studies, I think she will be most motivated if she chooses the path she most wishes to follow…"

Forto knew he was being naive; that was why he sounded like he was making excuses. Had he been acting in the best interests of the Luini family, no doubt he would have made the most of Fiona's looks and magic grade to find her a marriage partner that was right for their family and who had favorable terms as soon as possible.

However, it was a common story for a couple who did not get along to merely be a married couple on the surface, only to divorce once they bore two heirs. It was Forto's wish that both Fiona and Flavio would find life partners whom they loved. However, he would never express that wish aloud to a noble who placed family and magic grade above all else.

"If that is what you wish, I have no qualms," his wife responded with a graceful smile.

How many times is it now? How many times had Minerva heard him utter some wish that was hopelessly naive for a noble yet still given her approval and made sure to tie up any loose ends? He didn't deserve a wife like her. That was why he always tried to hear her out, even when her advice and suggestions were painful—though there were exceptions.

"However," his wife continued, "considering that's your wish, I want you to think about taking a second wife soon."

"This again…?"

"Yes. It's necessary that you do so—for the Luini family. I don't want to have another child, so in the interest of making sure you have a successor who is prepared to take on the role, isn't it best that you have another wife?"

He had heard this suggestion many times before and declined each time.

Minerva had been a sickly child, and it was difficult to say she was healthy even to this day. Perhaps because of her thin figure, Fiona had been a difficult birth for her, so much so that the doctors had told Forto to prepare for the worst. Despite that, she had wanted a second child. Forto had pleaded with her that he didn't want to lose her, and she'd eventually given up on the idea.

"Personally, I do not consider it necessary," Forto replied. "Could we not simply employ more advisers and aides?"

"Advisers and aides are not part of the family. I can help with

domestic affairs, but I am out of my depth when it comes to fashion. In my opinion, you need to take a second wife who can support you in your work."

It seemed a certain discussion had reached his wife's ears too. Forto kept his voice steady as he responded, "Mr. Tiziano has been advising that I do just that."

"Oh, he has? Then is there a young lady you two have in mind?" Minerva smiled at him with sincere joy. There was not a single trace of jealousy in her expression.

"...Yes. Head Manager Fano of the Magical Garment Factory."

"Wonderful! I'm confident she will be someone you can depend on," Minerva said, her smile deepening as she clasped her hands to her chest. Forto found himself unable to say anything in response.

It was common for heads of noble families to find their second or third wives through family or work. It also wasn't unheard of for couples to be married in name only while having other partners. Forto himself relied greatly on his wife and advisers when it came to household matters. If he did not, he wouldn't be able to fulfill his duties as the guildmaster of the Tailors'.

"Once she bears you a son, he can be either a knight or a couturier— Oh, am I getting too far ahead of myself?" Minerva asked, noticing that Forto had suddenly fallen silent.

Forto arranged a smile on his face and replied, "No, I was just thinking about work."

That put the matter to rest. Minerva did not ask any further questions.

Lucia—the topic of their discussion—was already helping him as head manager of the factory. Marrying her would be a way to protect her—no, a way to discreetly keep her enclosed. It would benefit the guild and the Luini family. And above all, perhaps it was even for Forto's own self-preservation.

Concealing his inner conflict, Forto picked up his quill. "I remembered something urgent I have to do. I still have some paperwork I need to finish, so please do not wait up for me, Minerva."

"Very well. Please make sure not to overwork yourself."

Forto watched as his wife left the room. She seemed just slightly out of reach.

The Tailors’ Guildmaster’s Wife and a Worthy Rival

“We’ve gotten so many orders for heated low tables… We couldn’t do this without all the woodworkers’ help.”

“We’re also booked solid making covers and rugs! We’re going to have to send some of the work to stitchers at coaching inns this year.”

It was the afternoon, and Lucia and Dahlia were having tea in the drawing room of the Tailors’ Guild. Forto and Ivano, with whom they were supposed to have a meeting, were absent; the two couturiers had received a message that they were dealing with the delivery of low tables and where to store them, and would be a little late. Naturally, even if they received more units, it didn’t matter if they had nowhere to put them.

While Lucia and Dahlia were locked in a discussion about warehouses and heated tables, they heard a knock. Lucia assumed Forto and Ivano had arrived, but when the maid opened the door, she let out a small gasp of surprise.

Lucia was wondering if a guest had come to the wrong room when she saw a woman with pale blonde hair walk in. The outfit of fine quality she wore made it obvious at a glance that she was a noblewoman. Her gray silk dress looked to be made of a similar material as the silver-gray suit Forto often wore—monster silk, Lucia suspected.

It wasn’t interwoven silk like Forto’s suit but was still a lovely, lightweight fabric. The gown was tapered at the waist by the stitching alone, and the fabric gently hugged her body. The elegant line of the dress was exquisite and enhanced the woman’s slender figure. It was one of Forto’s best designs.

The woman’s pale blonde hair was fashioned into an updo and held a decorative hair comb studded with white pearls from the Eastern Kingdom. With her porcelain-white skin, sky-blue eyes, and light red lips, she looked every inch a beautiful, refined woman.

Lucia knew right away that she was Forto’s wife. Both she and Dahlia stood up.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Minerva, Fortunato Luini’s wife. I hear you have been a great help to my husband.” Minerva smiled at her elegantly.

Nervous, Lucia put on a professional smile of her own and responded, “I appreciate your kind greeting. My name is Lucia Fano. I am the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I owe a great deal to Mr. Luini.”

“Thank you for the warm greeting. I am Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company. I am grateful for all the guildmaster has done for us.”

Once the two of them had delivered their own greetings, Minerva nodded at them lightly. Then she sat down on the sofa across from them, and they talked about work. They conversed about the Rossetti Trading Company’s business, Lucia’s work as the head manager of the factory, and other harmless topics.

Minerva thanked Lucia for all the hard work she’d been doing and favored her with a charming smile. “I’m pleased to know that my husband has someone as capable as you by his side. I hope you continue to support him.”

“It is an honor to hear that. I will work my very hardest!” Lucia replied with a genuine smile, happy that Forto’s wife was recognizing her work as the head manager and as an employee of the guild.

However, it wasn’t long before her delight turned to bafflement.

“I hope that you will forever be there for Forto. Personally, as well.”

“Personally?” Lucia asked, not quite catching her meaning.

Minerva responded with a sunny smile. “If at all possible, I would like you to become Forto’s second wife.”

“Huwhat?!”

Lucia hoped Minerva would forgive her hysterical reaction, but that was an absurd thing to say. She was left momentarily speechless, opening and closing her mouth in a daze. Then, with utmost effort, she pulled herself together and said, “Mr. Forto and I do not have that kind of relationship!”

“I know Forto likes you very much. Enough so that he allows you to address him by his first name, even though you are unmarried. He reserves that right for those he is close to or respects.”

As she mentally screamed, *No way! No way!* Lucia thought

back over her time in the Magical Garment Factory. They'd frequently received unexpected or urgent assignments, which meant they worked overtime fairly often. There had also been times when they'd had to work overnight to meet deadlines. Maybe Minerva had gotten the wrong idea from that.

"There's no need to fret. Ever since this summer, he's been making a habit of returning home well into the night… If you should have any marriage conditions, Ms. Fano, then I will do my best to meet them."

This is a complete and total misunderstanding! Lucia wanted to shout, but she restrained herself and clasped her hands tightly together on her lap.

She wished Minerva wouldn't suspect something so outrageous. She, Forto, and their colleagues were all devoted solely to their work. There was nothing more to it. Also, when it came to marriage, she probably did have conditions, but mutual feelings of love came before anything else. At least, they did for a commoner like herself.

As she was exerting all her effort to stop herself from yelling, she noticed Dahlia watching her with deep concern.

It's okay. I am the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I won't respond emotionally.

"Madam Luini, Mr. Forto and I really do not have that type of relationship. If you want a temple contract to confirm that, I don't mind."

That was the best idea she'd come up with after desperately racking her brain for ways to verify her statements. She could sign a contract at the temple that rendered her incapable of lying, then repeat what she'd just said then and there. It would cost a lot of money, but it was better than having Minerva urge her to get married based on a misunderstanding.

Minerva looked at her, and Lucia felt for a moment that the woman was seeing right through her. Then Minerva gave her an unreadable smile. "Is that so? I apologize for misreading things, then. But I must ask—has Forto not spoken to you about this matter yet?"

"No, he has not. We mainly talk about work and clothes."

"I will speak with Forto again, then. Regardless, I hope you will continue to support my husband."

"…You are too kind."

Lucia wondered if there had been some misunderstanding

between Minerva and Mr. Forto. As she was pondering the possibility, Minerva turned a polite smile toward Dahlia.

"Chairwoman Rossetti, if you have given my husband any consideration as a potential marriage partner, please let me know. I would be happy to discuss the possibility."

"No, I—" Dahlia cut herself off, clearly baffled.

Just as Lucia was about to say, *Madam Luini*, the woman parted her pale scarlet lips. "If you ever need Forto's—no, our family's help in any way, please do not hesitate to ask. You are still young, which means your future is yet to be decided, yes?"

Her words were directed to Dahlia, but her gaze shifted back to Lucia. The woman's pale blue eyes did not waver one bit, as if she were merely making a business deal.

Lucia couldn't for the life of her understand what Minerva was trying to say.

"This doesn't make any sense..." Lucia mumbled. She was back home in her own room, rolling around on her bed, still unable to organize her thoughts.

"Is that what people mean by an aristocratic way of thinking...?"

Minerva's husband was Lucia's boss. He was the guildmaster and a talented couturier, and on top of that, he was the head of the Viscounty Luini, he was influential among aristocrats and foreign dignitaries, and he was popular among wealthy merchant families. He had dashing good looks and he looked younger than his years. He was cheerful, kind, meticulously considerate, and very reliable.

As a marriage partner, his qualities were impeccable. However, he was already married. For a commoner like herself, that was a definite no.

Lucia had heard that nobles often got married through family or business ties. Moreover, here in the Kingdom of Ordine, marriage was not restricted based on the number or gender of one's partners. It was not out of the ordinary for nobles and wealthy merchants to have second wives or second husbands. Perhaps, to Minerva, a second wife was simply a woman who would help her husband with his work. As that thought crossed her mind, she heard a knock.

"Lucia, are you okay?" a worried voice came through the door. It was her older brother, Massimo. She quickly opened the door.

“Why do you ask?”

“You barely ate your dinner. I thought you might not be feeling well.”

“...Um, I just ate a late lunch!”

“You really are a terrible liar. Look, if you want to complain about work or talk about something, I’ll listen. Don’t expect anything more than that, though.”

Massimo held a plate of cookies in his right hand. He already knew exactly what she needed. Lucia grabbed a cookie and let Massimo into her room. She offered him a seat on a chair, then sat down on her bed and took a bite of the cookie.

She silently nibbled on her cookie, and once she’d finished it, she said without even taking a breath, “Today, Mr. Forto’s wife asked me if I wanted to be his second wife!”

“Huwhat?!” Massimo exclaimed hysterically before freezing in shock. They really were siblings. She’d had the exact same reaction. Or maybe this was just the way any commoner would react.

“Wait, it’s surprising enough that you would be asked to marry Mr. Forto, but why did his *wife* ask you?”

“Yeah, it’s weird. I don’t get nobles...” She had no reason to keep up appearances in front of her brother, so she continued with her unmasked thoughts. “Maybe she wants to stabilize the factory’s management, or maybe she doesn’t want information from the guild to get leaked...”

“Well, you’re getting all those marriage and adoption offers, so maybe they want to make you part of their family to keep you safe. Especially with what happened to you the other day...”

Lucia’s attempted kidnapping had happened when she had gotten separated from Massimo during an outing. He’d apologized to her profusely after they got home, but it hadn’t been his fault in the first place.

“Hmm, I don’t know. I don’t really see how getting married would ensure my safety. I already have a bodyguard. And commoners usually only have one partner, so wouldn’t it feel like cheating if the person you’re with likes or starts dating someone else?”

“Yeah, it is pretty common for people to break up over infidelity, but I don’t hear much about second wives. I bet merchants break up over assets and things like that.”

“When it comes to commoners, I hear a lot about people

messing around with someone in the red-light district and getting a cutting board or kitchen knife thrown at them."

"Hold on, where'd you hear something as horrifying as that happening?"

Massimo laughed awkwardly as he handed her another cookie. The two of them paused their conversation as they chewed.

Her brother finished his cookie first. "Lucia, what do you think of Mr. Luini?"

"I think he's a great boss and an amazing couturier."

"Well, sure... But that's not what I mean..."

Lucia knew more or less what her brother wanted to ask. She answered with a laugh, "I already declined. Besides, Mr. Forto is totally out of my league, right? It'd be like a tiny squid marrying a kraken!"

But Massimo didn't laugh. He fixed his dark blue eyes directly on her. "Lucia, if someone wants to be with you, then you don't have to worry about whether he's in your league or not. You should think about what you really want to do."

Normally Massimo was so timid when it came to these things. *Now* he wanted to act like an older brother? She wished he wouldn't, but she could tell he was sincerely worried for her.

She turned to her brother and nodded firmly. "I will."

They ate the rest of the cookies on the plate, and with that, their sibling late-night snack was over. Once Massimo left her room, Lucia opened her bag and took out a sketchbook. It was one that Forto had given her; the paper was high-quality and felt very nice to draw on.

At some point, she had grown accustomed to designing clothes like him and being near him. She deeply respected him as her superior and as a senior couturier. And she enjoyed spending time with him. However, he was a noble, a viscount, and the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. By nature, he was the type of person that would be out of her reach.

What she truly wanted to do, who she wanted to become—the more she thought about it, the less clear the answer became. Lucia wasn't suited for the aristocratic way of life. More than anything, she didn't feel like she could become someone's second wife. Besides, she'd already declined. As her scattered thoughts swirled in her head, she rolled around on top of her bed.

It wasn't until late into the night that Lucia finally fell asleep. In her dreams, she and Forto were chatting about the clothes they'd drawn in their sketchbooks.

***

"Lord Forto, I will wait outside."

"...Yes, please do."

It wasn't until Lotta said so that Forto realized he had not issued him any orders. It seemed he was more nervous than he thought he'd be.

It was a bit late for lunch, but that was what he had invited Lucia out for. He brought her to the very top floor of a restaurant in the nobles' quarter. Lucia seemed nervous as she looked around at the white-and-black stone building and its interior. Once all the food had been placed on the table, Forto dismissed the server. It was then that Lotta excused himself to the other room.

Today, Forto had selected a three-piece suit made of the finest black silk. Lucia was wearing a dress that she had designed herself, and for which he himself had also contributed several points of advice. The dress, which blended from white into aqua blue, looked very lovely on her.

"Lucia, you seem a little unwell."

"No! I'm just a little nervous. I'm not used to places like this."

He'd only meant to be considerate, but he felt he had now made her even more self-conscious.

After they toasted with their wine, Forto brought his knife and fork to his plate. This was their first meal alone together, and they were both acting slightly awkward. After they managed to get through a bit of small talk, Forto prepared some tea. It was something his grandmother had taught him how to do, and after seeing how it delighted the noblewomen around him, he'd practiced and become quite good at it.

However, even though he was currently drinking first-grade tea leaves, he could not appreciate their rich flavor. At least Lucia was happily eating her chestnut tart. He knew it had been an unreasonable request, but Forto was glad that he had asked that the restaurant have her favorite dessert brought in from elsewhere.

Once he saw that she had finished drinking her tea, Forto

spoke.

“I’m terribly sorry for my wife’s actions yesterday. I was not expecting Minerva to go to you directly…”

It was, in equal parts, an excuse and his true feelings. He had spoken to Minerva about Tiziano urging him to marry Lucia, and the very next day, she had gone to the Tailors’ Guild to ask in person that Lucia become his second wife. It was his own responsibility as her husband that he hadn’t foreseen her aristocratic initiative.

His earnest apology was easily dismissed with a smile. “It’s okay, Mr. Forto, but could you please clear up the misunderstanding with your wife?”

“Well, actually—I was the one who brought it up with my wife.”

“Huh?”

Lucia’s voice was quiet. It seemed the thought of marrying him had never crossed her mind. He couldn’t even gather his thoughts enough to know whether he was unsurprised or disappointed.

“It has only been half a year since I’ve met you, Lucia. I know it may be a little soon, but I spoke about you to my wife—although I truly did not think she would go to the guild to speak with you before I could.”

Forto was confident that they had a good relationship as boss and employee. However, having known her only a short while, he had no confidence about anything outside of that.

Still, he was being warned more frequently now not to let her be taken away by someone from another faction, so he could not delay things any longer. As those justifications ran through his mind, Lucia’s blue eyes remained fixed on him.

“When I first met you, Lucia, I thought you looked like a very charming young woman in your lovely princess line dress. I was surprised to learn later that you had designed and sewn that dress yourself.” The words describing their first meeting fell naturally from his lips.

“And you looked really nice in your silver-gray suit and white shirt. The one embroidered with monster thread,” Lucia replied promptly, describing the outfit he’d worn when they’d first met.

“I see my clothes were the only thing memorable about me.”

They both laughed, and Forto was reminded once again how much he enjoyed spending time with Lucia. They discussed

clothing designs, worked together, and she even told him about her dreams. He wanted to watch over her as she continued to blossom into a couturier. He wanted to be by her side, protecting her, and he didn't want to concede that role to anyone else. He had been harboring these feelings for a long time already.

The reason he'd been unable to act was because he hadn't wanted to ruin the relationship they had. He was a nobleman well into his thirties and a guildmaster, yet he was truly pathetic.

But he could not protect her if he remained pathetic. He searched for the right words.

Forto had sunk into the dark places that existed behind the glamour of noble society. He knew every line in the book. He could spin a litany of flowery phrases. It was even within his means to entice her with countless marriage conditions favorable for a couturier or to go to her family first so she had no choice but to accept. But those were the last things he wanted to do. That was why he was before her now, speaking from the heart.

"I realized from working with you that you are truly a talented and adept couturier. Your wonderful design sense and your valuable insight have inspired me day after day. Even when we've worked late into the night together, I've always looked forward to going to work the next day—to see you again."

"Mr. Forto...?"

Lucia's eyes widened at him. They were a beautiful, clear blue.

"Before I knew it, I felt that I not only wanted us to work together but to spend the rest of our lives together."

Forto stood up, then got down on one knee in front of Lucia. He heard his heart drumming loudly in his chest.

"Lucia, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? I want to protect you, until the day I return to dust."

He extended his palm out to her, beseeching her love.

Lucia gasped. Forto waited in silence for her reply.

Neither one of them moved. Those few seconds felt excruciatingly long.

"...I can't be your second wife, Mr. Forto."

Her voice was quiet, but her rejection rang loud and clear.

***

"Sorry for inviting myself over here, Dahlia."

“Don’t worry about it, Lucia. I was just thinking I wanted to have hamburger steak tonight.”

The aromatic scent of grilled meat filled the living room of the Green Tower, where Dahlia lived. Dahlia was sitting across the table from her and smiling at her tenderly.

Tonight’s dinner was onion hamburger steak. Ever since their school days, Lucia and Dahlia had made this together whenever one of them had a difficult or unpleasant day. They must have cut mountains of onions together.

While they were cutting onions earlier, Lucia had told Dahlia about what happened that day.

“Sooo, Dahlia… Mr. Forto proposed to me today…”

Dahlia looked shocked, but she listened calmly to what Lucia had to say.

Lucia and Dahlia had been born in different months but the same year. Even still, maybe because of her friend’s broad-mindedness, she thought of Dahlia like an older sister. She felt safe in her gentle presence, which was also why she couldn’t help but share her true feelings with her.

“Maybe if Mr. Forto was a commoner and single, I might’ve given it some thought.”

Once she said it, she realized it was true. She had come to feel deep in her heart that she couldn’t allow herself to fall in love with Forto. He was a noble, a viscount, the guildmaster of the Tailors’, her boss, and a couturier she revered. That “maybe” she spoke of was just a dream. She saw no future in which she could stay by his side and live as his second wife.

She must have cut too many onions. Her eyes began to sting.

“Did I add too much salt?” Dahlia asked after Lucia was quiet for a little while.

Lucia flashed the brightest smile she could muster. “Nope! The cheese sauce you made is perfection!”

Lucia cut a big piece of her hamburger steak slathered in cheese sauce, then popped it into her mouth.

She did get the sense that it was a little salty.

But Lucia finished everything on her plate, from the two medium-sized hamburger steaks to the side of vegetables and even a chunk of bread.

After their meal, the two of them cleaned up, and then Dahlia encouraged Lucia to use the bath first. While she was soaking,

Dahlia took out the cookie dough she'd been keeping in the freezer and baked it. They topped the cookies with dollops of strawberry jam, then toasted with milk tea.

"I can't believe I'm the first guest staying over in the guest room that I decorated myself…"

They had moved to the guest room on the fourth floor of the Green Tower, which Lucia had redecorated the other day. Lucia had picked out everything herself: chartreuse curtains, ivory and green bedding, cushions and pillows in differing shades of green… There were even two oversized winter blankets so that two people could sleep over.

"It worked out perfectly, then," Dahlia said with apparent sincerity.

Before she could stop herself, Lucia responded, "I thought for sure Sir Volf would be the first to stay in this room…"

"Volf goes back home every night!" Dahlia refuted vehemently.

But based on the fact that she said "every night," she and that male friend of hers must have been getting even closer.

Once they were done eating their strawberry jam-topped cookies, it was time for them to play dress-up. They moved to Dahlia's bedroom, emptied the contents of her closet onto her bed, and tried various combinations of clothes. Lucia also borrowed some outfits to mix and match, and the two squealed in delight over their creations in front of the mirror.

Lucia was surprised and delighted to see how much Dahlia had changed. Her closet was packed full of more garments in a richer array of colors than ever. Lucia took joy in her friend's progress. Naturally, Dahlia had grown even prettier than before, but it seemed she also had more of an interest in finding clothing that suited her and in putting outfits together.

"This sweater and this skirt plus stockings in this color would look great! It's perfect for a date or a trip!"

"Perfect for a trip…" Dahlia echoed.

It was clear from Dahlia's expression just whom she was thinking of. Dahlia had a male friend whom she had met in the spring and grown close with. It was a mystery to Lucia why they weren't going out already. He was the youngest son of an earl and a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters—his name was Volfred Scalfarotto. Lucia had met him several times as well, and true to his nickname, "the heartthrob of the capital," he was very

handsome.

But when it came to fashion, he seemed indifferent. He usually wore his knight's uniform or simple clothes of the kind a commoner would wear. It was such a shame. Maybe, now that Dahlia was dressing herself up more, the two of them could dress in matching couple's outfits—or better yet, maybe Lucia could give them outfits as a gift for their engagement party... Lucia's imagination had started running away from her.

"I think you should wear that mahogany coat you just bought once it gets cold out. Oh, and those red shoes you bought the same day! Those would look amazing with it!"

"I'll have to work myself up to that. I'm not used to wearing red..."

"But your hair is red, Dahlia. It should be natural for you. It'll really give you that extra oomph."

"Oomph...?"

That whisper didn't get past Lucia. She decided to coordinate some outfits for Dahlia that were cute, pretty, and even a little sexy.

"Hey, Lucia? I like this blouse, but what do you think I should wear with it?"

"Pair it with these flared pants, keep the top three buttons of the blouse open, and *ta-da*!"

"Lucia, I think three buttons is *too* open..."

Dahlia knitted her brows at her reflection in the mirror that hung on the back of the closet door.

"It's fine if you're inside the tower! It's not like it's open enough to see your chest, anyway. And it looks much more slimming this way."

"Slimming... Maybe you're right... But don't I look a little odd?"

"No way! You look super chic!"

Dahlia looked a little embarrassed, but she still carefully copied down the details of the outfit in her sketchbook. Lucia was overjoyed that Dahlia was now drawing clothes in that sketchbook of hers, which, up until the previous page, only contained sketches of magical tools.

Dahlia had once seemed to find dressing up too much trouble. Now she was choosing garments that suited her, and she was dressing up not only for herself but also for someone else. Lucia thought that was absolutely wonderful.

They had more milk tea, made some sandwiches, and tried on

outfits until the morning sun was high in the sky. Lucia didn't even end up sleeping in the guest room she had redecorated.

The two of them rubbed their sleepy eyes against the sunlight streaming through the window as they put away all the clothes and accessories. Lucia vowed to give Dahlia some fragrant, top-of-the-line mothballs as a thank-you for keeping her company last night.

"Dahlia, sorry for taking up so much of your time. Thank you so much!"

"No problem. I had fun too. And I learned a lot, Lucia."

Dahlia's sketchbook was now filled with sketches of various ensembles. All were outfits that would look flattering on her, but Lucia wanted to recommend one more thing: something of the finest quality, fit for nobles, that Lucia herself might never wear.

"Hey, Dahlia. Let me make your wedding dress for when you get married. It'll be my gift to you!"

"I'm not sure that day will ever come, though..."

"Okay, but if it does?"

"All right. Just in case it happens, you can make my dress."

"'Just in case'? Why say it like that?"

Don't talk about a wedding like it's a natural disaster or an accident, she thought. Lucia also had a feeling that the day would come sooner than she thought, but Dahlia seemed oblivious to that.

"And when you get married someday, Lucia..." Dahlia trailed off. She must have remembered the fact that Forto had proposed to Lucia yesterday.

But her friend had nothing to worry about. Lucia had come here to vent about that closed chapter and Dahlia had played along with her dress-up party. It was thanks to her that Lucia felt she could face a new day.

"Right, you can give me a magical tool as a present! Make me your latest freezer or compact magical stove!"

"I'll make you both. I'll keep polishing my skills until then."

Her friend gave her a smile befitting a magical toolmaker.

***

"...Where am I?"

Forto opened his eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling.

When he tried to sit up, he felt a pounding pain in his head

and an uncomfortably parched throat. It seemed he had drunk quite a lot and had neglected to take anything to help him sober up.

Yesterday evening, after Lucia had turned down his proposal, he returned to his carriage and let out a shallow sigh. He felt a strange mixture of feelings—he was disappointed, but he'd also expected this to happen.

There was no need to speak of this to anyone. He should let Minerva know, but there was no rush to do so.

Before returning home, he felt he wanted to have a drink with someone. However, he had few friends whom he could drink and speak candidly with. He had fallen out of touch with most of his friends from his days training to be a knight once he joined the Tailors' Guild.

He had made friends after joining the guild, but while the nobles were dependable people, they weren't the type of company he could speak imprudently with. All the same, neither would he have felt right about going drinking with his subordinates.

Maybe I can drink alone at my usual spot—as soon as he had that thought, someone came to mind.

"If there's anything you want to gripe about that you can't with anyone else, let me know. I'll forget it the day you tell me," Ivano, vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, had promised him.

Though the request for his company came at the last minute, Ivano invited Forto to his house and listened to his woes over dinner and drinks. It had been a while since he'd had a drink with someone one-on-one. He'd thought Lucia's rejection had put the matter to rest, but the alcohol made his feelings resurface. When he muttered aloud whether there was anything he could do to change her mind, Ivano informed him of something.

"It's a commoner custom for married couples to love only one another."

Forto and Lucia were couturiers. They shared a passion for clothes and they enjoyed working together.

That was where he'd been mistaken. Lucia did not think about marriage in terms of favorable conditions alone. What Lucia looked for in a partner wasn't someone who ensured an environment in which she could devote herself to her work, someone with enough money to buy clothing materials, or

someone with a prosperous family. What she wanted was someone who loved her and her alone, and someone she could love the same in return.

It was simple once he understood it. Forto could not even laugh at how foolish he had been.

As he drained his glass, Ivano gave him another piece of advice.

“You should accept her dream and her wishes, and continue being a good boss and friend to her. Then, even if Lucia ends up with someone else, you can still protect and help her, Mr. Forto.”

The suggestion was hard to hear, but he could accept it. He needed to find a way to protect her so she could do as she wished. The moment he had that thought, Ivano turned his navy blue eyes straight at him.

“If all goes well, then for as long as you live, you will be ‘Lucia’s Knight.’”

Forto wasn’t sure what expression he made when he heard those words.

Ah, yes. I did want to be a knight. But it was fine, because he’d become a couturier. It was fine, because he’d become a guildmaster. It was fine, because he’d become a viscount—so he had persuaded himself as he gave up the path to knighthood. And yet, it seemed that deep down, as someone who had aspired to be a knight from childhood, he had been struggling.

“Lucia’s Knight” didn’t have a bad ring to it.

Free from the constraints of being man and woman, free from the fetters of aristocracy, he wanted to protect her as a couturier—couldn’t that be enough?

He made his decision over the exceptionally bitter alcohol he shared with Ivano.

Having agreed that Forto would stay over at Ivano’s house that night, they talked and drank all night until Forto fell asleep at the table. That was the last thing he remembered. It was a mystery whether Lotta had carried him up to bed or if he had managed to drag himself here. Now, this morning, he was looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

His gold bracelet and cuff links had been taken off and placed on a handkerchief on top of the bedside table. He’d slept in his shirt, which was now wrinkled and had the top three buttons undone. This was Forto’s first time drinking himself into such a state. He could only laugh bitterly.

He was pressing the sides of his terribly aching head when the door opened a crack.

“Good morning, Mr. Forto,” Ivano said, entering once he saw that Forto was awake. He carried a towel and a hanger that held a change of clothes—unmistakably Forto’s own.

“These are for you. I asked Lotta to bring them here. He said these are spare clothes you leave at the Tailors’ Guild.”

“I see. Where is Lotta now?”

“He is having breakfast. Mr. Forto, I brought some hangover medicine for you. Once it takes effect, I’ll show you to the bathroom.”

“Thank you, Ivano. For everything.”

He dutifully placed the hangover medicine in his mouth and washed it down with a glass of water.

Ivano had been an exceedingly gracious host since yesterday evening. Forto had to properly thank him someday. But first, he would remind Ivano of his promise from last night.

“Also, please just call me Forto. I thought I told you not to worry about who hears you call me that.”

The corners of Ivano’s lips lifted slightly into a smile as he responded, “And I thought I told you I’d forget everything you told me last night…”

“How very cruel you are to your friends,” Forto said with a disapproving smile, and Ivano let out a wry laugh.

Ivano was a commoner and a merchant. He wasn’t accustomed to dealing with nobles. Ever since the two of them struck up a relationship, Forto had started teaching him about noble customs, the way they thought, and how to interact with them. However, last night, it had been Ivano’s turn to teach Forto about commoner customs. He’d even seen right through him, to the struggling knight within.

It was for that reason that Forto had given him permission to drop the title from his name and asked for his friendship. It was very rare for viscounts to permit commoners to address them without a title even privately, and rarer still for them to permit such a thing with other people present. That was precisely why it was proof that they were friends and equals. Perhaps doing so would grant Ivano Mercadante some safety and notoriety.

“Judging by your complexion, you must still have a headache,” Ivano observed.

“I think the ache is in my chest, if anything.”

“Are you finding it hard to let go, Forto?”

“…I will get over it. It would be unseemly of me to continue pining, don’t you think?”

At the end of the day, Forto was still the Tailors’ guildmaster and the head of a noble family. It was expected that he would cast aside any inelegance and put a mask on.

After he made his determined remark, Ivano asked, somewhat awkwardly, “Um, is it possible that this is your first time being rejected…?”

“Yes. I have never been in a relationship where I would have been rejected before. Besides my wife, I’ve mainly associated with people through work.”

“Then, in a way, this was a good experience for you. Though I’m very well aware of the pain and bitterness that comes with being rejected, having experienced that many times myself.”

Ivano’s emotions were evident in his voice and expression, but perhaps this was not the time or place to discuss such things.

“Ivano, is this something you don’t want your wife to overhear?”

“Naturally. Though I wouldn’t mind sharing it with a friend over a few drinks, Forto.”

Forto was heartbroken, but he had made a good friend.

The bright, golden rays of the sun stung his eyes.

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A couple days after Lucia’s lunch with Forto, a carriage came to pick her up at her family’s house as per usual. After taking yesterday to herself, she was going back to work.

“Good morning, chief.”

She had braced herself, thinking Forto might be inside, but it was Hestia who alighted from the carriage.

“Mr. Forto asked me yesterday evening to come pick you up. He said he had a meeting today.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks, Hestia,” Lucia said, putting forth an effort to make her voice sound cheery as she boarded the carriage with Hestia.

“Something happened, didn’t it, Lucia?” her friend asked, calling her by first name instead of her title. Lucia was unsure how much she should tell her. She found it hard to say that Forto had proposed to her. She didn’t want it to affect either of their

reputations.

"Umm, it's a long story... I'm sorry, it's hard for me to talk about."

"You're so honest, Lucia. Madam Minerva spoke to you about marrying into the Luini family when she came to see you at the guild, didn't she?"

Despite Lucia's vague response, Hestia had read her like a book. She had been born into nobility. For her, these sorts of things were probably so common as to be predictable.

"Um, can you make sure this stays between us...?"

"I don't think anyone else will be talking about it. I made sure to tell people that the reason you were absent yesterday was because you were so exhausted from working hard that your family made you stay home. Are you really sure you're okay, though?"

"Thanks for doing that. It's true that I'm a little tired. But I had a dress-up party with my friend, so I feel much better now!" Lucia replied.

Hestia fixed her bluish-violet eyes on her. "Say, Lucia, do you mind if I ask why you didn't accept Mr. Forto's proposal?"

"I know I should be grateful he asked, and Mr. Forto is such a wonderful person, but I can't be the wife of a viscount. Or a second wife," Lucia said. She had already given a lot of thought to this answer, so it came out readily.

"It's my fault," Hestia said tremulously. "I gave you the idea that being a second wife is loathsome, didn't I? It's normal for nobles, and I'm sure Mr. Forto would make you happy."

"It's not your fault, Hestia. I'm a commoner; I can't do what doesn't feel right to me. That's all."

"Well, I'm a commoner too."

It was true; now that Hestia was estranged from her family, she was a commoner, but even so, their upbringings had been drastically different.

"Even if you become a noble, that doesn't mean you need to become a different person," Hestia continued. "If you wanted to, you could appoint a representative to take care of all your aristocratic duties for you, and Mr. Forto would surely take care of you—"

"That's not the problem, Hestia." Lucia tightened her mouth into an artificial smile. "I'm just...greedy."

"Greedy?"

“Yeah. When it comes to a partnership, I want someone to love only me, and I want to love only them. With all my heart! That’s why I can’t be his second wife, so for the time being, I’m going to focus on my work above all else.”

“Lucia…”

Hestia said nothing else. She just looked at her with deep concern.

“I’m fine. All I can do is keep working hard,” Lucia said, exerting all her effort to smile at Hestia.

Time at work passed, regardless of the unsettled state of her emotions.

That afternoon, Lucia left the Magical Garment Factory and went to the Tailors’ Guild to give her regular report to the guildmaster, Forto. Normally Dante came with her, but today he stayed behind at the factory, claiming he was too busy.

When she arrived in front of the guildmaster’s office, Lucia took one deep breath. Then, she knocked on the door and, once she heard his response, stepped inside.

“Pardon me.”

Forto was at his desk, wearing the same expression he always did. They sat down across from each other at the coffee table, Lucia laid out some documents, and then she gave her report like she always did.

She explained the day’s deliveries, inventory, and distribution of work, regarding which Forto asked her several questions. The factory was still busy working on the covers for the heated low tables and heated tables, but the increase in staff had helped lighten the load. That allowed them to maintain their current pace without pushing the factory staff to their limits.

Once she finished giving her report, she knew that all that remained was to say a standard goodbye and then head back to the factory, but her relief was cut short when Forto spoke again.

“Lucia, I would like to request some of your time, so the two of us may talk. Of course, Lotta will stay in the room with us.”

Lucia paused a beat before responding. “Of course, that’s no problem.”

Her shoulders were tense, but she tried to keep her expression composed.

“I’ve made you uncomfortable, haven’t I…” he said.

“N-Not at all!” Lucia cried, her voice coming out unnaturally

shrill.

Forto paid no notice to that and continued. “Lucia, I will not ask you to marry me again. And I will not change my demeanor toward you. However, I, Fortunato Luini, will protect you, the couturier Lucia Fano. I ask only that you allow me to do that.”

“Mr. Forto…”

He’s such a good person, Lucia thought genuinely. She wouldn’t have been surprised if she had been asked to leave her post as manager of the factory for declining his hand in marriage. Her mind had been filled with worries that it would be awkward to talk to him, or that this matter might negatively affect her work.

As long as Forto said nothing would change, then there was nothing to be worried about. Lucia vowed internally that she wouldn’t change either, except to become a better subordinate.

“Thank you for the kind gesture.”

Forto responded to her word of thanks with his familiar, elegant smile.

“Now then, I will assign Lotta to be your bodyguard starting from the end of this month. I considered several other bodyguards, but none were adequate.”

Lucia was caught off guard by the news. Before she could stop herself, she asked, “Then, who will be your bodyguard, Mr. Forto?”

“Not to worry. Someone very capable.”

She was worried, all right. Didn’t Forto, a guildmaster and a viscount, need a much more skilled bodyguard than she did?

“But you need much more protection than I do—”

“This is for my own peace of mind, so could you please comply, Lucia?” Forto asked with just a slight tilt of his head and a troubled look on his face.

Not fair, Lucia thought.

“…O-Okay,” she answered.

Lotta’s presence grew stronger from where he was standing diagonally behind Forto. He bowed toward Lucia, and then presence grew faint again, as if dissolving in water. Forto turned and gave him a light nod, then looked back at her.

“Lucia, if you should ever change your mind, please let me know. Though I don’t expect you to.” Forto smiled gracefully at her, as if everything that had happened had just been part of an opera act.

That’s right, he’s a noble, through and through. There was a

towering wall between him and a commoner such as herself—one that was difficult to overcome or destroy.

When her eyes flickered downward, he spoke again. “Lucia, from now on, we will be boss and subordinate, fellow couturiers…” He stared at her, his blue eyes piercing right through her. “And…you will be my rival.”

“You think…I’m your rival?”

“Yes. My worthy rival in garment making. As long as you are a couturier, let us always be in competition, Lucia.”

A worthy rival—she had never imagined Forto would call her that. If she had to compete against him in terms of number of clients and sales as a couturier, she had no hope to rival him.

But somehow, she realized that wasn’t what he meant. Rather, what he likely meant was that she should commit to designing clothes as a couturier. There would be no actual competition. But if they were going to be employer and employee, fellow designers, and rivals, then she could face him head-on as a couturier.

“That sounds like a rewarding challenge. I will do my best to be your rival, Mr. Forto,” Lucia responded with a genuine smile.

Across from her, Forto nodded with satisfaction.

“Lucia, this is my latest sketchbook. Would you like to take it with you?”

“I would love to borrow it, Mr. Forto!”

Lucia took the sketchbook from Forto, said goodbye, and then left the office with a smile on her face.

The guard waiting in the hallway escorted her to the carriage stop, where she boarded a carriage back to the factory.

As the view of the city flew by outside the window, Lucia murmured, “A worthy rival, huh…?”

She sincerely felt happy about it, even if it was self-serving on her part. She was able to talk to Forto like normally, she was able to face him without issue, and he’d even let her borrow his sketchbook again. While she couldn’t forget what had happened between them, she could pretend she had.

Lucia could not be Forto’s wife, but she wanted to be the best employee and head manager that she could be. And above all, she wanted to be a couturier worthy to be his rival. It was enough for them to exchange ideas and be involved in making various garments together as fellow designers.

“I wonder what he’s been designing lately?”

Forto had a broad portfolio of work. Of the sketchbooks she had borrowed before, one contained very formal suits for noblemen that featured various embroidered patterns, decorative lapels, and matching ties, while another contained designs of ball gowns for noblewomen.

All his designs were sophisticated yet glamorous. The men’s suits especially had not only trendy floral patterns on the linings but even a touch on the ties and lapels as well as some embellishments on the insides of cuffs. Each design left her feeling more inspired than the last.

With her heart pounding in excitement, Lucia opened up Forto’s latest sketchbook and saw dresses for noblewomen. They looked like everyday outfits for the younger generation.



Unusually for Forto, the garments featured a lot of ribbons and ruffles. They were cute but still refined. The amount of ruffles, the placement of the draping, and the shape and length of the ribbons all seemed natural and very well thought out.

The figures dressed in the clothes all looked the same. They were slim, short, and wore high heels. Even though there were no faces drawn on the figures, and the hair wasn't painted green, Lucia could tell who they were supposed to be.

"This...is me..."

This entire sketchbook was filled with designs of garments Forto thought would suit Lucia herself. A slow ache started deep in her chest, but she held back the tears as hard as she could.

This love had ended before it started. But that was fine. From now on, she would move forward as best she could, in order to become someone worthy to be called his rival.

Threads Broken and Entwined

“Even if we lose with these, I’d be satisfied…” Zilo muttered with a serious expression.

“No, we will win with these. Nothing could surpass them,” Forto replied, his voice filled with admiration.

In a workroom at the Tailors’ Guild, the faces of Forto and the weary stitchers were all focused in one direction. What they were looking at were the guild’s completed sets for the heated low table and heated table. After working as quickly as they could, they had finally completed them.

The heated low table made by the Tailors’ Guild consisted of a tabletop that was a slab of very clear crystal with a border of obsidian stone. Underneath that was a dark blue embroidered cover made of special-grade, double-weave monster silk.

The design featured the Goddess of the Moon in the night sky. The goddess’s face was slightly downturned, her eyes tinged with sorrow, and her delicate expression looked as though she was about to flutter her eyelashes and turn her eyes toward the viewer. Surrounding the goddess were unnaturally lined up constellations and sparkling stars in a multitude of colors.

Forto jotted down a tagline into his sketchbook—*A heated low table that brings the distant night sky right into your hands.*

Next was the Magical Garment Factory’s heated table. The legs were adjustable, so it could be converted into a low table or remain as a table sat at with chairs—a heated low table and heated table in one, essentially. And since this table could be made taller, the cover had to be longer and wider than the one the Tailors’ Guild had made for the low table.

The tabletop was made of clear crystal, and underneath it was a light blue monster fabric beyond compare that made generous use of precious dye from the World Tree. The edges of the fabric were lined with soft and fluffy white horned rabbit fur.

In the center of the fabric was a depiction of a white unicorn sleeping with his head in the lap of a golden-haired maiden. The maiden was gazing kindly at the unicorn with her ocean blue eyes, and her pale, slender fingers were stroking his mane. Her hair swaying in the wind looked as though it would start moving

at any moment.

The four edges of the long monster fabric were also embroidered with a gorgeous, verdant forest scene, with each side depicting a unique design. There was a spring in the middle of a grove; wild roses blooming in a forest; small, burgeoning flowers along a narrow path; and a front-facing deer standing in the middle of the greenery. Looking at these whimsical scenes felt like stepping into a forest of fairies off-limits to humans where time had stopped.

A heated table that transports you away to a fairy forest—another fitting tagline.

"They're so beautiful…"

They were admirable pieces of workmanship. Complete works of art. The fruit of the stitchers' skills. These covers should be just as good, if not better than, the covers made with special-grade silver fox and crimson fox furs. After all, these covers were overflowing with the technical skills of the stitchers. Nothing could be better than these, at least not in Ordine.

"We've got this! Nothing can beat these!"

"That's right! They're even more exquisite than a noblewoman's gown!"

The stitchers exclaimed with their hands formed into fists, and Lucia had to agree. In fact, as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Forto had shown her the paperwork detailing the cost of making the covers, and the number was enough to buy *several* extravagant gowns. At least they would not lose in terms of expenditure.

"Now then, starting tomorrow, we will display these within the guild. It's my turn now to put in the effort."

Lucia sensed Forto tense up. The stitchers' work was over, but the guildmaster's work had just begun. He would invite high-ranking nobles to the Tailors' Guild to have tea—served on these very tables. If all went well, they would be purchased. And if not, then they would at least become conversation pieces to be brought up at tea parties and soirees.

However, Lucia had heard that when it came to these sorts of things, no one was better than Forto. He boasted a tremendous popularity, particularly among older high-ranking noblewomen, so he might very well sell the tables before putting them on the market. That was what Zilo had told her.

Although she could hardly hold a candle to Forto, Lucia also

planned to use her free time to write to the clients she'd had thus far and noble she knew in the hopes of getting them talking about the tables. It would be ideal if they could come in person to try them out for themselves, but that would be too much for Lucia to ask. The only other thing to do was to pray that the guild's heated low table and heated table received glowing reviews.

"Well, I will be singing like a skylark at the soiree tonight," Forto said, adjusting his tie, which needed no adjusting, with his fingertips.

"Umm... I wish you a successful endeavor!"

Lucia had learned that she shouldn't say "good luck" to a superior, so she used a phrase that she'd been taught was more appropriate for nobles.

"Godspeed!" Zilo exclaimed, as if he were sending a knight off to battle. He'd said the same once to Lucia, but she was still a little startled by it.

"Yes, I will return prosperous," Forto responded, facing them with a perfectly composed smile. It seemed they didn't need a single silk strand's worth of worry.

Everyone watched as the guildmaster elegantly strode out of the room.

From that autumn onward, the heated low table and heated table made by the Tailors' Guild and advertised by Forto himself became the hottest topic of conversation among the capital's elite.

The two tables received high praise, particularly for their beauty, excellent workmanship, and outstanding artistry. In addition to that, Fortunato Luini, the Tailors' guildmaster who had supervised the creation of the tables, also received a sudden rise in acclaim.

This success would bring with it an unprecedented number of orders to the Tailors' Guild—and even more work, an outcome that none of the staff had predicted.

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"My eyes!" one of the stitchers at the Magical Garment Factory shrieked.

The stitcher had already returned their sewing needle to its

rightful place in a sewing box and stepped away from the fabric, so there was no imminent danger.

"Apply some eye drops and keep your eyes closed for a bit. If that doesn't work, place a damp towel over them and rest," Zilo said without moving his gaze or stopping his hands.

Work on the covers for the heated low tables and heated tables was continuing at the Tailors' Guild, but the staff of the Magical Garment Factory was also hard at work in the secondary workroom making covers for the heated tables. This was due to the Tailors' Guild being busy and needing help embroidering some of the covers.

Fortunately, there would be fewer mass orders for the toe socks and drying insoles in the winter, and they still had a good number of them in stock, so those who were proficient in embroidery were stitching the covers in shifts.

Someone had joked once when the factory staff went out for drinks that whenever the Rossetti Trading Company showed up, the factory was showered in overtime and bonus pay. That was being proved true once again.

Nobles and commoners alike were ordering the tables en masse. The Tailors' Guild was recruiting more stitchers as they outsourced work to various embroiderers and artisans. However, the number of orders only continued to increase.

The cover they were embroidering today at the Magical Garment Factory was a custom order that had some very irritating—that was to say, *detailed* specifications.

They first wrapped a workbench in a white cloth and then spread the pure white fabric for the cover on top of that. The stitchers were seated in chairs around the cover and focused on their stitching, but the looks on their faces were frightening.

"Seriously, whose bright idea was this design?!"

"And who chose this fabric and thread?!"

The stitchers' overlapping shouts were met with nods of agreement from even the stitchers who remained silent.

"Not me, that's for sure! The *client* requested this!" Lucia replied loudly as she moved her embroidery needle through the fabric.

She understood very well how everyone felt. The heated table cover that was in her hands was pure-white monster silk, and the thread they were using to embroider was processed from the silk of the moonlight spiders found only in the Eastern Kingdom.

The thread had a silvery blue sheen, but it was still essentially a bright, shiny silver color.

The stitchers wore white gloves to make absolutely sure they kept the materials clean as they embroidered numerous tiny ice crystals on the pure-white monster silk with silver thread. It was torture for their eyes.

Lucia herself was blinking frequently and routinely applying eye drops. She really wanted to know why anyone would choose this fabric, this thread, and this design.

“Everyone, it’s time for afternoon tea!”

Once someone announced the start of breaktime, everyone loosened up instantly. They placed their needles back into their sewing boxes and stood from their chairs.

Lucia was shaking her arms out by the doorway when she saw a large wooden box come through the door.

“The tabletop arrived! Huh? Oh, are we just in time for tea?”

The wooden box, which Dante and another staff member carried in, contained a tabletop wrapped in cloth.

“Did the engraving come out well?” Lucia asked.

“Yeah, it looks outstanding.”

Dante removed the cloth, revealing a white marble tabletop. The surface was glossy and white, and the underside had a shallow engraving of a spider spinning a giant web over a rose. It was very beautiful, but it was also impactful and a tad bit scary.

The recipient was the Earldom Scalfarotto, a family famous for their water and ice magic crystals. The ice theme made sense for that family, and nobles in general were fans of rose patterns.

However, Lucia had to wonder, wouldn’t the lady of the estate find the spider off-putting? Though on second thought, since it was on the underside of the tabletop, it wouldn’t be visible, so maybe it was meant to be some sort of protective charm. Lucia shook her head from side to side, and Dante called out to her.

“Something wrong, boss?”

“No, I was just thinking that the design is pretty elaborate for being on the bottom of the tabletop where it can’t be seen, instead of on the top.”

“Ah, well, you know the Scalfarottos…”

Considering how many luxury covers the Scalfarottos were ordering, they must be a considerably wealthy family. Although, Lucia was almost certain that none of the other tabletops they’d ordered had featured a spider theme.

Lucia decided to voice her question aloud. “This is the only tabletop with a spider design that the Scalfarottos ordered, right? Does it mean anything?”

Dante looked into the distance and said, “Yeah… If I had to guess, I’d say it’s meant to be a protection for his wife…”

“For his wife?” Lucia repeated questioningly.

Zilo whispered by her ear, “Chief, this table is for the wife of the heir. Her nickname is ‘Ice Rose,’ while his is ‘Ice Spider.’”

The ice spider that protects the frozen rose—when she thought of it like that, it was quite a romantic design. The choice of white on white must have also represented the purity of their love. A design expressing deep love and devotion. Now that she thought of it that way, Lucia felt a sudden burst of motivation.

“Now I get it. A husband who wants to protect his wife. What a lovely meaning behind this design! In that case, I need to keep sewing as best as I can!”

Watching as she stirred herself up, Hestia and another stitcher called out to her.

“Chief! You need to take a break first.”

“Chief, do you prefer lemon or orange madeleines? They both have adorable sugar decorations!”

“Let me see!” Lucia cried, her attention jumping from the tabletop to the day’s tea cakes. She bounded in the direction of the snacks.

Dante turned his gaze from his boss’s back to the underside of the tabletop and narrowed his eyes slightly.

They had received many orders for decorative tabletops for the heated low tables and heated tables, but this one was exceptional. The design was of a rose in full bloom with a web stretched across the front, spun by a spider that seemed to be shooting a threatening look at the viewer. Artistically, it was beautiful, and it displayed the masterful skill of the engraver.

However, it was also strangely intimidating. He felt a chill emanating from it, despite the fact it was a tabletop for a heated table. Or perhaps that was just his imagination.

The one who had proposed the original sketch for the shallow engraving and the specifications for the complete set of the heated table—its pure-white monster silk cover, its design of ice crystals embroidered using shiny, silver moonlight spider silk, and its dark blue rug—had been the next head of the Scalfarotto

family.

Dante recalled the man, whom he'd met before, and his bluish-silver hair, fair skin, and dark blue eyes. He must have been such a devoted husband that he was unwilling to entrust his wife even to a heated table. Dante secretly felt sympathy for Forto, who had been the one invited to the Scalfarotto estate to discuss the details for the design.

"A husband protecting his wife, huh...?" Dante muttered.

Next to him, Zilo put a finger to his lips. "I'm envious of the chief's innocence. To an old man like myself, this looks like a spider spinning a tight web to make sure not a single person approaches the rose..."

"What a coincidence, Zilo. I was thinking the same." Dante nodded deeply, making great effort to keep his lips from moving.

In the back of the room, he saw Lucia pick up a lemon madeleine. It looked like she and Hestia were chatting excitedly about the romanticism of a husband's desire to protect his wife. Everyone had their own way of interpreting things.

Dante decided to leave them to their discussion, sweet as cake as it might be.

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"It's such a shame it wasn't meant to be..." Minerva muttered quietly. She was sitting at the desk in her room.

Forto had proposed to Head Manager Fano, but he had not received a favorable answer.

The evening he proposed, Forto had gone to the home of Ivano Mercadante, vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, and stayed the night there. It was Lotta who had informed her of that.

The chairwoman, Dahlia Rossetti, was building a close relationship with the Scalfarottos, a family known for their water crystals. Minerva wanted to form a connection with her if the opportunity was there, but based on the response Dahlia had given her, it was best to stand back for now. If Forto formed an amicable relationship with Ivano instead, then she would consider that good enough.

Besides, this whole matter had reassured her of one thing.

"I'm glad that Forto is finally considering taking a second wife..."

Those were her sincere feelings as his wife.

Minerva was born the youngest daughter of an earl. She was born premature, and she'd been told she'd been very small. Even as she grew older, she remained in poor health.

She had pale blonde hair and blue eyes like glass beads. Her complexion was more pallid than fair, and she had a thin, breakable-looking frame. People told her she had a doll-like, ephemeral beauty, but the truth was that she was merely feeble.

When she exerted herself too much, she broke into a fever, and it wasn't rare for her to be assailed by dizziness when riding in a carriage for a lengthy time or to be laid up by a cold for more than a week. She was the only one in her family who was frail, so the others always fussed over and protected her.

Even when she entered college, her choices were limited. She didn't have the physical strength or aptitude to become a knight or mage like her older siblings. Her magical grade, a factor prized in noble marriages, wasn't very high either. And because she was frail, there was the possibility she would not be able to bear healthy children.

She did receive some inquiries for marriage, but perhaps because her fragile appearance gave them the idea that she needed to be protected, she received many offers to be a second, third, or fourth wife, or received offers from men older than her father.

For the sake of my family, that's just fine, she told herself. But her father and brother had something else to say about it.

"Minerva, you can just remain at home forever. We'll protect you, so you don't need to worry about anything."

Meanwhile, her mother had her own opinion on the matter. "Is that what you want, Minerva? Don't you want to become your own woman, not a child who always needs to be protected?"

It was the first time Minerva realized that it was possible for her to become an independent woman.

From then on, her mother taught her all the future paths she could take. She taught her that the wives of noblemen and merchants often took leadership over the home or helped with the family business. She taught her how it was possible for a marriage to simply be a way to unite families, and how she could even forgo getting married and work for a company or in education.

Minerva was adept at language arts, Ehrlichian, and numbers. She could work toward becoming a translator of documents or an accountant while she tried to build her strength up. Once she decided on her future, the world became brighter. At last, her own feelings became clear to her. For the rest of her life, Minerva did not want to be a young lady who needed protection, but a dignified woman who could stand on her own two legs.

While she was studying civil service in college, she had also elected to learn the languages of Ehrlichia and Išrana, which lay beyond it, as well as mathematics and accounting. After graduation, she joined her family's company and learned how to use her interpretation, translation, and accounting skills for business. There was a lot to remember when it came to technical terminology and expressions particular to each country.

Her other relatives, who were the same ages as her, started getting engaged or married one after another, but Minerva didn't pay them much mind.

Then, a favorable marriage proposal dropped in unexpectedly.

It was from a viscount named Fortunato Luini. He was employed at the Tailors' Guild and was a talented couturier himself. He was so handsome that it was said women lined up to get dresses made by him. Minerva had even heard that his competency had inspired his older brother to concede the seat of the head of family to him.

Minerva had been requested to be his first wife. She found it, honestly, a little suspect.

It was true that Minerva was born to an earldom and the family business dealt in fabrics. Still, she wondered if this request was an attempt to tie their families together, or if he wanted an ornamental wife, when it was arranged for them to meet face-to-face.

Her meeting with Viscount Luini took place at the estate of Earl Ariosto, who had been the one to present the proposal to her. The person waiting for her there was a charming man who looked like a knight from a fairy tale come to life. That man was Fortunato.

His blond hair reflected the sunlight, and his eyes reminded her of the deep blue sea. She found herself gazing dumbstruck at his captivating appearance. It was only later that she understood that she had experienced love at first sight.

The marriage was settled without much input from Minerva.

After meeting with him several more times, she realized why Forto—the name he requested she call him—had been encouraged to marry her. The joining of their families and her proficiency in linguistics and accounting was an asset to the Luinis. Also, he wished to adopt his older brother's eldest son to be the next heir to the viscountcy. Knowing that, Minerva assumed their marriage was only for appearances' sake. But she felt reassured when Forto explained that if they were to have a child, it would be considered their second child without any discrimination, and all the necessary documents would be prepared.

In addition to that, Forto even apologized to her. He told her that as a couturier, he had a duty to obey his clients' every whim, whether it be escorting them to balls, accompanying them at banquets, or sometimes socializing with them after events. If his adolescent self hadn't done so, then he wouldn't have been able to restore the Luini family, which had fallen to ruin. But he divulged his past to her neither as an excuse or a justification.

"I know that to you, I am a disgraceful man who has strayed from the path of a knight, but I will not let you want for anything for the rest of your life. And I will do everything within my power to grant your every wish."

Although his appearance was very glamorous, the words he said to her were sincere and almost knightly. If that was merely the performance of a nobleman, then she would happily be deceived.

"Not at all, Lord Forto. You are a knight who successfully protected his family. And now, *I* will learn how to protect our family."

Minerva resolved to become a wife who could stand proudly next to this knight.

And so, she prepared her heart and mind to be the wife of a viscount, but Forto prepared everything for her. He provided her with an adviser and a private secretary to help her with household affairs, a personal maid and bodyguard, and he even took into consideration her fragile health and hired a resident healing mage.

The members of the Luini family were all deferential toward her even though she was still quite young. She attributed it to

the fact that they had been a family of knights for generations, but as time passed, she came to understand: Forto had sacrificed himself to save this family. Everyone felt that to be the case, so while they revered him for it, they also distanced themselves from him out of some sense of guilt.

Even after becoming a couturier, Forto still possessed the spirit of a knight. Rather than giving up, he'd simply made a choice. That was how Minerva saw it, though she was never able to say it aloud.

There was one more thing she was unable to say aloud. If it was possible, she wanted a biological child of Forto's to be the heir to the family. A child of her husband, who had obtained his position of power by striving harder than anyone else in his family.

Minerva bore Forto only one child—their daughter, Fiona. It was such a difficult birth that she found herself hanging on the precipice between life and death, and her husband refused to consider having a second child.

Minerva made efforts to take care of her health, but she still was not in good physical condition. In case anything should happen to her, Minerva wanted Fiona to have younger siblings whom she could rely on. Even if they were children of Forto's second or third wife.

More than anything, she wanted more hands around to be Forto's support. When Forto was resistant to the idea, Minerva went to Tiziano to ask that he urge Forto to take a second wife. He suggested several candidates, from a prominent chairwoman to people connected with the guild.

But the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory sounded like the best choice of someone to stand by Forto's side. Her name was Lucia, a name Minerva had heard her husband mention from time to time already. She could tell without him having to say anything that he had taken a liking to this Lucia.

So, Minerva decided that she would give Lucia whatever her heart desired, whether it be money, a villa, or even expanding her family's workshop. In exchange, she would ask Lucia to be there to support Forto. That had been her plan.

However, Lucia had refused his marriage proposal.

From what Minerva had heard from others, she was under the impression that Forto and Lucia did not have a bad relationship, but maybe she didn't get along with him outside of work, or

maybe she had a secret lover, or maybe she felt she didn't want to enter aristocratic society with all its restraints. Even reading through the report on the girl that lay on top of her desk gave her no answers. However, Lucia was competent as head manager of the factory, so Minerva wanted her to continue working by her husband's side.

Minerva narrowed her eyes at a pair of names listed on page one of the report as some of the people Lucia interacted with.

"Assistant Manager Dante Cassini, and Lotta..."

Dante, of the Viscountcy Cassini, felt a debt of gratitude toward Forto. And it seemed he was also on good terms with Lucia. If he deepened his relationship with Lucia, then they might both work with Forto for a long time to come.

Then there was Lotta, the bodyguard under Forto's direct command. Some had an aversion to him on account of his blight, but he was a skilled guard and had an unwavering loyalty to Forto.

Lucia cared enough about Lotta to invite him to have a meal with her. Minerva had recommended to Forto that he make Lotta Lucia's bodyguard, with the idea that he might be moved by her candor. The reason she'd given was that there was a possibility the head manager would be targeted once again, so it was best to supply her with a strong bodyguard.

Her husband had hesitated for a moment but ultimately made his decision after personally fighting against the candidates for Lucia's bodyguard. In terms of strength, Lotta was indeed the best choice.

Lotta's replacement as Forto's bodyguard didn't come from that same pool of candidates but was someone he'd found through his noble connections. Fortunately, the Luini family was flourishing exponentially, so there was no need to worry about the expense.

If her husband's job was managing fabric and thread at the Tailors' Guild, then her job as his wife was managing the threads entangling money and people in the Luini family. By weaving and unweaving the threads twining people together, she created something resembling fabric. Cloth might be weaker than steel, but when layered together, it became as strong as armor. As long as she lived, she would continue weaving those threads, protecting the Luini family, protecting Forto.

"I'll have to search for another prospective second wife..."

Minerva murmured as she placed a finger on her golden wedding band.

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In the evening, after finishing her work at the factory, Lucia rushed to the reception room. Lotta was already in the room waiting for her, sitting pin-straight on the sofa. Lucia had requested to borrow some of his time, so he'd come to the factory while Forto was at the Tailors' Guild.

"Here, Lotta. These are the pajamas I promised to make you."

Lucia had brought the dark blue pajamas in an inconspicuous, gray cloth bag.

"Thank you very much."

Lotta politely took the pajamas with both hands. His voice was even, but for a fraction of a second, the pupils of his dark gray eyes turned horizontal. Lucia still found it difficult to read him—was that surprise or delight?

"I want to make sure they fit you," she told him. "Can you try them on in the other room?"

"Yes, I will go do that."

The reception room had an adjoining room for clients to change clothes or apply makeup.

Lucia had finished sewing Lotta's pajamas in a flash. Her mind turned to silly thoughts when she had nothing to do, so she'd focused all her energy on sewing the pajamas to ward off unnecessary thoughts and ended up finishing it much faster than she'd expected. And so, today, she'd requested Lotta to come to the factory so she could give them to him.

"I've returned..."

After having changed in the adjoining room, Lotta returned wearing his pajamas, which looked a little unbalanced paired with his leather shoes. Not that there was any helping it, since Lucia hadn't brought him any slippers.

However, the pajamas themselves suited him quite well. They were a cobalt blue that did not fade easily, and the intense blue shade complemented Lotta's black hair and dark gray eyes. The size also looked to be just right.

"They look great on you! How do they feel?"

"They feel very nice..." Lotta responded, his voice a little quiet.



Lucia internally clapped her hands. All that hard work devising these pajamas had been worth it.

Lotta hadn't been very keen on wearing smooth silk, so Lucia had found some high-quality cotton fabric that she'd washed thoroughly before sewing. The pajama shirt was a collarless V-neck and was buttoned down the front. Lotta had told her that he disliked when his collar moved around his neck, so she'd gone with an open collar that didn't cling to his neck.

Lucia had also put a lot of effort into accommodating his bicorn blight. She made a long vertical slit in the back of the pants that started just under the waist and then stopped right where his tail was. That way, his tail could pass through that hole and be taken in or out as he pleased. The waistband could be tightened with a string in the front, so even if he went up or down a little in size, the pants should still fit him. She'd also placed another long vertical slit on the bottom of the back of the shirt to prevent it from getting stuck on his tail.

Plus, when Lotta left his room in his pajamas, he'd be able to tuck his tail into his pants and fasten the slit in his shirt with hidden buttons to keep his tail out of sight. That way, he would look the same as anyone else. He wouldn't have to change his clothes just to briefly step out of his room.

"Lotta, try lying down on that sofa for a little, please. If anything feels off, I can fix it."

She wished she could have him lie down on a bed, but unfortunately, there wasn't one in the reception room.

Lotta removed his shoes and slowly stretched out on the three-seat sofa. Then, he shifted his position several times, from rolling onto his back and lying on his side. When he turned his back to her, she could see his short, thin tail. It was the same color as his hair, and it was about half the length of a sewing ruler. It was like a shorter, thinner horse tail whose hair had been trimmed short.

It was smaller than she'd expected, but his comment about how he could hide it by wrapping it around his waist and tucking it under his clothes made sense now. Now that she got a look at how it swished slowly back and forth, she could understand how it'd be difficult for Lotta to sleep in regular pajamas.

"Nothing feels off in any way. It's soft and comfortable. My tail doesn't get in the way either, so I feel I can sleep well in this…" Lotta explained as he slowly got up.

He was smiling, and Lucia couldn't help but smile too.

"Don't hesitate to tell me if there's anything about it that you don't like. Like, maybe there's another fabric you'd prefer, or the length of the sleeves isn't right, or you want it to be looser around the shoulders or waist…"

Lotta looked at her intently with his dark gray eyes. "I wish that all of my clothes could be made this way, but I know that would be unfeasible as a guard."

"You're right, it would be hard to wear pajamas all the time…"

A bodyguard couldn't very well go around in pajamas. And even when he was wearing a suit, he'd stand out if his tail was visible. But now she knew that Lotta really liked the pajamas.

"Lotta, would you like one more pair to have while this one's in the wash?"

"Yes. Thank you very much for making them for me. I will pay for the second pair, so please let me know what they cost."

Apparently, he would accept the first pair as a thank-you gift, but he wouldn't accept any more for free. Lucia decided to make the second pair as a job.

"Thank you. I'll make you another pair, then. And I'll make it as quickly as I can."

"No, there is no need to rush. Your, um, finger is red."

Lotta's gaze moved to her right hand. He was right—her index finger was a little red. She hadn't noticed until now.

"This is from working on the heated low tables. I only worked on sewing your pajamas when I had time at home," she said with a wave of her hand.

Lotta narrowed his eyes. "…Why did you decline Lord Forto's proposal?"

"Huh?"

More than the question itself, Lucia was surprised that Lotta of all people would ask. Even Lotta held his fist over his mouth.

"Please forgive me. It is not my place to ask such a thing."

There was more variation in his voice than usual as he apologized. He must have asked without thinking.

It wasn't a shock that Lotta knew that had happened. He'd been standing guard by the door on the day Forto had proposed to her, and he had been there in the carriage ride back with them. And first of all, he lived in Forto's estate, so it wasn't strange to think that he'd hear about what happened from his employer.

A commoner marrying a noble was the denouement of many a romance novel. Maybe Lotta thought it was a waste for her to turn down such a good offer.

“No, I don’t mind. Um, Mr. Forto and I aren’t a good match. It would be impossible for me to marry into the Viscountcy Luini and live as Mr. Forto’s second wife.”

“Could you not live in a separate residence? I believe Lord Forto would be able to make that happen.”

It seemed even Lotta had the mindset of a noble. He was quick to suggest that Forto could just prepare another residence for her to live in alone.

Lucia elaborated on her answer. “Well, Mr. Forto also has a wife and kids. I’m a commoner, so I’m used to a couple being one husband and one wife… No, that’s not it. Mr. Forto is a wonderful person, but I didn’t think I could be his wife. That’s it.”

If Mr. Forto were a commoner or single—that idea was only a dream. Lucia had decided that she would look up to Forto as her workplace boss and as a couturier.

“I… No, please excuse me.”

Lotta had opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He must have had something he wanted to say, but perhaps he—who had told her he had no friends—wasn’t sure if it was all right for him to say.

“Umm, I’m going to be in your care from now on, Lotta. So if you have anything you want to say, please do!” Lucia insisted. Lotta would soon become Lucia’s bodyguard, so she’d prefer him to be upfront with his thoughts.

Lotta paused for a moment, then murmured, “The two of you looked very lovely when you laughed together…”

Lucia felt a stinging pain in her chest. Still, she responded with a smile. “Well, that’s…that’s because we’re both garment makers. I laugh with everyone else in the factory too. And soon you’ll be there laughing with us too!” Lucia declared, and Lotta nodded with an unreadable expression.

Before they fell into an uncomfortable silence, Lucia decided to change the subject. “By the way, Lotta, what color do you want your second pair of pajamas to be?”

“I’ve never had to choose before. What color do you recommend, Head Manager Lucia?”

“Well, I think you’d definitely look good in black, but also maybe a light blue. Also, green is good for relaxation, while

orange and yellow are good for health. And stripes would be nice and fresh!”

Once she gave her suggestions, Lotta furrowed his brow deeply. He seemed to be having a lot of trouble deciding.

After a short while, he looked up at her and squinted his eyes as if looking at something bright. Then, he finally opened his mouth and said, “I would like green, please.”

Evidently, Lotta wanted to relax. There were many shades of green to choose from. First she would have to look through some fabric samples to choose something, from bright greens to more subdued greens. As she was thinking about that, Lotta went to the adjoining room to change back into his clothes.

Once he was ready, the two of them left the reception room. Lotta held on to his bundled pajamas with great care.

As Lucia and Lotta were walking down the hallway, they ran into Dante coming down the stairs. Apparently, he had been looking for her.

“Oh, so you were down here, boss? I wanted to talk to you about the coverings for the heated tables.”

“You mean the waterproof versions to be used in restaurants, right? The mage in charge of the waterproof cloth at the guild will be bringing them to us tomorrow.”

“That’s good, then… Lotta, are you here to deliver a package?” Dante asked, having finally noticed Lotta behind Lucia.

“No, I came to receive my pajamas.”

“Pajamas…?”

“Yeah, I made them!” Lucia said. “Personalized for Lotta.”

“Personalized for Lotta?” Dante parroted back.

“Yes. Head Manager Lucia kindly made them for me. Now I will be able to sleep without having to worry about the position of my tail.”

Lucia hadn’t told anyone else about the pajamas because of Lotta’s tail, but apparently he had no intention of hiding it himself.

“I hope you sleep soundly tonight,” Dante told him.

“Thank you. Head Manager Lucia, I will bring you your couturier’s tip within the next few days.”

She’d forgotten until he mentioned it. Lotta seemed to have the same way of thinking as a noble. Lucia had thought he’d willingly accepted the pajamas as a thank-you for protecting her,

but it seemed he intended to pay her a tip.

Nonetheless, she didn't want to dismiss his sentiment, so she decided to propose something else.

"Those pajamas are a gift and a test piece, so instead of giving me a tip, you can get me snacks!"

"Very well. I will bring them to you tomorrow or the next day. Now then, I will take my leave for today."

After responding, Lotta receded down the hallway with silent footsteps.

Lucia watched as he left, and then Dante asked, in a quiet voice, "Boss, those pajamas personalized for Lotta...do they let his tail stick out?"

"Yeah. They don't sell pajamas with a hole for a tail in the market, after all. And I figured he wouldn't want to ask Mr. Forto to make them for him. Even though he's a couturier, he's still his boss."

"True. It does sound hard to sleep with a tail..."

Dante was quick to understand, having been involved with making clothes for blighted individuals himself.

"It does. That's why I made one special for him. Here, this is the sketched design, and these are the measurements for the pattern. What do you think?"

"Interesting. So the vertical slit lets him take his tail in and out. It looks easy to change out of too. You really put a lot of thought into this... Wow, Lotta has long legs!"

Dante's eyes had stopped at the measurements for the inseam of the pajama pants. Lucia had actually had the same thought. Lotta was tall and had long, slender arms and legs, so it was no wonder he looked handsome even wearing pajamas.

"Oh, that reminds me, I should probably buy pajamas soon too..." Dante said.

"You're not going to make them yourself?"

"If I'm going to sew anything, it'll be a women's garment. When we were making the dresses for the Volandri twins, Zilo said I needed to work on my frills, so I was thinking of practicing with some lightweight fabric," Dante said. *Spoken like a diligent couturier.*

Then, Dante abruptly shifted his gaze toward her. Lucia saw herself reflected in his ice green eyes.

"Boss, can I ask you to make a pair for me? I'll pay you for them. I'd like to try wearing something different."

“Oh, in that case, how about we try making pajamas using some new designs? While you practice women’s clothes, I’ll be practicing making men’s clothes! Oh, and ask Hestia too!”

The three of them would make pajamas together, challenging themselves with new designs. Just the thought of it was exciting. She could make stylish loungewear or something lightweight and chic. With the weather growing chillier, it might even be nice to make something using fluffy, cute material.

“Yeah, I thought you might say that. Got it!” Dante agreed with a smile. It seemed he was looking forward to the challenge too.

“And down here on the back of the shirt are the hidden buttons!”

Lucia was cheerily explaining Lotta’s pajamas to Dante.

She had declined Forto’s marriage proposal, but it didn’t seem like she was going to resign from the factory. He felt relieved that she was acting like herself when it came to clothes, but at the same time, he felt a light pang of guilt for his Forto, to whom he owed a great deal.

It would be difficult for him to say that he had been sincerely rooting for them, but he had decided he would not interfere in any way shape or form. He was free from that constraint now, but even so, he felt he couldn’t step forward now with an innocent smile.

At any rate, Lucia had put a lot of thought into the design of these pajamas. They could even be recommended to other blighted individuals with tails. As he was admiring the ingenuity behind various features of the design, Lucia asked for his advice on the fabric for Lotta’s second pair of pajamas.

“Lotta said he wanted green pajamas, but there are *so* many different types of greens, right? For something relaxing, I was considering a darker green, but I can’t discount a lighter green for a mental refresher. I’m not sure what Lotta prefers, so I was thinking I should ask him to look through some fabric samples.”

“Yeah, it’s probably better to let him choose…”

Even while he agreed with her, he had a strong feeling that the color green Lotta would choose would look strikingly similar to the hair color of his boss, who was before him now.

“He tried them on and lay down on the sofa, and it was a success!”

“That’s good. I’m sure Lotta will sleep like a rock tonight.”

Even though Lotta had changed in a separate room, what young woman would let a man lie down on a sofa in a room they were alone together in? *Lucia, apparently.*

And Lotta going along with what she said was just Lotta being Lotta.

He didn’t seem romantically inclined, and he said himself that he didn’t feel sexual desire, but he had to have his preferences. When Lotta and Lucia were together just now, his expression appeared softer. For some strange reason, that bothered Dante.

Starting from the end of this month, Lotta would be Lucia’s bodyguard. Dante had heard he was very good at what he did, so he was happy she would be safe. However, that meant the two would be spending more time together in close proximity. The thought rubbed him the wrong way, a feeling he tried as hard as he could to shake off.

When a noble gave nightclothes as a gift, it was to family, a betrothed, a lover, or someone they had a very close relationship with or whom they wanted to have a close relationship with. Dante suspected that even if he explained that to Lucia, she would assert that rule didn’t apply to her, a commoner and a clothier.

In that case, there was nothing wrong with him and Lucia exchanging pajamas, was there? Whether it could become a simple memory or a red thread connecting their hearts, he didn’t know, but when he’d broached the idea, she’d immediately replied with Hestia’s name.

That boss of theirs truly, genuinely cared about her employees. But she didn’t know the first thing when it came to men’s hearts. That was for certain.

“Let’s see, a pair of pajamas for you, boss… Yup, I’ve got to go with frills and lace!”

“Yeah, because I’ll see them, even if no one else does!”

People would likely see her try the pajamas on here at the factory, but Lucia didn’t seem to be counting them. Maybe he should casually mention it when he finished them—no, that wasn’t something to think about now.

The two of them started walking down the hallway, Lucia smiling at Dante’s side.

Funeral Garments and the Couturier

At dusk, Lucia arrived at the Tailors' Guild. Forto had called her here on urgent business, so she headed straight to his office.

They sat across from each other at the coffee table, Forto's expression composed yet bleak. Lucia braced herself, thinking someone had complained about one of the Magical Garment Factory's products, or that the day had finally come where she was being replaced as head manager. Then, Forto opened his mouth to speak.

"Lucia, I want to let you know before I begin that you are free to refuse should you feel disinclined. It's a bit of a difficult consultation..."

It was unlike Forto to have trouble speaking. Judging this was something serious, Lucia urged him to continue.

"What sort of request is it, Mr. Forto?"

"It's regarding funeral garments for a noble girl who died young."

"Did you say...funeral garments?" Lucia asked, making sure she heard right.

Funeral garments were the clothes that a deceased person was dressed in when placed in their coffin. It was common for people to be dressed in formal attire or one of their favorite everyday outfits. However, if the girl was a noble, then she must have had a personal tailor or a couturier who was in charge of making her clothes for most of her life. Lucia had heard that only those types of people who were close with the deceased were allowed to make funeral garments for nobles. Was it really okay for her, who'd had absolutely no contact with the girl, to make her funeral garments? Before she could voice that concern aloud, Forto continued.

"When she was well, she wore clothes purchased from my establishment as well as ones I designed for her myself. The young lady's father has asked if a female couturier, rather than myself, could make the funeral garments for her..."

Even though Forto was her couturier, her father must not have wanted a man to touch his deceased daughter. Lucia could understand his feelings.

“Right now, her body is being kept in their cellar using ice crystals, but the family needs to hold a funeral, and she will need to be transported to the temple in a few days.”

It was a custom in the capital for remains to be cremated within seven days of passing to prevent them from turning into undead. The deceased were laid in coffins with flowers, and once their family and friends bade them farewell, they were transferred to the temple to be turned to ash with fire magic, and then laid to rest in a grave. But that left them little time to get everything done.

“I will be unable to accompany you, but I can give you guidance on the design and materials. Though, since this matter concerns a person’s death, I would fully understand if you are reluctant to accept this request. It is quite a delicate matter…”

Lucia could tell from Forto’s hesitation that he was concerned for her, but she herself had selected the clothing her own grandmother had worn for her funeral: her grandmother’s favorite starched white blouse, a vibrant blue scarf, and a flowy, navy blue long skirt—in that outfit, she had looked very much like herself as she was laid in her coffin, covered in flowers, and bidden farewell.

Death came for all, so if Lucia could help create someone’s final outfit of their life, then she wanted to take on the job.

“I think I would like to accept, but do nobles have specific rules for funeral garments?”

“No, not particularly. People are generally buried in their formalwear or their favored outfits. Also, this is unrelated to nobility, but since the deceased will be cremated, in order to keep as much metal out of the coffin as possible, buttons are often switched out with wooden ones, and metal fasteners removed and clothing sewn shut with thread.”

Lucia knew that from her grandmother’s funeral. It seemed there wasn’t a great difference between commoner and noble rules regarding those matters.

“Considering the time constraint, it will be difficult to make something from scratch. You are free to take something from the Tailors’ Guild or my establishment and use it as is, or use it as a base. I do think you should meet with the client once beforehand. If you feel you want to decline after doing so, I will assume responsibility.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Forto. I’ve already experienced a family

member's funeral."

"Is that so? Normally, I would prefer to take this on myself, but the client does not wish to entrust this matter to a man, and I believe he'd prefer me not to see his daughter emaciated from her illness... The client is a friend of mine from college, you see."

Sadness clouded Forto's blue eyes. Lucia had a feeling that Forto had been close to his friend's deceased daughter.

Late the next afternoon, Lucia and Hestia arrived at the villa used as the second residence of the Earldom Xiphos. It was located in a relatively quiet district in the eastern part of the capital. It was small and cozy, as second homes often were, and there were darling flowers blooming in abundance in the bed alongside the narrow path.

A male servant cordially guided them inside, but Lucia sensed solemnity and melancholy within the house. She remembered what Hestia had told her on the carriage ride here. The Earldom Xiphos was well-known for being one of the families who were involved in running the capital's school for guards. Many members of the family became royal knights and city guards. The earldom had just recently gone through a change in family head, and the girl who had passed away was the daughter of the current earl.

"You will be in this room," the servant said as he opened the door to a parlor room for them.

A brown-haired man in a black suit rose from the sofa. With his broad shoulders and thick neck, it was easy to tell he was a knight. He looked older than Forto, so he must not have been taking antiaging measures like ingesting powdered skybat. Even more apparent was the deep sorrow on his face.

"I am Efisio Xiphos. I humbly thank you for responding to this sudden request."

"I am Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. Please accept my deepest condolences for your loss," Lucia said, her voice tense with nerves.

Hestia had accompanied her here today as her attendant, which meant she had to stay behind Lucia and not introduce herself. Feeling a little bad that Hestia couldn't join her on the sofa, she nevertheless sat down across from Efisio.

They were served tea, but Lucia's nerves prevented her from appreciating any of the aroma of the rising steam.

“I will begin by saying we do not have much time before we have to bring my daughter to the temple—the funeral will be held the day after tomorrow, and we will need to move her to the temple to be cremated that night. I will be unable to stay here to supervise, so I will be leaving more or less everything regarding my daughter’s funeral garments up to you.”

“I understand. I will dedicate myself to the task.”

This was a heavy responsibility. Lucia felt a sudden weight on her shoulders.

“My daughter, Enrica, passed away three days ago. She is currently reposing in the cellar of this house. Ice crystals have been placed down there, so the room is considerably cold.”

Lucia had already heard this from Forto, but it was still a good reminder.

“It may be hard to change her clothes, since rigor mortis has set in. My hope is that you can dress my daughter in clothing that suits her, even if it’s only the parts that will be visible.”

The man was speaking with quiet calm, but his words were still painful to hear.

“Lord Xiphos, may I ask what you have in mind for her funeral garments?”

“Well… I am not sure. Due to her illness, she was usually in her nightclothes, so the family and I are unaware of what her taste in clothes was… That sounds awful, doesn’t it?”

Efisio must have been trying to smile, but it simply looked like he had forced his facial muscles to move.

Resigning herself to the possibility that she might appear rude in front of an earl, Lucia decided to make her own request. “If you don’t mind, could you please tell me more about what your daughter was like?”

“More about my daughter… Yes, very well. Then, please allow me to begin.”

And so, in a halting voice, Efisio spoke about his daughter. Enrica was born with a heart condition. She couldn’t perform strenuous exercise, but she was a child with a sunny disposition who liked reading books and taking walks in the garden. She had only been able to attend barely a third of primary school, but she’d studied hard even from her bed. Her wish had been that someday, they could find an effective medicine to make her healthy so she could go to college.

However, starting last spring, she started spending more and

more time in bed. Then, a few days ago, her condition deteriorated rapidly, and she departed this world.

"I visited her here once a week, but I became very busy once I became earl, and on the day I was unable to come here—"

Efisio's voice cut off there as he fell into a coughing fit. Even without being instructed to, a maid brought over a cup of tea that was not steaming. Once he drank that and his voice returned, Efisio continued.

"Enrica was only thirteen years old. She did not even have a debutante dress. But I do not wish to send her off in her nightclothes, no matter how much she liked them. We hadn't had a dress made for her in a while, since my daughter herself insisted on waiting until she was back on her feet, so she didn't have any dresses that she actually liked to wear... Normally, in a situation like this, I would go to her mother or sisters to pick something out for her, but Enrica's mother is no longer with us, nor does she have any sisters—and as pitiful as it is, I cannot choose either."

The man's lips curved in an attempt at a smile, but his eyes were unmistakably sorrowful.

"I went to Forto with this request, hoping that at least for her final moment, I could dress her in clothes that befit her. But dressing her requires touching her body, which is why I requested a female couturier."

"I see..."

A heavy, restrictive gown must have been deemed too cumbersome for the girl, who was often confined to bed due to her illness. That said, it was clear that the family hadn't thought Enrica would pass away so suddenly.

Lucia's first notion was to dress Enrica in a girlish dress that was colorful and cute. With that idea in mind, she said, "Very well. In that case, how about a debutante dress or something similar to that?"

"Yes, that seems best. Ideally, she would be dressed in the clothes she liked, but...that's impossible now."

No, wait, Lucia thought. *Someone should at least know her favorite colors and her basic interests.*

"Um! I'm sure Lady Enrica had a favorite color, so could I possibly speak with whomever was taking care of her? And I would also like to take a look at the clothes she wore, even her nightclothes."

“Certainly. I will talk to the maids,” Efisio said.

Immediately, there came a knock at the door.

The male servant entered, walked to Efisio with silent footsteps, and whispered something to him. The earl had other business to attend to, so he and Lucia said their goodbyes and parted ways.

Two maids entered the parlor room. They were Enrica’s caretakers. Lucia invited the two nervous-looking ladies to sit down on the sofa and asked them to listen to what she had to say. After explaining that she would be preparing Enrica’s funeral garments, she asked the maids for their help.

“I would like to know more about Lady Enrica. I won’t speak about anything you tell me here to anyone else. I will put that in writing if required,” she said in a formal tone. The two maids nodded.

Hestia came to her side and then placed an opened sketchbook on the table so it was visible to all. This was so Lucia could take notes about Enrica, while also letting the maids see what information they were recording. That should make them feel more at ease as they spoke.

“Lady Enrica was a girl who loved to read and take walks in the garden. When she was in better health, she often liked to play in the garden of the main residence.”

“Even after she was moved to the villa, she enjoyed gazing out her window at the garden.”

The maids’ eyes were bright red. They must have loved Enrica very much.

Lucia moved on to ask the maids about the girl’s favorite colors and flowers. When they explained that Enrica’s most favorite color and flower had been violet, Lucia realized that the pretty flowers planted at this estate must have been Enrica’s choice.

Next, Lucia asked about the time when Enrica had been moved to the secondary home.

“It was the summer of last year. The Xiphos family has many knights, and the sounds of their training often could be heard through the open windows, so Lady Enrica requested to move here…”

Maybe her health started to take a turn for the worse last year, Lucia thought as she continued to ask more questions.

“What sort of books did she like to read?”

“The young lady read a variety of— Well, actually, in the past year, she mainly read adventure stories and tales of knights.”

“Do you mean romance stories, where a princess is saved at the end?”

“No, she preferred reading stories about people overcoming hardships to become knights, and stories about adventurers exploring the world and slaying monsters.”

Now that brings up questions. That description contrasted with Lucia’s image of Enrica being of a sickly, meek young girl who liked to read books and admire flowers.

“Did Lady Enrica ever mention what she wanted to be when she grew up?”

“Well…” one of the maids started. Lucia waited patiently for her to continue. If it was something she could draw, then she wanted to draw that girl’s dream on the blank page of the sketchbook. “Lady Enrica used to aspire to be like her father and older brothers. A long time ago, she would say that once she recovered from her illness, she would train and study a lot to one day become a brave knight who would protect others… But starting last year, she said that less and less. Even when she spoke about it, she would say, ‘I wanted to try holding a sword.’ Yes, in the past tense…”

The maid’s explanation finally made things click for Lucia.

“Did Lady Enrica move here because she felt she couldn’t participate in the knights’ training?” Lucia asked.

The maid froze for a moment, then covered her face and nodded.

Enrica had still been a young girl, so it was only natural that she would have wanted to be near her family—still more when her illness had left her in a vulnerable state. And yet, she had preferred to move to the villa by herself, with her stated reasoning being that she could hear the sounds of the Xiphos family’s numerous knights training from her window.

Lucia found it hard to believe that a girl who liked reading stories about knights and adventurers, who dreamed of becoming a knight like her father and brother, would dislike the sounds of training. Enrica had left the main residence for another reason entirely. It was because she had ultimately realized that her poor health meant she would not be able to pursue her dream of becoming a knight, nor could she join her

family's training.

Still, without whining or complaining, and without letting anyone else know her true reasoning, she had been able to protect her pride by moving to the villa. That was the conclusion Lucia came to, but when she saw the maids shedding tears in front of her, she couldn't bring herself to say anything else.

Once the maids calmed down, they offered to show Lucia Enrica's walk-in closet. Most of the clothes hanging in the closet were everyday garments or nightclothes. There were some ball gowns, but they were all cute, fairylike dresses for small children. Enrica had only been a few years shy of being a debutante, but she hadn't even possessed a white dress to wear to practice for her debut.

As the maids were showing Lucia the contents of the walk-in closet, one of them gently dropped her gaze and said, "Lady Enrica said she would not require new clothes for a while, so she did not even meet with Lord Luini..."

"Was the reason she didn't have new clothes made because she was unwell?"

"Yes. She said she was too embarrassed to meet with him until she grew a little more..."

Making clothes for children, who were still growing, required taking frequent measurements. If Mr. Forto saw that her measurements had not increased, then he would have noticed she was doing poorly.

Enrica had refused having new clothes made to make sure Forto did not know the poor state of her health.

"She always used to look forward so much to having tea with Mr. Forto on the days when he came to make her dresses..." one of the maids muttered.

From that, Lucia realized something. Forto was probably the last person Enrica had wanted to see her in ill health. Lucia didn't know if Enrica had admired him or had a small crush on him, but she had a feeling the girl wanted Forto to remember her as she was when she was healthy.

"What a dignified girl..." Hestia murmured in a strained voice as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. She must have come to the same conclusion as Lucia and been unable to hold back.

As if a dam had broken, the maids wept as they continued speaking about Enrica.

“When her health declined this summer, she started dismissing us to the other room more and more often. For a while, she called for us only for the bare minimum… She spent a lot of time looking up at the sky from her window. I suspect she knew she was going to die.”

“Even still, until her dying breath, she didn’t utter a single complaint… She was truly a strong, dignified girl.”

The maids broke into uncontrollable sobbing and were unable to continue. Lucia fought back the tears forming at her eyes. She was here to make Enrica’s funeral garments. She mustn’t cry. Enrica Xiphos had been a proud noble until the very end. That much was clear to Lucia.

Once they finished their conversation, Lucia moved to another room to get herself dressed properly. She put on her winter coat and fastened it to the very top button, then pulled on a pair of winter boots over wool stockings.

Even with all that protection against the cold, the cellar she was guided to was markedly cold. Thanks to the numerous ice crystals in the room, she could even see her breath.

Along the wall, two magical lanterns were lit, casting a pale orange glow over the room. In the center of the cellar was a bed of plain wood, on top of which lay a girl who would never wake from her slumber. She had an ashen face, thin wrists, and dull, light brown hair. Her skinny body was dressed in a white, frilly nightgown, and she was surrounded by many white flowers. Lucia had mentally prepared herself before coming here, but she actually didn’t feel any fear.

“Please excuse us.”

Lucia entered the cellar with the maids so she could take Enrica’s measurements. Her body was already stiff and cold. As she gently passed the tape measure over the girl’s body, taking care not to move her, Lucia was astonished at how skinny she was. She could wrap the fingers of one hand around the girl’s wrist, and her shoulders were so thin that it seemed an embrace might break them.

But she would be failing as a clothier if she expressed her pity aloud here. She had come here to make the best outfit to send Enrica to the other side, after all. Lucia clenched her molars, and with frozen fingers, she noted down the measurements in her sketchbook.

Once Lucia was finished taking measurements, one of the maids asked, “Pardon me for asking, Head Manager Fano, but what are you thinking of making for her funeral garments?”

“I would like to make her a knight’s uniform.”

“What? A knight’s uniform?” the maid repeated perplexedly, her teary, red-rimmed eyes growing wide.

Lucia knew it was a ludicrous choice of outfit for the young daughter of an earl. Enrica’s father, Efisio, was also likely expecting a cute, fairylike outfit or a beautiful gown fit for a girl of her status. But Lucia didn’t think those types of garments were what this young girl—no, what Enrica Xiphos would have wanted to wear.

“What Lady Enrica wished to be as an adult was a knight, right? So I believe a knight’s uniform is the only option.”

“But the young lady never attended school for chivalry…”

Enrica had never served as a knight’s apprentice, much less been a part of a knight’s brigade. They couldn’t very well dress her in an official knight’s uniform. And neither could they use the training uniforms worn in college chivalry courses. That being the case, there was only one thing to do.

“I will make Lady Enrica her very own majestic and pretty knight’s uniform.”

“But there are only two days until—”

“That will be just fine. Trust me—I’m a clothier of the Tailors’ Guild!” Lucia exclaimed with a wide smile.

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Lucia and Hestia were in a small workroom at the Magical Garment Factory when Dante and Zilo burst in.

“Dante is here, at your service!”

“Your humble servant Zilo has arrived!”

“You two, stop saying foolish things and hurry up and sew these strings!” Hestia ordered.

Lucia had asked the two of them if they could help her once they were done with their regular work, and they had arrived after finishing their day’s tasks in record speed. *Before afternoon tea, even.*

The veteran stitchers had also returned to the factory to have tea and then stayed to help embroider the heated low table covers while giving guidance to the others. Today, the stitchers

were embroidering white fabric with blue thread, a fact they were delighted about after having to suffer through embroidering white fabric with silver thread the other day.

“So you’re making a knights’ uniform for her funeral garments? I have to hand it to you, chief. I’m impressed by how much progress you made in a day.”

“It’s not done yet, Zilo! Save your praises for later!”

Yesterday, Lucia had stayed up all night drafting the design for the uniform, and had finalized the concept at sunrise. Since she didn’t have time to make the whole outfit from scratch, she’d hunted for a usable-looking jacket at both the Tailors’ Guild and Forto’s establishment and procured some cloth as well. Everything was in Enrica’s favorite color, violet.

Deconstructing garments before they even had a chance to be worn so that she could alter them was discourteous toward the original couturier—in this case, Forto—and she felt guilty for it, but she hoped he would forgive her.

For the uniform pants, Lucia chose a pair of white pants that were close to Enrica’s size, which she was currently working on taking apart. Since Enrica could not be moved much, Lucia was dismantling the pants into parts to be put together again later.

Also, Lucia could not bring Zilo or the other stitchers to the cellar. Lucia was the only one who would be able to make minute sewing adjustments on the day she dressed Enrica in the uniform, so they were currently in the process of sewing on strings wherever possible to be used to fasten the parts together.

The pants seemed to be working out just fine, but the area around the collar of the uniform was presenting some difficulties. Rather than a tight-fitting collar, she had made an attachable collar with a more open, streamlined design. The lapel had round, flat, silver buttons, and the hem of the jacket cut away and fell to the sides, resembling the long hem of a tailcoat. Lucia had taken some of the fabric from the light purple jacket and used it to add a band collar to the front. However, it was proving difficult to line the collar up with the rest of the jacket in order to sew them together.

“Chief, leave sewing the collar on to me. I’ll show you the trick to doing it another time.”

“Thank you, Zilo!”

“Are these the wooden buttons you’re using? I’ll go paint

them," Dante said, picking up the small box containing the wooden buttons. Since Enrica would be cremated, they could not use metal buttons; instead, the plan was to paint wooden buttons a metallic color so they resembled metal.

Next, Lucia worked assiduously to sew a pair of knights' combat boots—or at least, a pair of cloth shoes that were designed to look that way. Her plan was to make them like loose socks that were fastened in the back, but she really wanted to attach soles to them too. *Once Enrica is laid in her coffin, flowers will be placed on top of her, so the shoes won't even be visible. I don't need to get* all *the details perfect, right?* Lucia's post-all-nighter mind tried to convince her, but still her fingers worked diligently.

They all continued their work silently, and for dinner, they ate sandwiches at the table in the corner of the room and washed them down with coffee.

"Boss, you're going to have to make the final adjustments, so get some sleep first. Your stitches are getting a bit uneven," Dante said. He had just finished sewing the undershirt of the uniform while she was still working on the shoes.

She couldn't deny that her eyes were bleary. Pulling an all-nighter was not the best thing for sewing efficiently. But there was still one more thing she wanted to make.

Dante was watching her with his ice green eyes as though he were waiting for her orders.

"Dante, do you still have some energy left in you?" she asked.

"I am ever your energetic, youthful, unflagging, eager employee. What do you require, boss?"

"I want to use some shiny white fabric to make a sword! And a hilt."

Lucia flipped to the next page in her sketchbook. Dante immediately nodded.

"It's mainly straight stitches. No need to say more. Now, go to sleep."

Lucia decided to follow his advice and went to lie down for a few hours in the nap room.

Once she woke up from her nap, she splashed water on her face and hurried back to the workroom.

"Mr. Forto?"

When did he get here? Forto was sewing a button onto the violet knight's uniform, which was the last task that could be completed in the workroom. Dante did the final ironing and then

wrapped the knight's uniform, undershirt, pants, and cloth shoes in a white sheet.

"Lucia, I believe I won't be able to give my final farewell to Lady Enrica, so please tell her 'good night' for me," Forto said, his voice lower than usual.

"I will," she replied gently.

Once she got dressed, she and Dante—who was carrying the bundle of clothes for her—headed for the second residence of the Xiphos family under the glow of the sunrise. Being a man, Dante could only go as far as the front door. A maid took the bundle from him to carry it inside.

From there, they went to the cellar so Lucia could change Enrica into the garments and sew the finishing touches. She couldn't move Enrica very much, so she placed the deconstructed clothing onto her body and adjusted the strings in the back to make the clothing sit as naturally as possible. Even having done that, there were some parts that seemed to stand out, so Lucia had to sew in some concealed seams on the sides and back. It was difficult to see, so Lucia borrowed a side table and placed some extra magical lanterns on top.

Enrica's maids offered to help, so they alternated coming down into the cellar. With their assistance holding up Enrica's limbs and keeping fabric in place, the work became much easier.

Still, the cellar was kept cold enough to keep Enrica's body from decomposing. Even with her winter coat on, Lucia's gloveless fingers holding her needle were freezing. As she continued to push herself, her elbow movements slowed. Then her toes became frozen and her knees began to shake.

When she reached the point at which she was so cold she was unable to keep sewing, she went upstairs, where the maids brewed her some hot tea. She eagerly drank it down, nearly burning her tongue, then she stretched her body and jumped up and down for a bit. Once she regained feeling in her hands and feet, she returned to the basement and threw herself back into sewing.

At some point, the maids told her to stop, saying that her lips were turning blue, but she claimed evasively that her makeup had just come off and that she was always that pale. They were also concerned she was going to catch a cold, but she assured them she'd be fine since this was just for today, and then continued working.

Toward the end, she accidentally pricked her finger with her needle several times, but she told herself this was a once-in-a-lifetime garment that she couldn't under any circumstances do a slapdash job on. With that resolve, she continued sewing.

After working as fast as she could, Lucia finished dressing Enrica Xiphos's body in the violet knight's uniform just as the clock struck noon.

Please become a knight on the other side, Lucia prayed as she placed the cloth sword on Enrica's right hand.

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"Thank you so much... It looks absolutely perfect..."

It took some time before Efisio could finally get the words out. He was unable to sustain the facade of composure; his voice trembled as he spoke.

His daughter, her eyes closed, was dressed in a violet-colored uniform that fit her like a glove, as if it had been made-to-order.

She wore a white shirt underneath a violet knight's coat and white pants that looked good for running around in, and a pair of black boots made of cloth. A white sword was placed on top of her right hand and laid across her body to her left shoulder. The shininess of the material made it look like a real blade.

Rouge colored Enrica's cheeks and lips, making her look healthier than usual. If it weren't for the white coffin she was lying in, he felt as though he could nudge her awake.

When the maids told him that Head Manager Fano wanted to make Enrica a knight's uniform for her funeral garments, Efisio had thought it must be some sort of joke. Then, he wondered if it was a way to express consideration toward their family of knights. But apparently, it was what Enrica, his own daughter, had wished for.

My adorable little girl. He'd turned to doctors, medicine, healing mages, the temple, desperate for a cure. He'd even turned to medicinal herbs from the Eastern Kingdom and the prayers of Išrana. But to no avail. All he received were consoling words, telling him the best he could do was let her lead a safe, quiet life.



He wanted to dress her in beautiful gowns and send her to glamorous dances. He wanted to buy her a wedding dress and give her away to be married to a trustworthy partner someday. That was the life he'd always thought she deserved, and one that would make her happy.

But last night, he'd found out her funeral garments would be a knight's uniform. He'd stood by her side, trying to understand why, when his daughters' maids explained it to him. Enrica had aspired to be a knight, like him and her brothers, and the reason she had spent so much time in the garden wasn't to admire the flowers but to watch their training sessions.

When his daughter had announced she wanted to move to the villa, she'd smiled and said that the loud sounds of their training made it hard for her to sleep. She must have felt longing and envy, and heartbreak over not being able to follow that path herself, yet she had voiced none of those feelings aloud.

The maids had been sworn to secrecy, so not even they had been able to say anything until now. However, the green-haired couturier had figured it out just based on the facts that Enrica had requested to move to the villa and that she liked to read stories about knights and adventurers.

And then she had been able to find out from the maids what Enrica had truly wanted to be when she grew up. His daughter had dreamed of becoming a knight just like him. Meanwhile, he himself—her own father and a knight—had been completely unaware. Even fools had their limits.

When Efisio came to the villa once a week to visit her, Enrica used to laughingly recommend that he get remarried, and that her two older brothers get married too. As if she knew she would be dying soon.

She must have been frightened of death, and she must have been suffering through her illness. But Enrica never complained. She fought alone until she crossed to the other side. *What a proud, brave, strong child she was!* He wished she'd expressed her pain, her sadness. He wished she'd cried in his arms. The fact that he couldn't help but have those thoughts was proof that he was much, much weaker than her.

"Lord Efisio..." a voice whispered.

Efisio wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. His vision was so blurry, he could scarcely make out the face of the couturier in front of him.

“I believe the reason Lady Enrica did not want to see Mr. Forto wasn’t because she didn’t want him to make dresses for her. It might have been that, since she wanted to be a knight, she was embarrassed to have him see her with the thin arms of a little girl.”

“She was…?”

Even though she had little opportunity to wear them when she was doing well, Forto used to make new garments for Enrica. She was always excited the day before his visits.

However, once she moved to the villa, she declined his suggestions to have a new dress made, saying she could wait until she grew a little taller. She needed to try on clothes during Forto’s visits, and since the process required energy on her part, she said they could just wait until her health improved.

Whenever Efisio mentioned Forto’s name, Enrica would momentarily look down at the floor. It was only now that he realized that she used to do that. Just as he felt his body start to burn with regret, he heard a compelling voice ring out.

“But see how wonderful she looks in her knight’s uniform. I am sure Lady Enrica can meet Mr. Forto now.”

The couturier looked straight at him with her blue eyes, and he was sure she was entreating him to let Forto see his daughter. Forto, who was Enrica’s longtime personal couturier, was one of the few men his daughter knew outside of the family.

Finally, Efisio—as dense as he was—understood. Even though Enrica had wanted to see Forto, she’d refused to so that he would not see how emaciated she had become from her illness. That was her pride as a noble—and her stubbornness as a maiden in love.

“…Yes, you are exactly right.”

Efisio turned to Head Manager Fano and nodded firmly.

Dressed in this knight’s uniform, Enrica would have wanted to invite Forto to their home to show him. No, she probably would have hopped onto a horse and gone to see him herself.

His daughter, clad in the violet knight’s uniform, looked to be faintly smiling.

Efisio turned to look at the servant behind him.

“Ride quickly to Forto. Ask him if he’d like to see my daughter in her funeral garments.”

***

“Achoo! Achoo!”

“Goodness, look at you! You’re chilled to the bone!” Hestia nearly screeched as she wrapped a blanket around Lucia. The warmth of it was very welcome.

“I’m fine! I’m just a little chilly.”

“A little, my foot! You’re as cold as ice! What if you catch a cold?” Hestia cried as she placed a hand against Lucia’s cheek.

Lucia was about to tell her she was being overprotective, but she fell silent at the sight of her friend’s moist eyes. She really had made her worry.

They were currently in the carriage. Lucia was headed back home to the Fano residence. Once she felt relief at finishing the job, she had started sneezing incessantly. When Hestia came to get her, she’d fretted over her catching a cold and insisted she go straight home.

The Xiphos family would soon be moving Enrica’s coffin to the main residence for everyone to say their goodbyes, and then, that night, she would be transported to the temple.

“I wonder if she got to see Mr. Forto yet…” Lucia muttered, looking up at the blue sky outside the window.

“Chief… I have a good feeling that she was able to move on to the other side with a smile. That uniform was simply magnificent,” Hestia told her, taking the effort to make her voice bright and cheerful.

“Yeah. Maybe she’s over there riding a horse and learning how to use a sword from her grandfather or great-grandfather.”

Maybe she really had caught a cold. The inside of her nose stung a little. She sniffled loudly, and with a flourish, Hestia produced a handkerchief and held it to Lucia’s face.

“It’s okay, Lucia. Your work is over now…”

Hestia held her tight, squeezing the breath out of her.

“*Hestiaaa…*”

A miserable sound escaped from Lucia’s throat, then at last, she cried. She’d tried so hard to keep herself from crying until now, but once she started, the tears wouldn’t stop. She held the handkerchief to her face as she sobbed.

While Lucia was putting the garments in place, and while she was sewing, she’d felt the coldness and stiffness of Enrica many times over. No one knew how long they had to live, and people did not have long in this world. But hadn’t Enrica’s time come much too soon?

“It’s not fair!” Lucia wailed. “I wanted her to get healthy and learn how to be a knight, and then I could have made cute uniforms for her!”

“Yes, I know.”

“Mr. Forto would have made her gowns, so I would have made so many pants or comfortable skirts that were easy to run in that would have looked so good on her!”

“Yes, I know…”

Lucia moaned and wept in her friend’s arms until she got it all out of her system.

Once she was back home, her entire family looked at her tearful face with concern, and after hearing Hestia’s exaggerated claims, they became even more worried about her being cold. In the end, she warmed herself by taking two hot baths—one right after getting home and one before bed. She decided no one had to know that she’d stayed in the bath for too long and ended up getting dizzy.

“Lucia, drink this and then go straight to sleep. And don’t get out of bed again. Do you understand? Don’t get up, okay?”

“Okay, okay.”

With her mother making doubly sure that she would stay in bed, Lucia obediently accepted the hot milk with honey. She had a feeling that if she took so much as a single step into the hallway, one of her family members would pounce on her.

Lucia sat on her bed, holding her cup of hot milk, and sank into thought. Enrica was probably being turned into white ash in the temple right about now. And tomorrow, that ash would be laid to rest in a grave.

Maybe Enrica was embarking on a new life as a knight’s apprentice. All Lucia could do was pray that that was true.

Once again, she had immersed herself in making clothes and managed to complete her task in time. But even though Enrica’s father had thanked her, Lucia didn’t feel as happy as she normally did. She’d tried to do her best, but there were still some parts of the uniform that looked out of place on Enrica’s unmoving body, and she hadn’t been able to tidy up the back.

Although she knew it was an impossible dream, she wished she could have seen the girl wear a stately, cute knight’s uniform when she was alive.

“When it’s my time to join her on the other side, I’ll make her a *proper* handsome knight’s uniform! I’m sure she’ll be a bigger

size then too!" she purposefully said aloud in an attempt to bring herself some closure. But she knew this feeling wouldn't fade for a while. Making funeral garments certainly was a challenge.

When Lucia finished making the uniform for Enrica, she'd been hit with a thought. *When I die, what do I want to be wearing on my journey to the other side?* Lucia couldn't call an outfit to mind. She still wanted to make so many improvements to her everyday outfits, and there were so many new designs, materials, and colors she was interested in. It would still be a long time before her own funeral clothes would need to be decided.

What sort of person did she want to be when she died? Rephrasing the question that way, she had no doubts about her answer. Until her very last day alive, she wanted to be a couturier. As long as her hands could move, she wanted to design and create garments.

"When it comes down to it, I really do like clothes…"

Lucia was blessed in so many areas of her life. She earned money working a job she loved, and she learned new things every day. She had a good boss, good friends, and a good work environment. She had never felt so grateful for every day of her life. Even if someone would eventually take over for her as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, she would work her very hardest until then.

Clothes weren't trivial things. They were a vehicle for self-expression, or the armor that protected someone else. They could even be part of the precious memories that brought color to one's life.

Until the day when she would be wearing funeral garments herself, she wanted to be a couturier who could deliver others the outfits of their dreams.

The Wind-Colored Raincoat

“Someone requested that I make raincoats?” Dante said, putting a hand to his chin in surprise. He had been called into Forto’s office.

He was a couturier of the Tailors’ Guild, after all, and while he was the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory, he usually accepted direct requests when they came in. But after transferring to the factory, he had started declining requests more often, and had also begun receiving fewer of them.

Besides, in the case of raincoats, there were artisans at the guild who specialized in working with waterproof cloth. He couldn’t imagine why someone would go out of their way to request him specifically for the job. While he didn’t want to consider the possibility, it was possible that the request came from someone connected to his family, a viscountcy. It had been a while since he’d received a request through such a connection.

“It is up to you whether to accept or decline, Dante,” Forto told him in a slightly lower pitch. The request must have come from a troublesome individual. Dante braced himself as Forto slid a letter across the table to him.

“The request comes from the Vogel Group based in Ehrlichia, through the vice-chairwoman, Madam Jessica Vogel.”

Jessica—not only did that name sound familiar to him, he’d said it himself many times. *Though I feel like the last name Vogel doesn’t really suit her,* he couldn’t help but think. The woman was none other than Dante’s ex-girlfriend.

Now he understood why Forto thought he might not want to take on the job. He was the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory and held a position at the Tailors’ Guild, so it came as no surprise that Forto was aware of his past romantic relationships and who he generally associated with. It was also reasonable for him to be vigilant of any contacts Dante might have in Ehrlichia.

“You don’t need to be concerned about me, Mr. Forto.” Dante looked straight back at the pair of blue eyes on him, then continued, “Or are you worried about me getting swayed by any lingering feelings?” He was ready to promptly follow up with *I*

have absolutely no intention of disclosing confidential information pertaining to the Tailors' Guild, but before he could, his boss shook his head.

"I would never suspect you of such a thing, Dante."

"Once again, you think too highly of me."

"What was it that noblewoman with brilliant golden hair said long ago? That you are a 'devotedly sincere man.'"

"No, she said I was a 'devotedly sincere *boy*.' She was treating me like a child."

Back when Dante had been a fresh recruit of the Tailors' Guild, he'd committed a serious error. He had divulged a certain design—the next season's gown for a noblewoman from a ducal family—to an outsider. He'd gone drinking at a tavern with someone he'd considered a friend, and after being slipped a strong truth serum, he'd spoken nonstop about the design and had even drawn a quick sketch.

He realized what had happened the next morning, after the serum had worn off. Without hesitating, Dante went straight to the duke's estate, confessed his mistake to the door guard, and bowed his head and asked him to let the noblewoman know. To his surprise, the noblewoman granted him, an ordinary couturier, a face-to-face meeting with her on the spot.

Dante apologized for divulging her gown design to an outside party, then got down on both knees and begged for her forgiveness. He desperately insisted that the blame rested solely on him, not on the Tailors' Guild or Forto. She asked him for more information, and he spared her no details, explaining that he'd been dosed with a truth serum.

He offered to compensate her for the cost of the dress, no matter how many years it took, but the lady simply waved her black fan side to side to express her refusal. Then, she walked to his side, took his hand, and made him rise.

"Well, aren't you a devotedly sincere boy. Do be careful who you choose to associate with in the future," she said in a sweet voice while delivering an elegant smile.

It was clear to Dante that she forgave him because she saw him as a child. Had he been an established couturier at the time, then she would have surely held him accountable.

"Tell Forto this for me, please—I look forward to a new design."

From there, Dante went directly to the Tailors' Guild, this time

dropping to his knees to apologize in front of Forto. He was prepared for Forto to cast him aside, but he had only given him a pale-faced warning. Every time Dante looked back on that memory, he felt ashamed and guilty.

"...To be perfectly honest, I've never been more certain my life was over than I was at that moment."

"You gained a valuable experience while still a new recruit, Dante."

That's one way to put it. Forto made it sound as if it were a positive story. Dante never wanted to repeat an experience that gave him such terrible stomach pain as that had. Ever.

"When all those pendant stones were delivered on the day I wrote a thank you letter for her payment, I was flustered out of my mind..."

It seemed Forto was reliving the same memories. From his posture—one hand covering his face—Dante could guess how he was feeling.

Once Forto designed the noblewoman a new dress for the next season, she had paid him for both the old design and the new. And that wasn't all. Forty pendants with enchantments to protect against poison, confusion, and aphrodisiacs were delivered, addressed not to the guild but to Fortunato Luini. Dante had heard that magical tools with three enchantments were considerably expensive. To send forty of them went beyond generosity. Still, it was undeniable that the woman had style.

At the time, Forto hadn't been the guildmaster yet, but there were some people who thought those pendants helped give him a boost. It was unclear whether it was by coincidence, if that noblewoman had somehow had the foresight to do so, or if she simply had taken a liking to him, but Forto went on to become the youngest guildmaster of the Tailors' in its history.

Moreover, after that, a noblewoman appeared wearing a gown that looked identical to the one originally meant for the other noblewoman, but her family's name was no longer included in the peerage of Ordine.

"It took me by surprise too. Though those stones really were a blessing..." Dante said, his faraway look matching Forto's own.

Currently, Dante was wearing a shiny, round, emerald green stone hanging from a silver chain underneath his shirt. The stone was the same color as that noblewoman's eyes. She'd picked that color so he would never forget his mistake.

Now he was an established couturier. He had no intention of hesitating to accept any opportunity to make garments, be they for an ex-lover or an old enemy.

“Well then, I’d like to get back to talking about this project, so if you don’t mind…”

Dante picked up the letter from the table and ran his eyes over it. He recognized that easy-to-read handwriting, detailing that the design would be left up to him and mentioning a sizable sum in payment.

“High-end raincoats for Ehrlichia?” Dante read out loud.

“Yes. She would like to have a meeting first, but fundamentally, everything from the design to the test pieces will be left up to you. She will bring those back to Ehrlichia to be evaluated.”

Next, Forto produced a letter of introduction from one of the former guildmasters of the Tailors’, Tiziano Ariosto. Apparently, he had been the one to recommend Dante for the task. Despite the fact that it would have caused trouble for Forto if Dante were to decline when the former Tailors’ guildmaster had written a letter of introduction for him, he had neglected to tell him about it beforehand, likely out of consideration for Dante himself.

As a couturier, it was an exciting project that gave him a good amount of freedom, and it was also a job that would advertise the Tailors’ Guild in Ehrlichia. There was no reason to turn down such a great opportunity.

“I accept.”

“…If possible, could you also ask Lucia for her help?”

Dante pretended not to notice Forto pause for a beat before saying that.

“Right, raincoats are made with waterproof cloth, and waterproof cloth is an invention of the boss’s good friend, after all. And for an important task like making raincoats for Ehrlichia, it’s probably best for the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory to be involved.”

After saying so, Dante finally brought the tea he’d been served up to his lips. It had already gone lukewarm.

Once he left Forto’s office, Dante headed for the carriage stop, memories resurfacing as he did.

Jessica had always listened to him with a smile as he talked at length about clothes, and he, in turn, had enjoyed listening to

her talk about business, even if he didn't fully understand it. But about a year ago, she had abruptly ended things by sending him a letter that stated she couldn't be with a man who was only interested in talking about clothes.

At the time, he'd thought that he must have pushed her to her limit. She probably didn't have much interest in fashion but had patiently listened to him speak about it because she was his girlfriend. She was a merchant's daughter, and he was, technically speaking, the son of a viscount. She must have also been conscious of that difference between them.

He'd had a hard time getting over her, but he had no desire to do something like chase after her. Then, a few months later, he'd learned she had married a merchant from Ehrlichia. His and her family's companies formed a partnership, and the general consensus was that neither family could have made a better match.

Dante wasn't even upset. She had simply chosen the best option for herself as a merchant. But before he knew it, he'd started to feel like he didn't want to bother with romance anymore. To be precise, he'd become tired of trying to be understood by another. That was not to say that he had completely given up on wanting to find love, though. It was a difficult way to be.

"Okay, that's enough. I need a change."

As if shaking off the self-pity that left him feeling heavy-footed, Dante picked up the pace.

"Boss, got a second?"

"What's up, Dante?"

When he entered the office of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia looked up at him, a sheaf of papers in her hands and her expression dark. She was currently working hard to learn how to properly read financial statements, but frankly, she looked like nothing so much as a student trying to avoid having to take a makeup exam in her worst subject.

There should be no problem with leaving the financial statements to the accountants, but Lucia had asserted that she wanted to learn how to read them to a certain extent, since she was the manager, and now her copies of the statements were filled with cramped notes. While he admired her as an exemplary boss, everyone had their strengths and weaknesses. He decided

he would pull her back to what she was good at.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I accepted a request from an Ehrlichian company to make high-end raincoats. It's an express order, so would you be able to help me with it? We can come up with our own designs and pick what we like from both."

"Oh, fun! Count me in," Lucia said, instantly accepting with a smile.

The artisans of the Tailors' Guild were working on the covers for the heated low tables and heated tables, as were various workshops and embroiderers. Forto had also called on retired stitchers, asking if they wanted some work for winter. If they accepted, they would each be paid a bonus, and they would also be given priority on orders of heated low tables or heated tables for their own use. Dante heard that a great number of retired stitchers had already accepted the offer.

The waiting period for the heated tables sold on the regular market had already extended into the next year. It was no longer seeming like a joke that there would eventually be a one-year wait.

"This project has a short turnaround, but we'll first start with a test piece of our design, and if the company likes it, it'll be made into an official product, and if that all goes well, they'll move on to mass production."

Dante showed Lucia the specifications document, and she tilted her head quizzically.

"This looks like a pretty hefty sum," she noted. "Is that reasonable for making products for Ehrlichia?"

"It's enough that even if they don't like any of the raincoats we make, we'd still be in the black."

"Is that normal?"

"No, not really. This is sort of like an upfront investment on their part. They're prepared for the possibility that it might not work out."

"This is a big responsibility, then. But it sounds fun! Oh, let's make sure we're all on the same page with the basic concept for the raincoats. It'll be a problem if we go in completely opposite directions."

His boss was quick to catch on and grasp the situation. She was right—whether they prioritized function, appearance, or luxuriousness, there was no getting back lost time if they went the wrong way with the raincoats.

The two of them opened up their sketchbooks.

"First of all, we have to make sure we don't obstruct the waterproof properties of the coats," Dante started. "We should use high-quality waterproof cloth and sew along the inside. I've heard Ehrlichia is more mountainous than Ordine and has a harsher climate, so durability is also important."

"Then, we'll have to make sure the seams are tight enough that water can't pass through."

"We should also seal up the seams at the end, then. We can't have high-end raincoats that let the inside get exposed to water."

It would be best to ask artisans at the Tailors' Guild who were specialists in that area to handle the sealing. Dante and Lucia both noted that down in their sketchbooks at the same time.

"Also, they'll definitely need to have long sleeves and be dress-length, right?" Lucia asked. "If the parts that cover the wearer's body aren't large enough, then that'll pose problems in the wind. If Ehrlichia has a lot of mountains, then there are probably a lot of areas that get strong winds."

"In that case, all of them should have hoods too."

"And they should have handy strings to adjust their size."

"If we want to make the coats stylish, then we should use hidden strings of the same color as the coat. We have a big budget, so we should be able to make that happen."

Having decided on most of the features for dealing with the weather, they could now discuss the designs.

"Should we go with a unisex design? Or should we come up with separate designs for men and women?"

"Since they asked for high-end raincoats, we should probably make them distinct by gender and make a few different patterns for each. I'd also like to make a raincoat that has an aristocratic, formal feel to it. Something that looks a bit like a suit that you wouldn't think twice about wearing to pay someone a visit."

"I think that's a great idea. Oh, and there are some patterned fabrics that have been made waterproof too. Let's go look at some samples!"

It would certainly be faster to go see the fabrics for themselves. Dante was looking forward to poring over the waterproof cloth samples at the Tailors' Guild, then going home to flip through his sketchbook and mull over the designs for these new raincoats.

"That reminds me—the dyers recently said that they've been

able to dye waterproof cloth with more colors. Though unfortunately there's still one color that they just can't seem to get."

"And what color is that?"

"White. Apparently, the more they try to mix colors to get white, the muddier it gets. The dyers and magical toolmakers were agonizing over it."

It was probably just as difficult as making white paint, though white cloth was very versatile.

"Well, who really needs pure white raincoats anyway? The Household Troops?"

"No, since they're stationed inside the castle, they can manage. The requests the guild receives are from hunters who want white waterproof cloth applied to the surface of cold-weather gear for winter so they can hunt in the snow. But the dyers couldn't quite make that happen, so at least for this year, they made them gear that's white cloth on the surface and waterproof underneath. It's cheaper that way."

"Right, it's important to be economical too!" Lucia declared with intensity.

"All right then, leave those financial statements for later and let's go check out the waterproof cloth samples at the Tailors' Guild."

"Okay!"

They both closed their sketchbooks, then stood up to make their way to the Tailors' Guild.

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The following day, Madam Jessica, the vice-chairwoman of the Vogel Group, came to pay a visit to the Magical Garment Factory. Lucia hadn't been given a lot of notice before her arrival, so she had to prepare herself in a hurry.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Jessica Vogel, vice-chairwoman of the Vogel Group."

A tall beauty with dark blonde hair appeared in the reception room. Her loose curls fell down to her bust, and her piercing brown eyes were quite striking. She wore a deep green jacket with lace at the cuffs and slits on the sides and back. Underneath that she wore a dress in a lovely shade of champagne beige. The hem of her dress was adorned with a beautiful floral pattern. It

must have been the work of a talented Ehrlichian artist. The abundant green in the pattern complemented her jacket very nicely.

Nearly spellbound by the woman's clothing, Lucia joined Dante in responding to her greeting.

"Thank you very much for meeting with me on such short notice. Please accept this in lieu of a proper gift."

Vice-Chairwoman Vogel placed a long silver box on the table, then gently opened it herself. Inside was a bolt of fabric that gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the windows. For a moment, it appeared to be black silk, but Lucia and Dante soon leaned forward, sensing the magical power emanating from the surface of the fabric. Then, at the exact same moment, they both expressed their astonishment aloud.

"Is this baphomet wool?"

"It has to be first-grade—no, special-grade?"

"Yes, it is a special-grade fabric made using the wool of baphomets raised on an Ehrlichian farm. It is not a dyed fabric; rather, it comes from black baphomets," Vice-Chairwoman Vogel explained with a smile.

Apparently, there was a newly established farm that gathered black baphomets with high magic; an annexed facility handled everything from processing the wool to weaving it in a seamless integration.

They were given permission to touch the fabric, and its texture was just as smooth as silk. Both Lucia and Dante admired the cloth.

"They are also looking into expanding the farm. I would be delighted if you could test out this fabric and let me know if you believe it could be usable."

A black fabric that won't fade, with this luster and texture? Lucia internally wished she could order a batch for her personal use right this second.

They moved on to discuss the black baphomets, briefly touched on the raincoats, and then their meeting was over. Lucia and Dante remained behind in the reception room after Vice-Chairwoman Vogel left. They had been so absorbed in their discussion that they hadn't drunk a sip of their tea. Call Lucia tightfisted, but these were first-grade tea leaves they served to clients. As far as she was concerned, it was a waste not to drink it.

As Lucia cherishingly drank the cooled tea, Dante furrowed his brow and said, “Hey, boss. Doesn’t this project seem less like a commission for high-end raincoats and more like a sales pitch for black baphomets?”

“Does it matter? At the right quantity and price, it’s a great fabric.”

The quality, shine, and weave left nothing to be desired. And most importantly, since the material was naturally black, there was no concern about the color fading. It was, by all accounts, a thrilling fabric. Still, Dante looked somber.

“Dante, does it bother you that you were commissioned for a project but now you feel like you’re being pitched a product?”

“...Well, yeah. Something like that.”

“But that’s neither here nor there, right? We’ll make the high-end raincoats and consult with Mr. Forto about the black baphomet wool. It’s all great *and* fun!”

“Great and fun...” Dante echoed. “I guess you’re right.”

She must have convinced him. He downed his tea, and they began discussing the designs for the raincoats.

Lucia and Dante left the regular operations of the factory in the hands of the staff while they focused on designing the high-end raincoats. Forto was sending them additional personnel, so as long as there was no unexpected trouble, the two of them should be able to give the raincoats their full attention.

They were in a conference room with their sketchbooks open on the table. The reason they were not in Lucia’s office was because here, they would be able to lay out several sketched designs on the table at once.

“Let’s see, we have a translucent blue, one in burgundy, one in black, and one with a lace lining... Well, seeing as it’s almost winter, these should be good.”

“But you know, I really didn’t think the heated low tables would take *that* much waterproof cloth...”

Lucia was still a little disappointed about that fact. She hadn’t been able to get her hands on a pastel cloth that she’d had her eyes on.

Yesterday, they had gone to look at the waterproof cloth samples at the Tailors’ Guild, but while they liked the samples they saw, there wasn’t actually much in stock. The reason for that was very simple: waterproof cloth was in high demand for use in

duvet covers to protect the heated tables from stains. There were even clients who were willing to take any color they could get, so the guild was hastening to secure several first-rate products.

Right now, their job was to create sample raincoats. But although they had freedom in terms of color and patterns they could include, if the raincoats they delivered to Ehrlichia had no appeal, then they would not go on to be manufactured as official products.

These raincoats would be sold by Ehrlichian companies, and they would be sold to merchants and nobles who were quick to share their thoughts. With the reputation of the Kingdom of Ordine's Tailors' Guild at stake, they had to produce an appealing product by any means necessary.

"All right, let's get cracking on these designs!" Dante exclaimed.

"Yeah!"

Now that they were properly fired up, they sketched designs and discussed ideas as they went. Since they knew what waterproof cloth they would be using, they had already narrowed down the designs. However, they were undecided on the belts, hems, and other details of the coats. They both frowned at their sketchbooks for a long time.

"...Ah!"

Dante had been pondering with his metal pen in the inkpot when he accidentally tipped it over. Black ink spread across the table, reaching their rough drafts, and Lucia handed Dante a handkerchief.

"Use this, Dante! The ink is going to spill on your pants!"

"Don't worry—it's not a big deal. I'd feel worse getting your handkerchief dirty."

"You're wearing cotton today, aren't you? It's hard to get stains out of cotton!"

Dante didn't reach to take the handkerchief, so she threw it onto his lap. She knew it would be a huge pain to get black ink out of those light brown cotton trousers.

"Thanks, and sorry for the trouble. I was thinking about things I didn't need to be thinking about..."

The handkerchief soaked up the watery black ink. The handkerchief was starched, so it shouldn't be too difficult to lift the stain from it. What would be more difficult to lift was Dante's

peculiar gloominess. His expression and voice were cheerful, but having worked with him before, Lucia could tell when he was in a sour mood. And she also knew just when his dourness had begun.

"Hey, Dante, don't feel pressured to answer, but do you know Madam Vogel?"

Dante's shoulders twitched. Then he turned to her, his expression unreadable. He could have either been smiling or angry. She had never seen Dante like this before.

"Yeah. She's an ex-girlfriend of mine."

Lucia wished he hadn't said something so heavy with such nonchalance. He could have even dodged the question. In any case, Lucia decided to match his feigned light tone.

"Oh, really? She's pretty, and she seems like a good businesswoman."

"Yeah, she is. She always talked about how she wanted to own her own boat someday, and she often postponed our dates because of her work."

"You probably had to do the same, right?"

"Well, sure. Work was just more important to both of us. Now she's actively handling her husband's company. Everything seems to be falling into place for her."

Dante *seemed* to be completely over her, but his gaze fell to the sketched design at the edge of the table. A green raincoat. Lucia didn't know if he had unconsciously designed it or if he'd designed it because he still had feelings for her. But there was one thing Lucia did know, and that was that the green raincoat was beautiful and would surely look stunning on her—on Vice-Chairwoman Vogel.

"Dante, let's throw in a complimentary raincoat."

"Huh? For who?"

"For Madam Vogel! She can be an advertisement for the high-end raincoats in Ehrlichia!"

Her green-eyed assistant manager's jaw dropped.

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On the night before their delivery date, Dante let out a long exhale as he finished dressing mannequins in the raincoats. Together with Lucia, he had decided on the raincoats' design, made the paper patterns, cut the cloth, and sewed everything

together. They'd had the help of stitchers and the staff in charge of waterproof cloth from the guild, so the work had progressed smoothly.

When they had told them that they were making raincoats to be brought to Ehrlichia, everyone had put in their best effort in the name of Ordine's Tailors' Guild, so they had of course produced only the finest work.

They had made four test pieces. The first was a pale aqua blue raincoat. It was similar in appearance to a winter coat, but it had a wide collar and pockets. It was an A-line silhouette, which made it easy to move in, and the addition of sleeve straps allowed the wearer to roll up their sleeves and keep them in place. It was slightly see-through, due to the translucent quality of waterproof cloth, which meant the wearer could change up the impression the outfit gave depending on what they wore underneath.

The second design was a burgundy raincoat, similar in style to a standard straight coat but made with waterproof cloth that resembled leather. It came with a long removable belt around the waist. It could be tied tightly to accentuate the waist, tied loosely to act as an accent, or removed to emphasize the straight silhouette of the coat. Leather coats were more popular in Ehrlichia than Ordine, so Dante expected this to be the familiar choice.

The third raincoat was black, but it had a unique glossy texture that was unlike leather. This was an overcoat designed for nobles. It was double-breasted, fastened with buttons, and long enough that the trailing hem would flow behind the wearer as they walked. It was technically for men, but it could also give off a dressy look if worn unbuttoned over a dress, so it could also be recommended for women.

Then, the fourth design was a raincoat made of highly translucent, light blue waterproof cloth that had a layer of charcoal-colored lace lining attached underneath. As one might expect based on the tears from those who had manufactured the waterproof cloth, the lace was perfectly uniform. Moreover, the cutters and stitchers had shed many tears as well when it came to making and combining the lace pattern pieces, with excellent results to show for it. Of course, that included Dante.

This design had a standard silhouette, but the color worn underneath would change the look entirely. Black showing

peeking through lace would give the impression of calm sophistication, white would look quite stylish, and red would add a seductive flair.

The last design—the green raincoat to be given as a gift—was not placed on a mannequin. That was because Dante hadn't finished sewing it yet. When Lucia had asked him about Jessica, he'd stupidly given the honest answer that she was his ex-girlfriend.

Although, after hearing his answer, his boss had seemed unconcerned and had even suggested that they make Jessica her own complimentary raincoat to wear as a form of advertisement. He wasn't sure if it was a good idea, but he didn't want to refuse and have Lucia think he was still hung up on Jessica, so he'd agreed against his better judgment. He had assumed they would come up with the design together, but Lucia had promptly pointed to one of his sketchbook designs—the green raincoat.

She knew without me having to say anything, he'd thought at the time. That raincoat was based on something he had once designed specifically for Jessica. He had designed it for her when the two of them had still been dating; he'd had the idea to sew her a coat as a present for winter. He had redesigned it as a raincoat because he was confident in the coat's shape. *Not because I still have feelings for her,* he'd nearly added as an excuse before stopping himself. That wasn't the sort of thing one talked about with one's superior.

In the end, he'd told Lucia that he was particular about the design, hence the fact that he was now in the middle of sewing it himself. Though there was some truth to that. It was Dante's personal opinion that clothes looked better on a person when made by someone who knew them. He wanted to provide Jessica with a raincoat that she could show off and advertise in Ehrlichia. *No, scratch that.* What he really wanted was to give Jessica Vogel a raincoat to make her look her finest. It was an attempt to give himself some closure, and that need for closure was most likely proof that he still held some affection for her after all.

"I hope she likes them…"

The four raincoats displayed on the mannequins were quite a sight to behold. It was safe to say these were his—or rather, his and Lucia's best works. He wished she were here so they could commend each other on their efforts, but Lucia had gone with Hestia to brush her teeth after having a late-night snack. She

often ate sweets at the factory, so she had recently become worried about cavities.

"Good work. Even high-ranking nobles will want raincoats this fine."

There was a knock at the door, and in came Zilo with some fresh coffee for him. Dante thanked him, took the coffee, and then Zilo continued speaking before Dante could step away.

"Dante, I'd like to talk to you about Madam Vogel. Do you mind?"

Zilo knew that he and Jessica had dated in the past. He had nothing to hide, so he gave a short nod.

"Be my guest. She's our important client right now, after all."

"Apparently, her family partnered with the Vogel Group because their business wasn't doing so well, so she married the eldest son of the Vogel Group's chairman, who is now the chairman. It was at the suggestion of a noble who owns a large baphomet farm. It seems their goal may be to develop a new market here in Ordine."

Dante kept his expression controlled, but he couldn't stop himself from dropping his gaze. He suspected Jessica must not have had much of a choice in the matter. And she hadn't even come to him for advice—not that there was anything he could have done.

"I more or less already knew all that. Besides, this all happened after we broke up." *So it has nothing to do with me,* he wanted to add on with feigned disinterest, but he found himself unable to under Zilo's amber red stare.

"If you can say it's over, then why don't you move on to the next?"

"The next... If I have some sort of theatrical encounter like you did, Zilo, I'll think about it."

"Is that right? I'd say such an encounter is closer to you than you might think."

Zilo's teasing remark caught him off guard, and his hand shook. He readjusted his hold on the cup to keep the coffee from spilling out. *Jeez, even if that is a joke, it's in poor taste.*

"Hey, Zilo, wasn't it *you* who told me not to bring romance into the workplace?"

"Ah, so I did. I retract that statement."

A senior employee shouldn't take back the words he said to his juniors so easily, Dante thought.

“If you’re interested in the chief, then the sooner you act, the better. You don’t have to hold back for Mr. Forto’s sake anymore, and if you delay, you might find her surrounded by other suitors.”

Now that *was unsparing and personal.* There was no sense of tact in Zilo’s statement. Though it was true that nobles were fond of surrounding certain people. In order to keep talented individuals close at hand, they brought them into their families. The methods were numerous, including marriage, adoption, money, temptation, or intimidation.

But even as someone of noble birth, he had distanced himself from his family to pursue the path of fashion, so he was far removed from all that. At least, so he thought. Joining the factory had brought up more questions than answers for him.

“I appreciate the advice. But boss—”

He heard the sound of returning footsteps coming from the hallway, and their conversation halted there.

***

“Head Manager Fano, I am truly thankful to you that we were able to reach a successful transaction.”

When Jessica expressed her appreciation to the head manager in the reception room of the Magical Garment Factory, the head manager’s blue eyes lit up as she responded brightly.

The newly designed raincoats had all turned out to be wonderful garments. The head manager had also explained their functions, which had exceeded Jessica’s expectations. If she brought these back to Ehrlichia, she was confident that not only would they sell for a high price, but there would be requests for additional orders and different colors.

The raincoats were currently being packed up to be sent to Ehrlichia tomorrow, on the same boat she would be returning on. Jessica’s heart jumped at the thought—but it also sank a little.

Lucia Fano, a commoner, had been made the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, which had come as a surprise to those working in the fashion industry. There were rumors concerning the possible reasonings behind such a young woman being given the post—speculation that she had been placed there as a figurehead; that the Tailors’ guildmaster, Forto’s, had a

fondness for her; or that they were actually half siblings.

However, Jessica had been personally more shocked to learn that Dante Cassini had been appointed assistant manager of the factory. Dante deeply revered Fortunato Luini, so she had assumed he would always be working close by his side.

But even if Dante had accepted the position, why was he the *assistant* manager? The Tailors' Guild performed work deeply tied to the nobility, and commoners were subject to harsh criticism. Dante, who was from a viscountcy, was more suited to the role of head manager. At the time, she couldn't help but think there had to be something going on behind the scenes.

She realized she was mistaken when she saw the two of them working together on the raincoats. Lucia and Dante were less head manager and assistant manager and more like siblings in tune with each other.

"Um, will Assistant Manager Cassini be joining us today?" Jessica asked.

For the first time since Jessica met her, Lucia responded evasively. "My apologies, but he is currently engaged in finishing up an urgent garment..."

Jessica wanted to say goodbye to Dante before returning to Ehrlichia, but it seemed his urgent work matter took priority for him.

Lucia served her tea, and they spoke for quite some time about Ehrlichian fashion, sheep, and baphomets. When Lucia received notice that she had another work-related matter to attend to, Jessica gave her a conventional formal goodbye and left.

When Jessica stepped out into the hallway, she found Dante there, standing as if he'd been waiting for her.

"Madam Jessica, allow me to escort you to the carriage stop."

She wanted to ask him if it was the assistant manager's job to personally escort the clients out, but seeing the playful look in his eyes, she decided to go along with him.

"Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to do so, Assistant Manager Cassini," she replied in an overly polite way.

Dante's shoulders started to shake. He must have been trained not to laugh out loud here.

The two of them walked down the hall together and then outside the factory.

“That took way longer than I thought— Oh, you don’t mind if I talk like we used to just for now, do you, Jessica?”

Hearing Dante speak with the same inflections he used to put her very much at ease. She decided to do the same.

“Sounds like you already are. Though hearing you speak so politely to me today was a pretty rare experience.”

“You think so? I seem to remember being pretty polite for a while after we first met.”

“Sure, until our third date.”

Jessica was surprised at how easily the memories came back to her.

But Dante nodded and said, “Oh yeah, you’re right. I stopped being so formal when I was serving you that pasta with tomato sauce, if I remember right.”

“Yes, I told you I only wanted one serving, but *someone* boiled enough for four people.”

“Well, we ended up eating it all, didn’t we?”

Dante’s rapid way of talking and his chuckle felt touchingly nostalgic. As the two of them laughed together, she felt like they had returned to old times.

“Here. I think this would look good on you,” Dante said as he unfolded some green fabric he’d had hanging from his left arm. It was evidently a raincoat.

“What’s this? Selling me something extra?”

“It’s a raincoat just for you, Jessica. Go ahead, try it on.”

“Huh? Why?”

As she was reeling with confusion at the suddenness of this offer, Dante promptly draped the raincoat over her shoulders before she could do anything about it. *Oh, honestly, this man is as quick to dress me as he was to undress me.*

She passed her arms through the sleeves; it was a perfect fit. The jacket didn’t just hang straight down but was cinched tight at the waist and gently flared at the bottom, making it easy to walk in. The sleeves were slim-fitting around her arms, but there was enough room in the shoulders to move comfortably.

The shade of the coat was also a nice, fresh green color, betraying no trace of the blue slimes used to make the waterproof cloth. Everything about the coat was perfect, from the exquisite design to its ease of movement to the fact that it was her favorite color. She knew without even having to ask that Dante had designed it himself.

“Since you’re beautiful and eye-catching, it’d be great if you could wear this to advertise the raincoats. Oh, but let me know if you’ve gained some weight. I can make alterations. Confidentially, of course.”

“Um, excuse me! Just take a look! I’m obviously maintaining my figure perfectly fine!” Jessica retorted in spite of herself, making Dante cackle. His laugh hadn’t changed at all.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake—this coat is wonderful, Dante.”

“It is an honor to receive such high praise from you, Madam Jessica,” he said, abruptly switching back to a courteous tone. That way of teasing of his hadn’t changed either.

“Dante, you really have become a couturier.”

“Thanks for the compliment. And you’ve really become a merchant, Jessica.”

“...Yes, I have,” she managed to respond with a nod. Then, she tried to voice the apology she hadn’t been able to utter before. “Dante, I’m sorry. That last letter I sent you—”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m a clothier to the end, and you’re a merchant to the end. There’s nothing wrong with that,” he stated definitively with a brilliant smile. She could tell without him having to say anything that he already knew the whole story.

“From now on, I’ll be cheering you on. As a clothier, and as your friend.”

She gave a wordless exclamation.

Ah, that’s right. Dante was a man who could say such things like they were nothing. She wished he wouldn’t abruptly put her facial muscles to the test like that. She pressed a hand to her trembling throat, then effortfully put on a smile.

“Thank you, Dante. I’ll make sure to earn enough money that someday I can buy myself my very own boat!”

“Once you do, I’ll look forward to you importing a bunch of fashion goods from Ehrlichia!”

“You know it. And Dante, you keep raising your skill and reputation as a couturier. I’ll be coming to purchase garments from you too. And I’ll be cheering you on as your friend, when I’m around.”

“Oh, only when you’re around, huh?!”

Even as they laughed together, they did not exchange contact information. From here on, the Tailors’ Guild and the Vogel Group would be doing business together. The next time they met, Jessica might have her husband or a member of her staff at

her side. And Dante might have that green-haired head manager by *his* side.

Jessica smiled as broadly as she could and said, “See you, Dante.”

“Yeah, see you, Jessica.”

They ended their conversation with the parting words they had used long ago, then turned their backs to each other and walked in opposite directions.



Jessica went past the carriage stop and walked toward the Central District. She decided to peruse a few shop windows until her heart calmed down. As she was walking, it began to drizzle. Fortunately, she would be able to put the raincoat she'd just been given to use right away.

While she walked through the light rain, she recalled the days she'd spent with Dante. They had met at a friend's wedding reception. While she had found Dante's noble rank and couturier title appealing, she'd found him attractive above all else. They got along with each other well, so they'd set up a date for the following week.

For their first date, she put a lot of thought into what she'd wear—a green dress—and Dante complimented the shape of her outfit. Before she could take delight in his compliment, he asked her overly blunt questions, like where she'd bought it and how much she'd paid for it. On top of that, he told her that a lighter shade would look better on her, then pointed out that one of the buttons on her sleeve was loose and fixed it for her on the spot.

What an odd man, she thought.

They went out to eat together, and while his mannerisms were elegant, he polished off large portions of food. While Jessica was trying to appear prim and eating lightly, Dante kept relentlessly ordering extra plates of food.

If I stay with this man, I'll gain weight, she thought.

Dante owned even more clothes than she did; one entire room of his apartment was dedicated to clothes. She found it odd that he had four pairs of the same outfit, and when she asked him about it, he went on in annoyingly excessive detail about how they had different collars, slightly different colors, and so on and so forth.

If I stay with this man, I'll be spending a lot on clothes, she thought.

She tried to put in the effort to cook for him, but Dante was much more skilled than her on that front. He skillfully boiled the pasta, knew just when it was ready, and sautéed the ingredients perfectly. Still, he claimed that it was an easy meal to make. One time, she drunkenly demanded to know how he'd gotten so good at cooking, and he simply laughed and said, "Through trial and error."

Even when they took walks through the city, his eyes were

always drawn to clothes before anything else. Whenever the subject turned to clothes, he became talkative, and when he became busy with work, he couldn't meet with her. But then, the same could be said for her, someone with an interest in business.

The last day they'd met, it was raining.

"See you, Dante!"

"Yeah, see you, Jessica!"

They'd waved goodbye to each other, neither one suspecting that they wouldn't see each other again.

As work became even busier, she found she kept accumulating more things she wanted to say to him the next time they met, and the letters she hadn't been able to post started to pile up. Not long after, her family's business started to fall on hard times, and there were discussions with a company from the neighboring country about furnishing them with funds and forming a partnership.

One of the conditions for uniting their companies was that Jessica would marry the eldest son of the Ehrlichian company. Her father had bowed his head to her and pleaded for her to accept the offer. Many of those who had been a part of their family business for a long time and had known Jessica since she was a child had dissuaded him, asserting that there was no need for Jessica to make such a sacrifice.

Other personnel were unsure and kept quiet. Everyone's livelihoods were at stake. While her family's company was not that large, they did have a sizable workforce. Jessica did not want the people who had looked after her as a child, or the younger staff members who had joined the company with hopes and dreams, to be turned out onto the streets.

From a merchant's point of view, partnering with the Ehrlichian company was a good deal. Moreover, she was acquainted with the chairman's eldest son already. They were both merchants, so they had a lot in common to talk about. They both had a responsibility to carry, and even if they didn't love each other, she felt they wouldn't have a bad relationship.

Having decided to accept the conditions, she knew she had to tell Dante she was breaking up with him, but they were unable to find a day to meet. Instead, she wrote him a letter, stating, *I can't be with a man who's only interested in clothes,* one-sidedly ending the relationship and all contact with him. At the time, she

foolishly thought that she would be fine with him resenting her for being a horrible woman and start dating someone else. She felt that would be the best outcome.

But that was a lie. She hadn't wanted him to forget her. He could resent and hate her, but she wanted to remain in Dante's heart in some way or another. She wanted him to pine after her. But the one who was still holding on to feelings was Jessica herself. *What a stupid, selfish, hopeless—*

Her nose began to sting, and she reflexively looked up at the sky. A droplet of rain fell down from the sky, landing in her eye.

"Ah..."

Half of the view in front of her became blurred. Feeling the onrush of tears, Jessica stopped walking. However, her body stayed dry from the rain. The droplets of rain that tried to cling to her rolled off her brand-new raincoat and dropped to the street.

Dante used to tell her that he wanted to make clothing that was comfortable and flattering on the wearer. This raincoat certainly was comfortable, and the style was lovely. She felt it was just the sort of garment he'd make.

The other day at the Magical Garment Factory, Dante and the head manager, Lucia, had worn very similar expressions. Even if he and Jessica had stayed together, she knew they would never have looked as similar as that. That was very clear to her.

Dante had changed. In a good way, in the way he wanted to. She wished she could change too, but her dreams were vague and elusive—

Suddenly, she had a thought: she wanted to be someone who truly suited this raincoat. She had joined a company that wasn't her family's and become both an Ehrlichian citizen and the wife of a merchant. And what of it? Perhaps she had gone down a path she hadn't expected, but from here on out, she could be who she wanted to be. Maybe she could strive to be a merchant who suited this raincoat, who brought in a rain of profits.

"See you, Assistant Manager Cassini."

I will let these attachments and regret roll off me like raindrops, and I will slice through the wind as I move forward.

Jessica faced forward and began to walk.

Pasta with Tomato Sauce and a Couturier's Apartment Tour

Lucia was in a workroom of the Magical Garment Factory, drinking her afternoon tea and munching on a butter cookie.

The tasks of a garment maker—be they cutting, sewing, or knitting—required one to be constantly leaning forward and focused solely on one thing, which meant fatigue set in easily. Every one of the factory staff members was swinging their arms and stretching in between drinking their tea.

Next to Lucia, Dante was chewing on a cookie while he opened and closed the palms of his hands. He had been holding a sewing needle for a long time, so his finger muscles must have felt stiff. Lucia herself was shaking her arms out before picking up her tea cup.

"Chief, there are still some butter cookies left. Would you like some more?" one of the stitchers asked, offering her some cookies.

"Yes, thank you!" Lucia said, gladly accepting.

The stitcher turned to Dante and asked, "Would you like some too, Dante?"

"Oh, I think I'll pass."

It seemed the cookies weren't to Dante's liking. Perhaps they were too sweet for him. Lucia found herself inadvertently staring at Dante as he drank his unsweetened tea, and he stared right back.

"Something up, boss?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that you might be hungry until dinner."

"I've already finished growing, you know. Besides, I had a decent lunch."

Now that she thought of it, Dante *did* always eat enough for two for lunch. Although, that amount was probably necessary considering he frequently carried around heavy fabrics and threads.

Also, Lucia was sure she had finished growing too, and yet it seemed her voracious appetite remained. If she kept eating at

this rate, could she grow another two or three inches in height? As she was pondering the possibility, Dante turned the conversation on her.

"Do you cook, boss?"

"Sometimes, but I haven't been cooking much recently. At home, whoever has the most free time makes dinner."

The Fanos managed their own family workshop, so that was the only way to keep things running. Ever since Lucia started working for the Tailors' Guild, she'd been coming home late, which meant she'd had fewer opportunities to cook dinner.

At the Fano home, the rule was they could praise another's cooking but never belittle it. If someone couldn't bring themself to eat a dish, they could leave it on their plate, and if the meal wasn't large enough, then they could supplement it with bread.

After she explained as much to Dante, he nodded a few times and said, "So that means everyone in your family can cook."

"Yeah, but I'm probably the worst at it. What about you, Dante?"

"I'm pretty good at cooking for myself."

Those are confident words. "That means you must be *really* good at cooking, then."

"Why do you say that?"

"Only people who are *really* good at cooking say they're 'pretty good.' Everyone else would say something like they're bad at cooking, they don't like it, or they only do it because they have to," Lucia explained, speaking from experience.

Dante smirked and replied, "I'm really not that good, though. I can't cook anywhere near the level of restaurant-quality food, and I said I can cook for *myself*. I only do it when I can't be bothered to go out to eat after working late."

"What do you like to cook?"

"Well, for one meal, I just boil some pasta, top it with some stuff from the store I have lying around, like bacon and vegetables, and then I mix it with tomato sauce I have on hand, and then I squeeze an orange or whatever into sparkling water."

"Dante, that sounds amazing. Why'd you rush through that explanation?"

Dante had said everything without taking a single breath. Even though she had just eaten her fair share of butter cookies, Lucia was starting to feel hungry. Seeing her reaction, Dante let out his signature cackle.

“Well, if you ever have the chance to come by my place, I’ll make it for you.”

“You mean I can get a tour of your apartment?” Lucia asked excitedly.

“Boss, my apartment isn’t a sightseeing destination. There’s nothing special about it.”

As they joked back and forth, their afternoon tea break came to an end.

In her office at the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia had just finished writing her daily report when a murmur fell from her lips. “I’m hungry…”

She had only worked a little overtime today, and tomorrow was her day off. Even though she had finished earlier than usual, she felt a strong sense of hunger. As if testifying to that sensation, her stomach growled plaintively. Dante, who was sitting at the coffee table looking over some documents, turned to look at her.

“Do you want to stop somewhere for dinner on the way home, Ms. Still-Going-Through-Her-Growth-Spurt?”

“I’ve been craving pasta with tomato sauce!” Lucia blurted out. “Ever since afternoon tea!”

“Pfft! That long?”

Dante burst out laughing, even though he was the cause of her cravings. *Rude.*

“All right, if you want, I’ll make it for you,” he said.

“Huh?! Really?!”

“I don’t really mind. Oh, but it’s just going to be pasta that I make to my liking, okay? Don’t go expecting there to be any fancy side dishes.”

“Fine with me! Please and thank you!” Lucia replied with a wide smile.

Then, there was a knock at the door, and Hestia entered.

“Perfect timing, Hestia,” Dante said. “We need to borrow you for a bit.”

“For what, Dante? Did something urgent come up?” Hestia asked, bracing herself with documents in hand. Perhaps because the factory often received urgent work, Dante’s question had put her on the alert.

Dante kept his face straight and serious as he said, “Boss is coming over to my place to eat my homemade pasta with

tomato sauce, so you come too."

"Oh, of course I'll come! I wouldn't miss it for the world!" Hestia responded, clenching her fists. For some strange reason, she was exceptionally enthusiastic. Maybe Hestia had been craving tomato pasta too.

And so it was decided—Hestia and Lucia would go to visit Dante's apartment together.

They boarded a carriage, which delivered them to a considerably large three-story building located near the center of the South District. There was only one entryway, located in the middle of the first floor, where a guard was stationed, suggesting that this apartment building was prudent about their security. Once the guard saw Dante, he greeted them and let them through.

As they walked down the hallway, Hestia asked quietly, "Dante, is this apartment building for couples or families?"

"It's intended for couples *and* families, but single people can live here too. I chose this place so I'd have enough space for all my dressmaking tools, but it's not *that* spacious," Dante explained as he guided them to his apartment.

They climbed two flights of the building's central staircase, bringing them to the top floor.

"Just so you know, I haven't tidied up."

The door to Dante's apartment had two locks—a top and bottom one—which he unlocked to finally let them in.

"What was that about not having tidied up...?" Lucia muttered as soon as she saw inside. The door opened up into a hallway that didn't have a single speck of dust or item out of place. The walls were such a stark white that Lucia wouldn't have been surprised if he'd told her they were freshly painted.

At the end of the hallway, she could see a dark brown six-person table. It was an old but polished antique, and four chairs were placed casually around it. Underneath the table was a stylish black rug with gray patterning. Lucia's first impression was that it was just the sort of chic apartment a couturier would have. As for her own bedroom, she decided not to think about that right now.

"Could you two wear these slippers, please? I don't want dirt to get tracked in."

Apparently, Dante preferred wearing indoor shoes in his

home. Lucia and Hestia nodded deeply and then changed into the slippers.

Dante took off his coat, washed his hands, and then put on a black apron that was hanging on a chair. He looked natural in his movements, which confirmed to Lucia that he cooked often.

"I'm going to boil the pasta now. How much should I put in?"

"One and a half servings for me."

"One serving, I think…"

"Okay, six it is."

I think that math is off. Dante stacked more dried pasta than three people could possibly eat onto his kitchen counter. Next, he placed a large stockpot onto a compact magical stove, then turned to a cutting board. With a practiced hand, he sliced onion, garlic, and a slab of bacon, adding them to a frying pan one by one. While he sautéed those, he gave instructions to Lucia and Hestia.

"Boss, take the salad we bought from the food cart and portion it out onto any three plates you can find in that cabinet over there. Hestia, you can grab some silverware from this drawer over here. Whoever's done first, get the large plates to put the pasta on, please."

"You got it!"

On their carriage ride to Dante's apartment, they had made one stop to buy a green salad and some oranges. Since he was treating them to dinner, Lucia had bought these as her contribution.

"All your plates are so lovely," Hestia said, admiring the plates he planned to serve the pasta in.

Each one had a different shape and was painted with its own unique floral and botanical design. They were separated from each other by layers of cloth, so they must have been expensive products.

"I really wouldn't want to break one…"

"Don't worry, I buy them cheap from the pottery market at the port. But since I don't buy them in sets, their shapes and heights don't match, which means they sometimes break when stacked on top of each other. That's why I have to separate them with cloth, even though it takes some time."

In contrast with his usual attitude, it seemed Dante was meticulous about things like this.

Dante deftly mixed together the boiled pasta, the sautéed

ingredients, and the tomato sauce, then filled each of the three large plates with a generous portion. With how high it was piled on the plate, it looked like it would be a very satisfying meal.

Hestia had poured sparkling water into glasses, so Lucia took an orange that had been cut in half and squeezed it with her hands. Unfortunately, only a few measly drops of juice came out. It would have been better to just cut the orange into quarters and stick one in each glass of water, but as she was thinking that, Dante suddenly took the orange half from her and squeezed it with one hand. A yellow rivulet flowed from the orange, filling the room with a pleasant scent. Strengthening magic certainly was convenient.

“Okay, dig in before it gets cold. Oh, and keep these napkins on. This tomato sauce doesn’t come out easily.”

Obeying the chef’s orders, Lucia and Hestia both placed napkins over their chests, then started eating their pasta.

Lucia’s first thought after she took a bite was that it needed a little salt. But she was soon hit with a wave of garlic flavor, followed by a salty, meaty flavor as she bit into a chunk of bacon. The pasta was a little al dente, but combined with the toppings, it was the perfect level of chewiness.

Lucia and Hestia sat side by side in silence, enjoying the delicious flavor of the pasta.

Despite the mountainous serving, Lucia greedily felt there still wasn’t enough on her plate. She moved on to eat her salad, and Dante stood to fire up the frying pan once again. He reheated the tomato pasta and, without asking, added another helping onto each of their plates.

“Thanks, Dante!”

The flavors of the reheated pasta had blended even better and tasted even more delicious.

Lucia polished off the extra serving and, as she was feeling blissfully satiated, washed the plates and tidied up. Dante told her he’d do it later, but she couldn’t leave all the cleanup work to him after he’d cooked dinner for them.

While she was wiping the plates dry with a dishcloth, she suddenly remembered something.

“Dante, did you say you had a lot of dressmaking tools?” she asked.

Lucia herself had a good stock of fabrics and sewing

equipment in her room, but Dante was a longer-serving employee of the Tailors' Guild who had experience working with garments for nobility. And above all, Lucia was curious what the rooms of other couturiers were like.

"Some, yeah. I have some monster fabric too. Oh, and I have some 'Cutter's Bane' too."

"Wait, by Cutter's Bane, do you mean kelpie horsehair cloth?! You have that?" Hestia asked with keen interest.

"What's kelpie horsehair cloth?" Lucia asked immediately.

"Horsehair cloth is a fabric made from the hair of a horse's tail," Dante explained. "It's normally composed of a cotton warp and a horsehair weft. But in this case, it's made with kelpie hair, not horsehair. Its yield is low, and it's stiff and wiry, which makes scissors and knives slip easily on it. But it works really well for reinforcing knights' uniforms."

"But a mythril knife should have no problem cutting it, right?" Hestia asked, the look of a professional cutter on her face.

Dante tilted his head slightly and answered, "It will, but it's tricky. Like, if you place the knife at an angle and slide it... I'll just give you some; that way you can try it out at the factory. Whatever you do, don't do it at home. One mistake and you could slice your finger off. Only try it where you have a potion handy."

"Thank you. I do want to attempt it, so I will take some, if you don't mind," Hestia said, her eyes sparkling.

Ever since she received her mythril knife, Hestia had become even faster at her work. Although, the first day she used it, she'd cut clean through the pattern paper and into the mat underneath. Apparently, she had been so happy about her new knife that she'd put too much strength into the cut.

"Well then, ladies, right this way," Dante said formally, leading the way to a room connected to the living room. He opened the door, entered first, and lit two magical lanterns on the wall.

"Wow!" Lucia cried in astonishment at the brightened room.

It was a fairly spacious room entirely packed with clothes and other clothing items. The entire back and right walls of the room had floor-to-ceiling shelving that held a row of tailcoats, suits, and shirts on hangers, just as they would be on display at a store. Farther back, the shelves contained blouses and dresses in hues ranging from white to bright colors. The bottom shelves contained polished leather shoes. There were several pairs of the

same style, reflecting Dante's obsession with shoes.

There was shelving on the left wall too, with sizable paper-wrapped packages resting on each shelf. The edges of the packages were torn at the ends, providing a small peek at the colorful fabric inside. The bottom shelves on the left wall contained thread, drawing supplies, stencil paper, and other clothing-related materials, all meticulously organized. One of the cabinets had a mirrored door where Lucia assumed Dante checked his outfits. The size of the mirror was certainly useful for a full-body check.

The first thing that Lucia found her eyes drawn to were the three mannequins. One was dressed in a business jacket that was still in the process of being sewn, the second had an ice green dress whose shape was still held in place by pins, and the third held a lilac gown.

Lucia wouldn't have even been shocked if Dante had announced he was running his own independent boutique out of his apartment.

"You have even more clothes than I do..." Hestia said with a sigh.

Dante smirked. "I mean, it's not like I wear all these clothes. Some are test pieces or finished garments I made for fashion school. I have a good number of women's garments here too."

"You have so much here, you might as well open up a store!"

"Oh, come on, boss. The clothing room Mr. Forto has at his house is five times the size of this."

"F-Five times?"

"And that room is just for clothes. He has a separate room for his monster materials, and I heard he even has a warehouse. Oh, and his wife has a wardrobe room all to herself too."

That was only to be expected from the guildmaster of the Tailors'. If only it weren't for the circumstances, Lucia would have loved to go see it for herself, but she didn't feel it was something she could ask for right now. A small ache slowly spread through her chest.

"Let's ask him to show it to all three of us someday," Dante said.

"Yes, that would be nice," Hestia agreed. "He can show all three of us and teach us all about the clothes and fabrics he owns."

Lucia knew they were trying to be considerate of her, so she

put on a smile and replied as brightly as she could, “Yeah, that sounds great!”

At any rate, Dante’s room was extravagant, marvelous, and exciting.

“I think I could spend an entire day trying on clothes here…” Lucia muttered.

“If there’s something you want to try on, go ahead. I’d prefer it if you didn’t make any sewing adjustments, but I don’t mind if you pin or fold things in.”

“Really?!” Lucia exclaimed, grasping Dante’s arm.

“Yeah. Feel free to try on the men’s clothes too if you want. Just one thing, though. Don’t open that drawer right there.”

“Thank you, Dante! I won’t touch your favorite things, I swear!”

“I appreciate it. Naturally, I don’t recommend trying on my underwear.”

Hestia and Lucia shared a glance that said, *Under no circumstances will we open that drawer.*

“I want to try on this and this!” Lucia cried.

“I’m interested in these,” Hestia said.

Dante nodded when both Lucia and Hestia picked out their choice of clothes.

“All right. You can change in the other room. It locks from the inside.”

Lucia had no concerns about Dante peeking in on them, and couturiers regularly received permission to see their clients in their underwear to take measurements, regardless of gender. But then she reconsidered the reason behind Dante’s comment. Hestia had gone through the painful experience of having even a friend’s father view her with an objectifying gaze. Dante was likely being mindful of that fact.

“Go right ahead, ladies. To lock the door, all you need to do is turn the knob under the door handle.”

The room they entered appeared to be Dante’s study. Sketchbooks lined the shelves, and on the desk by the wall was one that was lying open, along with numerous metal pens and inkpots. The trash bin was close to overflowing with discarded designs, but other than that, the room was kept very clean.

It was a very sophisticated room, but there was one thing Lucia found extremely perturbing. In the back of the room was a very large and spacious bed. With two pillows.

“Um, Dante… Our visit today won’t cause any misunderstandings with your girlfriend, will it?”

“Boss, I appreciate your concern, but like I said before, I am currently a free man. The reason I have such a big bed is because I toss and turn in my sleep and tend to fall off. And I have two pillows because I have a hard and soft pillow, so I can switch them out depending on how stiff my shoulders are,” Dante explained in a near monotone.

Well, can you blame me for asking? Lucia thought. She had never seen a bed that large in her entire life.

“Oh no, Dante. Are you getting premature aging pains?”

“Stop with the teasing, Hestia. Oh, and if you make that sort of comment to Zilo, he’ll explain things to you in excruciating detail.”

“Very well, then. Those kinds of pains are still far and away for you, so I’ll stop.”

At that response, Dante left the room, laughing as he went. Hestia readily locked the door so the two of them could change their clothes.

The first garments they picked up were three-piece suits—Lucia’s was indigo blue, and Hestia’s was gray. Dante had said that he’d made the indigo suit back when he was in fashion school, but it was still too big on Lucia. Moreover, since she was unused to wearing men’s clothes, it took some time to put on. She really felt like the suit was wearing *her*, but she did think she liked the bright shade of indigo. Also, she was pleasantly surprised at how nice the suit vest looked on her.

She had to hand it to Dante—the stitching on the sleeves and around the collar was expertly done. It was easy to move her shoulders and arms, and the trousers were comfortable and didn’t get bunched up around her legs.

Hestia’s trousers and vest were a bit loose, but she didn’t have to roll up the cuffs and sleeves as much as Lucia did. In fact, the suit didn’t obscure her figure in any way, and she looked like the perfect model of a beautiful woman wearing men’s clothes. Lucia wanted to see her try on every single three-piece suit in the other room. Very much so.

The two of them returned to the previous room, and Dante’s eyes widened when he saw them.

“Boss, that looks pretty good on you. You look handsome *and* cute.”

“Thanks! I’m not used to how it fits around my neck, though.”

The shirt collar, tie, and jacket lapel—compared to the outfit of her own that she’d worn today, they were all made of a stiff material concentrated around her neck. But rather than constrictive, they felt protective.

“And Hestia, you look as dapper as Mr. Forto.”

“Oh, please, Dante! I won’t pay you in gold and silver coins no matter how much you try to flatter me.”

It was commonly said that couturiers were smooth talkers, and Dante was no exception.

The three of them shared an enjoyable time chatting and trying on more three-piece and other fancy suits. Lucia had wanted to try on men’s clothes first both because she had few opportunities to wear them and to better understand their creation.

After they were finished with the suits, they moved on to trying on shirts and dresses of Dante’s design. Lucia tried on a white sleeveless shift dress and a black dress with hidden pleats that provided freedom of movement when running. Most of the dresses were minimalist in design, but they had lovely shaping and they were comfortable to wear.

The one unfortunate aspect was that everything was a little too long for Lucia. Apparently, Dante envisioned tall women wearing these dresses. She recalled Vice-Chairwoman Vogel, whom she’d met the other day, and realization set in. Dante preferred women who were tall and shapely.

Incidentally, among the clothes Dante always wore, he had five types of similar designs with slight differences in materials. Since the opportunity was available, Lucia tried them on, rolling up the sleeves and pant legs, but alas, they were very baggy on her. When she showed Dante, he pressed a hand to his brow and urged her to change. As she had thought, he must have thought she looked pitiful in his clothes.

In exchange, he handed her a daffodil yellow dress. It was short enough that it didn’t impede her walking, and the design looked simple from the front. However, when she turned around to look at the back in the mirror, she saw that it gave off a different impression.

“The front of this dress is pretty standard, but the back has so many cute frills! Plus, it’s so easy to walk in. Very impressive!”

“I appreciate you saying so, boss. By the way, that dress was

meant to be worn for tea parties, but it wrinkles easily, so it's a reject."

"But why? It's so cute! Couldn't you just find a fabric that doesn't wrinkle easily? Or if not, this could be worn to a standing dinner party—then you wouldn't have to sit down."

"Lucia, people shouldn't have to accommodate themselves to their clothing," Hestia said with mild exasperation, but Lucia knew this dress was cute beyond a doubt. She strongly encouraged Dante to sell it to the Tailors' Guild as a dress to be used for parties where the attendees didn't have to sit down.

They continued trying on different outfits as they talked about clothes and the occasions to wear them, as well as chatting about clients they've had. As night approached, Lucia turned to look at one of the mannequins.

"This gown would sell instantly at a shop."

The lilac layered chiffon dress had a camisole-style top and long, wavy frills that cascaded down from under the waist. It was an incredibly elegant and beautiful design.

"I made that for a showcase for fashion school. Working with this thin chiffon frustrated me to tears... The fabric kept slipping with the slightest movement even while I was just marking it."

"Oh, I know," said Hestia. "Chiffon is so difficult to keep in place when cutting too. The slightest breeze makes it move, which is why the doors and windows are always kept shut in the Tailors' Guild's workroom, even in the summer..."

"Yeah, this stuff always shifts around when sewing too. And sewing it with tissue paper makes my fingers hurt..."

All three looked off into the distance. Just as it was said that beautiful roses had their thorns, it took skill to achieve mastery over beautiful chiffon.

"Dante, people buy things at showcases, right? No one was interested in buying a gown as gorgeous as this?"

"Ah, well, I made it so the waist fit perfectly on the mannequin... And there's not enough fabric for it to be let out. Plus, the train is pretty long."

In short, there was no one interested in buying who could fit into the dress. Lucia shifted her gaze to the side.

"I think Hestia might be able to fit into it. Dante, can you take it off the mannequin?"

Dante gladly agreed, and once he took the gown off the mannequin, he told them to call for him when Hestia was

finished changing, then left the room. He must have determined that it would be too difficult to take this gown all the way to the other room.

“These sorts of gowns certainly are hard to put on alone,” Hestia said with conviction in the middle of changing.

There were hidden hooks along the back, but they were small and hard to see. Lucia took care of closing each one. The gown was very narrow in the waist, but it fit Hestia like a dream. According to Hestia, the gown was tight around the waist, and she lamented not having worn shapewear, but as an outside observer, Lucia hardly noticed anything wrong with the fit at all. In fact, anyone would believe that the gown was custom tailored for Hestia herself.

Once Hestia was fully dressed, Lucia went to get Dante. When he returned to the room and saw Hestia, his green eyes went wide.

“It’s perfect! No surprises there. It’s a gown of my design, after all. Oh, but your hair should be in an updo.”

“You’re aware I’m not a mannequin, aren’t you?”

Dante laughed as he sat Hestia down in a chair, picked up a brush, and opened up a case of hair accessories.

“You’re quite good at this, Dante…” Hestia said admiringly.

Dante rubbed his nose in imitation of a certain someone and replied, “Zilo trained me well. He told me, ‘No couturier worth his salt leaves a lady’s hair undone in the morning.’”

“I can’t say I was expecting *that* to be the reason.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m lucky enough to have many opportunities to do that anyway.”

Lucia saw Dante’s ice green eyes turn to her in the reflection of the mirror. *I get it.* She and Dante were both single. For them, that type of situation was, although longed for, the stuff of dreams.

As Dante spoke, he braided Hestia’s long hair, then wound it up tightly into an updo. Before them appeared a beautiful young noblewoman who resembled Hestia.

“If this gown was white, you’d look like a debutante. You look stunning enough to have a line of guys waiting to dance with you,” Dante said with satisfaction.

Hestia laughed, then rose and went to stand in front of the large mirror. Lucia followed her to take in the side view of the gown, but then she noticed that her friend was barely moving.

“Hestia?”

Hestia didn’t respond but simply stared at the mirror. There was no smile or look of surprise on her face—she was frozen like a doll.

“Hestia, you might as well put these on too,” Dante said brusquely as he slid a pair of white evening gloves onto Hestia’s arms. Then, without even asking, he clipped a pair of pearl earrings to her ears.

Hestia looked even more beautiful, like a young debutante. It was then that Lucia realized something. Hestia had been born into a viscountcy, but since she had been born with no magical power, she’d had to leave home at a young age. She had probably never debuted as a young noblewoman. On top of that, she had probably never gotten this dressed up before.

“Hestia, you look *so* pretty! Hey, Dante, I wanna try on a tailcoat!”

“Oh, what a coincidence. So do I.”

“Huh? What’s gotten into you two all of a sudden?” Hestia asked, having returned to her senses.

Tonight was Hestia’s first soiree as a debutante. Both Lucia and Dante felt that was true without even having to voice it aloud. They left the bewildered Hestia where she was as first Lucia, then Dante changed in the next room.

Dante only had tailcoats in large sizes, so Lucia had to roll the sleeves and pant legs up as high as she could. As a result, she looked like someone’s little brother trying on the clothes of his much older brother. In contrast, not only did Dante look at home in his tailcoat, but he had also combed his hair back stylishly. He looked just like a nobleman.

Well, he is *a noble.*

“Now for the final touch. You take one too, boss. Oh, but don’t spill it.”

Dante was carrying up a tray of glasses that he’d filled with red wine.

“Lucia, Dante, um, you really don’t have to do all this…” Hestia said, finally understanding their intentions as Dante smoothly placed a glass in her gloved hand.

“But look how lovely my gown made you look. The least you can do is let us celebrate with you, right? Boss, can you say a toast?”

Lucia nodded, then pulled up the jacket sleeve, which nearly

covered her hand, and raised her glass. The light from the magical lanterns made rainbows dance on the glass of red.

"Cheers to lots and lots of happiness for Hestia from this day onward! Oh, and for Dante and me too!"

"I'll put aside the cruelty of your favoritism and refrain from asking what you'd ever do without me, and say cheers to all of our good fortune and maybe some half decent relationships!"

"...Here is to my gratitude that I was able to meet both of you, to the hope that we all find happiness..."

Hestia's choked-up voice was drowned out by the sound of their clinking glasses. She smiled, looking as though she was about to cry.

They drank their wine where they stood as they once again chatted animatedly about clothes. As promised, Dante gave Hestia some of his kelpie horsehair cloth.

"I'll practice my hardest so I can learn to cut it with complete mastery!" Hestia declared, her expression having reverted to that of a skilled cutter.

Lucia thought of Hestia's gleaming mythril knife and made a mental note as the head manager of the factory that she should buy more protective cutting mats.



By the time they finished their wine, night had fallen completely. Lucia and Hestia started to get ready to go change so they could return home, when Dante spoke up.

“Hey, Hestia. Do you want to take that?”

“Are you sure? How much would I owe you for it?”

“Oh, you want to pay for it?”

“Of course. It’s so beautiful. Though I’m not sure if I can pay its full price…”

“No, I was joking. The material is old now so it’s not worth selling. I’ll wrap it up and put it in a dress case, so take it home with you. I’ve been wanting to free up that space on the mannequin.”

“Are you really, really sure? I won’t give it back if you ask for it later.”

“Take it off right now! I’m putting it in the dress case before you change your mind! I’ll put the kelpie horsehair cloth in there too!”

“Thank you, Dante! I’ll take very good care of it!”

As she listened in on their spirited exchange, Lucia quietly took a half step back. She thought of Vice-Chairman Vogel, Dante’s ex-girlfriend. She was mature, had a nice figure, and was good at her job—just like Hestia. Was Lucia currently witnessing the beginning stages of a blossoming love? Hadn’t Dante once mentioned that romance often sparked between staff members of the Tailors’ Guild?

She watched them with excitement, and once they were done talking, they both turned to look at her simultaneously.

“Boss, why are you smiling at us like that?”

“Lucia, you’re not thinking anything strange, are you?”

“No, I was just admiring how good that gown looks on you, Hestia!” Lucia said with a grin.

Dante started fishing through one of the shelves. “Here, I can’t let only Hestia take something. This is for you, boss.”

He opened the lid of a small, white box and handed it to her. Inside was a small decorative pin. It was a green four-leaf clover on a silver base. It was expertly crafted, and it glimmered beautifully. She wondered if it was an expensive item. If so, she couldn’t possibly accept. But if she declined on the grounds of it being too expensive, then Hestia might feel badly about accepting the gown. As her mind was going around in circles, Dante whispered in her ear, “Relax, it’s just glass.”

“Thanks, Dante! I’ll design an outfit to go with it!”

“Great, I’d love to see it once it’s done.”

Thus, the couturier’s apartment tour ended with wonderful parting gifts.

A Managerial Three-Piece Suit

At Forto's behest, Lucia arrived at the parlor room of the Tailors' Guild.

"It seems that the Earldom Scalfarotto will be establishing a team developing magical tools. The head of this team will be coming to deliver an official greeting, so I would like you to be present for that as well, as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory."

"Understood!"

Dante had accompanied her from the factory as well, but he went to his former department to pick out fur pelts. It was apparently very difficult to distinguish between special and first-grade monster pelts, which were to be used for the heated tables intended for nobles. And to make matters worse, someone in the department was on maternity leave, so the insufficient personnel had put them behind schedule.

Dante had grumbled and complained about how they should be able to tell by touch, but the person in charge had begged him in tears, saying they didn't have enough staff. Even Forto had asked him to go, so he'd gone there to help.

Fur was vital for winter clothing, and it was especially popular this year to be used for the heated tables. Monster pelts, which were favored among aristocrats, were often highly priced. Dante, who could determine which pelts were special-grade, was a valuable human resource. That being said, he also held the important role of assistant manager of the factory, so having him pulled away like this was not ideal.

"The head of the Scalfarottos' Weapons Development Team is Mr. Jonas Goodwin. He is the right-hand man of Lord Guido, the next head of the Scalfarotto family, and acts as both his bodyguard and attendant."

"Mr. Jonas Goodwin..."

Lucia thought of the man with rust-colored eyes, whom she'd met previously. Since she'd felt he resembled Mr. Sunset, she'd impulsively asked if he had an older brother, which was a very impolite thing to ask someone she'd just met. He'd smiled and appeared unbothered, but she hoped he'd taken no offense.

Then she realized something. Right before she came to the Tailors' Guild, it had been raining heavily. Afterward, the day had grown warm and humid, so Lucia had left her jacket behind at the factory.

Fortunately, she was wearing a dressy blouse that had a ribbon around the collar and was made of sturdy fabric. Even the skirt she wore was longer than her usual style, so her outfit should be appropriate. Still, she probably should have been wearing a jacket to appear more presentable for this meeting.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Forto, I left my jacket at the factory. Is this outfit respectable enough?"

"Yes, it is. This meeting will be more of an informal introduction than a formal meeting. As an outfit for a modern woman, your clothing receives passing marks. However, I urge you to put in extra care when visiting the Scalfarottos' estate. On another note, were you aware there are many Goodwins in the nobility?"

"Yes, Hestia told me."

"There are said to be eleven families at present, but there are some individuals who will receive baronies next term, so there will be even more in the future. Moreover, there are quite a few families with the Goodwin name who do not hold a peerage."

As Lucia listened, she thought of Randolph and Jonas, and how they might both be part of prestigious families.

Forto continued. "The nobility has two main factions, the northern and southern faction, but the Goodwin clan belongs to neither, remaining neutral. If, for some reason, one of the Goodwin branches decides to align themselves with either faction, they change their surname."

Apparently, the Goodwins were thoroughly committed to their neutrality and refused to participate in conflicts between the factions.

Lucia found something about that a little strange. If their numbers were so great, and they had the power and influence to keep their entire clan neutral, then one might reasonably expect that there would be higher ranking families among them. However, there were no dukes or margraves with the surname Goodwin. Forto continued to explain the reasoning behind that.

"The beginnings of the Earldom Goodwin can be traced to three brothers who were knights in charge of protecting the first king of Ordine. They swore an oath of loyalty to the royal family,

mainly serving to protect the kingdom and only participating minimally in politics. Successive kings attempted to raise their court rank, but they declined all offers, stating that they were but the humble swords of Ordine."

The result of sticking true to the path of a knight. And the fact that the entire clan upheld that ideal was even more impressive.

"How cool! It's like something out of a fairy tale! Oh, I'm sorry... That was impolite, wasn't it? Umm, they sound like very proud and virtuous people," Lucia said, trying her best to reframe her thoughts into words appropriate for nobles.

Forto gave a short nod. "Very good. For words of praise, those were right on the mark. Many members of the Goodwin clan have knightly dispositions. It would be more accurate to call Mr. Jonas himself a guard knight than an attendant. Also—and please keep this to yourself—even high-ranking nobles who make enemies of the Goodwin clan reliably find themselves in very deep trouble. There are said to be many stubborn individuals in their clan."

"Stubborn individuals, huh...?" Lucia said with a chuckle. But when she gave it some serious thought, she realized it was no laughing matter at all.

The Goodwins were a clan that even powerful noble families didn't want to quarrel with. Just as one might think, their sheer numbers and their history were held in high importance.

"In addition to coming here to meet with us, Mr. Jonas has requested a black three-piece suit. The design is fairly standard, but he has requested as many as fourteen hidden pockets, as well as the same level of enchantments as his previous attendant's uniform."

"It sounds like it will be more like a suit of armor than a three-piece suit."

At that point, they might as well call it a guard knight's uniform, for how much it would resemble one.

"Yes. However, they say that a three-piece suit was originally made to serve as protective gear for nobles."

"Protective gear? A *suit*?"

"In the early days of the Kingdom of Ordine, many domains were the battlegrounds of fierce battles against monsters. Records from that period describe how chain mail used to be inserted into the lining of suit vests and metal plates affixed to the chests and backs of jackets. That appears to be how three-

piece suits were first made. Furthermore, the people of that time practiced prioritizing protection in other articles of clothing—for example, by placing metal in the soles of shoes or inside hats."

That did sound very protective, but also heavy. But was there a reason that had been done with suits?

"Why didn't the nobles of that time just wear armor?" Lucia asked.

"While this may not have applied to all, it seems some nobles—especially the heads of families—refrained from wearing armor in order to demonstrate the safety of their own domains. It was akin to making a declaration that they wouldn't fall prey to monsters."

"Now that's an outfit that requires courage to wear."

"Yes. Though I'd say that comes with the territory of being a noble," Forto said with an elegant smile. Maybe it wasn't so odd to consider the three-piece suits worn by nobles to protect their people and their prestige as a type of armor.

"Is that why many people still wear three-piece suits in the castle?"

"I do think that plays a role, but nowadays they hold more significance as proof of one's rank. Only nobles are permitted to wear black three-piece suits inside the castle. Exceptions are made for special guests or foreign emissaries, though." As he spoke, Forto placed his fingers on the lapel of his own suit. "There was a time when it was considered the norm for heads of noble families to wear three-piece suits even in the summer, though now a simple two-piece suit is considered appropriate."

"But you usually wear three-piece suits in the summer, don't you, Mr. Forto?"

"In my case, I socialize with and make sales calls to many high-ranking nobles and members of the older generation. Some people still think a family head should wear a three-piece suit everywhere he goes, and they view it as a show of respect."

"Ah, so that's why..."

An outfit could be worn to express consideration and respect toward another—that was an aspect of noble garments that differed from commoner garments. Lucia had made garments for several nobles by this point, but she felt a keen realization that she still had a lot to learn. It wouldn't be a bad idea for her to study the history of fashion in its entirety.

"By the way, I heard that you made Lotta a pair of pajamas,

but may I ask your thoughts regarding blighted individuals? Oh, rest assured this will stay between us, so please speak freely. I'd like to know for future reference as well."

"I just thought it was unfortunate that clothes could cause someone an inconvenience. I think there should be clothes that are comfortable and easy to move in for people with blights too."

"Do you feel an aversion, revulsion, or even fear toward people with blights?"

"I haven't had many opportunities to interact with them, so I can't say with absolute certainty that they don't bother me at all, but Lotta doesn't scare me, and I've never thought the blighted adventurers I see in the lobby were revolting or scary either."

Among the blighted Lucia had crossed paths with, one was a person with long canines, and another had yellow-tinged skin that peeked out from underneath their swaying veil. They stood out, so her eyes were naturally drawn to them. But once Dante explained the blighted adventurers to her, she viewed them simply as clients.

If she had the opportunity, then she wanted to assist them in finding clothing that accommodated their distinctive needs based on their blights, or even to design and create garments personally for them.

"Also, coming up with pajamas for Lotta was a lot of fun!" she added. Behind Forto, Lotta smiled with his eyes.

He had apparently taken such a liking to his pajamas that he slept in them every night. Lucia wanted to make him something to wear while his pajamas were being washed as soon as possible. Or no, maybe she should go ahead and make him an entirely new pair of pajamas so he had an extra set.

"I am glad to hear that. Well then, please join in on the creation of this three-piece suit. There is a wide range of designs for clothes for blighted individuals, and I want those without an aversion to blights to be involved."

The opportunity she'd wished for had suddenly fallen right into her lap. But the three-piece suit he mentioned was for the man with rust-colored hair. Meaning—

"Mr. Jonas Goodwin is possessed by a fire dragon," Forto stated.

"A fire dragon..." Lucia echoed.

She was a bit surprised, but it also made sense. The attendant's uniform he'd requested before had sleeves of

different sizes, and the cuffs contained fire-resistant material. Lucia had only ever seen a fire dragon in a reference book at Dahlia's house, but she knew they were very powerful creatures that could wield fire magic.

"I will do my best!"

"Mr. Jonas's blight is public knowledge, but please make sure to keep the construction and magical enchantments of the suit confidential."

"Understood!" Lucia said with a deep nod.

"The Scalfarottos will be developing new magical tools, and I have been appointed chief of the Weapons Development Team."

A man with rust-colored eyes entered the parlor room, wearing an aristocratic smile on his handsome face. His rusty hair and light brown skin were rare to see even in the cosmopolitan royal capital. Instead of his usual attendant's uniform, he wore a black three-piece suit of quite fine quality. The greater thickness of his right arm compared to his left was fairly noticeable, but since many knights had thicker dominant arms, it didn't appear unnatural.

"I offer my sincere congratulations to you for being appointed to such an important position."

"Thank you truly for your kind words. We look forward to your help with magical tool-related matters going forward. Thank you in advance, and apologies for any inconvenience."

Lucia felt a little dazzled as she watched Forto and Jonas's smooth exchange. Their polished appearances, phrases, and mannerisms were aristocratic to the core. Lucia had untiringly studied noble etiquette and behaviors with the help of Dante and Hestia, but it was as if Forto and Jonas were in a league of their own.

But then again, Lucia had just finally come to the point where she could comprehend that difference. Hestia had praised her by saying she had come a very long way from when she first started, but Lucia had also come to realize just how much further she had to go.

"I also greatly appreciate your assistance in providing me with a black three-piece suit to be worn in the castle."

"Certainly. Head Manager Fano will also be involved in the creation this time."

"I will be sure to put my utmost effort into the task," Lucia said

nervously.

Jonas responded with a splendid aristocratic smile. “Could I request that this three-piece suit contain hidden pockets and weapon holsters in as close to the same positions as in my attendant’s uniform? However, the length of the shirt will mean I’ll have to hold four fewer weapons around my waist.”

When he began speaking about the hidden weapons, Jonas’s rust-colored eyes glanced her way. Lucia wondered if he was trying to turn the conversation toward her, to see if she had any suggestions, since she had newly joined in on the creation of his suit.

After she’d had the opportunity to see his attendant’s uniform last time, she’d been studying up a bit on guard uniforms. She had even chatted with and asked questions of the security guards of the Tailors’ Guild.

Recalling as best she could Jonas’s attendant’s uniform and its accompanying specifications document, Lucia proposed an idea. “What if you wore doubled garters on your thighs? It will depend on the size of the weapons, but that should allow you to hold more.”

It was common in bodyguard uniforms for the pants pockets to not be sewn shut inside. That way, the wearer could reach down to the garter—in this case, a strap worn snugly around the thigh—to take out the spare weapon being held there.

It was normal for nobles to not put anything in the front pockets of the pants of their three-piece suits anyway, in order to avoid deforming the shape of the pants, hence why it was easy to make it a pathway to a spare weapon.

“Doubled garters?” Jonas turned his rust-colored eyes to her doubtfully.

Lucia wished he wouldn’t look so concerned. Even some noblewomen pretended to carry nothing but fans on their persons only to have—not a spare weapon—but spare makeup stashed in their garters. Among them, some had thin, breathable double garters that did not slide down easily. They were also quite durable.

“Leather would be a good option, but I also believe an elastic monster fabric would be durable and easier to move around in without getting too sweaty—although that also depends on the shapes of the weapons and the materials they’re made of.”

Something like a sheathed dagger could be secured to a

garter, but if his weapons were sharp and carried without sheaths, like Hestia's mythril knife, then they would have to make the garters not with monster fabric but with a sturdy monster leather.

"I would personally recommend affixing a light scabbard to a garter made from monster fabric, and then carry the reserve weapons in that," Forto said, consolidating her ideas nicely.

"In that case, I will ask that you proceed with that. I would prefer not to have to carry fewer weapons," Jonas said with approval.

Lucia breathed a sigh of relief.

The suit would be made with monster silkworm cloth, and hidden pockets and weapon holsters would be added. It would also have several layers of enchantments similar to those on his attendant's uniform and garters for spare weapons. That would surely be a three-piece suit comparable to a suit of armor. Lucia wanted wholeheartedly to make an outfit for Jonas that was above and beyond the black three-piece suit he currently wore.

"Incidentally, what are your thoughts on the cuff links to go with this black three-piece suit? I would like to offer a pair as congratulations on your new post."

Jonas shook his head at Forto's offer. "I appreciate the thought, but my master has already insisted I accept a pair of cuff links from him. I would like to ask if the sleeves can be made to match these, if possible."

Jonas took a small, white box out of his breast pocket. Inside were round, silver cuff links on which the Scalfarotto family crest were deeply engraved. The lines of the engravings gleamed blue—they were likely embedded with cut gemstones.

It was then that Lucia remembered something she'd learned from Forto. Families often supplied their employees with cuff links as a form of identification, but they were usually dyed. Only those whom a noble family treated as equals received cuff links engraved with the family crest. In other words, Jonas was regarded as highly important to the Scalfarottos.

"Although I did try to tell him they were far too much for me."

Despite what he said, Jonas seemed happy to have received them. The light in his eyes softened a touch.

And with that, their meeting came to an end without incident.

They watched Jonas leave the parlor room, and then Forto

headed to his next meeting.

When Lucia went out into the hallway, Dante—who she assumed had been in the monster materials room—came running over to her. She wondered if he'd just finished up there, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"Boss, sorry, but I'm staying here today. I want to use this chance to teach the monster materials team the *right* way to tell pelts apart."

Either she was imagining things or Dante's ice green eyes literally looked cold.

"I just can't stand the idea of them mistaking first-grade pelts for special-grade ones. Plus, instead of me having to repeat myself, it'll be faster if I get them to use magic and make them learn how the reverberation feels. I'm going to have them practice that over and over for the rest of the day."

It seemed those in charge of monster materials would be practicing how to distinguish the quality of pelts until it was fully ingrained.

"G-Good luck with that, Dante," Lucia said, her voice a little shrill.

"Thanks. I'll walk you to the carriage stop before I head back to them."

"Don't worry, Dante, I'll be fine. And anyway, there's a guard in the carriage."

Since Dante had accompanied Lucia to the guild, she hadn't brought her personal bodyguard. But they had come here in a Magical Garment Factory carriage, so she wasn't particularly worried.

"I'm walking with you to the carriage stop. What if someone tries to make advances on you on the way there? You know you're not supposed to go around on your own."

"I know. Okay, I'll take you up on that, then."

The carriage stop was right outside the Tailors' Guild, but Lucia decided to obediently accept Dante's offer. She highly doubted that she would be abducted on the street with plenty of people around, but being safe was also part of her job. She walked quickly in order not to take up too much of Dante's time.

"All right, don't make any detours, boss."

"I'm not a kid! I'll be fine!"

After escorting Lucia all the way to the carriage stop entrance, Dante sped back to the Tailors' Guild.

From what Lucia had been told, distinguishing monster materials, especially monster pelts, was considerably difficult. Not only discerning genuine articles from imitation goods but also being able to judge what was a first-grade product or not was a matter that affected clients' faith in the guild, so it wasn't surprising to see Dante's face set in such a stern expression.

As she internally cheered him on, she walked into the carriage stop. Then, suddenly, she noticed something peculiar. The carriages of the Tailors' Guild and others were all standing in a row, but none of them were moving. There weren't many people around, and the ones who were there looked somewhat troubled.

Wondering if something had happened, Lucia decided to ask the person in charge of the carriage stop, but before she could, someone emerged from between the nearby carriages.

"Head Manager Fano."

Lucia was startled by the voice and the person who appeared. It was the man she'd just had a meeting with—Jonas.

He proceeded to explain there had been an accident on the main road resulting in a broken down carriage. Fortunately, no one had been injured, but it was a large carriage used by the Couriers' Guild, so the road was closed until its cargo could be transferred to another. That explained why none of the carriages here were moving.

"Those in a hurry are utilizing the carriages nearby for transport. Should you require one, I will escort you there," Jonas said, regarding her with his calm, rust-colored eyes.

It was very gentlemanly of him to offer, but Lucia couldn't allow a client to go so far out of his way for her. She thanked him but declined. They exchanged goodbyes and then parted ways.

Honestly, Lucia wanted to talk to Jonas for just a bit longer. She wanted to ask him more details about what he liked to wear, his everyday clothes, and if he had any requests or issues with his clothing as a blighted. But since that seemed like a rude thing to do, she restrained herself from asking. And besides, her first order of business was making sure she delivered him a well-made three-piece suit.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that Jonas resembled Mr. Sunset, but he had neither red hair nor red eyes.

A ridiculous thought suddenly crossed her mind—was it

possible that his hair and eyes had changed color as he'd grown older?

There was also the possibility that she was idealizing a childhood memory.

But there was one thing she was sure she remembered, and that was how majestic Mr. Sunset had looked from the back.

Someday, she hoped that she, too, could look like that from the back. With that thought, Lucia straightened her posture and started walking.

Extra Story: The Guard and a Certain Someone's Back

Jonas was blessed with good luck. He was where he was thanks to his connections and the opportunities he'd received.

Jonas Goodwin—after signing his name on countless documents, he officially assumed the position of chief of the Earldom Scalfarotto's Weapons Development Team.

Jonas was primarily an attendant and a bodyguard. He had no ability to make magical tools, and he wasn't deeply knowledgeable about them either. The magical toolmakers of the Scalfarotto family had recently introduced him to some books on magical tools, which he pored over every night, but he probably knew even less than a first-year magical toolmaking college student.

The reason he had assumed this post nevertheless was because of the sudden need for a "shield."

A magical toolmaker by the name of Dahlia had developed a new weapon for Volfred, the younger brother of Guido Scalfarotto, the master Jonas served. They had started out as shortswords enchanted with wind magic, but for some reason or another, they were connected with mythril thread and became powerful projectiles.

They were excellent for slaying monsters, but they could also be used to fight against other human beings. One false step and Dahlia could be taken in by the castle or a high-ranking noble to work for them as a magical toolmaker who solely developed weapons.

In order to make sure that didn't happen, and to protect Dahlia and Volf, the weapons would be officially known as a development of Jonas and the Scalfarotto family. That was how things had come to this point.

As a "shield," Jonas had assumed a favorable post and obtained a position as a purveyor to the royal Order of Beast Hunters without having to do anything to earn it. It was as lucky as a flying wyvern dropping a treasure box from the sky.

When Guido offered the position to Jonas in his office, he'd

been apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Jonas. I know this puts a lot on your plate."

"I cannot say I understand what you mean. It is an honor to be given a managerial post in the Scalfarotto family."

"This position might require you to deal with some complicated matters."

He wasn't wrong. Once people knew he was the chief of the Scalfarottos' Weapons Development Team, he would be the target of envy and even more criticism. But he would obtain some power, albeit a small amount, and he would be qualified to frequent the castle. Most importantly, he would be making himself useful to the Scalfarottos.

Although Jonas had been born into a viscountcy, he couldn't count on support from his family. He was nothing but appreciative for this opportunity.

"You will receive a higher salary to match your position, but is there anything else you want?" Guido, his friend and master, asked him seriously. That look on his face made Jonas feel ill at ease.

Maybe I'll ask for a bottle of liquor, Jonas thought, then reconsidered. He still hadn't finished that premium alcohol he'd been given. The Scalfarottos provided him with everything he needed when it came to food, clothing, and shelter. His salary, too, was adequate. He couldn't think of anything else he could possibly need.

"Nothing comes to mind," he responded.

"Hmm..."

Wasn't he the one who had asked? Then why, after Jonas said he didn't need anything, did Guido look so troubled?

"Oh, I know!" Guido exclaimed with sudden enthusiasm. "Let's get you a black three-piece suit!"

"I already own multiple black three-piece suits."

He was, technically, the son of a viscount, and he worked for an earldom, so he owned suits for several formal occasions. In fact, he had received those suits from the Scalfarotto family in the first place.

"But your suits are made with lower quality fabric than the ones I wear, are they not?"

"An attendant cannot wear a better suit than his master. Besides, my current suits are perfectly fine."

Even when he accompanied Guido to some ceremony or

another, there was a hierarchy between master and attendant-slash-bodyguard that needed to be maintained. The suits he owned were purchased through Forto, the guildmaster of the Tailors', so there was no question as to their quality. Jonas didn't feel the need for any extras.

"But don't they only have one grade of protective enchantments?" Guido protested.

"And that is more than enough."

As a blighted, Jonas was fairly strong. He insisted that one grade of protective enchantments was enough to allow him to shield Guido in an emergency, but his master shook his head.

"That won't do. Seeing as you will be visiting the castle as someone with an executive position in the Scalfarotto family, you need the finest three-piece suit with the finest enchantments. We need to get you a suit that you can proudly wear anywhere."

You mean a suit to keep me safe at all times. Jonas kept that thought to himself; if he said that aloud, it would only make his friend double down.

"...Very well. I will gratefully accept it as a congratulatory gift."

"In that case, you should have some new cuff links too. Since you'll be working for the family, they'll be engraved with our crest. I'd like to have those enchanted as well, but we might not have enough time for that... Maybe if I tell the Zola Company it's urgent..."

As he listened to Guido mumble to himself, Jonas felt a dull ache form in his head. He already had a pair of simple cuff links. As for the Scalfarotto family crest, while it featured a beautiful snowflake design, he could by no means accept an item engraved with it. He was not a member of the Scalfarotto family.

"Thank you for the thought, but I have my own cuff links. There is no need for you to prepare something I will not use much."

"Then you should wear them to the castle and to guilds. I'll interfere if anyone tries to give you grief," Guido said with a very broad grin. Jonas's headache grew worse as he looked at his master, so willing to protect his own bodyguard.

Jonas had never wished he'd been given a pair of cuff links by a lover more than he did right now. If he had, then he could have claimed that he still held feelings for her even after breaking up and wanted to continue wearing the cuff links she'd given him. For now, he insisted that the cuff links absolutely not be

engraved with the family crest, and that they needn't be enchanted either.

"You've made your point, Jonas," Guido said, but the way he was grinning gave Jonas the feeling that his point had been made in vain.

His expectations proved correct. A short while later, Jonas was given a small, white box.

"The left has been enchanted with a barrier stone, and the right has been enchanted with anti-eavesdropping magic. The barrier can only be used once, so bear that in mind," a magical toolmaker with silver hair and eyes explained cheerfully.

He was not one of the Scalfarotto family's exclusive magical toolmakers but one who owned his own company. When it came to making cuff links as magical tools, his company was among the top five in the capital. Taking into account the additional fee for expedited service, Jonas could only guess just how much money the cuff links cost.

Barrier stones were produced by the temple. They contained quite valuable protective magic, and using it allowed one to repel or diminish physical and magical attacks by a certain degree. High-quality stones were difficult to obtain due to their limited quantity, and they were also considerably expensive. Jonas could hardly imagine how much it cost to use them to enchant a small magical tool—the left cuff link, in this case.

In any case, with these, he should be able to protect Guido and other members of the Scalfarotto family.

"Please take a look for yourself."

"Very well. Thank you."

He suspected that the cuff links would either be white or blue crystal with the Scalfarotto family crest painted on top, or else the crest would be lightly engraved on top of silverwork. *Though that would still be conspicuous,* Jonas thought as he opened the lid of the box.

A sound escaped his lips, but wanted to give himself a pat on the back for not shouting. Jonas's gaze froze on the contents of the box. There they were—round, silver cuff links deeply engraved with the Scalfarotto family crest. In place of paint, silver-blue stones—blue sapphires, he guessed—were embedded in the engraved lines of the crest. Jonas lightly brushed them with his fingertips. There seemed to be more than

one enchantment; he felt the gentle pulse of two layers of magic.

As Jonas stood immobile, the magical toolmaker's silver eyes crinkled into a smile and he continued on with his explanation.

"I also applied a strong hardening enchantment, so they should be quite durable. I hope they are to your liking."

The toolmaker must have put in a lot of effort to layer these enchantments. If he stated so confidently that the cuff links were durable, then they undoubtedly were. With these, maybe even Jonas's scales wouldn't break off when he hit them against things. Perhaps he could even emerge unscathed from any battles.

"If you should ever need the enchantments reapplied, please do not hesitate to contact me."

Apparently, the toolmaker would enchant the cuff links again if he were to use the barrier magic. They should make for good protective equipment. He would surely use them if he ever found himself in a critical situation.

"Thank you very much for these wonderful pieces of work," Jonas said, smiling sincerely at the magical toolmaker.

Now, today, he'd put on a black three-piece suit and headed for the Tailors' Guild.

He still hadn't used the cuff links Guido had given him. He intended to wear them with the new three-piece suit once it was complete, so he brought the cuff links with him to the guild on the chance that they could match the suit to the cuff links' design.

Once they saw the cuff links, the two couturiers' eyes went wide, and then they looked at him with new understanding. Matching smiles rose to both their faces. They must have recognized that these cuff links represented Jonas belonging to the Scalfarotto family. And maybe he didn't mind that right now.

His personal knowledge of the quality of clothes went no further than their enchantments and durability. But he could rest easy leaving this task in the hands of the guild. With that thought, he left the room.

A school uniform, a knight's uniform, an attendant's uniform, and a managerial three-piece suit. The garments he clothed himself in had changed before he knew it.

In college, he'd worn a knight's uniform, which he'd thought

was ill-suited for him since he wasn't strong enough. Then, by Guido's side, he wore an attendant's uniform that he felt fit him well. And now today, he was requesting a three-piece suit to be worn for a position that he had never imagined he would hold.

Jonas truly did not know the workings behind good and bad luck. He had been born with low magical power for a noble and an inability to outwardly express his magic. But now, he had magic power and the ability to wield fire magic that could contest a high-ranking noble.

And that was all because ten years ago, he had been cursed—blighted by a fire dragon.

He'd ended up getting dragged into a fight against a fire dragon, a rare creature meant only to be viewed from afar. When he and Guido stood alone before the wounded fire dragon, he'd laughed at their luck.

However, that misfortune had led to good fortune. The two of them survived, and Jonas became a blighted, and as a result, he gained powerful magic and the ability to use fire magic. He never thought he would eventually feel gratitude toward that fire dragon, against whom he'd struggled for his life.

And there was one other time, when he was a boy, that luck and chance had led to him meeting a certain little girl: Lucia Fano, whom he'd just met with at the Tailors' Guild, a couturier with an overflowing passion for clothing.

She had green hair that evoked fresh young leaves, and eyes like a clear, blue lake. With her short stature and delicate appearance, he wouldn't have thought twice if she were introduced to him as a well-behaved young noblewoman.

But once she opened her mouth, she spoke with a bright, strong voice, and when she spoke of clothes, the light in her eyes became one—no, two or three times more intense. Rather than her appearance, it was her disposition that convinced him that she was without a doubt that same little girl.

They had shared a moment at sunset in a back alley, where they had cried and lamented together about how preposterous life was. That day, he'd told that girl she should wear the clothes she wanted to wear, and he decided that he would pursue the path of knighthood as he so desired.

The more he recalled that day, the more it felt like a green, childish, somewhat embarrassing memory.

Today, Lucia once again had on a fashionable outfit that befit

a couturier. She wore an ornate ivory blouse paired with a dark blue skirt that matched her eyes. With its lace and ribbons, it was an outfit that showcased her style much better than the one she'd worn the day he'd first met her. The reason she didn't appear small despite her short height was not only due to the high heels she was wearing.

In any case, the fact that she would be involved in the creation of his suit was a curious coincidence. That little girl who had dreamed of wearing lace and ribbons was now involved in the creation of an aristocratic three-piece suit with secret pockets and magical enchantments, and had even proposed ideas for materials to use for garters to hold concealed weapons. It was amazing how far she'd come.

Earlier, when she was talking to Forto about the design of the suit, it seemed that the two of them got along very well. However, Jonas had learned from a source that she had declined his marriage proposal.

The report he had received described how some people theorized that maybe she wanted to become more established in her career, or maybe she, as a commoner, was intimidated by the prospect of becoming the wife of a viscount, or maybe she had even received a different offer for marriage. Or perhaps Lucia was in love with someone else, or she chose to be single and had no interest in romance or marriage—

When his thoughts reached that point, Jonas stopped himself. His and Lucia's relationship was that of a couturier and her client. Nothing more. Instead of prying into her personal life, he should be looking forward to the completion of his suit.

Then, suddenly, he heard a great clamor.

"Please wait just one moment!" a guard shouted while running over to him. There seemed to have been an accident nearby. The guard explained that the main road was closed and that it would be a while before they could let carriages pass.

It hadn't been a serious accident; a carriage had slid in the rain, resulting in broken wheels, and it was now immobile. It was a large delivery carriage used by the Couriers' Guild, so it would take some time to transfer the cargo to another carriage.

Most couriers could use strengthening magic, so Jonas doubted it would truly take that long for them to transfer the cargo. He decided to just wait at the carriage stop until they were finished.

After he told his coach driver his intentions, he caught sight of Lucia walking into the carriage stop alone. Some of the people in the vicinity had seemingly gone to help with moving the cargo, so there were few people around. And there was no one nearby who could explain the situation to her.

Jonas walked from the front of his carriage to the pathway.

“Head Manager Fano.”

When he called her name, her deep blue eyes went astonishingly wide. That color was exactly how he remembered it, and he had to pause before continuing.

“A carriage has broken down on the main road, so it will be some time before traffic can pass through. Those in a hurry are utilizing the carriages nearby for transport. Should you require one, I will escort you there.”

“Thank you very much for letting me know. I am only returning to the Magical Garment Factory, so I think I will wait here.”

Jonas understood why she would decline an escort from him. He might be a client, but they barely knew each other. It was natural for her to be wary. In fact, it was better that a young lady was this wary, for her own safety.

“Understood. Then I pray that the road will be reopened soon.”

“Yes, I hope so too.”

After they said goodbye, each of them wearing a professional smile, Lucia walked past his side. Without turning around to look at her, Jonas decided to return to his own carriage. Inside it, he could relax and wait until—

“Ack!”

Not far from where they had just parted ways, he heard a small shriek. He turned around, wondering if she’d slipped on the rain-slick path, and saw that she was drenched from head to toe.

“Please forgive me! I drew back the canopy to shake the rain off!”

Next to Lucia, a coach driver was bowing his head up and down in apology. Rainwater must have pooled in the carriage’s canopy, and the driver had pulled it tight without realizing Lucia was right next to it.

“I’m fine! Please, there’s no need to worry.”

The woman wiped her wet face dry with a handkerchief, not

uttering a single word of reproach to the driver. Then, she smiled brightly at him.

But though she said she was fine, the rainwater had turned her ivory blouse see-through. Even though there were few people around at this time, Jonas couldn't let her remain looking that way. He ran to her side to shield her, then unbuttoned his jacket.

"Here, take my coat. I will walk you to the Tailors' Guild."

Thinking that if she could wear his coat to the Tailors' Guild, she'd be able to change into something there, Jonas began pulling his right arm out of his sleeve. But the woman before him threw her bag to the ground and tightly grabbed his arm before he could take it out of his sleeve.

"Mr. Goodwin, keep your coat on!"

"But your blouse—"

Perhaps she found it disturbing to wear the jacket of someone who was blighted. Her expression was set in firm refusal.

Beneath the sleeve she currently had clasped with both hands were his rough, hard scales. The sensation surely had to be eerie and unpleasant to her. But the bigger problem here was letting this woman walk around in such a compromising state. He was about to ask her if she could bear with it at least until they could reach the Tailors' Guild, but before he could say anything, the woman looked up at him with her deep blue eyes.

"I've been told your jacket is enchanted. No one outside of those involved in enchanting it is permitted to see it. We can't let it be seen by anyone else!" she cried, her voice forceful and resolute. Her face, though still bearing traces of her childhood features, was the face of an established couturier—

He found himself staring at the woman in fascination when she swiftly released her hold on his arm, then picked up the bag at her feet.

"No one can see my shirt if I carry my bag like this, and there are clothes I can borrow at the Tailors' Guild, so I will be fine!" Lucia bowed, clutching the bag, which was barely able to hide her transparent clothing. "I very much appreciate your concern, Mr. Goodwin!"

Drops of water fell from the tips of her green hair as she kept her head lowered. The sight reminded Jonas of droplets trickling off fresh verdure after the rain.

“Now, if you will excuse me.” Lucia abruptly spun around, turning her back to him, and without any hesitation, started to walk away.

Before he was even aware of doing so, and without even knowing why himself, Jonas cried out, “Head Manager Fano!”

The woman turned around and looked at him questioningly with her clear, blue eyes.

Jonas paused for a moment to think of a reason he might have called for her to stop. “There are many others with the surname Goodwin. If you wouldn’t mind, please call me Jonas.”

He asked her to call him by his first name only so she would not get him confused with anyone else. Not for any other reason.

“Thank you, Mr. Jonas! Please call me Lucia, then.”

“It would be my pleasure to, Ms. Lucia. Please take care not to catch a cold.”

“I will!” Lucia said, her face blooming into a smile. She readjusted the bag over her chest, then walked in the direction of the Tailors’ Guild. Although she was wearing heels, her gait was steady and secure.

Jonas put his jacket back on and fastened the buttons. He wasn’t wearing his usual attendant’s uniform jacket but a jacket with light enchantments. It would have been no issue if someone had seen them. If he’d told Lucia that, he could have compelled her to put it on. But he’d been unable to; he’d been so pleased with the couturier she’d become.

Back then, in that back alley, that little girl had cried about how lace and ribbons didn’t suit her—though he shouldn’t continue referring to her as a little girl. She was Lucia Fano, the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. There was absolutely zero chance that she had attained that position through her beauty or charm. The blue eyes that had stared back at him weren’t those of a woman who needed to be protected but those of a couturier who protected her clients.

Life was preposterous. They had both commiserated over that fact that day in the back alley.

Perhaps life could be fun if all one had to do was try one’s best, but unfortunately, life was never that easy. It was filled with preposterous things, and his birth predetermined what he could

achieve even through his best efforts. He went through one frustrating experience after another and had so many things slip through his fingers.

He suspected that Lucia had walked a similarly twisted path. But she hadn't given up. She was incapable of giving up. And after years of struggling, here she was today. He was certain that their encounter that day, when they cried over their preposterous lives, hadn't been for nothing.

On that first meeting of theirs, that little girl had watched him walk away in the sunset. He hadn't been able to bring himself to turn around and meet her gaze, and the simple reason for that had been that he'd wanted to show off.

The last time he'd run into her in the hallway of the Tailors' Guild, he'd privately celebrated seeing the respectable young lady she'd become. But, thinking their paths would never cross again, he hadn't turned to look back at her.

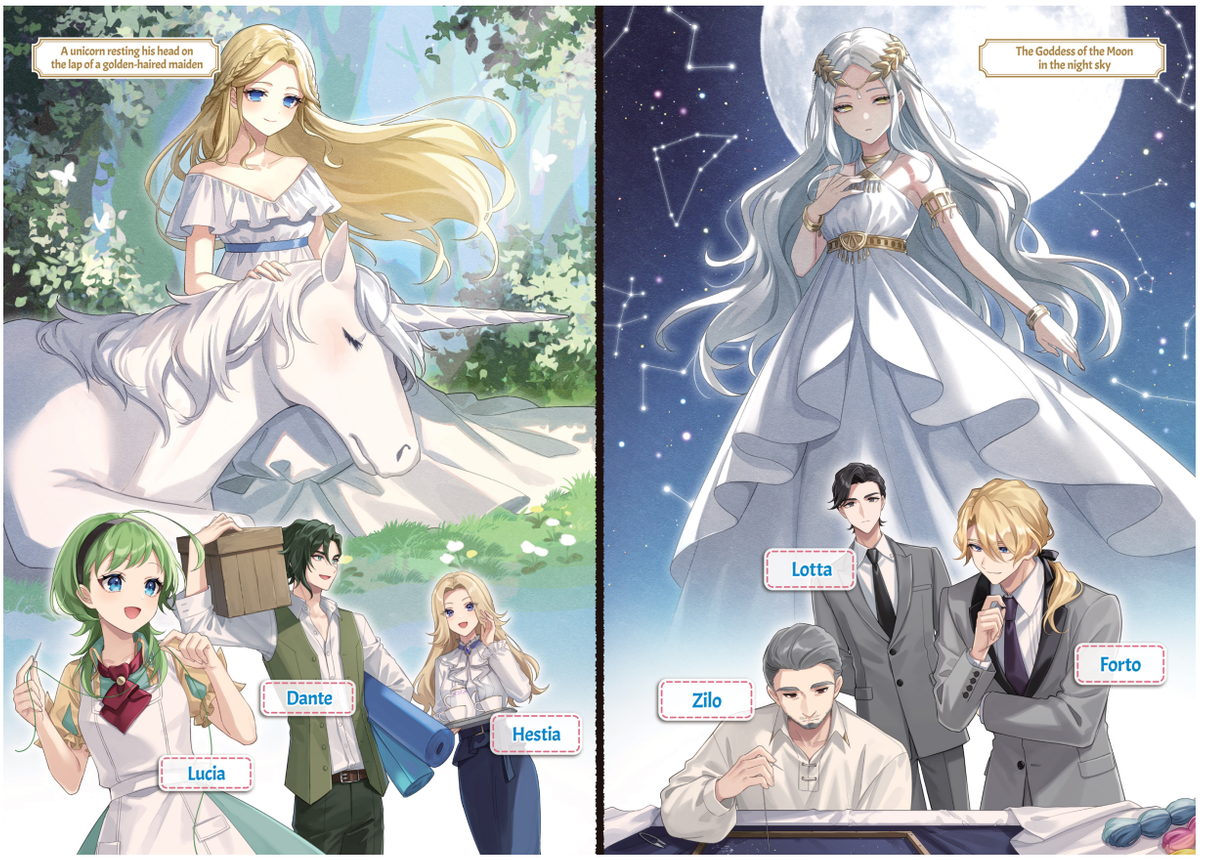
And now, today, he was the one staring at Lucia's back as she walked swiftly down the wet pathway. As she walked with quick steps, bag to her chest, he looked at her back, at the ribbon fluttering around her waist and the swinging lace-trimmed hem of her skirt. She looked like a blue flower swaying in the wind. It was the perfect look for her.

He watched her receding figure, then said in a soft whisper, "I suppose this time, it's my turn to watch you go."




Lucia and the Loom
Weaving Her Way to Happiness
3
Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Esora Amaichi
Character Designs: Kei


Jonas
Enrica
Jessica


A unicorn resting his head on the lap of a golden-haired maiden
Lucia
Dante
Hestia
The Goddess of the Moon in the night sky
Lotta
Zilo
Forto


"I fully understand if you wish to refuse my request."
Frandine
Noemi
Tiziano
"The method you choose does not matter, as long as you protect the Tailors' Guild and the Magical Garment Factory."
"I'm glad Forto is finally giving it some thought..."
Minerva



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by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by A.M. Cola
Edited by Shakuzan

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