



# Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start  
with **Magical Tools**

Hisaya Amagishi  
Illustrator: Kei

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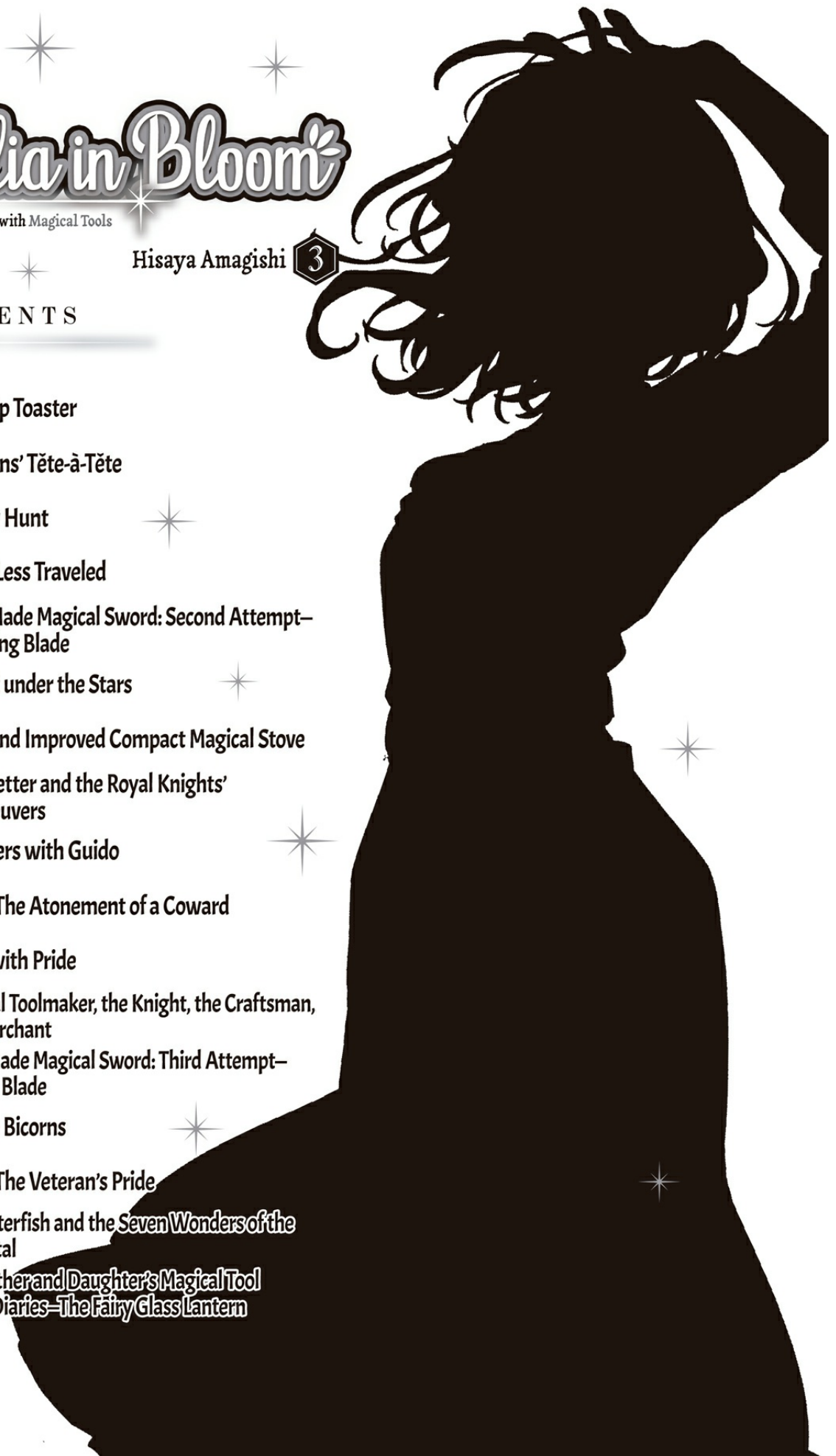
Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

Hisaya Amagishi

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# The Pop-Up Toaster

At the chime of a little bell, a brown object shot into the air. Its trajectory sent it high into the bright sunlight that streamed in through the window, until the door opened and it was deftly snatched from flight by a young man. *That's a knight of the Beast Hunters for you*, Dahlia thought as he dashed to her side. His reflexes and kinetic vision were second to none. As he stood there clutching a well-toasted slice of white bread in his right hand, his beautiful face was a picture of puzzlement.

"Just out of curiosity, Dahlia, is there a reason you're making a magical bread flinger?"

"Well, um, you see..."

Dahlia began to perspire slightly as she struggled to work out how to explain herself. All she'd wanted to do was try to recreate the pop-up toaster she remembered from her past life. However, she couldn't tell him that, for that would reveal her biggest secret: Dahlia was a woman from another world reincarnated. She'd once lived in a country known as Japan, where she'd worked for a domestic appliance manufacturer. She had worked, she had overworked, and eventually, she'd worked herself to death.

Dahlia Rossetti was the name she'd been bestowed with when she was reborn here, in the kingdom of Ordine. This world that abounded with monsters and magic would have seemed like mere fantasy to her former self.

Her profession was now in magical toolmaking. It was an occupation undertaken by craftspeople who used crystals and monster materials to create magical tools of every description. In workshops throughout the kingdom, one might find magical lanterns with fire crystals to produce constant, reliable light, dryers powered by a combination of air and fire crystals, as well as accessories like rings and bangles that could nullify poison and aid in battles against fearsome monsters. Dahlia's workshop was situated on the first floor of a stone tower—nicknamed the Green Tower for the vines that wrapped its exterior.



“I was trying to make this thing called a pop-up toaster.”

“Pop-up toaster?”

The dark-haired young man cocking his head at her in bemusement was named Volfred Scalfarotto. He was one of the kingdom’s royal knights, and he was a member of the Order of Beast Hunters. He was tall and lean, with glossy ebony hair and flawless skin. Of all his strikingly beautiful features, perhaps the most bewitching of all were his long, almond-shaped eyes, centered with golden irises. However, the man himself was not fond of his looks. Over the years, they had caused considerable hardship in his relationships with men and women alike.

“What this pop-up toaster *should* do is toast the bread and automatically pop it out when it’s done so that it’s easy to pick up.”

Dahlia took the browned slice of bread from Volf and cast her eyes down to the workbench. Sitting on top of it was a somewhat tall, rectangular housing made of silver metal. Dahlia had modeled it after the toasters she remembered from her past life.

There were tools for toasting bread in this world, but they weren’t generally used at the table. They sat on top of a magical stove, enclosing the bread inside somewhat like a waffle iron, and needed to be turned over halfway through toasting. It was a somewhat slow method and required a pair of metal tongs—in short, it wasn’t the most convenient piece of cookware.

That morning, when Dahlia had gone to buy groceries, she’d noticed that the white bread was on sale. She hadn’t bought white bread in a while, and it had triggered memories of her past life. It was that sense of nostalgia that had prompted today’s project. First, she had remolded a rectangular metal housing so that it could be set with a fire crystal. Then she had made two slots in the top, the inner surfaces of which she furnished with magical circuits that would heat up to produce the toasting effect. It would heat slices of bread placed inside from both sides, and once the timer ran out, a bell would ring and the bread would pop up about one-third of the way out of the slot—that had been her plan, at least.

“These springs must be too strong.”



Although the loaves of white bread in Ordine were about the same size as those Dahlia had known in her past life, the individual slices were about four times as thick and fairly dense. More to the point, they were rather heavy. The first two slices Dahlia had tried toasting failed to pop up properly and had burned. She'd used the weakest of the springs she had on hand, which obviously lacked sufficient force. According to her calculations, springs just one or two grades stronger would do the trick, but unfortunately, she had none of those in stock. She could always go and buy some tomorrow, she thought, but then she reminded herself that the toaster was only a prototype. It wouldn't matter if the springs were a little on the strong side.

She'd spread a cloth out on top of the workbench, so that any toast that *did* happen to jump out wouldn't leave a crumbly mess on the surface, before inserting the stronger springs. Thinking she'd just do a bit more testing before Volf arrived, Dahlia soon became engrossed in her work. Shortly after she'd popped her third slice of bread into the toaster, Volf had arrived and opened the workshop door. The toast had sprung high over Dahlia's head, only to be immediately intercepted by Volf's quick reflexes. Whether his timing had been good or bad was up for debate.

"Springs? For bread?" Volf queried with an expression of fathomless bafflement.

"I didn't mean to make it jump quite *that* far. I just thought it'd be nice to be able to toast bread at the table and for it to pop out automatically when it's done."

As she spoke, she realized she perhaps wasn't explaining it very well. She'd never had any intention of making the toast fly out like it had just now. All she wanted was for the toaster to raise it up a little so that it was easy to take when it was ready. Would he understand if she put it that way? There was nothing even similar to the pop-up toaster in this world.

To her surprise, Volf nodded with an enthusiastic smile. "Now it makes sense. Setting the table would definitely be faster if the toast jumped right onto the plates!"

"Er, that's..." She couldn't bring herself to tell him that wasn't what she had in



mind and was somewhat disappointed in herself.

“That way, you won’t burn your fingers trying to pick it up, but it’ll still be nice and hot when you want to eat it. That’ll be perfect for winter. Could be great for cafeterias and the like too, since you can just keep lining up plates, ready for the next slice to pop out.”

“I...suppose so.”

A pop-up toaster that served the toast right onto the plates... Perhaps that was a possibility after all. Dahlia found herself wavering in light of Volf’s suggestions. Perhaps people in this world would find *that* more useful than what she’d had in mind.

“In that case, maybe ‘flying toaster’ would be a better name than ‘pop-up toaster,’ though!”

“Y-Yes, maybe.”

In the back of Dahlia’s mind, a little toaster sprouted wings and flapped away into the blue. The new name Volf had coined was painfully accurate.



As soon as they climbed up to the living room on the second floor, Dahlia switched on the ventilation fan. Though it was still only May, the breeze wafting in through the window was faintly warm. It was set to be a scorcher of a summer. Dahlia left Volf with a glass of sparkling water with ice and some chilled orange slices before going to the kitchen. She cut the crusts off of the bread she’d toasted in the workshop, sliced the toast into small pieces, and topped each piece with a random assortment of cheese, ham, and tomatoes to make canapés. She saved the crusts to be used in a pudding later, where they would be soaked in a mixture of egg and sugar. It would be a little fattening, but Dahlia hated to let good food go to waste.

“I made these with the bread I toasted earlier; I hope you don’t mind,” Dahlia said as she returned to the living room, offering him some canapés as she sat down in a chair across from him.

The two began chatting once again.

“I’ll be leaving on another expedition tomorrow,” Volf told her. “We’re going



to slay some harpies.”

“I see. Harpies fly, so...” She caught herself on the verge of voicing some needless concern. “You’ll have your work cut out.”

Dangerous expeditions were the Order of Beast Hunters’ bread and butter. What was more, Volf belonged to a division known as the Scarlet Armors. Their role placed them at the forefront of every assault. They knew the dangers of their work better than anyone.

“Yeah, but I have *this* now. I’m sure I’ll be just fine.”

Volf smiled as he held up his left hand. Around his wrist was a silver bracelet that gleamed with flashes of gold in the light. The bracelet was one of Dahlia’s creations, enchanted with the magic of a sköll fang. When activated, the sköll’s air magic could send the wearer high into the sky or hurtling in any direction they chose, augmenting their movements. There was a catch, however. If the wearer was capable of expressing their magic externally—even just the tiniest drop—the magic would blast them off their feet in an instant. The accessory’s potency had come at a cost.

Volf, as it happened, was completely incapable of expressing his magic. They’d used the blood bonding technique so that now only his touch would activate the bracelet. Its power was tremendous, but incredibly, Volf had mastered it in no time. Just a few days prior, Dahlia had watched him use it to reach the roof of the Green Tower in a single leap.

“Harpies have wings, though,” Dahlia said. “Even if you manage to jump up to their height, you can’t go chasing them through the air.”

“I still think it’ll come in handy. You wouldn’t happen to have a magical tool in the works that *could* let me fly like a bird, would you?”

“Not at the moment.” Dahlia chuckled at his friendly jest.

She’d never heard of a magical tool that let the user fly freely through the air. Besides, enchanting the sköll bracelet had already pushed her to her limits, exhausting her reserves of magic. Supposing this tool Volf spoke of did exist, enchanting it with whatever materials it needed would surely require deep and potent reserves of magic. Only the most powerful magical toolmakers or mages

could achieve such a feat. Nonetheless, Dahlia's spirit of adventure was inextinguishable. She'd never know for sure what she was capable of without testing herself.

"To be honest, I think it'll be the bow knights who take center stage for this mission," Volf told her.

"Bow knights? Do they use longbows?"

Once, long ago, Dahlia had been in the forest with her father when they'd seen a hunter with a longbow. The bow had been about two-thirds the man's height; it was impressive merely to look at. Furthermore, it had obviously required great strength to draw—her father had tried to pull back the string, but the bow had barely bent at all.

"No, the next size up. They're called greatbows. They're very large and not easy to draw; the men use a strengthening spell before firing them. The arrows they loose have enough power to pierce wyvern skin."

"They're *even bigger* than longbows?"

She should have expected as much from the Order of Beast Hunters. If even wyvern skin couldn't stand up to their bows and arrows, they had to be powerful indeed.

"If only they could have helped you when that wyvern carried you off," Dahlia said, thinking back to when she'd first encountered Volf in the forest, caked in blood.

Two days prior to that meeting, during a mission, he'd been snatched up in the talons of a wyvern and carried away. He'd managed to kill the wyvern, but he had crashed to earth on a mountainside far from the royal capital. With dreadful wounds, he'd run through the forest for two full days without food or water until he finally emerged onto the road Dahlia happened to be driving her carriage along. She shuddered to think what would have become of him if she hadn't been there. Volf, on the other hand, merely grinned as he raised his glass of sparkling water, an almost dazzling golden light dancing in his eyes.

"Nah, I'd rather have been rescued by you any day."



## The Artisans' Tête-à-Tête

In a corner of the city's artisan quarter, Dahlia stepped down from a carriage into the blazing sun. Even in her dark-blue summer dress and airy linen jacket, she was on the verge of sweating. Before her stood a green-roofed building with an engraved silver plaque beside the entrance. "Gandolfi Workshop," it read. Satisfied that she'd come to the right place, Dahlia rang the doorbell.

"Good day, Mr. Gandolfi."

"Ah, Chairwoman Rossetti. Welcome."

With an alacrity that suggested he had been awaiting her arrival, Fermo—the head of the workshop and a specialist craftsman of small goods—appeared to greet her. Though age had added a sprinkling of white to his head of brown hair, his posture was still ramrod straight. He was wearing a dark-gray smock—probably his usual work attire.

Dahlia had first met Fermo at the Merchants' Guild a few days ago. They'd arranged for him to create some samples of her foaming soap dispensers that would be suitable for mass production. Both of them had been rather busy since that day with one thing or another, but today, at last, their schedules had aligned.

"It's a little cramped, I'm afraid, but come on in."

The workshop was a single-story wooden building with a high ceiling. Fermo had called it cramped, but it was no less spacious than Dahlia's workshop in the tower. One wall was lined with shelving, where a multitude of bolts, springs, tubes, spray bottle parts, and much more were neatly stored. Fermo invited Dahlia to sit at the table in the middle of the workshop before fetching three soap dispensers that he placed in front of her. He pointed one of them out.

"This is the one for mass production. If you see anything you're not happy with, let me know right away."

Dahlia picked it up and inspected it, turning it over in her hands. Then she

disassembled it. All the sections of the lid, the pump, and the vessel were more cleanly and uniformly crafted than in her initial prototypes. One of the bottles had been filled with soap, ready for use. She tried it and was delighted by the thick, fluffy mound of white foam that squirted onto the prepared plate.

“These are beautifully made. So much lighter than my prototypes. The lid pushes down far more easily and smoothly too.”

“Yeah, I hollowed out the inside of part of the pump a little. It ought to be just as durable, and now the downward pressure on it’ll be spread out more evenly. Each pump’s been pressed a thousand times, and we didn’t find any problems in each of these three bottles. If you’re satisfied with them, then I’ll go ahead and have them pressed five thousand times.”

“Who does your testing for you?”

“Some students at a local elementary school took the job on. It’s a good bit of pocket money for them.”

Every child in this kingdom, regardless of whether they were of noble or common birth, was permitted to go to school as long as they passed the requisite exams. The kingdom bore the cost of tuition, but students had to pay for their school supplies and any extracurricular activities on their own. These expenses soon added up, so many children from commoner families worked part-time jobs.

“Well, I’m more than happy with the quality of these, Mr. Gandolfi. We can proceed to the next stage whenever you’re ready.”

“Sure thing. I’ll get those tests done soon as I can and then turn in the specifications to the guild. Call me Fermo, by the way. Everyone in this workshop’s called Gandolfi, so it’ll get confusing real fast if you come calling for me.”

“Understood. In that case, you must call me Dahlia. I simply can’t get used to being called Chairwoman...”

“Miss Dahlia it is, then. I know how you feel—I still think of my old man every time someone calls me the workshop head.” Fermo chuckled as he lifted a large basket onto the table. “Now, these are some different models. I just made them



as the ideas came to me. I'd appreciate an honest opinion of them."

Taking them one by one from the basket, Fermo lined up a total of ten soap dispensers, each one a different shape from the last.

"There are so many!"

"Yeah, well, y'know how it is sometimes. You get started and then don't know where to stop..."

The expression in the man's eyes as he sheepishly glanced away was all too familiar. Both Dahlia and her father had been just the same when crafting prototypes—they'd get a little momentum behind them, and before they knew it, they'd have half a dozen new versions with all sorts of extra features and functions. Most of them were useless, but searching out new possibilities was where the joy of experimentation lay. There was nothing a craftsperson delighted in more.

"This one's for shaving," Fermo explained, pointing to the first bottle in the row. "I've made the vessel bigger; firstly, so it'll fit better in men's hands, and secondly, so it'll hold a lot more soap. A lot of men find it a real hassle refilling these things."

"Oh, I see."

She hadn't considered that. Refilling soap bottles was indeed rather time-consuming.

"These next two have larger vessels as well. I've made them wider and square-shaped and weighted the bottom so that they're much harder to tip over. I figured this type would be handy in a busy kitchen or the like, where you'll have a lot of people using it."

"I agree. I think big families would appreciate having these in their bathrooms too."

"Now, this one's got a catch on the bottom so it can be fixed in place. Just needs a corresponding part set into the surface it's going to sit on. Once it's locked, no one'll be able to remove it without knowing the exact mechanism. Might be good for people who're sick or elderly and have shaky hands, or for kids, since there's no chance of them knocking it over. The other thing it'd

solve, though I know it's not so pleasant to think about, is people harassing business owners by stealing them. Drunks in bars and eateries sometimes think it's funny to take them home too."

"Right. That would definitely make them safer."

Dahlia herself had thought of designing a version that was easier and safer for children and elderly people to use, but the idea of people stealing the dispensers from businesses hadn't occurred to her. While the crime rates in the royal capital were very low, it saw its fair share of troublesome drunks, and there were certain places where employing anti-theft measures would be wise. It made sense for a small goods specialist to be aware of these sorts of issues, Dahlia reasoned.

"The next four are all luxury versions for the noble market," Fermo continued. "The vessels are decorated with colored glass and some simple glasswork techniques. We could probably add some metalwork decoration too, though I'd guess most higher-ranked nobles would want them custom-made."

The transparent bottles featured delicate floral patterns with accents of translucent blue, scarlet, and opaque milk-white. Each one was eye-catching and beautiful in its own way.

"The glasswork and colors are absolutely lovely," Dahlia said with admiration. "They're pretty enough to be given as gifts. Perhaps we could use the same vessel and offer a range of glass and metalwork covers to go over the outside."

"Ah, I see what you mean. That'd save us from making each one individually. Customers could choose whichever combinations of colored glass and covers they liked. Semi-custom, I guess they call that."

"And they'd be replaceable if they got broken or if the customer just felt like a change."

The craftsman nodded and began to jot down notes on a piece of paper he had near at hand. Dahlia took out her notebook and followed suit. She wrote down the various colors of glass they might use and potential designs for the outer covers. The covers could depict all sorts of subjects, not necessarily just flowers. There was plenty of scope for exploration, and Dahlia couldn't help but be excited.



“The last two I’ve got here are meant to be portable. They could be useful anytime you’re out and about and want to wash your hands, but...to be honest with you, I just made them to see how small they could go.”

“I understand completely! I’m always curious about how big or small I can make my products.”

“You too, huh? It’s something I always think about when I’m crafting something new. Can’t help wanting to know what’s possible!”

*Oh, he’s a craftsman all right. A true craftsman!* Dahlia rejoiced. Fermo’s zeal reminded her of talking about magical tools with her father, and it was infectious. Dahlia could hardly keep a lid on her bubbling enthusiasm.

“Tell me, Mr. Fermo, are you the type to test the limits of a product until it breaks?”

“But of course! You want to know exactly what experience the customer’s going to have, and it gives you points to improve on too. I’m going to have these pumps pressed ten thousand times and then keep upping it until they break, to test their durability. You do the same kind of thing with magical tools?”

“Well, I certainly like to be that thorough in my testing. Not all toolmakers go so far, though.”

Fermo nodded, accepting this without question. However, the state of affairs Dahlia described didn’t quite give an accurate picture. Generally speaking, magical tools were considerably more durable than the kinds of small goods Fermo handled in his workshop. Thus, toolmakers who insisted on testing their creations to the point of breakage were considered rather eccentric by their fellow craftspeople. Dahlia was one such eccentric; she conducted thorough durability tests on almost all of her inventions. Even her waterproof cloth had been put through its paces. She had washed the finished articles around a hundred times and even employed the services of an ice mage to freeze them. Her father had been supportive of her efforts—“It’s necessary work, so keep at it until you’re satisfied.” However, as she’d repeated the tests incessantly, he’d had a slight change of heart. “I’m starting to feel sorry for that blue slime stuck on there,” he’d sometimes joked.

Nonetheless, Dahlia had grown up watching her father thoroughly test the durability of all his inventions. It was he who'd taught her the importance of it.

"So, I thought we could submit whichever of these prototypes you approve of to the guild," Fermo said.

"I approve of them all. If you could draw up the specification documents for each of them, I'd be much obliged. I have a man called Ivano on my staff—I'm sure he'll be able to sort it all out for us."

"There're a lot of them. You're sure we can leave it all to him? Wouldn't want to overwork the fella."

"Well, he did give me free rein to create everything I wanted...but if it's too much, I'm sure he'll tell me."

For the moment, the red-haired woman's carefree smile assuaged Fermo's concerns. This man she called Ivano was obviously a master of his profession.

If only Ivano had had a seat at that table, he'd have just about turned to stone by now.

"One thing I would say for all of them is that they're prone to leakage where the upper parts join the vessel. All it needs is some kraken tape. Want me to send them over to a magical toolmaker's for that?"

"Yes, please. I actually brought some kraken tape with me, so I'll try applying it right now."

Kraken tape had the appearance of a thick white bandage. However, once magic was applied to it, it quickly turned translucent, took on a pliant, rubbery texture, and became sticky. It was frequently used as a sealant and for preventing slippage.

"I'd do it myself if I could, but my magic's only grade two, you see," Fermo told her.

"You can use kraken tape at grade two."

In this world, people's magical power was generally measured on a fifteen-grade scale, with grade one being the weakest and fifteen the highest. Most commoners possessed a grade of one to five. Power was measured by a special



magical crystal that detected a person's magical potency when touched. These assessments were conducted at school entrance exams and other such events. However, this method didn't work for people like Volf, who couldn't express *any* magic externally at all. Their power could only be measured by dropping a small amount of their blood onto a different type of crystal. There were also some, such as those of royal lineage or the most high-ranking nobles, whose power was too great and would actually damage the measuring crystal.

The last time Dahlia had had her power measured, it had been grade eight. Her father's had been grade twelve. Dahlia's power was ample for a magical toolmaker, but not quite sufficient for a mage. She was simultaneously in awe of and completely unsurprised by her father's result.

"Hm? I thought you had to be grade five to handle magical toolmaking materials," Fermo replied dubiously.

"That's just what they tell you when you want to study it in school. You can definitely handle kraken tape at grade two. In fact, I've heard that people at grade fifteen or close to it find it trickier to work with than people at lower grades. It tends to cling all over their hands once they apply their magic to it. I remember seeing the more powerful students struggling to use it in my magical toolmaking classes."

"Huh. You don't say."

Taking the high school magical toolmaking exam required power of grade five or above. That must have been why Fermo had always believed he couldn't use magical materials. The reason the bar was set at five was because that was the level of power needed to use the equipment in the magical toolmaking classes. However, for a simple material like kraken tape, grade two was perfectly adequate. It would be a little time-consuming, but their pace wouldn't be far behind that of someone more powerful working carefully.

"Would you like to try it, Mr. Fermo?" Dahlia inquired, though the fire in the man's eyes had already answered her question.

"You betcha!"

Fermo sat down beside her at the table and picked up the lid parts of the soap dispenser's pump.

“Um, are you familiar with the enchanting technique?”

“Yeah, more or less. You use your index finger on your dominant hand, right? Like when you use a magical tool for the first time?”

“That’s it. You want to focus on letting the warmth in your fingertip flow into the tape. Hover your finger just over the surface. You’ll see the color gradually change from white to translucent. Then you can start slowly wrapping it round.”

“Whoa, it’s turning into putty!”

The softened kraken tape beneath the man’s fingertip was twisting and curling like dried squid on the grill. He was obviously expressing his magical power too erratically. It took practice to make it flow in a steady, constant stream.

“Don’t try to force it. Take steady breaths as you go. If it starts curling like that, just pull back slightly, like this, and move to a different spot.”

“Oh, now it’s going straight... Hm? Hold on. It’s not setting.”

“Your magic’s weakening. Bring your finger closer and concentrate.”

“Right, concentrating...concentrating...” Fermo mumbled to himself as he focused intently, slowly drawing the kraken tape around in a circle. “All right! It stuck!”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he picked up a second piece of tape. He was getting the hang of it far faster than Dahlia had anticipated. Pleasantly surprised, she watched over his subsequent attempts, offering advice where necessary.

“I did it. I actually used kraken tape. Shame about all those lumps and bumps, though.”

“This is fantastic work after only handling four pieces. You should be proud.”

On his fourth attempt, Fermo had managed to wrap the kraken tape completely around the soap bottle’s lid without letting his magic falter or letting the tape ball up. The result was well beyond what one would expect from someone performing their first enchantment. No doubt his long years of experience crafting small, delicate objects had played a part.

“How long do you reckon before I can stick it without any lumps or wrinkles?”

“At this rate, I’d say you’ll be producing salable results after another hundred or so tries.”

“I’m a tad short of breath... Is this magic exhaustion? I’ve only used four pieces.”

“If you do four pieces every day, then it’ll only take you twenty-five days to be able to use it properly. You can also gradually boost your magical power by draining it on a daily basis. You’ll be able to handle enchanting the prototypes in no time,” Dahlia said cheerfully.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Fermo let out a shallow sigh.

“It’s exciting having this range of prototypes to play with, but this is going to be tough. Wish I’d started this when I was a little younger, y’know?”

His gaze was somewhat wistful as he sat still clutching a piece of kraken tape in his hand.

“But you *will* do it, won’t you, Mr. Fermo?” Dahlia asked earnestly.

The man’s green eyes narrowed slightly, and he nodded with a smile.

“Course I will. I’m a craftsman, aren’t I?”

“Oh, that reminds me. I apologize for not getting this to you earlier. Here—please consider this a greeting from the Rossetti Trading Company.”

Dahlia placed a bundle on the table, opening it to reveal one of her compact magical stoves. When trading companies first struck a deal with a new supplier, it was traditional to present the supplier with a gift of one of the company’s products—so Dahlia had heard from Ivano. Thus, she’d brought along a stove. She’d gotten so engrossed in talking to Fermo and teaching him how to use the kraken tape that she’d almost forgotten all about the gift.

“This is magical, I take it?”

“Indeed. It’s a compact version of the magical stove. Simply place a pot on top, and you can enjoy cooking at the dining table or outdoors. I’ve included several recipes for dishes like grilled meat and a kind of cheese stew. I’d be delighted if you’d give it a try.”



“I’ll be glad to. Thank you. Is this one of your creations too?”

“Yes, but I can’t claim too much credit. I didn’t *invent* the magical stove per se; I only made it smaller.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, now. Getting a stove this small can’t have been a walk in the park.”

“As a matter of fact, I’d like to make a version even smaller and lighter than this one, but it’s proving rather tricky.”

Fermo inspected the stove from every angle, even turning it upside-down. He gave the body a light tap with the back of his finger before removing the compartment housing the magic crystal.

“It seems plenty small to me. What kind of reduction are we talking about?”

“Ideally, I’d like to make it about a third smaller and no heavier than a wineskin.”

“I don’t know whether they’ll apply to magical tools, but I’ve got books on weight-reduction techniques for small goods. Reckon they’d help?”

“I’d imagine so. Do you think I might be able to borrow them?”

“You can have them. I’ve got extra copies.”

Fermo got up and went over to the shelves, retrieving two books from the lowest one. They were guides to reducing the weight of objects made of metal and glass. Once he’d handed them to Dahlia, he once again picked up the stove and peered at the underside.

“Even with magic, I guess you can’t just shrink things as you please.”

“Indeed. It makes crafting parts easier, but no, there’s no magic that can make things shrink or expand, and every piece has to be created individually.”

Although magic abounded in this world she’d been reborn into, the lack of spells that could make objects greater or smaller in size, or replicate them, left Dahlia feeling ever so slightly cheated. She imagined every artisan had dreamed of such magic at least once in their life.

“Where did you learn to design housings, Miss Dahlia?”

“I learned in high school and from my father.”

“Your father... He was the man who invented the hot water dispensers, er...”

“Carlo Rossetti, yes. He passed away a year ago, sadly.”

“Oh, I see.” Fermo carefully set the stove down on the table before turning his deep-green eyes on Dahlia. “His daughter founded her own company and supports herself through her own hard work. I’m sure he’s resting easy.”

“I’ve still got a long way to go. If Father were to watch me at work, he’d still be fussing over my every move.”

“That’s just how it goes. The more you expect from an apprentice, the more you end up nagging them.”

Fermo’s smile was tinged with bitterness, as though he were reflecting on personal experience. Just as that smile faded, there was a knock from the door at the back of the room.

“Pardon me,” called the voice behind the door. “Forgive my husband’s manners, not even offering you a cup of tea...”

“Barbara, you should be in bed. I’ll take care of that, so you go take it easy.”

Bearing a tray laden with cups of tea, a woman with mauve hair entered the room. She was dressed in dark-gray work clothes like Fermo, but her movements were noticeably stiff and awkward. Her eyebrows drew together with every change in her posture, but she was trying her best to conceal her discomfort with a smile. It was difficult to watch. It seemed almost as though she was bearing a wound.

“Oh, sorry, Miss Dahlia. This is my wife. We run this workshop together.”

“I am Barbara Gandolfi. We are honored by your visit today, Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“I am Dahlia Rossetti. I’m very grateful for your cooperation. I believe we’ll be working together closely from now on, so please, call me Dahlia.”

“Very well. In that case, you must call me Barbara.”

Dahlia was already on a first-name basis with Fermo, after all, and both he

and his wife would be involved in their future work, so it was best that they all be on an equal footing. To Dahlia, it only seemed like common sense, but she couldn't help noticing how pleased Barbara looked.

"Here you are."

The woman held the cup of tea carefully in both hands as she took it from the tray, but the moment she set it down on the table in front of Dahlia, her face contorted in pain.

"M-Mrs. Barbara, are you all right?"

"Yes, it's nothing. I had a case of redneedle last year, you see. I was treated at the temple, but a little pain still lingers."

Redneedle was a disease characterized by red spots and small blisters that formed in bands around the body. As far as Dahlia could tell, it was this world's equivalent of shingles, which her mother in her previous life had suffered with. It wasn't uncommon in this world; one of her father's friends had had it too.

Dahlia had an inkling as to the cause of Barbara's lingering pain. It was almost certainly what her mother had also suffered with—postherpetic neuralgia. This condition occurred as a result of nerve damage caused by a shingles infection. There were limits to the powers of the curative magic in this world. As a general rule, illnesses had to be treated at the temple within seven days of their appearance, otherwise they would become too firmly rooted and magic would be ineffective. Barbara, Dahlia could only assume, had not made it to the temple for treatment within that seven-day window.

"Don't overdo it, now," Fermo said. "Go and rest."

"I'm all right. It's nothing to worry about."

Barbara's forced smile did nothing to mask her suffering. It was clear that she'd become used to simply enduring it.

Dahlia found herself painfully reminded of her mother. Shortly before Dahlia had died in her past life, she'd received a letter from her mother saying, "Don't forget to come visit us sometimes." "I'll come home for Obon," she'd replied in an email. She'd been so swamped with overtime that she never even called. It had never occurred to her that she might leave that world before her parents.

She was never able to properly thank them for raising her. After she'd found a job, the best she'd managed were some paltry gifts—something to drink on Father's Day and some sweets on Mother's Day. Then she'd passed away. Few could boast at having failed in their duty to their parents quite so spectacularly.

What Dahlia was about to do didn't come from a place of pure kindness. It was nothing more than an effort to soothe her aching conscience, she told herself, as she unclasped the unicorn pendant around her neck.

"Um, Mrs. Barbara, would you hold this for a moment? If you don't mind that I've been wearing it, that is."

Dahlia held out the pendant to the other woman. She had crafted this pendant of pure-white unicorn horn, its surface delicately carved into the form of a rose, only a few days ago. The properties of unicorn horn included pain relief.

"It won't stop it completely, but it may help a little to relieve your pain."

"But this looks so valuable..."

Seeing Barbara's hesitance, Dahlia took a step closer to her and pressed the pendant into her hand. She felt the gentle, wavering warmth of flowing magic, though whether it was Barbara's or her own, she couldn't be sure. The pendant glittered brightly as it responded.

"My goodness... It doesn't hurt anymore."

Relieved, Dahlia released the astounded woman's hand.

"Hang it around your neck so it's in direct contact with your skin. I believe the pain will return quickly otherwise. You might want to tie it around your hand instead. It won't be affected by water or sweat. If it gets dirty, you need only wipe it with a soft cloth."

"But—"

"If it's all right with you, Miss Dahlia, we'd be real grateful if we could borrow it for a little while," Fermo cut in. "But wait, are you sure you don't need it yourself? Are you in pain anywhere?"

"No, not in the slightest. This pendant is only a prototype; I'm not sure how



long its effects will last. I'm more than happy to give it to you; all I ask is that you test it for me."

"What did you make this from?" he asked.

"It's...unicorn horn."

"Gods above... You're too kind, Miss Dahlia—much too kind. I can't pay you back right away, but I will, in installments. You have my word."

Fermo bowed deeply. He was obviously aware of how rare and precious a material unicorn horn was.

"No, honestly, I don't need any payment. Um, what I'm really interested in is how long its effects last. Please let me know if it stops working."

Her magical toolmaking books had made no mention of how long unicorn horn would remain effective for pain relief. If that property did dwindle after a certain amount of time, she would need to craft replacements.

"That's hardly a fair trade. Unicorn horn doesn't come cheap."

"Erm, well then... Perhaps I could ask you to teach me about product design. I'd be very grateful for your guidance when I'm developing new inventions. Lots of elements in magical tools require detailed designs, after all."

"Sure thing. I'll teach you everything I know. And what I don't know, I'll find out for you. Let me know if you need to subcontract out any jobs that someone with weak magic like me can handle. Physical work and odd jobs are fine too."

"That's very kind of you. I promise to get in touch if anything comes up."

She knew that Fermo wouldn't be satisfied if she tried to refuse his offer. That was why she'd made it a promise. Barbara had been silent all the while—perhaps in awe of the pendant's effect—but at last, she spoke.

"Miss Dahlia, I cannot thank you enough for your thoughtfulness. But you know, women get a lot of aches and pains as they grow older. Your mother might need this one day. I really think you ought to keep it."

"There's no need to worry. I don't have a mother."

"Oh, please forgive me. How sad for her to have passed so young. You must

miss her.”

“No, I can’t say I... I never knew my mother, so, um...”

Her memories of her mother from her past life, and her feelings toward the mother she’d never known in this one, clashed within Dahlia’s head, leaving her at a loss. Her only recollection of her mother from her past life was a hazy, indistinct face and the sound of her voice. The memories were so dim and distant now that Dahlia couldn’t truly say she missed her. But, of course, she couldn’t explain this to the couple in front of her. She couldn’t even think of a way to evade the topic. Noticing her distress, Barbara’s expression became apologetic.

“I’m awfully sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed. But this pendant must be worth a great deal of money. I’m just not sure the likes of me ought to have such a thing.”

“Mrs. Barbara, nothing makes me happier than seeing my magical tools go to people who truly need them. Please accept it. I insist.”

There wasn’t one iota of falsehood in those words. Right now, Barbara needed that pendant far more than she did. Besides, it made Dahlia happy to see the people she worked with smiling cheerfully. From here on out, she’d be relying on the Gandolfi Workshop to manufacture her products. One pendant was a small price to pay for a boost in morale and efficiency, the benefits of which would come back to her anyway.

“A-Anyway, this is all self-interest on my part! I want Mr. Fermo to do his very best work for me, so I thought I’d just fire him up a bit with this.”

“Yeah, I’m fired up all right. To say it plain, it feels like you’ve put a fire crystal in my chest.”

“M-Mr. Fermo?!” Dahlia exclaimed shrilly.

In this kingdom, the phrase “You’ve put a fire crystal in my chest” couldn’t always be taken at face value. In fact, it was frequently used as an expression of ardent desire. The words had barely left Fermo’s lips when a noise like a cracking whip split the air.



It was the sound of Barbara's palm striking the side of her husband's head with considerable force.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that, Miss Dahlia. He just opens his mouth without engaging his brain..."

While Barbara smiled sweetly, Fermo groaned as he pressed a hand to his head. Dahlia's carriage couldn't arrive soon enough.

The conversation soon returned to the topic of work, carrying on as though nothing untoward had happened. Not long after, a carriage arrived outside the workshop to collect Dahlia. Watching it draw away, Fermo patted the ache beneath his salt-and-pepper hair.

"Still smarts... You haven't smacked me like that in a while."

"You shouldn't say such foolish things to that poor girl." While her words were harsh, Barbara's lips were curved into a pleasant smile.

"Ah, y'know, it just slipped out. I wish I'd met her when I was younger."

"You *still* haven't learned? Am I to take this as a declaration of war?"

"Hey, hey! Put that hand down. I didn't mean it like that. I just can't help thinking that if I'd had a craftswoman like her working alongside me when I was young, I could've gone much further."

"What are you *talking* about? You're still young. And now that I can move again, we're free to pursue whatever goals we choose," Barbara said blithely, placing the empty teacups on the tray.

Looking at her brisk gestures, one would never even know she'd been sick. Fermo grinned as he watched her.

"Well, you've sure perked up."

"Of course I have. I can *move*. Oh, how I wish we'd had a sweet little daughter like Dahlia. Those boys of ours are such rascals. Now, you must tell me—how much would this unicorn pendant cost? I didn't get a chance to ask."

"Well, I saw a piece of horn like that at another workshop once, attached to a bracelet. That was three gold. This one's been magically carved with that flower



design, so it'd probably be a little more than that."

"We'll have to buckle down and repay her as soon as we can."

"Yeah, we've got to—with interest. Can't tarnish the family's good name."

As Fermo thought back to the day his father had handed the workshop down to him, his finger traced a scratch in the old workbench's surface. Just next to it was a fresh one made by one of his apprentices. The surface, bright and pale when it was new, had now turned caramel-colored with age, but it would still be good for years to come. Tonight, upon this very workbench, Fermo would draft the specification documents and blueprints for each model of the foaming soap dispenser. He was determined to finish them all, even if it took all night.

*"My magic's grade two. Do you suppose I could use the kraken tape as well?"*

Barbara was staring at the kraken tape with just the same fire Fermo had earlier.

"Let's give it a shot. I'll show you how it's done. Once the young'uns get back from their delivery, we'll teach them too. Pretty sure they're at grades three and four, so they should manage more than I can."

Nothing gave a craftsperson more joy than discovering a new way to use their hands. Fermo couldn't wait to tell the apprentices about the kraken tape—as well as about Barbara's recovery and Dahlia's visit. Smiling in anticipation of their return, he handed the kraken tape to his wife.

# The Harpy Hunt

Thirty knights from the Order of Beast Hunters and five mages set out from the royal capital, heading northeast toward the mountains. They traveled one full day by carriage and a second on horseback and hiking the mountain roads. Word had arrived of a flock of harpies building their nests in a cave on a thickly wooded mountainside.

That in itself wouldn't have been cause for alarm, but at the foot of this mountain, there lay a village. The inhabitants' livelihoods were dependent on sheep farming. First, a stray lamb had been taken, then an adult sheep. The harpies had apparently developed a taste for mutton, for after that, their attacks had become a daily occurrence. Feeling desperate, the villagers had petitioned the kingdom for aid in exterminating the harpies, and the Beast Hunters had been dispatched.

"Do you see the harpies?"

"Yes, sir. It appears to be a small flock of approximately thirteen individuals."

A mage dressed in a black robe observed the beasts through a large glass panel with a red magic circle drawn upon its surface. It was a kind of magical tool that greatly magnified the user's field of vision. Unlike a telephoto lens, it produced little distortion. The drawback was that only the person holding it could see the magnified image. Even someone standing right beside them would be unable to share the view.

"They seem to be the regular species—no mutants."

The harpies, beating their wings as they circled above their nest, had vivid green hair and ivory-white skin. To a layman, their bare chests might have been somewhat salacious, but they brought no pleasure to the knights. Their aerial agility and savage fangs and talons made them devilishly tricky to fight.

"Mutants or not, they've still got wings. Don't let your guards down for a second. I wish we could've had a dragoon with us, in case things turn sour."

“It’s hard to imagine the palace allowing that as long as they’re so few. I hear the neighboring kingdom has more.”

The word was that that kingdom, well-known for its animal and monster husbandry, had domesticated several dozen small wyverns for use in its army. In Ordine, however, knights who could ride wyverns were still extremely scarce, and all of them were in the Household Troops. This meant they could only really be called upon in the gravest emergencies. Unless the Beast Hunters were to find themselves completely overwhelmed, they were highly unlikely to have a dragoon joining them. That said, these knights did cooperate with the Beast Hunters in certain cases, such as when one of their members went missing, which was greatly appreciated.

“We need to destroy the nests as well as eliminate the harpies. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

“If I may, Vice-Captain?”

Griswald nodded at the dark-haired man who raised his hand. Volf proceeded to explain his proposal.

“How about we begin with a unified attack by all of the mages and archers? The rest of us can dispatch the fallen harpies and then proceed to destroy the nests. I would also suggest that those who can use earth magic should block up the cave’s entrance with soil, so as to discourage any more harpies from nesting there.”

“Very good. Then that’s what we shall do.”

Volf had formulated this plan during the carriage journey based on all of the information they’d been given thus far. He was relieved to hear Griswald accept it so readily. He hadn’t volunteered this plan out of a desire for recognition—all he wanted was to see the mission finished as quickly as possible so that they could return home. In total, the hunt would take a minimum of five days. They were far from the capital, and Volf had no way of sending a letter to the Green Tower. Until last month, it had never bothered him how far they sometimes traveled from the city, but now, it felt unbearably distant.

Once they had made all of the necessary preparations, the knights slipped stealthily into the trees to lie in wait. After about half an hour, a number of

harpies returned—more than half the flock. Perhaps thanks to their daily diet of mutton, all of them looked well-fed, their hair and bright green feathers healthy and lustrous. Hanging in their talons was incontrovertible proof of their guilt—sheep. No matter how the villagers tried to protect their stock, there were too many to keep an eye on at all times, and they couldn't afford to keep them indoors all year round. The sheep had to be free to graze.

“I guess a harpy's still a harpy at the end of the day,” Dorino said with a sigh.

“Well, what else would it be?”

Harpies' faces resembled those of humans, but there was something uncanny about them—something not quite right in their expression, perhaps. Their mouths opened far wider than a human's and were bright red inside, with long, white fangs.

“It'd just be nice if they were a little, you know, cuter.”

“Dorino, last I checked, we were here to *slay* these monsters, not date them.”

“Not long now,” another knight interjected.

Barely daring to whisper, mouthing their words to each other, the men waited for the signal from one of the senior knights.

“Attack!”

The unmistakable roar of air magic ripped through the trees, quickly followed by blasts of ice, water, and earth magic as the mages attacked in unison. It was an impressive display of techniques; the air magic, slicing skyward like invisible blades, was accompanied by piercing ice needles, water lances, and stone arrows. While these were fairly potent spells, harpies possessed a degree of magic resistance, as well as air magic of their own that they could use to evade attacks and fly high out of the knights' reach. That was where the bow knights came in. All at once, they loosed their arrows, bringing the harpies tumbling down to earth.

“*Kreee!*”

Around five or six of those that fell were still alive, but they'd been thrown off balance by their wounds and could no longer fly. The knights waiting below



sprinted toward the falling harpies, but there was one dark-haired man among them who suddenly leaped high above their heads. Soaring upward as though on wings, the lone knight brandished his longsword. Before they could even open their mouths to screech, he cut not one, but two harpies cleanly in half. Sailing through a spray of blood, the man landed with an expression of complete nonchalance.

“Hey, I never saw you jump like that in training!”

“If you wouldn’t mind, oh Dark Lord, leave some for us!”

A few grumbles rose up from the men who’d been beaten to the chase. In just a few minutes, they dispatched every last one of the harpies. The next order of business was to destroy the nests in the cave. They set alight the dried grass and vegetation that had been spread over the cave floor. Harpies detested the smell of burning vegetation, so this would ensure they wouldn’t return. All that remained was for the mages to fill in the entrance using their earth magic, and the job would be finished. However, through the white smoke that drifted through the air, one of the knights suddenly caught sight of a shadow on the ground.

“Look out!”

A single harpy, having apparently separated itself from the flock, was flying toward the nest site. However, it wasn’t the harpy itself that turned the men’s faces pale—rather than clutching a sheep in its talons, it carried a small child. His limbs dangled limply; whether he was dead or merely unconscious, it was impossible to tell.

“Someone, take it down with magic!”

“We can’t! It’ll hit the child!”

“What about bows?!”

“Not when it’s moving like that!”

The harpy surveyed the group of knights that had invaded its nest and quickly changed course, obviously intent on fleeing. At that same moment, the little boy regained his senses. He suddenly cried out and began to thrash in the harpy’s grip, causing the beast to falter in midair. The child slipped from one of

its talons, swinging precariously. The height was too great—if he fell, there would be no saving him. Volf didn't waste a moment.

"Randolph, ready your shield!" he shouted.

"Right!" Randolph dropped to one knee, both hands gripping his broad shield tightly as he held it at an angle. "Go, Volf!"

Volf sprinted toward him, bounding off the shield as though it were a springboard and leaping high into the air.

"Damn fool! He'll never make it!" someone yelled in exasperation.

Volf had made use of Randolph's shield like this many times before. It was helpful for attacking or jumping atop larger monsters. During their recent training, he'd even done it with a little boost from the sköll bracelet. However, he'd never attempted to reach this high before. He put everything into the jump, but he still found himself several meters away from the boy.

"Come *on*!"

As though the wind itself answered his call, just for a moment, an invisible foothold seemed to appear in midair, allowing him to propel himself forward and close the distance. He just had time to kick the harpy with all his might and snatch the child away from it before gravity finally got the better of him. The harpy, the knight, and the boy fell into the trees in a flailing tangle of limbs.

"Hey, Volf! Are you all right?!"

"Fine, sir! Could someone dispatch the harpy, please?"

One of the knights who'd been keeping watch among the trees ran his sword through the motionless harpy. The creature made no sound, presumably unconscious or already dead.

"Are you hurt, Volf?!"

"No, all good. I got caught in the trees and the harpy cushioned the landing. It's this child who needs help; he's got wounds from the harpy's claws. Better fetch someone with healing magic."

"I'll go get them—wait, actually, it'd be faster if I just take him. Just to be safe, you get your armor off and make sure you're not hurt anywhere."

Dorino gathered the young boy into his arms and hurried away. Even after the battle had finished, lingering adrenaline often kept people from immediately noticing their wounds. The fall had been a long one. Helpful as the sköll bracelet was, Volf would have to make sure to use it carefully.

As Volf began to remove his armor, a dark-haired mage approached him. The man was about ten years Volf's senior.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Volfred?"

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"Have you perchance learned to use air magic?"

"I haven't. I can't express any magic externally."

"Then could what I saw just now have been late-blooming magic?"

"No. I don't mind being tested again to confirm it."

"Late-blooming magic" was a phenomenon in which adults would experience a sudden surge in their magical power or become capable of expressing magic when they previously couldn't. However, this was extremely rare. Volf, hoping he might just be one of those rare cases, had had his magic tested and retested many times over the years. However, the result had always been the same.

"I see. It was such an incredible leap that I thought your magic might have finally manifested."

This man was a fellow magical tool enthusiast and the leader of the group of mages who had accompanied the knights on this mission. Volf realized it might make things rather awkward if he tried to hide his secret only to be found out later. Thankfully, he'd already gained permission to bring the sköll bracelet into the castle grounds. He explained himself to the mage while deliberately obfuscating some details.

"I have permission to use a certain magical accessory that augments my movements. For my family's convenience, though, I would prefer its existence to be kept quiet."

"Ah, I understand. Just for reference, might I take a look at it?"

"Of course. Pardon me for not removing it."

Volf pulled off his glove and pushed his sleeve back to reveal the bracelet. After studying it for about ten seconds, the older man smiled faintly.

“I can’t discern precisely how it works, but I can see nothing’s wasted in the design. It’s a fine item, crafted by a very skilled artisan, I should say.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

To look at Volf’s smile, one would think he was the one being praised. Suddenly, another knight came rushing up behind the two of them.

“Hey, we need a healer, quick! It’s Randolph!”

“Randolph?” Volf spun round upon hearing his friend’s name.

“It looks like he’s broken both his wrists. They’re bent at a weird angle, and he can’t let go of his shield!”

“Oh gods, this is my fault! Excuse me, I need to go and apologize!”

The downforce when he’d leaped off Randolph’s shield must have put considerable strain on the man’s wrists. Volf dashed off to see his friend.

“No matter how finely crafted it is, mastering a magical tool with no magic of your own...” the mage murmured as he watched the tall knight go. “That’s no simple task.”



# The Road Less Traveled

“Yes, I knew there were challenges ahead, and I was prepared to meet them. With a bit of grit and determination, I was sure I’d overcome whatever she threw my way. I truly believed that, once.”

Standing in Gabriella’s office at the Merchants’ Guild, a man with mustard-colored hair heaved a weary sigh. He’d come to the vice-guildmaster clutching a thick bundle of documents.

“Ivano, please sit down. This matter you wish to discuss... I take it that it concerns those documents?”

“Yes. These are specifications and blueprints for new versions of the foaming soap dispensers.”

“If my aging eyes don’t deceive me, you appear to have an entire *stack* of them,” Gabriella noted, narrowing her eyes quizzically.

Exactly how many were there? Had he perhaps brought some additional documents and materials with him?

“It’s all soap dispensers. I’d taken steps to prepare for whatever Miss Dahlia might throw at me, but I underestimated the Gandolfi Workshop. For Mr. Fermo to submit this amount in one go... Does he expect me to divide in two like a slime just to keep up?”

For one moment, Gabriella thought that was her cue to laugh, but Ivano’s face was deadly serious. *All* of the documents he held were those necessary to register new product contracts with the guild. It was an unthinkable amount to register in one go—that is to say, it didn’t bear thinking about.

“To that end, I wish to apply to borrow one of the guild’s offices for the Rossetti Trading Company. I would also like to hire two or three clerks—if you’re able to recommend anyone, please let me know at once. Ideally, they should be able to write neatly enough to copy official documents and write letters.”

A number of offices within the Merchants' Guild were available for lease to businesses. Foreign firms would sometimes use them as their first base of operations. Companies whose business required frequent visits to the guild often occupied the offices too, finding it convenient to have staff permanently stationed there. However, renting a single small office cost no less than two gold per month—a considerable sum.

"I would like an office on the second floor. I foresee us needing to visit the contracts desk quite regularly. I'd rather avoid getting hot and bothered from jogging up and down the stairs all day."

"It seems you won't be escaping from the guild after all. Not even from the second floor. How is the company's income? Are you sure you have the leeway to cover the rent?"

"I believe twenty percent of our payments from the guild will cover it. I did consider renting an office in another building nearby, but I'll still be employed here for a while longer, and it wouldn't make sense to waste time traveling back and forth. Besides, once we have a production line going of these various soap dispenser models, I should think we'll be in the black and then some. That depends on the output of the Gandolfi Workshop, though."

"Shall I find some additional manufacturers for you?"

"No, thank you. I'm meeting with Miss Dahlia this afternoon to work out the particulars, but personally, I'd like to keep our operations to a minimum. It would be prudent to promote the Gandolfi name now and earn their loyalty. One day, I'd like to see them supplying Miss Dahlia exclusively," Ivano explained matter-of-factly.

His manner was quite different from that of the mild, gentle man Gabriella had become accustomed to. His indigo eyes stared unflinchingly into the vice-guildmaster's, the light they harbored burning far brighter than it had when he'd been in the guild's employ.

"Vice-Guildmaster, on behalf of the Rossetti Trading Company, I have a request to make of you as the guildmaster's representative."

"What would that be, I wonder?"

“For two years, I would like the guild to act as an intermediary for all sales of the soap dispensers intended for the noble market. Naturally, the company will pay any fees this incurs and agree to whatever arrangement best serves Lord Jedda’s interests.”

“That’s a generous proposal indeed, Ivano. Are you quite sure? Your profit margin in the noble market would be considerable.”

“Sir Volf and the castle notwithstanding, I wish to keep Miss Dahlia far away from any unscrupulous nobles for the time being. It is far too dangerous, and I don’t yet have the know-how to properly deal with such situations. Much as I wish to expand the company and its staff, I believe it will take around two years to train the new employees—and assess their character.”

The Rossetti Trading Company had been established without any particular preparation, with Ivano joining it shortly thereafter of his own volition. Dahlia’s inventions were sure to start bringing in profits soon enough, but the company had few connections; its foundation was not yet solid.

“So the guild will be your contact address. Where shall the company be officially based?”

“At Sir Volf’s estate. I’ve already discussed it with him. Otherwise, we might have unwelcome visitors turning up at Miss Dahlia’s home.”

“Very sensible. Although, it will only add credence to the misunderstandings going around.”

“Misunderstandings?”

“It appears the two of them visited the cemetery together a few days ago. One of the young clerks passed them on the way in. Although they *did* apparently go their separate ways into the noble and commoner sections.”

“I do wonder... *Are* we misunderstanding them?” Ivano tilted his head pensively.

For all appearances, Volf was head over heels for Dahlia. Whether he was aware of the fact was a different matter, however. He couldn’t quite discern Dahlia’s feelings toward him, but she was clearly very comfortable in his presence—as much as one would be around a bosom friend or a family

member. For his part, Ivano would be very happy to support the awkward young knight who seemed determined to protect Dahlia from the shadows.

“Madam Gabriella, would you indulge me in a little hypothesizing for a minute? Let’s say a certain couple—the son of an earl and a merchant—were to become very close. Do you suppose the earl’s son would be permitted to give up his noble rank and marry the merchant?”

“I think that would be very difficult, especially considering that the next earl in his family is set to be made a marquis. For a boy with such remarkable looks to quit his family without so much as a guardian would invite all sorts of trouble. Jealous noblewomen would harass his lady friend like rabid dogs.”

The “guardian” to which Gabriella referred was a noble who would vouch for the good standing of a commoner or lower-ranking noble and, essentially, agree to watch their back.

“Supposing...the merchant expanded her company, perhaps became an official supplier to the castle, gained a noble guardian, and eventually became a baroness...*then* might the marriage be accepted?”

Though no names were mentioned, the true identities of the hypothetical couple were no mystery.

Gabriella narrowed her dark-blue eyes and smiled at Ivano. “Yes, in *those* circumstances, I think it might.”

“Well then, it shall be my mission to create a company that can realize all this and more.”

“How very bold of you. I should warn you, though—the road less traveled can be unforgiving.”

Ivano knew that Gabriella was speaking from the heart; she herself had ascended from a humble commoner to a viscountess. However, he also knew that this dream of his *could* be realized. The proof was sitting before him.

He smiled broadly as he replied, “It’s all right. I know someone who conquered it, you see. My friend will be traveling the other way, but we know where we’re going.”

After leaving the vice-guildmaster's office, Ivano descended the stairs to the second floor. As he walked down the corridor, he slowed his steps just a little as he passed a window, a bright square of blue sky. Every time he walked this way, he remembered Carlo, Dahlia's father.

With his sandy-colored hair and warm, gentle smile, there had been something about Carlo Rossetti that reminded Ivano of the wind. He treated everyone he spoke to as an equal, never looking down his nose at anyone. Of course, he showed deference when the occasion called for it, but Ivano had never felt there was much difference in Carlo's attitude when he spoke to Gabriella and her husband versus when he spoke to the lowlier guild staff, Ivano included. He was no less respectful to a fresh-faced clerk than he was to any of his noble customers. The man had a talent for sliding a well-timed joke into any conversation; wherever he went, he was always surrounded by cheerful, good-natured laughter.

Carlo was also a talented and highly respected magical toolmaker who approached his work with the utmost seriousness. He had never once failed to make a delivery on time, and defects in his products were extremely rare. If one of the more experienced staff ever got lazy and tried to sweep an issue under the rug, Carlo would be on their case in a flash.

An honest mistake from a newbie, however, was met with quite a different attitude; he wouldn't make a fuss, simply pointing out the error and moving on. He would be the first to offer help to those in need, but he never asked anything in return. Whenever he heard of a young, inexperienced toolmaker about to be trapped in an unfair contract with a noble, he would step in and use his position as a baron to right the situation.

He would break up arguments between the guild staff now and then, and if he found anyone feeling downhearted after messing up at work, he'd take them out for a good meal and a drink. Ivano himself had once been treated to a few drinks when he was feeling overwhelmed by the burden of his responsibilities.

Another time, Carlo saved a female clerk from the unwelcome advances of a noble. The next day, however, when she went to thank him, he didn't even recognize the woman. She'd come looking her best, wishing to see if he, too, had felt a spark between them. When it wasn't mutual, she understandably



burst into tears.

In spite of having a young daughter, Carlo—a highly respected craftsman and an honorary baron to boot—was a very eligible bachelor. He received his fair share of invitations to marriage interviews and the like. Apparently, Dominic the scrivener had repeatedly encouraged him to remarry. However, Carlo simply brushed off all talk of marriage with his usual smile.

Over the years, there was very little talk of Carlo being involved with women in any intimate way. The only rumor Ivano remembered hearing was of an affair with Gabriella. One fool had gossiped to anyone who would listen about how often the magical toolmaker Carlo visited the vice-guildmaster in her office, and what a close personal relationship they appeared to have. It was no secret that Carlo made regular visits to Gabriella's office, but he was never alone, and in fact, he was more often to be found in the guildmaster's office, meeting with both husband and wife.

Ivano had been very young at the time, and the rumor had infuriated him. Honest to a fault, he'd gone and told Gabriella and Carlo what was unfolding.

"There's an insolent fool down there spreading nonsense about you both!"

Gabriella had merely smiled silently while her fingertips caressed her engagement bracelet. Carlo, meanwhile, far from growing angry, had looked as though he'd just been called to a funeral.

"He has my deepest sympathies," was all he said.

Ivano was left perplexed, wondering why neither of them were at all angered by what he'd told them, until the next day. He arrived at work to see the gossip on his knees in front of the guildmaster's office, spouting apologies. Viscount Leone Jedda, the guildmaster and Gabriella's husband, realized the man had obviously done something dreadful, but no one would fill him in on the details. Even the senior staff only answered his inquiries with awkward smiles. So, he tried asking Carlo.

"Leone, a man can love his wife a little *too* much, you know," the craftsman replied with a faraway gaze.

It was enough to give Leone an inkling as to the man's crime. For a further five

days, the gossip knelt and apologized in front of the guildmaster's office. On the sixth day, he was nowhere to be seen. At first, Ivano assumed Leone had finally forgiven him. As it turned out, however, he'd been fired after the head cleaner had complained to Gabriella about him causing an obstruction. Ivano spared him a grain or two of sympathy, but no more.

Carlo was an exceptional toolmaker, but profit was never in the forefront of his mind. Even nobles couldn't persuade him to do a job he wasn't interested in. Ivano had even seen him turn down invitations from the castle without hesitation.

"There are only three things Carlo cares about: magical tools, his daughter, and good drink. You won't interest him in anything else," Gabriella had said of him once.

Ivano had not had cause to doubt her.

When Ivano's own daughter had been born, Carlo had not only offered his congratulations, but also detailed advice on which stores offered the best childcare products, which medicines to always have on hand, and so on. In all matters concerning raising his daughter, Ivano looked up to Carlo as a kind of mentor whom he knew he could always rely on for guidance.

One day in early summer, in this corridor bathed in bright sunlight, Carlo had suddenly collapsed. Ivano was the first one to notice and come running to his aid. Minutes before, Carlo had been filling out paperwork and chatting with the guild staff about his work, just as usual.

"'Tis the season for a crisp, cold ale," he'd said with a chuckle as he took a break from the form-filling. "Well, almost."

Carlo had loved to drink. Every year, he looked forward to chilled ale in summer, spirits in autumn, and hot estervino in the winter.

"You seem to love your drinks, no matter the season," Ivano had commented one day.

"That's 'cause they come with my daughter's home cooking!" he'd replied.

Despite being an undeniably heavy drinker, Carlo hadn't shown the slightest sign of illness when Ivano had drunk with him just a short time before his

collapse. That was why, at first, Ivano had thought he'd only tripped or perhaps had a bout of dizziness.

"Are you all right, Mr. Carlo?" he'd called.

But there had come no reply. Carlo's face was horribly pale and crumpled in pain as he clutched his chest, his breaths fast and ragged, muscles seizing up.

"Call a doctor!" Ivano had immediately cried out to one of the staff nearby while he knelt at the man's side. "Mr. Carlo! *Mr. Carlo!*"

He called his name over and over, until he noticed, belatedly, the warmth beginning to leave the man's body. In those last moments, Carlo's lips seemed to be trying to form a sound—"da." There was little doubt in Ivano's mind that it had been the "da" in "Dahlia." To this day, he'd never told another soul about this. It wasn't a fitting end for a man like Carlo—racked with pain, unable even to say his daughter's name. That was why Ivano had always said it had been a swift death, with no time for suffering nor for him to help.

On the day of Carlo's funeral, Dahlia had stood all alone. Tobias must have been close beside her, as well as his brother, Ireneo, chairman of Orlando & Co. Many of Carlo's friends and colleagues had gathered there, and Dahlia's friends too, each in turn expressing their condolences to her. However, to Ivano's eyes, it appeared for all the world as though Dahlia were standing there completely on her own as she bore her grief.

"I'm so sorry that I couldn't help him," he'd apologized.

There had been no reproach in the young woman's reply; quite the opposite.

"Thank you for looking after my father. I'm very grateful," she said in a small, soft voice.

Unable to find the words to properly express his condolences or comfort her, Ivano had simply bowed deeply. Now, he found himself at her side once again as an employee of her trading company. He was a merchant, and his decision to join her had been calculated. He was her colleague and subordinate; his role was to support her toolmaking work. He could not call himself her family or her friend. And yet, he sincerely wished to see Dahlia overcome the challenges Gabriella had spoken of and achieve true happiness. Was it because he'd known

Carlo and witnessed his final breaths? Was he haunted by the sight of Dahlia standing alone at that funeral? He couldn't help feeling that there was an element of self-appeasement in his desire to support Dahlia.

Whatever his motivation, though, there was one thing he would swear to. No matter what, he would *never* tarnish the name of his cherished mentor, Carlo Rossetti.



“Miss Rossetti! Miss Rossetti, may we speak with you for a moment?”

It was a little past noon, and Dahlia had just set foot inside the Merchants' Guild when she was immediately accosted by a gaggle of female clerks. They would be in the way if they gathered in the entrance like this, and so Dahlia ushered the group to the area in front of the stairway.

“Is there something I can do for you?” she inquired.

She was already well aware of what the women wanted, but she maintained her professional facade.

“Miss Rossetti, are you in a relationship with Sir Scalfarotto?” the youngest of them asked, her eyes practically sparkling.

Dahlia resisted the urge to heave a sigh as she repeated the answer she'd given dozens of times already. “Yes, I do have the honor of counting Sir Volf among my friends.”

As a Scarlet Armor of the Order of Beast Hunters and the fourth son of an earl, Volfred Scalfarotto had considerable social standing. However, that was not the reason for his fame. The reason Volf was known throughout the city lay in his remarkable—some might say divine—looks. His hair was glossy and the deepest black, his skin as pale and flawless as marble, his features exquisitely fine. He had a long, straight nose and thin yet shapely lips.

His most stunning assets, however, were his long, almond-shaped eyes, each one set with irises like pools of molten gold, dotted at their center with midnight-black pupils. Beneath this angelic face was a tall, lean physique that could hardly befit a knight of the realm more perfectly. Many were the women who found not only their heads turned, but their hearts captured by a mere

glimpse of him.

Volf, however, took no pride in the looks he'd been blessed with. They had been the source of a great deal of strife—if anything, he considered them a curse. Before meeting Dahlia, he'd had not a single female friend, and his relationships with men frequently ended up in tatters due to quarrels over women. As Dahlia had come to realize, there most certainly was such a thing as being *too* attractive, and it was miserable.

“Friends? You aren’t dating, then?”

“Is it...you know...a sort of relationship of convenience?” one of the clerks from the information desk asked, clearly trying to find the most polite way to say what she meant. “Or is he maybe helping your company?”

Despite the pussyfooting, Dahlia could tell precisely what the woman was trying to coax out of her—if she and Volf weren’t lovers, were they simply friends with benefits?

“He is indeed assisting me, yes, but our friendship is entirely ordinary.”

Not for the first time that day, Dahlia found herself wondering what exactly an ordinary friendship was, anyway. Volf had kindly agreed to become a guarantor for the Rossetti Trading Company; that much was true. More importantly, however, he was simply someone whom she enjoyed talking with, drinking with, and crafting magical tools and swords with. Putting all that into a brief word or two wasn’t easy.

“So you really are just friends... But you have tea and meals with Sir Scalfarotto quite often— isn’t that right, Miss Dahlia?”

Why was she being addressed as “Miss Dahlia” instead of “Miss Rossetti” all of a sudden? Why had this woman’s tone become so friendly? She didn’t recall asking to be spoken to this way. Seeing this sudden change in the clerk who’d often delivered documents to various companies for her left Dahlia with a feeling of vague, indescribable bitterness. To make matters worse, the woman’s next words were all too predictable.

“Do you suppose I could join you next time?”

“It is not my place to decide on Sir Volf’s social engagements. In case you have

perhaps forgotten, he belongs to the house of Earl Scalfarotto. Please direct your inquiries to Sir Volf directly or to the Scalfarotto estate.”

Dahlia had been accosted like this frequently in recent days. Her response was always the same. It was what Volf himself had asked of her. Apparently, any hopeful letters that did arrive at the Scalfarotto estate wouldn’t go any further—Volf would never even have to hear about them.

“Now then, if you’ll excuse me.”

Having had their hopes of an introduction dashed, the women didn’t look pleased, but that was no concern of Dahlia’s. She felt no remorse as she curtailed the conversation and began to climb the stairs. She only made it as far as the landing before one of the female clerks, who’d chased after her, grabbed her by the shoulder.

“Please, wait! Could you at least tell me about Sir Scalfarotto’s interests or some things he likes?”

Her escape foiled, Dahlia found herself subjected to another round of questioning about Volf and yet another request for an introduction. It took quite a while before she finally managed to shake off the persistent clerk.



By the time Dahlia reached the second floor, she was already somewhat fatigued. She locked eyes with Ivano, who was carrying a hefty stack of papers.

“Hello, Miss Dahlia. Are you all right? You look rather tired.”

“I’m fine. I just got a little held up on the way.”

She was relieved to hear that Ivano had rented an office for the company inside the guild. With all the meeting rooms and lounges she’d been taking up lately, she’d been afraid that she might be a nuisance. Fortunately, the offices on the second floor weren’t as popular as those on the first, so finding a vacant one had been no issue. Dahlia followed Ivano to the new office right away, where he apprised her of the state of the company’s finances, the production of the insoles, and his plan to hire some clerks.

“I also received a message from Orlando & Co. earlier today. ‘The fairy glass will be arriving shortly,’ it said. Shall I go and collect it once it does?”



“I hate to trouble you, but if you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d appreciate that.”

With fairy glass, she could make a spare pair of enchanted glasses for Volf. Then, even if he happened to break his original pair, he wouldn’t need to worry about venturing out in public. She was glad to have that little worry lifted from her mind.

Just then, Ivano spoke again in a low, quiet tone. “Miss Dahlia, with your permission, I think I’d like to start using my original surname again.”

“Your surname hasn’t always been Badoer?”

“Badoer is my wife’s family name. My original surname is Mercadante. Before I came here to the royal capital, I was Ivano Mercadante. Oh, don’t worry about the magical contract I signed at the temple—it’ll still be binding even if I use a different name.”

“I don’t mind. So, it’s Mr. Mercadante... I’ve never heard that name before.”

“Yes, I doubt there are any others in this city. It’s quite rare.”

“It has a great ring to it. It suits you.”

“You think so?”

Ivano smiled. Or at least, his mouth curved into the shape of a smile. Sensing a sudden coldness in his indigo eyes, Dahlia tensed up.

“I’d like to tell you about my past, Miss Dahlia, though I’m afraid it isn’t very pleasant. I once worked at a trading company in another town. I was the chairman’s eldest son. When I was nineteen, the company folded, and I lost my family along with it. I ran away from that town with my wife and settled here. Ever since then, I’ve worked at the guild under my wife’s surname.”

“I...see.”

“My father’s company is long gone. Even so, having no living relatives bearing the name has started to bother me lately after all these years. It isn’t exactly auspicious, being the name of a failed trading company, but would you allow me to use the Mercadante name all the same?”

“But of course! Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, if anyone happened to remember the name, they might say your company’s cursed. They might ask why you’re employing the son of a failure. That sort of thing.”

“There’s no need to give people like that the time of day. Everyone knows what a talented man you are.”

There would be no end to it if they started paying heed to omens, comments from strangers, and the like. Dahlia had learned that lesson. On her way here, she’d been interrogated at length on her relationship with Volf. People poked and prodded, trying to find out whether he was her lover, something more casual, or some sort of patron of her company. As soon as Dahlia dispelled those notions, insisting that they were just friends, she found herself being begged for introductions. It was laughable.

There was nothing to be gained from valuing the opinions of strangers too highly. She would much rather place her faith in Ivano; she could see his worth with her own two eyes.

“Besides, this could be your chance to restore the Mercadante name’s honor. If we make your name famous around the city, then any naysayers will soon quiet down.”

“You have a point there. It’d be good to hear people say, ‘There’s a Mercadante at the Rossetti Trading Company.’”

Ivano closed his eyes for a moment and nodded decisively. Then, his usual gentle smile returned. He handed Dahlia the full set of registration documents that Fermo had turned in for the foaming soap dispensers. After reading through them thoroughly, Dahlia added her signature as joint developer to each one. Things were proceeding faster than she’d expected.

“Mr. Fermo works very quickly,” Dahlia commented. “He had all those prototypes made and these documents drafted in no time.”

“Yes, I was surprised myself when he handed them in. He explained what everything was, but I never expected so many with such detailed plans.”

“I’m glad we found someone with such a mind for product design. He came up with things I’d never have thought of and taught me a lot about design. I’m

very grateful for his help.”

“That’s very good to hear.”

Ivano nodded again, but then his expression changed subtly, becoming hard and serious. He cleared his throat and looked Dahlia straight in the eye.

“Miss Dahlia—no, Chairwoman Rossetti. I wish to give my opinion as your subordinate. I’m afraid I may make you somewhat angry, but will you listen to everything I have to say?”

“Of course. Please go ahead.”

Dahlia straightened in her seat. Perhaps this had something to do with her newly invented shoe-dryer, or maybe there was some problem with designs she had developed with Fermo. There might even have been a complaint about her conduct at the castle. There were too many possibilities for Dahlia to pin down a likely candidate.

“With all due respect, Miss Dahlia, you need to stand up for yourself.”

“What?” Dahlia blurted out, taken aback.

“I saw those women hassling you on the stairs before you got here. You’re under no obligation to answer questions about Sir Volf. If someone is bothering you and being rude, tell them so and go on your way. I’ll see to it that the guild gives them a warning for this behavior. If staff are being allowed not only to disrespect a company chairwoman and the Scalfarotto family, but also to waste guild time with idle chatter, then there’s clearly a management problem. If anyone continues to bother you, then let me know at once. I’ll lodge a complaint as a member of your company, and as a member of the guild, I’ll ensure that the issue is dealt with firmly.”

“I will.”

“I would also remind you of our positions within your company. I may be a good bit older than you, but I am your subordinate, and you must treat me as such. It may take a bit of getting used to, but this is the way a company is run. I aim to become your right-hand man, so please get yourself accustomed to it.”

“R-Right...”

Dahlia was reminded of when, just after she'd become chairwoman, Gabriella had insisted that they address each other as equals. Although what Ivano was asking for was entirely the opposite, this too would take some getting used to.

"My next point relates to the Gandolfi Workshop. The Rossetti Trading Company provides them with orders, which they fulfill—that's the basis of our relationship. It's absolutely fine for you to be friendly with Mr. Fermo, but please avoid treating him like your teacher or foreman when you're at the guild. People will get the wrong idea."

"The wrong idea?"

"People may claim that the designs you and Mr. Fermo create jointly are really all his work and he's merely allowing you to put your name on the documents. I'm afraid that young women with a talent for invention and crafting are often the targets of intense jealousy. I'm serious about that—it's twice, perhaps three times as bad as it would be for a man your age."

"I'll be careful about that."

Given all the knowledge he'd been sharing with her, she did indeed see Mr. Fermo as something of a teacher. She'd never imagined that people might twist that respect in such a way.

"Lastly, I would ask you to exercise greater care in handling your prototypes. I heard that you handed over a magical tool in the form of a pendant to Mr. Fermo's wife. They wish to pay you for it."

"But that had nothing to do with the company. It was a personal decision."

"Yes, you gave it to her out of kindness. I heard the whole story from Mr. Fermo, so I understand. However, the cost of the materials and the time you spent on that item can't have been insignificant."

"It wasn't a finished product, though—only a prototype. I don't even know how effective it is or how long its effects will last. Besides, my father taught me to *never* take money for a product that's not properly finished."

"That's a toolmaker's way of looking at it. I do see where you're coming from, but you're not just a magical toolmaker anymore, Miss Dahlia. You're also a chairwoman. You have staff and several guarantors to consider, as well as your

future clients. You have a responsibility to increase the company's profits."

"I understand."

"I'm not suggesting that Mr. Carlo was wrong or that you should never give your inventions as gifts. But the person you gave that pendant to was not a relative or a friend. Given our relationship with Mr. Fermo, I think that gift will be beneficial in the long run, actually, but what if it had been someone with a mind to take advantage of your goodwill? If someone kept coming to you and begging for prototypes to solve their troubles, would you hand them all over for free?"

"Well, no..."

She was aware that, as chairwoman, she had a responsibility to prioritize her company's profits. Perhaps it was because she'd always given her prototypes to her father and Tobias that Ivano's argument had never occurred to her. Looking back, she'd never thought very deeply about giving these things away. All she'd hoped was that recipients would find them useful.

"Besides, as a magical toolmaker, you're a professional, aren't you?"

"I certainly try to be."

"Well, I believe that a professional should follow a certain set of procedures when they give away a prototype. They should thoroughly explain its function and features, agree on the period for which the recipient should hold the item, request reports from them, and so on. If you hand these things over too casually, the recipient might feel that they're just being given them out of pity or being patronized. Have you considered that?"

"Oh..."

Ivano's words struck a nerve, and she felt a pang in her chest. She couldn't respond right away. She'd just wanted to be of some help to Volf. Reminded of her mother from her past life, she'd just wanted to ease Barbara's pain a little. She'd never meant to look on either of them with pity or condescension. But she couldn't be sure how they'd truly felt about her gifts. The thought that her efforts to help people might have hurt them instead gave the young woman a chill.

“That is all. I’m sorry to have spoken so harshly.”

Before she knew it, Ivano was bowing down in front of her. She must have looked rather shell-shocked.

“Oh, no! There’s no need to apologize. I appreciate you telling me these things. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have thought about considering profit and other people’s feelings, making sure I give away prototypes only with the proper arrangements, getting fair compensation for finished products... I need to learn to discuss things with people properly rather than just push my idea of kindness onto them.”

“I think that would be wise. Although, of course, I may just be pushing *my* idea of how things ought to work onto *you*. As chairwoman, you will always have the final say.”

“Chairwoman... Hmm.”

“Ah, I suppose ‘boss’ would be the more modern title. I think ‘chairwoman’ suits you better, but ‘boss’ has a bit of a younger feel to it.”

“Please, don’t call me either,” Dahlia begged with dismay. While Ivano chuckled, she felt her expression stiffen again.

“Tell me truthfully, Miss Dahlia: are you thinking of stepping down as chairwoman?”

“I...” Caught unawares by Ivano’s question, she froze for a few moments. “No. There are so many opportunities that weren’t open to me before.”

“If the role ever does begin to weigh too heavily on you, we can always appoint someone to act in your name. Please be sure to tell me if you find yourself truly suffering. I know your heart’s in magical toolmaking—there’s no need to break it for the sake of the company.”

“I understand. I promise I’ll tell you if it becomes too much.”

“You can always come to me for help and advice too. If I can’t answer your questions, Madam Gabriella surely will. We can even locate specialists for you if necessary. We’ll support you however possible. If you make a mistake, we’ll find a way to fix it. Even I don’t always get things right—when that happens,



don't hesitate to reprimand me."

Having said his piece, Ivano silently apologized to Dahlia's father. As far as he knew, Carlo had tried to raise Dahlia so that she would never be in a position to make enemies—instead, she would be surrounded by friends who would shield her from the harshness of the world, even if it meant she might never be wealthy. Carlo had intended for her to work alongside fellow artisans while under his or her husband's protection, keeping her light hidden under a bushel. No doubt, all he'd really wanted was for her to live her life in peace and safety. Expanding the Rossetti Trading Company would inevitably result in that protective wall breaking down. While Dahlia would feel the sunlight, she would also be exposed to the wind and rain.

Ivano could try, but he knew he wouldn't be able to shield her from everything. All he could do was to support her as best he could in her roles as a professional magical toolmaker and company chairwoman. Dahlia would have to discover and nurture her own strength. Still, Ivano found himself praying that fate would be kind and lead her away from all the pain and trouble life could bring. Was it because he had daughters of his own? Was it because of his memories of Carlo?

"Um, Ivano, you look awfully troubled... Is something wrong?" Dahlia inquired hesitantly.

Ivano put those unanswerable questions out of his mind. "To tell you the truth, I'm not very good at giving people warnings or scolding them. Not at all. I have to gear myself up just to scold my kids at home."

"Really? You seem like the kind of person who'd be good at telling people off when they need it and showing them where they went wrong, like a teacher."

Ivano could tell that she was absolutely sincere and found himself slightly abashed. "That's enough of the flattery, *boss*."

"You're actually going to call me that from now on?!"

Seeing Dahlia in such a flap, the man couldn't help but laugh. It was far more pleasant to laugh with her than to admonish and lecture her, that was for certain. But Ivano was resolved to be straight with her and to repeat his advice as often as necessary. From now on, he would constantly keep the best

interests of the Rossetti Trading Company, of Dahlia, and of Volf at heart. They would grow and strengthen the company, earn the community's trust, and amass a fortune.

Ivano would give his all to see the day he could say with pride: "There's a Mercadante at the Rossetti Trading Company." That would be the day his once forsaken name would finally regain its honor.

# The Man-Made Magical Sword: Second Attempt— The Creeping Blade

“It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve been here.”

“I feel that too. I suppose we’ve both been busy.”

In the Green Tower’s workshop, Volf and Dahlia were both putting on their work gear. On the workbench in front of them lay a screw-fitted shortsword and a variety of enchanting materials. Volf had sent a messenger to Dahlia as soon as he returned from his expedition, and they had agreed to meet at the tower the following afternoon. Although it had only been about a week since they’d seen each other, it felt like far longer. It was strange, considering they’d been complete strangers only a month ago.

“What was your mission like?”

“We had to bring down a flock of harpies. They’d been stealing sheep from a nearby village. They even snatched a child during the hunt, but we got him back safe and sound.”

“Was he all right?”

“Yeah. He had some cuts where the harpy had grabbed him, but we got him healed up with magic in no time. Feisty little guy. He’d gotten bored of being stuck indoors all the time, so he’d sneaked outside to play. His mother was livid.”

“I’m glad he didn’t come to any harm. And that you didn’t either, of course.”

“Er, about that... I actually got Randolph hurt.”

“Huh?”

Volf hesitated and glanced at the sköll bracelet on his left wrist. “At one point, that harpy looked like it was about to drop the boy, so I used Randolph’s shield as a springboard so I could leap up and catch him. I managed to save him, but I fractured Randolph’s wrists. The mage healed them soon enough, but I

obviously need to work on controlling this bracelet properly.”

“Well, it was an emergency.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you. The commander of the mages who came to support us saw me jump and asked if it was late-blooming magic. I told him I had a magical accessory that augments my movements and showed him the bracelet, though I didn’t let him touch it.”

“I don’t blame you for that. There wasn’t anything else you could have done.”

They would have found no evidence of magical power if they had asked Volf to use the measuring crystal. It was inevitable that he would have been asked about the bracelet sooner or later. In fact, being upfront about it was probably the safest approach.

“I was careless. I’m sorry. He didn’t ask me where I got it, but if anyone does, I’ll say it came from my family. Whatever happens, I’ll make sure you don’t get mixed up in it.”

“Please, don’t worry about it. Even if someone does find out that I made it, if I explain how I did it and that only people who can’t express magic can use it, I expect that’ll be the end of it. At my level of magic, I don’t even know if I’d manage to make another one. Besides, there’s nothing special about the technique; anyone with enough power and the right materials could do it.”

“I suppose it doesn’t seem that attractive when so few people can use it. You’d have to search pretty hard to find another knight in my situation. Even so, I’ll be careful. I seem to have a habit of getting you into trouble,” Volf said, smiling wryly as he began to dismantle the sword.

His familiarity with such weapons was clear in the easy movements of his hands. One by one, he laid the parts out neatly on the workbench.

“I wouldn’t say you’ve ever gotten me into trouble. If anything, isn’t it the other way around? You became a guarantor for my company and even promoted my inventions to the Beast Hunters.”

“Oh, I’ll do that sort of stuff anytime; it’s fun. Right, there we go. One shortsword, dismantled.”

Within moments, Volf had taken the small weapon completely apart and was rolling the screws around playfully. In total, there were five separate parts: the blade, the guard, the handle, the sheath, and the screws.

“Now that I think of it, your dryers use both fire crystals and air crystals—two different kinds of magic, but they don’t interfere with each other. Why is it a problem in a magical sword?”

“The dryers aren’t enchanted, you see. Their power derives from the crystals via magical circuits. It’s the same with the cooling fan and the chilling fan. We draw the circuits with as little overlap as possible so we can adjust the magic from each kind of crystal separately. But with this sword we’re trying to make, each part is enchanted—the guard uses water magic for cleaning itself, the blade has some other passive ability; they’re all separate. Um...put simply, it’s the same reason why you can’t put a hardening enchantment on a completed dryer.”

“I’m starting to see how impossible of a request this was...”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s not *impossible*. We just need to find the right materials and methods, and I’ll probably have to draw some more complex circuits. Those are the sorts of things we need to work out. Magical tools with multiple enchantments do exist, after all.”

Dahlia was sure that her knowledge, magical power, and technical skill were all insufficient for this task. *If only Father were here, he could teach me...* Dahlia quickly waved that thought away.

“Now then, it’s taken a bit longer than intended, but let’s get started on our second attempt.”

“What are we going to do this time?”

“Well, last time, thanks to the black slime, we ended up with a sword that you can’t even touch with bare hands. This time, I want to try using *yellow* slime, which possesses earth magic. I know of a technique for coating metals with earth magic using a similar material, and I thought it would be worth trying on our sword.”

“Coating them with earth magic... But yellow slimes will corrode metal over

time.”

“Yes, but unlike black slime, its corrosive properties disappear once it’s been powdered. I tested this when I was in college,” Dahlia explained as she retrieved a box containing yellow slime powder from a shelf. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to put a mask on. The powder is very fine, and it’ll choke you if you breathe it in. Here, gloves too.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Once they were both properly masked and gloved, Dahlia carefully opened the box. She scooped out about half a cupful of the floury, light-yellow powder and tipped it into a silver bucket along with some liquid.

“Sorry, Volf, could you slowly stir this for me? While you do that, I’ll start enchanting the sword. I was going to keep the enchantments similar to last time—self-sharpening on the blade, self-cleaning on the guard, haste on the handle, weight-reduction on the sheath, and hardening on the screws. Would you like to change any of those?”

“No, that sounds perfect. It’ll be easier to compare the effects to our last attempt too.”

“Good point. I’ll go with those, then.”

Dahlia picked up the parts one at a time and applied the various enchantments. Since she’d already done this once and gotten the feel for it, it didn’t take her long. The weight-reduction enchantment on the sheath was the most time-consuming one, but even that took half the time it had before. The only problem she encountered was with the screws; perhaps due to their small size, she had trouble ascertaining whether her enchantment had actually worked on them.

Across from her, Volf’s golden eyes were staring fixedly into the bucket as he stirred its contents with a glass rod. The liquid had turned light gray with a yellowish tinge and was becoming thick and viscous. Dahlia immersed each of the shortsword’s parts into the mixture and then applied a fixing spell. So far, the process was virtually the same as it had been last time.

“Shall I try putting it back together?” Volf asked.



“Yes, please.”

Once she was sure that the fixing spell had settled on every part, Dahlia handed them over to Volf. As he fitted the blade into the handle, Volf nodded.

“This is good. I don’t feel any resistance, so it should all go together just fine.”

Dahlia was relieved. Yellow slime obviously shared the magic-sealing properties of black slime, preventing the parts from repelling each other. It appeared they’d found another viable material to use as a coating. The assembled sword was pale gray with a faint golden sheen. Depending on the angle, it almost looked as though gold dust had been mixed into the coating. The previous sword they’d tried to enchant, with its pitch-black blade and dark-red handle, had come out looking undeniably bewitched. This one was fairly unremarkable by comparison—it wouldn’t have looked out of place on a regular weapon shop’s shelf.

Volf groaned as he examined the sword. “Ah, that’s a shame...”

“Is something wrong?”

“There’s no water coming from the guard. The sheath doesn’t feel any lighter either. It’s like the magic’s completely sealed in.”

“I think you’re right; the coating’s completely smothered it. That’s another dud.”

Evidently, the coating of yellow slime had rendered the magic on each part inert. Attempting further enchantments would be meaningless.

“So black slime will melt your hand and yellow slime smothers the magic... I guess there’s nothing we can do except try a different material.”

“It looks like unicorn horn might be the best bet after all. I’ll powder a little for next time. If I’m not powerful enough to use it, we’ll find a mage who is. I’ll also do some more research on monster materials with magic-resistant properties.”

The enchanting techniques employed by mages, alchemists, and blacksmiths were often closely guarded secrets. What Dahlia *could* research were monster materials, mainly through books and her father’s notes. But it wasn’t only her

knowledge of enchanting techniques that fell short—she also lacked familiarity with the metals used in swordsmithing, having had few opportunities to work with them. Continual trial and error was her only recourse. This project was shaping up to be a long journey.

“It almost feels like our first attempt, the Blade of the Dark Lord’s Minion, went a bit *too* well. We were able to assemble it, *and* all the enchantments worked,” Volf said as he finally put down the sword, glancing over at the shelves.

Upon one of those shelves sat a magically sealed box that housed the first enchanted sword Volf and Dahlia had created together. The slightest touch would leave one with burned fingers, so it had lain there ever since. If only they had been able to touch that sword, the experiment would have been a resounding success.

“So, I was just thinking...” Dahlia mused. “If we were to find some way of making that sword from last time touchable, that would mean the process we used to make it wasn’t wrong after all. Do you see?”

“The *process* might not be wrong, but I think I’d still call it a failure from a safety perspective.”

However, she wasn’t suggesting anybody should touch the sword with bare hands in its current state.

“Earth magic is effective against black slimes, right? If we dipped that sword into the yellow slime mixture, what do you suppose would happen? Would it fail to stick? Would it melt the metal underneath? Or would it actually form a protective coating over the top of the black slime, allowing the sword to be safely held?”

It was fun to consider the possibilities, but her hypothesis was nothing more than that. They couldn’t know the result without first conducting the experiment.

“It’s certainly true that earth magic works well against black slimes, but...have people done experiments like this with yellow slime before?”

“I’ve heard of it being used to enchant stones and bricks for the likes of walls

and flooring before. It makes them a little sturdier. It's simpler and cheaper to just employ a mage to perform a hardening enchantment, though."

Mages blessed with earth magic often had the ability to perform hardening enchantments over large areas. Dahlia couldn't help envying that sort of power. Apparently, elite mages wielded the same type of magic with awesome effects. Only they could create the so-called "adamant walls" that even the largest monsters would struggle to break down.

"Stones and bricks... Hold on, have you tried it here in the tower already?"

"Well deduced, Volf. My father enchanted the roof with some yellow slime right after he burned the black one that revived itself up there. He was worried that it might have weakened the stonework."

"I swear this tower must be partly *made* of slime by now..."

"I wouldn't go that far. Probably."

Now that she thought of it, in the period leading up to her perfecting her waterproof cloth, she'd dried all sorts of slimes in every spare corner she could find. There were some that had shriveled up and gotten stuck in the nooks and crannies of the stones. Perhaps Volf wasn't entirely wrong. Dahlia noticed her eyes starting to wander over the workshop floor, looking for the telltale stains, and quickly told herself to forget the matter.

"Anyway, why don't we give this yellow slime mixture a try?"

"You love a challenge, don't you, Dahlia?"

"Yes, I can't deny that. Not that I've had the chance to take on very many. My father and my, er, ex-fiancé were always stopping me."

"Well, now I'm wondering if I should stop you, for safety's sake."

"Volf, be honest. Do you really want to stop me when this magical sword could be within our grasp?"

"I don't. In fact, I want to cheer you on. But I also want to keep you out of danger."

Seeing Volf gripped in a dilemma, Dahlia began to make her case. She explained that yellow slimes' corrosive properties were much weaker than

those of other slimes. Even on bare skin, it wouldn't cause burns immediately. It was nothing like the terrifyingly caustic black slime. In any case, she would wear gloves, prepare a piece of meat to check the sword's safety, *and* have a potion on a shelf near at hand. Persuaded by her thorough safety procedures, Volf finally relented.

The Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion was unchanged since they'd put it away in its magically sealed box. Thankfully, it appeared that the black slime powder was not eating away at the metal. After donning some heavy-duty gloves, Dahlia submersed the sword in the yellow slime mixture. She saw no unusual reaction or any sign of the liquid being repelled; it coated the surface evenly. However, when it came to applying her fixing spell, she saw the color of the yellow slime mixture all but disappear before her eyes. The once-pitch-black sword was now a very dark gray, giving it a rather used, weathered look.

"I guess the black slime won," Volf commented.

Dahlia smiled grimly. All she'd done was add a second coating of liquid; it wasn't as though the slimes were actually fighting, but in a way, he might have been right. After all, the properties of black slime were far more potent than those of yellow.

"I'll just test it with a piece of meat."

Just like last time, Dahlia placed a small scrap of raw meat on top of the sword. On that occasion, the meat had quickly melted into sludge and burned away. This time, however, even after three minutes of waiting, the meat was unchanged. Dahlia tried placing it in different spots, but still there was no reaction.

"It seems to be all right."

"Right, then I'll try holding it. Don't even try to argue because I won't hear of it."

Before she had a chance to reply, Volf reached out and grasped the sword in an ungloved hand.

"Does it feel okay?"

"Yeah, completely. And look—the scabbard's light, and the water comes out.

You've done it!"

"Well, we're not finished yet, but it looks like this method works!"

Volf placed the shortsword down in the middle of the workbench and raised his hands in triumph. "We've just taken a huge step forward. What do you say we go for a drink to celebrate?"

"Great idea!"

"Anywhere in particular you'd like to go? Anything you're hungry for?"

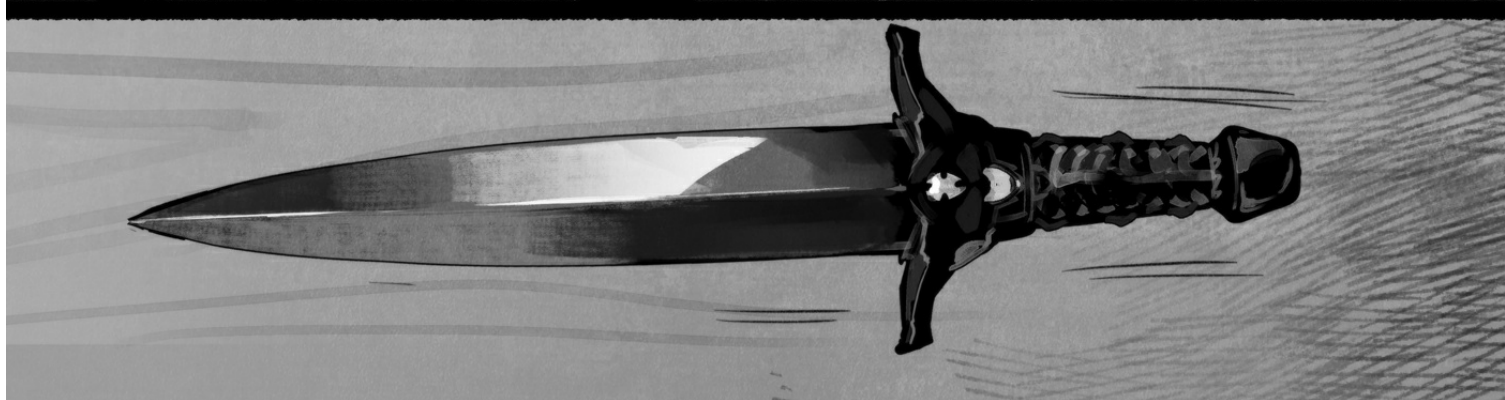
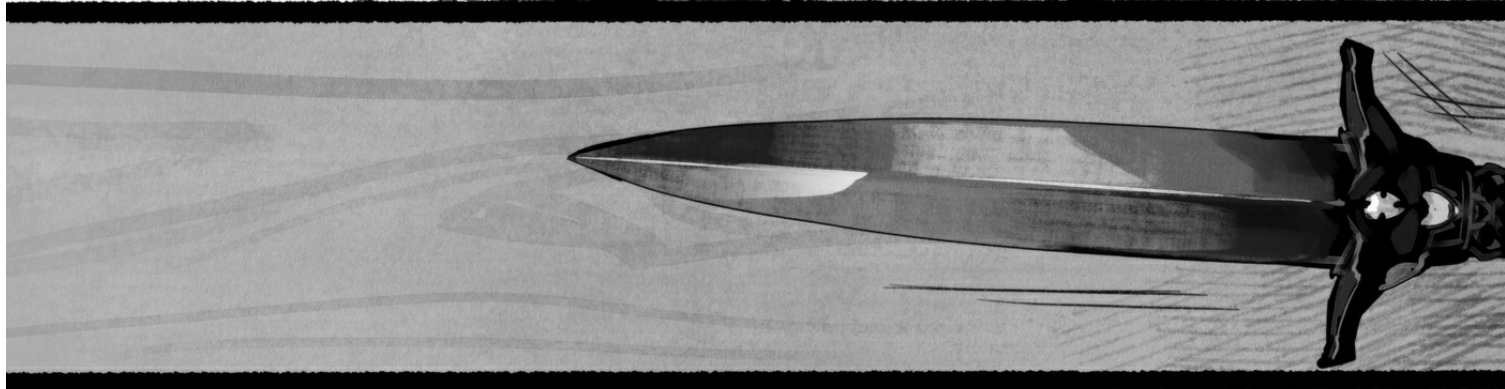
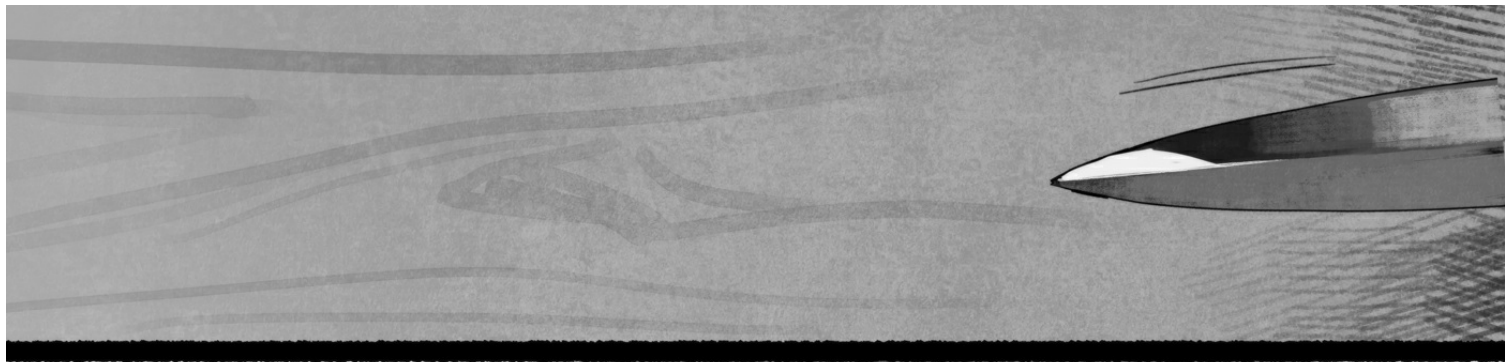
They began to discuss their favorite restaurants and drinks. A minute or two later, Dahlia happened to glance down at the sword again and unwittingly took a step back.

"Volf, unless my eyes are playing tricks on me...I think that thing's moving."

"I just noticed it too. It's very slight, but it *is* moving. Almost like it's alive."

"Oh no, it's definitely not that. I'm sure it's just magical antagonism!"

At a pace slightly slower than a snail's, the sword was creeping forward across the surface of the workbench. The magical properties of the black and yellow slime were repelling each other, causing all the magic to flow in a single direction. That was undoubtedly the cause for the sword's movement.



“But just look at the way it crawls... It really looks as though there’s something living in it. Um...I’m sorry for the weird question, but when you’re crafting magical tools, is it possible that something like a soul or spirit can get sucked inside them?”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that, although spirits, holy energy, and warriors’ souls do dwell inside some weapons and armors, don’t they?”

“Yeah, so they say.”

“And we spoke about dullahan before too. What in the world is inside *them*?”

“Ghosts, maybe? Wait, so does this mean a magical tool really could have a soul inside it?”

The moment he said that, Dahlia felt a shiver go down her spine. Could it really be that *ghosts* could enter her magical tools while she crafted them? The mere thought was horrifying.

“But you don’t think the same thing that’s inside a dullahan is in this sword...do you?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t say so. I mean, we’re in your tower. The only ghosts that would be here would be your fam— I mean, er, never mind.”

“I’m sure Father and my ancestors wouldn’t haunt my tools!”

While she’d prefer her father’s ghost to some mysterious, unknown specter, she’d be happiest not being haunted at all. Dahlia frantically shooed those befuddling thoughts from her head and turned her attention to the problem of the restless sword.

“The yellow slime will peel off if I freeze it. Once we’ve thoroughly observed the sword, I’ll shut it in a box with some ice crystals and then remove the slime.”

Although the experience promised to be slightly unnerving, it was important that she made observations of this new creation and recorded them in a report. It wouldn’t take long, and Volf would be there beside her. She could have a nice drink before bedtime and leave her magical lantern on while she slept. She’d made countless magical tools before now, and not one of them had ever been



haunted. She'd never heard of such a thing from her father either. Anyway, there *were* no ghosts here. None. Nada. Zip.

"I won't just bring a sword for enchanting next time. I'll bring one for protection too. Would you mind keeping it here?"

"Not at all; that's fine. I'm not sure that any protection will be necessary, but...I'll keep two bangles on just in case."

An unsettling thought occurred to Dahlia then—would weapons like swords or the magic from a bangle even work on a ghost? What if they just passed right through it? Every time she tried to quash one of those scary thoughts, two more popped into her head. At times like these, the best thing was to speak them aloud and laugh them off.

"Honestly, if it turns out we've somehow created a haunted sword or some new species of monster, it won't be funny."

"New species of monster? Ha ha, it gets worse and worse. Say, since this thing likes to move around on its own, do you suppose we should call it the 'Creeping Blade' or something like that?"

"The Creeping Blade... I just hope it creeps toward monsters and not us."

Both of them were smiling as they bantered, but their eyes were trained on the sword, not each other. Dahlia had hoped to laugh off her concerns, but she only found herself thinking up increasingly dire possibilities.

"In the teeny-tiny chance that we *have* created a new monster, we won't just become enemies of the state, we'll be the enemies of humankind."

"True. We'll have to rule over the forces of the darkness."

"I think the title of 'Dark Lord' belongs to you."

"Then you can be the 'Dark Sorceress' at my side."

The pair gazed gloomily at the sword as it slowly but menacingly inched onward.

# Merriment Under the Stars

After a thorough inspection, Dahlia and Volf's second attempt at an artificial magical sword, dubbed the Creeping Blade, was shut away in a box with some ice crystals and water. Once it was completely frozen, the yellow slime coating could be peeled off. It didn't take long. Dahlia worked gingerly on the frozen sword until it turned back into the Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion again. With a sigh, she returned the now-motionless shortsword back to its magically sealed box. For good measure, she stacked several metal sheets on top of the lid.

"Not that it'll exactly be a celebration, but shall we go for a drink anyway?" Volf asked.

"Yes, let's," Dahlia replied without hesitation.

Just a little while ago, they'd been rejoicing in their success. However, the end result had been a double failure—one nonfunctioning sword and another that crept around on its own. The best thing they could do now was step out for a change of scenery. Thankfully, it wasn't too late in the afternoon, just a little before teatime.

"I know—why don't we head to the South District and go shopping for those estervino glasses? By the time we've done that, we'll be ready for something to eat."

Dahlia was more than happy to go along with the suggestion, and so the two set off on their long-awaited shopping trip. The city's main port was situated in the South District, and the stores along the seafront boasted a wealth of goods imported from all over the kingdom and beyond. Many of these shops dealt in glassware and ceramics. They were sure to find glasses well suited for estervino.

"Small glasses would be best for estervino, right?"

"Right. Ceramic cups could work well too."

The pair chatted along the way, changing carriage twice as they headed toward the shopping streets. It was another hot day. In the tower's workshop,

the magical cooling fan could offer relief, but out here, the summer sun was fierce and the breeze was feeble. Volf looked up toward the sun through his fairy-glass lenses.

“Something the matter?”

“I think we’re in for a hot summer this year, so I’m just praying we won’t be sent out on too many expeditions.”

That was understandable. Expeditions in these temperatures must have been deeply unpleasant. Simply traveling would be tiring, never mind fighting, and it would be difficult to sleep at night.

“When you go on expeditions, do you sleep in sleeping bags, inside tents?”

“We sleep in tents, yeah. But in summer, we either sleep with a light blanket or just our clothes.”

“Don’t you get cold?”

“Well, on cold nights, we use heavier blankets or those wearable sleeping bags. They let your arms move, and your legs are free too. In the old days, people would cut their sleeping bags open in emergencies, but someone decided that that was a waste and asked the makers to invent a solution. That’s how they came up with the wearable sleeping bag, so the story goes.”

There had obviously been a need in this world for a sleeping bag that afforded ease of movement. It made sense. No one would want to be trapped in a bag, unable to move, while a monster was attacking.

“The older knights tell me that expeditions used to be much worse. They didn’t have wearable sleeping bags, waterproof cloth, or as many horses. Apparently, the meals haven’t improved much, though.”

“I’m really hoping my compact stoves can help with that. It’s still a work in progress, but I’m currently developing an even smaller, lighter version.”

The design manuals Fermo had given her had been very instructive. She was experimenting with various approaches—using different materials, making the stove round instead of square, paring down the edges, lowering its height, and so on.

“How much lighter are you aiming for?”

“Ideally, I’d like it to be no heavier than a full wineskin. Unfortunately, its crystal consumption won’t be as efficient, but what I’m thinking of at the moment is removing the grate so pots would sit directly on top of the heating element.”

“At that weight, we could even carry one each. Oh, and there’s no need to worry about how fast it goes through crystals. We can always get someone with fire magic to charge the crystals up again. Those guys often don’t get to use a lot of their magic since it’s too dangerous in the forests.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, I’ll make the crystal efficiency a low priority and focus solely on weight reduction.”

Talking as they went, Volf and Dahlia walked from the carriage stop toward the gateway to the shopping streets. The closer they got, the busier and louder the streets became. A faint salty tang wafted through the air, reminding them how close they were to the ocean. The shouts of the vendors, the haggling between customers and shopkeepers, and the chatter of passersby all blended together into a somehow musical hubbub.

Once they passed the threshold of the shopping area, the road forked to the left, right, and center. Storefronts jostled side by side as far as the eye could see. The central road looked almost like a river of people. In this crowd, no couple strolled along with the woman’s hand daintily resting atop the man’s; they either held hands or linked arms so as not to get separated. However, for nobles, such gestures were only for blood relatives or intimate couples. For one moment, Volf considered asking Dahlia to link arms, but he thought the better of it.

“Dahlia, would you mind holding on to my sleeve until we get out of this crowd?”

After a few moments’ thought, he’d settled on this as the safest option. Thankfully, he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt today. He only needed to roll them down and Dahlia would be able to grip one.

“Sure, that’s fine... It makes me feel a bit like a child, though,” Dahlia said, looking slightly perturbed.

Volf found himself picturing how she must have looked when she was little and had to suppress a chuckle. “I know, but it’s better than getting lost. It’ll just be for a little while.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure to stay close.”

It was only once they’d joined the throng that Dahlia was reminded just how tall Volf was. He would be difficult to lose in the crowd; all she needed to do was follow behind him. However, it felt too late to point that out now. She hoped she wouldn’t stretch the material of Volf’s sleeve.

“Hey, if it isn’t Dahlia!”

Dahlia looked up to see a sturdily built man with sandy hair standing before her.

“Marcello! Hello there.”

“Good to see you. And, er, who’s this?”

“Oh, um, this is Volf, my friend I spoke to you about before. He’s also one of my company’s guarantors.”

In order to not block the traffic while they continued their conversation, the three of them moved over to the edge of the road.

“Marcello Nuvolari, at your service. My wife and I are both friends of Miss Dahlia. I’m a member of the Couriers’ Guild and a fellow guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Marcello bowed politely as he introduced himself. Dahlia had never seen Marcello converse with a noble before. He seemed to be a natural, even though his manner was utterly different from that of his usual lighthearted self. His work with the Couriers’ Guild often took him to and from noble residences, so it made sense that he’d be accustomed to interacting with them. It was refreshing to see this new side of her friend.

“I am Volfred Scalfarotto of the Order of Beast Hunters. Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Volf had also shifted into business mode. It was their first meeting, after all, so it was understandable that they would both be tense.

“This is the Marcello I was talking about the other day when I suggested we all have drinks together,” Dahlia quickly explained.

“Ah, got it.”

Volf was the first one to unclench, turning to Marcello with a friendly smile.

“I may be from a noble family, but I live in barracks now and spend most of my time around commoners. Since we’re fellow guarantors for Dahlia’s company, I’d be happy if we could speak as equals.”

“So, drinks are on then, once we’re all free?” Dahlia chimed in.

“Well, sure, but...Irma and I aren’t too familiar with noble customs, so I hope we won’t offend.”

“No need to worry. Just the other day, Dahlia treated me to her Green Tower exclusive, wine-steamed clams, and I ate them straight out of the pan.”

“Oh? Wait, *you* were the guest Dahlia had?”

“You have my gratitude. Those clams were absolutely sublime.”

Marcello couldn’t help but laugh at the earnestness of Volf’s words and soon relaxed.

“Looks like we’ve got nothin’ to worry about, eh? Tell you what—next time there’s a good catch of clams, I’ll bring *two* buckets over to the tower!”

“In that case, the drinks are on me,” Volf replied with a grin.

“Look, you two, that’s my *home* you’re talking about.”

Both Volf and Marcello burst into laughter. Dahlia was relieved to see them getting along so well on their first meeting.

“So, are you out shopping, Marcello?” she asked.

“Someone at work just got married, so I’m here to get them a gift on behalf of the whole crew. We played rock-paper-scissors for it and I came out on top, so I’m the bearer of fortune this time ’round.”

Evidently, he’d already found said gift; in his right hand, he clutched a large box made of pale wood. It was tied up tightly with cord and looked very heavy.

“Winning at rock-paper-scissors means you have to buy the wedding gift?” Volf said.

“Sort of. The idea is that someone who wins a lottery or a game like rock-paper-scissors is blessed with good luck. They’re called ‘the bearer of fortune,’ and they’re sent to buy the gift and present it to the happy couple in the hopes that their luck gets passed on to the newlyweds.”

“I see. I’ve never heard of that before.”

Evidently, this celebratory custom was only practiced among commoners. Dahlia had been familiar with it ever since she was little, so it had never occurred to her that it might not exist in all levels of society.

“What sort of gift did you get?” Dahlia asked.

“They asked for tableware, so I got plates, soup bowls, cups, and...well, a whole set. I’m just on my way to drop it all off.”

“That couple must be blessed, having someone from the Couriers’ Guild as their bearer of fortune. You’ll bring them more good luck than they know what to do with.”

“It’s perfect, right? Anyhow, I’d better go catch my carriage. I’ll look forward to drinkin’ with you both soon!”

“Likewise!”

With that, the trio parted ways. The way Volf and Marcello smiled and waved each other off, one would almost think they were old friends.



“C’mon, you two... Even elementary schoolers hold hands these days.” Marcello chuckled to himself as he went on his way, leaving Dahlia and Volf behind.

Although both of them were in their twenties, Marcello thought they looked like a pair of teenagers who’d just started dating. Dahlia had been holding onto Volf’s sleeve, gripping it so timidly that any sudden movement would have seen it slip from her fingers. Volf, meanwhile, had walked slightly ahead of her, matching her pace and constantly watching the path ahead so as not to let

anyone bump into her. The moment Marcello had called out to them, he'd seen the young man's eyes dart toward him as though wary of a threat. Though it was hard not to laugh at Volf's assiduous efforts to protect her, Marcello couldn't bring himself to tease the young man. It took him back to the early days of his romance with Irma, and he felt his cheeks heat up a tad.

"Huh?"

That was when a strange thought occurred to him. He'd met Dahlia and Tobias countless times during their two-year engagement, but he had no recollection of them ever holding hands. Regardless of what their feelings toward each other may have been, Marcello was *sure* he must have seen them hand in hand at least once. No matter how he scoured his memories, however, he still drew a blank.

When he thought of Dahlia, he saw her caring for Tobias as though he were a family member, nursing him after he'd drunk too much, fixing a loose button on his coat, and so on. His memories of Tobias were equally unromantic. He couldn't remember the young craftsman looking at or speaking to Dahlia with anything resembling passion. Instead, he would carry heavy things for her, repair the stairs and floors when she wasn't around, and keep customers who made odd or unreasonable orders well away from her.

Even when it had been just Marcello and Tobias drinking together, the younger man's attitude toward his fiancée never changed. He never fawned over her in any way—instead, he fretted about her dangerous prototypes and experiments. One day, he recounted how she'd gotten her hand stuck in some slime; another, he mentioned how she'd arrived on the doorstep with a client who'd escorted her home. He and Carlo had been beside themselves with worry, he said. "What are you, her big brother or somethin'?" Marcello had joked at one point.

Although it was an engagement that had brought the pair together, their relationship was far more like that of siblings. There was no spark of passion there; they were simply trying to become family. As it happened, Marcello had won at rock-paper-scissors back then too. Had things gone differently, he would have been their bearer of fortune. Perhaps it was just as well that they'd parted ways before he'd had the chance to fulfill his role. Looking back, it had been a



blessing in disguise.

Marcello recalled the tall, dark-haired man who stood at Dahlia's side.

"Doesn't seem like a bad fella."

His expression had been calm and mild, his voice gentle yet clear. Then, of course, there was the unmistakable ardor in his eyes as he gazed at Dahlia, visible even through his blue-tinted glasses. Truth be told, Marcello didn't care for nobles. He preferred to avoid them where possible. However, he wanted to believe that this man was different. It had only been a month since Dahlia had broken off her engagement, and Marcello couldn't bear to see her hurt again. He wanted some assurance that this young nobleman's intentions were pure—that he wasn't a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"We'll do a little digging over those drinks..."

Holding his precious cargo tightly, the bearer of fortune climbed aboard a carriage.



Dahlia and Volf gradually proceeded down the long central street of the shopping area, dropping in on a number of glassware and ceramics stores along the way. All the stores they visited had many beautiful wares on display, but the pair struggled to find precisely what they were after. They sought cups for drinking estervino, similar in shape to sake cups, but larger. Now and then, one of them would spy an attractive vessel and pick it up for closer inspection, only to find that it didn't quite have the right feel.

As they traveled further down the street, the crowds began to thin out, and so did the shops, becoming outnumbered by buildings resembling storehouses and offices. Soon, they would reach the end of the shopping area and emerge onto the road that led to the port. They stopped in front of a small wooden building sandwiched between two storehouses and tucked back off the road. It appeared to have been there for decades.

"This place looks like it specializes in drinking vessels," Dahlia observed.

"Drinking vessels" were indeed the only words on the storefront, written in faded white paint upon a dark wooden signboard. The shop's sliding door was

wide open, but there was no banner hanging up to advertise the wares, and none were on display. There was also no sign of any staff. Volf peered inside.

“I *think* it’s a store. Let’s take a look.”

Dahlia followed Volf down the dim path that led up to the entrance and into the softly lit interior. Thin white curtains hung over the windows, easing the harsh glare of the sunlight. A gentle breeze flowed through the small shop, making it surprisingly cool. Dahlia could only guess that there was a chilling fan running somewhere, aided by some strategically placed ice crystals. On dark wooden shelves running along the walls was a small selection of bottles and cups of various sizes. They were just like the sake vessels Dahlia remembered from her past life.

“Welcome.”

At the back of the shop, an old man—presumably the shop’s owner—was sitting cross-legged on a rug spread out over the wooden floor. He wore a long, loose-fitting robe in a dark shade of blue, quite an unusual sight in this kingdom. Judging by his snow-white hair and beard, he was very elderly. His dark, narrow eyes looked somewhat sleepy.

“Good day,” Volf and Dahlia both greeted him.

“I can offer you only estervino vessels, but take your time and look around. You do not need to buy.” The man’s tone was easy and relaxed, his wizened face crinkling with a smile, as though to reassure the hesitant pair. He had a slight accent. “If you see something you like, pick it up. Otherwise, you will not know if it suits you.”

“Thank you, sir. We shall,” Volf answered. He bowed politely to the elderly shopkeeper and approached the shelves. Dahlia followed suit.

Very few of the pieces on display had gaudy colors or striking designs; the majority were clearly made with utility in mind. Dahlia picked up several that caught her eye, finding every one of them pleasing to hold. However, perhaps due to the recent heat, she found her gaze drawn to the vessels made of glass. The ones she liked best were two large cups made of clear glass and decorated with elegant lines in red and blue respectively. Picking one up, she found it had a pleasing weight and thickness and sat comfortably in her fingers. Beside her,

Volf was handling one of the same type.

“These are nice,” he said. “Comfortable to hold.”

“I like them too. What do you think? Shall we buy them? And should we get a serving bottle as well?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. We drink quite a lot, so we’d better find a biggish bottle.”

“If you will be drinking a lot, I recommend a serving bowl,” came a voice from behind Volf.

Neither of them had noticed the old man approaching.

“Serving bowl?”

“Yes. If your cups empty quickly, you may enjoy a bowl better than a bottle. It releases the fragrance too.”

The shopkeeper pointed in the direction of some larger vessels that, at a brief glance, looked much like drinking glasses. However, they each had a small spout molded into the lip, and the bodies featured subtle concave curves where they would be held. The somewhat-thick glass the vessels were made from was tastefully decorated with opaque lines drawing beautiful patterns across the surface. These bowls were easily large enough to accommodate a full tumbler and a half of liquid.

Volf could get through estervino at a considerable pace. A serving bottle would be sufficient, but he preferred the idea of enjoying the estervino’s fragrance from one of these bowls before pouring it into large cups. There were no hard and fast rules when it came to drinking, of course—they could pour the estervino straight from its original bottle into the drinking cups or merely a couple of large tumblers. However, there was just something so appealing about the gently curving shape of the serving bowl.

Thankfully, the three pieces turned out less costly than expected. But just as Dahlia was about to ask the shopkeeper for their bill, Volf was drawn to something on the end of a shelf.

“There are even *metal* vessels for estervino.”

“Is that tin, I wonder?”

His eye had caught on an elegant vessel with a soft, silvery color. Sitting atop a piece of ink-black cloth, the smallish round cup almost looked like a full moon.

“I’ve seen silver goblets a few times, but never anything made of tin.”

“I’ve heard they give a smooth, mellow flavor to their contents, though I’ve never used one myself.”

This was the first time in her second life that Dahlia had seen a cup of this type made from tin. In her past life, however, her parents had sipped their evening drinks from cups just like this one. She remembered that her father had favored sake or whiskey, while her mother, who drank little, preferred plum wine with a mixer.

“Those tin cups are very good for caldo,” the shopkeeper commented.

“Caldo?”

“That’s estervino heated up until it’s hot or warm,” Dahlia explained.

“Oho, so you are the expert, young miss. Tin vessels are very good for making caldo in hot water. At this time of the year, of course, you are better resting them on ice instead. Tin cups also suit this kingdom’s brandy well,” he said slowly, occasionally gesturing with his deeply wrinkled hands. “But remember, tin is soft. Too much force and it will bend. And you must not fill it with estervino that is boiling hot or ice cold. It will be ruined. You must treat it like a lover—gently, kindly.”

“It seems rather tricky,” said Dahlia.

“Ah, but that is what makes the flavor so good. Wait there a minute...”

The old man disappeared through a door at the back of the shop, reappearing shortly afterward with a glass serving bottle. He gave both Volf and Dahlia a tin cup to hold and carefully filled them with crystal clear alcohol. The glugging sound as the drink poured from the glass serving bottle brought a wealth of happy memories welling up in Dahlia’s mind.

“Thank you very much. This is beautifully clear.”

“It is vetrovino from the Eastern Kingdom. Difficult to make. Difficult to store.

It needs to be kept at just the right temperature. Only this year did they start to bring it here on the ships. It is still quite rare, but as it comes from my homeland, I think it is my duty to promote it.”

Evidently, the shopkeeper had been born in the Eastern Kingdom. The estervino’s unique aroma drifted upward, and the cold liquid soon began to chill their fingers through the silvery cups.

“Now, take a sip. Then we will wait.”

“Just one sip?” Volf queried.

“Yes. Until cup and drink get to know each other. Back home in the east, men learn to be silent and wait while ladies shop, dress, and put on their makeup.”

Volf couldn’t help a wry smile at the shopkeeper’s earnest words, but he and Dahlia did as the old man instructed. They took just a single sip from their cups, taking the time to fully appreciate the flavor before swallowing. It was a very dry estervino that hit the taste buds with a bold, clean flavor. A bitterness came first, then it heated the throat on the way down. Dahlia liked it, but she felt it would probably be too powerful for a less seasoned drinker. It packed quite a punch.

“I think it’s excellent as it is,” Volf said. He was fond of dry alcohol.

“Really? Well, just wait and see how it changes. Ah, but I should not keep a lady waiting. Please, miss, help yourself to these.”

“Thank you. Are they a sort of candy?”

“Yes, made of pressed sugar. Too sweet for me, but my wife likes them. How about you, young man? Will you have some?”

“No, thank you. I’m not all that fond of sweets.”

Volf had obviously apprehended the flavor of the white, angular candies just by looking at them. Dahlia, however, took up the shopkeeper’s offer and popped one into her mouth. Although these candies were pure white and not quite as bumpy, the taste and texture were almost exactly like that of the konpeito she’d known in her past life. After the dry estervino, the candies tasted even sweeter and more flavorful. While she ate, Volf spoke to the

shopkeeper.

“Are all your wares from the Eastern Kingdom?”

“Yes, indeed. This shop is only my hobby, though, so I’m afraid my goods are all rather humble. Ah, but there *is* something rare I can show you.”

The old man bent down and opened the lowest in a set of drawers beneath the shelves, retrieving a bundle wrapped in jet-black cloth. Inside was an estervino cup, its flattish shape characteristic of an older style of vessel. Its outer surface was black, while inside, it was a rich red.

“This one is made from cherry wood. The outside is painted with black lacquer, and the inside with pyrefox blood.”

“Pyrefox?” Dahlia repeated.

She’d seen a picture of one in a book years ago. It was a rare beast that possessed fire magic, hence its name, and it was found only in the Eastern Kingdom. As the shopkeeper traced his finger around the rim of the cup, magic began to shimmer like a heat haze over its surface.

“Unclean water will not make you sick if you drink it from this cup. I have rarely used it myself, though. This kingdom’s water is very good.”

Evidently, it was a sort of water-purifying magical tool. It would have little utility in Ordine, sadly, where water crystals were plentiful.

“Do you often use magical cups like this in the Eastern Kingdom?”

“No, no. Where I come from, magical tools are few and expensive. With just this cup, you could buy a horse, I think.”

Dahlia was taken aback. In Ordine, a horse would be worth a whole mountain of water crystals. Even water-purifying and detoxifying magical tools weren’t terribly expensive.

“How do you hunt pyrefoxes?” she asked.

“The same as other spirits—ah, you do not call them spirits, but monsters, yes? Well, they are hunted like any other monsters—by men with swords and spears.”

“I see... Are those men something like this kingdom’s Order of Beast Hunters?”

“No, they do not fight for the kingdom. They are more like what you would call adventurers. Those who have mastered a weapon choose to go hunt monsters for honor and profit.”

The shopkeeper’s homeland obviously took a different approach to the ever-present threat of monsters. Perhaps it was simply a difference in national character.

“Now, I think it is probably time. Take a drink.”

By now, the silvery cups were glistening with condensation, almost as if they had sweated. Dahlia and Volf raised their cups to their lips, feeling how much the vessels themselves had chilled since a few minutes earlier. The estervino still had its dryness, but it felt quite different on the palate. It was gentler than before, softer. There was none of its previous bitterness or harsh aftertaste; it left behind only invigorating freshness once it had slipped down their throats.

Dahlia was the first to comment on it. “It hasn’t become sweet, exactly, but it’s so much mellower.”

“Right. It’s like the sharp edges have been smoothed off. You know, I think I like it even better this way,” Volf said with a smile as he gazed into the tin cup. He’d clearly taken a shine to it.

“Tin vessels soften the flavor of the drink. If you like it better now, young man, then it must agree with you.”

The only sticking point was the price. One of the tin cups was almost double the combined cost of the two glass cups and serving bowl.

“If you buy two, I will offer you a good deal. Thirty percent off. What could be more pleasant than sharing a cup of caldo with your little sister under the autumn moon? Surely such a delight is worth the price.”

“I’ll take them.”

“*Volf!*” Dahlia shouted as she heard Volf’s unhesitating reply.

“Oh, I beg your pardon. You are husband and wife?”

“No, no, we’re not married,” Dahlia hurriedly explained.

“Please forgive my mistakes. I make many of them in my old age. But it is true, I find, that people become more alike the more they share each other’s company. Be they friends, lovers, or husband and wife, it is the same.” With a kind smile, the old man half filled both their cups with the remaining estervino from the serving bottle. “You two appear very similar to my old eyes.”



By the time Dahlia and Volf left the small shop, the sun was beginning to sink low in the sky. In the end, Dahlia had bought the glass cups and serving bowl, while Volf had bought the tin cups. Concerned that the vessels might get broken if they took them on a carriage or carried them through crowded streets, they hired a courier to deliver them to the tower. The items would arrive the following evening, they were told. The two could hardly wait to use them.

“How about getting dinner down by the harbor? There’s a great place I go with the other knights sometimes.”

“Sounds perfect. I haven’t been down that way very often.”

“Right then, let’s get going before it gets busy.”

Once evening drew in, businesses would begin to close and the streets would quickly fill with employees heading home for the day or out to eat. They knew they’d better get to the restaurant before the rush, following the road leading to the harbor with a little more haste than before.

Along the lively harborside shopping streets, the lamps were already throwing their warm light upon the flagstones underfoot. A steady flow of people traversed the roads flanked by rows of brick restaurants and bars. Outside every one, staff in colorful clothing called out to passersby who were often just as flamboyant, many of them dressed in foreign garb and exotic patterns. The faint salty tang of the ocean that hung on the breeze was overwhelmed by enticing smells of alcohol and sizzling meat and seafood.

“Here we are. I know the name’s a little odd, but I promise it’s good.”

Volf halted in front of an establishment made of black bricks and topped with



a black roof. It was a conspicuous presence even on this extraordinary street. Its name, written in large white letters on the wall, was impossible to miss. The Black Cauldron, it read.

“It even looks a bit like a black cauldron,” Dahlia commented.

“Yeah. Apparently, the idea is to make the customers inside so happy that they melt. In my experience, it’s the contents of your wallet that melt away, though.”

The interior of the restaurant was much larger than Dahlia had expected, with many round tables arranged in rows. Toward the back and to the right, there was a bar, and on the other side, there was a staircase leading up to the second floor. About half of the tables were already occupied, servers in black aprons skirting busily between them. Judging by the raucous voices carrying from the second floor, a few customers were already getting pickled. Volf headed straight for the bar, greeting a man who held a bottle of some unknown beverage in his hand.

“Evening. Been a while.”

“Welcome, er... That *is* you, isn’t it Volf?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Any room in the back today?”

Volf took off his fairy glass spectacles to show the man his golden eyes. Satisfied that he had the right person, the man set the bottle aside and smiled.

“Nifty pair of specs you got there. Anyone else coming later?”

“No, it’s the two of us.”

“All right then, room number two on your right. What’ll you drink?”

“A glass of red and white to start with. We’ll order more with the food.”

“No problem. I’ll bring your drinks, so go ahead and get yourselves comfortable.”

Once the man had handed over a couple of menus, Dahlia followed Volf down a corridor to the side of the bar. They passed through a pair of white swinging doors, a little like those in an old saloon, which opened into a room with four pale wooden tables and chairs.

“That was the assistant manager. He and I joined the Beast Hunters around the same time, but he retired last year after getting married.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

Dahlia had never heard of anyone leaving the Order of Beast Hunters on account of marriage. She’d had the impression that the knights generally stayed on until they were fairly mature in years.

“His wife’s family runs this restaurant, and I think they were keen for him to take it on. The Beast Hunters are pretty popular among commoners, but actually, most wouldn’t necessarily want to be married to one. From that perspective, there are a lot of better positions at the castle.”

“Is that because of how dangerous it is?” Dahlia asked as she sat down diagonally across from Volf.

“That’s part of it, but the expeditions are the main reason. You can be called up at any time, and you’re never sure how long you’ll be away. So, a lot of guys transfer or quit once they get married. They call it ‘four in ten in five.’ About twenty percent—two in ten—of the new recruits drop out after one year. After five, another twenty percent are gone.”

“It must be incredibly demanding.”

“I don’t think there’s any work that isn’t demanding in some way, though. I mean, I hope you won’t be offended, but before I met you, I thought toolmakers just sort of waved their hands and cast some spells and voilà, there were your magical tools. I never realized how exhausting it was or that you could be blown off your feet and hurt like that. I didn’t think there was anything dangerous about it.”

Dahlia realized her exploits had left Volf with a somewhat distorted impression of her craft.

“I’m pretty sure that sort of thing doesn’t happen often... Although magic exhaustion isn’t that uncommon, I suppose,” she said a shade defensively as she took the menu Volf offered to her.

“What sort of age do magical toolmakers typically work till?” he asked.

“Well, there’s no set retirement age, so most keep going for as long as their body allows. As they get older, some take on an apprentice to manage the more physically involved work.”

“I’m a little envious. We’re paid well in the Beast Hunters, but even the best of us have to give it up by fifty.”

“You’ll be fine as long as you make sure to save up. Get yourself a good nest egg and you can enjoy your old age in grace and comfort.”

“Grace and comfort, huh? What about you? Do you have any plans for your golden years?”

“Well, let me see... I think once my hair starts turning white, that’ll be a good time to find myself an apprentice. Before that, of course, I’ll need to become someone worthy of having one.”

Dahlia had spoken to Irma about this once. She’d always been keen to pass on the skills her father had taught her as well as those she’d developed herself. The simplest way to do so was to take on an apprentice.

“You haven’t thought of passing the business onto future children or a relative?”

“I don’t plan to marry, and I’m not in contact with any relatives, so I don’t think there’ll be anyone like that. Ideally, I’d adopt someone who’d be willing to take the Rossetti name.”

There was a knock at the door, and the man who’d been at the bar, the assistant manager, appeared.

“So, it’s white for you, Volf, and red for your little sister, I assume?”

“She’s not my little sister, but yes.”

After that peculiar exchange, the man set down the two glasses of wine in front of them.

“Decided what to eat? We’ve got a special on today: crimson cattle steak with oxtail soup. How about it?”

“Ah, the one that makes the red cheese.”

“That monster that looks like a cow...”

During Dahlia’s first meal out with Volf, she’d learned about crimson cattle. Both of them had enjoyed the cheese, but she hadn’t realized that the meat was also available.

“I think I’ll go for that. You too, Dahlia?”

“Yes, please, I’ll have the same.”

“What drinks go best with crimson cattle?” Volf asked.

“I’d recommend a whiskey and soda, an apple cider, or a medium-dry red wine.”

“Right, whiskey for me then. Dahlia?”

“A cider, please.”

She decided to take the opportunity to try something different. Once they’d ordered a few side dishes, the assistant manager swiftly headed back down the corridor.

“Can’t believe I’ve been mistaken for your big brother twice in one day.”

“My big brother... There’s a thought.”

The enchanted glasses Volf wore gave him a passing resemblance to Dahlia’s father, so perhaps that was the cause. Any visual similarity between the two of them was purely down to the glasses; ordinarily, they looked so different that no one would mistake them for relatives. But perhaps the old shopkeeper had had a point; perhaps they *were* becoming alike, at least in personality, due to all the time they’d been spending together.

“You’re the one who’s always looking after me and doing me favors, though,” Volf said. “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“You mean I’m more like your older sister? But I’m younger than you.”

“Not on the inside.”

Dahlia was struck by a sudden realization. Taking her previous life into account, she’d actually been alive for over forty years. In that sense, she was by far Volf’s senior.

“It’s not that you act older than you are. What I mean is, in my head, I’m probably still in my teens.”

“Ah, I see. In that case, perhaps we should swap this wine for some nice, sweet grape juice, hm?”

“C’mon, cut me a break.”

After toasting to their future fortune, the pair continued to chat while sipping their wine.

“Do you think you’d have liked having siblings, Dahlia?”

“Yes, I think so. Growing up as an only child, I did sometimes wish I had a brother or sister. We could’ve done all kinds of things together—make magical tools, enjoy meals, stay up late chatting, even quarrel now and then...”

“I think you do all of those things with me. Aside from quarreling, of course.”

“Yeah, it would have been fun having an older brother like you when I was little.”

Dahlia envisioned a version of her childhood in which she and a young Volf played together in the tower’s workshop, sat side by side at the kitchen table, caused mischief, and were scolded by her father. The thought brought a fond smile to her face. If only she and Volf were brother and sister, there would be no insulting rumors whipped up every time they went out together. Their genders and social positions would be no cause for worry. She hoped to be friends with Volf for life, but they belonged to different strata of society, and they each had careers to worry about. Eventually, something might come between them, preventing them from enjoying each other’s company as they did now.

Dahlia could also imagine a day when she felt more than friendship for Volf. However, she knew that if she confessed those feelings and found that they weren’t mutual, that could sever the bond they shared. Volf would surely think she was just like all the other women he’d known and distance himself from her. She would do anything to avoid that.

“If I’d had a little sister like you...I think I would’ve had a fun childhood.” Volf chuckled, distracting Dahlia from her brooding. “We would’ve played together,

gotten up to mischief, and studied, of course. Sometimes. We could've been working on magical tools and swords together ever since we were kids. We would've made a hell of a team," Volf said animatedly.

Their eyes met, and they exchanged the same half smile. Dahlia thought of the flamethrower she'd once made instead of a dryer, the ventilation fan that had blown a gale inside her room when she'd tried to adjust its power, the black slime that had melted her fingers, and the dubious results of their efforts to create a magical sword. As far as magical toolmaking was concerned, her youth had been marked by one hazardous episode after another.

"I think we would've been positively lethal together."

"Yeah, I'd feel sorry for whoever was looking after us."

The conversation was brought to a close by the return of the assistant manager. He wheeled in a tea wagon laden with their food.

"Apologies for the wait. Here're your crimson cattle steaks. Don't worry about the color; they're properly cooked. Feel free to add some ginger to the soup," he said with a cheerful smile. After swiftly setting these dishes down in front of Dahlia and Volf, he placed two smaller ones on the side. "These are on the house. Black pepper crackers for you, Volf, and for you, miss, crimson cattle cheesecake."

"Thanks. They'll finish it off nicely."

"Thank you very much. I've never seen a pink cheesecake before; it's charming."

"Glad you approve. We're hoping to put it on our regular menu if we can get a steady supply of crimson cattle products. Well then, please enjoy your time in the Black Cauldron."

Once the man had bowed and left them to their meal, they raised their glasses in a second toast. Volf's whiskey and soda was garnished with a slice of lemon, while a thin slice of apple accented Dahlia's cider. As she tilted her glass, she heard the soft hiss of the bubbles grow slightly louder, and the fresh fragrance of apple rose from the surface. The first sip was surprising; she found the cider's flavor boozier than she'd anticipated, and it fizzed vigorously on her

tongue. That initial punch was followed by pure, sweet apple. This cider was evidently a dry one.

“I see what he meant. Even cooked, it’s still bright red. That’s obviously its natural color.”

Volf had already begun cutting into his crimson cattle steak. It was far redder than ordinary beef, but once it had been sliced open, one could see the subtle gradation of color toward the center that clearly showed it was cooked.

“Do you suppose crimson cattle can use fire magic?”

“No, from what I’ve heard, they can only use magic to strengthen themselves. They’re extremely territorial, though. That’s what makes them so dangerous.”

Being hit by a charging cow powered up by strengthening magic would be no joke. It would be the equivalent of being run over by a car, Dahlia imagined. She was in awe of the people who’d managed to domesticate these creatures.

“How did people manage to catch them in the first place?”

“They covered the meadows in sleeping powder. Once the beasts were subdued, they caught the cattle, took them to safe enclosures, and fed them well. A few generations later, they were fully domesticated. Although I’ve heard they’re still really tough to raise.”

It was no wonder that the neighboring kingdom was known as “the land of herders.” Only people truly dedicated to animal husbandry would attempt to raise such dangerous beasts when they already had ordinary domestic cattle.

Ordine had a nickname too; it was often referred to as “the crystal kingdom.” This was simply because it exported the highest volume of magic crystals by far. Dahlia had wondered occasionally why it wasn’t called “the magic kingdom” instead, putting it down to the fact that every kingdom had a certain amount of pride in its magical techniques and technologies.

“Let’s try it,” Dahlia murmured to herself, skewering a piece of vivid-red meat on her fork and bringing it to her mouth.

It hadn’t been apparent due to the color of the flesh, but it was beautifully marbled with fat. It was tender yet springy, and it became juicier with every

bite. Though similar in flavor to beef sirloin, there was a lightness to it that Dahlia more readily associated with chicken. Contrary to her expectations, this meat could potentially be quite healthy.

After a couple of bites, she drizzled on some of the crimson cattle cheese sauce it had come served with. It was bright red, just like the meat. She took a swig of cider and followed that with a morsel of cheesy meat. It was deliciously rich and indulgent. The cheese complimented the meat perfectly, no doubt because it came from the same source. It was an utterly irresistible combination. For one brief moment, the thought of the calories popped into Dahlia's mind, but she stamped on it immediately.

"The cheese sauce is amazing with it," Volf said. "I could even go for another piece. How about you?"

"Oh, no, just one of these is enough for me. You go ahead and order another, though."

Dahlia was quite sure that these were larger than regular steaks. Perhaps it was another show of generosity from the assistant manager. In any case, she couldn't see herself managing two. Besides, there were grilled vegetables and sliced fruit on the table already.

"You're not a big eater, are you, Dahlia?"

"I eat more than most women. Drink more too."

Dahlia had never held back during her meals with Volf, eating and drinking as much as she liked. If she was supposed to have a small appetite, she couldn't imagine what he thought of other women's eating habits.

Once Volf had ordered an extra steak, the two of them started on the soup. Oxtail soup often looked somewhat unappealing, but there were no tailbones floating around in this one; they had been removed, leaving only the meat. The salt-based broth was made with plenty of flavorful fat and expertly seasoned with herbs and spices. It was so delicious, Dahlia was tempted to pick up the bowl to drink every last drop, and she found herself craving a portion of noodles to go along with it. That had to be something she'd picked up in her past life.



“I bet crimson cattle tail would be great in a wine stew too,” Volf mused.

“Yes, I think you’re right.”

Flavor this rich would never get lost, even stewed in a sweet red wine. If she ever saw these tails in the commoners’ marketplace, she’d be sure to buy some and try it.

“Have you ever been to a restaurant that specializes in monster cuisine?”

“Never,” Dahlia replied. “I eat the sorts of things you can buy at the market, though.”

“If you’re okay with eating monsters, then how about we go to one sometime? I ate at one a while back. They had all kinds of things, like roasted basilisk and kraken mousse.”

“I don’t mind at all; I’d love to go. Was the basilisk good?”

In the fantasy stories of Dahlia’s previous world, basilisks and cockatrices had been very similar. Here, however, basilisks had black, snakelike bodies and four sturdy legs armed with formidable spurs. They were also lethally venomous. She couldn’t help being curious about their flavor.

“It was a little on the tough side, but it was tasty, yeah. Reminded me of chicken. The kraken mousse, though, that was...uh, very unique, you could say.”

The kraken mousse had obviously failed to impress Volf. His brow furrowed as he recalled the dish, and it was obviously only his good manners that kept him from saying how awful it had been. Dahlia wondered what exactly they’d done to that kraken. It wasn’t a difficult ingredient to work with; simply grilling it would yield tasty enough results. Had it been served sweetened as a dessert? Once again, her curiosity was piqued.

Dahlia and Volf worked their way through the meal at a leisurely pace as they talked of monsters and magical tools. Dahlia had learned about monsters in school and from reading her monster encyclopedia, but listening to anecdotes from people who’d seen them firsthand always proved surprising and educational. This was especially true when it came to the mutant strains present in many species. Books typically contained only scant information on them, but people had many fascinating stories of them to share.

Mutants were typically set apart from the ordinary members of their species by some special traits or the ability to use different kinds of magic. Some of them could potentially prove very useful as enchanting materials for magical tools, creating different effects from unmutated creatures. According to Volf, even the Beast Hunters sometimes pursued mutant monsters for rare and valuable materials. However, since the supply of these materials was under the castle's control and they were prohibitively expensive, it took considerable wealth and social standing to obtain them. Dahlia hoped they would become a little more accessible someday.

As she bit into her cheesecake, Dahlia noticed the starry sky outside the window. Darkness had fallen so quickly. Volf downed his whiskey and soda; she wasn't sure how many he'd had, but he seemed to have quenched his thirst for the time being.

"Um, Volf, there's something I've been wanting to ask you..."

In truth, she didn't want to ask at all, but the question would never stop preying on her mind if she didn't. She was ready to apologize too, if necessary.

"Go ahead. Is it something about monsters or the Beast Hunters?"

"No, that's not it. Have you...ever felt like I've patronized you or looked down on you?"

"No. You've helped me plenty of times, though. Why? Did someone say something to you?"

There was no hint of intoxication in Volf's slightly narrowed eyes as he leveled a steady gaze at her. Volf was her friend and her company's guarantor; it was only fair that she was open and honest with him. Dahlia straightened her posture and told Volf about her conversation with Ivano the other day. The knight listened with one elbow resting on the table, nodding occasionally.

"And that's how I realized how naive I've been all this time," she finished.

She initially thought she'd taken it well when Ivano reprimanded her at the guild, but once she returned home, she fell into quite a sulk over it. She realized it was childish of her; Ivano had been absolutely right to say what he did.

"Looking at it from a work perspective, I'm inclined to agree with Ivano's way

of thinking,” Volf said. “But that doesn’t mean that everything you’ve been doing up till now is wrong. That kindness of yours has helped a lot of people, myself included.”

“But it might not even be real kindness. I might’ve just wanted to act like a nice girl to please everyone around me,” Dahlia replied, her voice tinged with guilt as she sat with her arms folded.

Growing up, the only blood relative Dahlia had known was her father. The maid, Sofia, had been there too for a few years, and then, later, Tobias had appeared as her father’s apprentice. Other than them, she’d had just a handful of friends. Dahlia’s world had been small and closed. It was only recently that she’d realized how sheltered she’d been and how much she’d relied on others’ protection.

“Even if that’s true, I appreciate all you’ve done for me just the same. After all, you saved my life. And you’ve been helping me ever since that day I met you in the forest.”

“I feel the same way. You’ve helped me so much with my work. It’s not always been easy, but it has been fun. Even when things have been difficult, there’s been no time to sit and mope.”

“And it hasn’t even been a whole month yet. Not for a few days. Still, I want to make the next one even better. I can’t think of any better way to honor our friendship.”

“You’re right. We’ve got...so much ahead of us. We’re still a long ways off from our magical sword, and I have so many ideas for magical tools I want to make. I just hope the days ahead won’t be *too* hard on my stomach.”

“Yeah, there’s so much more I want to talk about. I’ve got drinks I want to share with you, restaurants I want to show you...”

“I can’t wait.”

Hearing that, Volf smiled warmly before closing his eyes. “I think I ought to thank the wyvern that carried me off that day. I’ll pray that its soul rests peacefully...although I *was* the one who slew it.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll pray too.”

Dahlia closed her eyes and clasped her hands to her chest as she offered a prayer for the fallen wyvern's soul. She truly considered herself blessed to have met Volf, but it had been that creature's death that had brought them together. Even monsters surely feared death, just the same as people. She prayed that the wyvern passed peacefully onto its next life. She hoped that that world would be a tranquil one where the creature could live out its days in happiness. It was a prayer that only someone who knew the possibilities of reincarnation might make.

Volf was about to speak her name, but the sound died in his throat. He'd fully expected her to laugh or tease him about the idea of praying for a wyvern, but as he gazed at her in those few moments of silence, Volf saw no hint of mockery. All that showed in the young woman's expression was the sincerity of a heartfelt prayer.



Night had long since fallen by the time Dahlia and Volf left the Black Cauldron and headed home. Since the omnibuses had finished service for the day, they decided to hire a carriage. However, the nearest carriage station was jam-packed with people, so they opted to walk to the next district and pick one up from there instead. Along the road, they passed by the occasional drunks, men singing merrily with arms around each other's shoulders, and glamorously dressed women. The two of them were happily chatting away as normal when Volf suddenly leaned in close. Dahlia didn't even have time to flinch before he murmured into her ear.

"Dahlia, just listen. I think we're being followed."

A faint glow emanated from Volf's hand—he'd activated his magical anti-eavesdropping device. Dahlia cautiously glanced around, catching their pursuers out of the corner of her eye before facing forward again.

"Do you...think they're muggers or something?" she asked.

"Not sure. I doubt they'd try to take on both of us, but I'd rather not take any risks," Volf said, turning to Dahlia with a smile.

The very next moment, though, his expression suddenly changed. Perhaps they were drawing closer.

“We’d better give them the slip before they can try anything.”

“I’m sorry, Volf, I can’t run very fast. But the guardhouse is...oh, it’s back the way we came, isn’t it?”

While the street wasn’t exactly crowded, they weren’t alone here. If these people did try to threaten money out of them, someone would surely run and call the guards. However, being the son of a renowned earl, Volf could certainly be their target. If that were the case, and Volf needed to run, she would be a serious impediment.

“Forgive me, Dahlia, but will you give me permission to carry you?”

“Wh-What? I’m heavy, you know! And tall!”

“There’s a corner right up ahead. Sorry about this.”

Before Dahlia could stammer a reply, the world suddenly whirled before her eyes. The street behind them blurred into streaks of color, and the next moment, Dahlia’s field of view was consumed entirely by the night sky, studded with countless glittering stars.

“Wha—?!”

It took a long few seconds before Dahlia grasped what had just happened. She found herself on the roof of a building, two stories up, clutched in Volf’s arms.

“Hey, you’re not heavy at all,” came a familiar voice, close enough to tickle her ear.

Her head snapped around and, sure enough, there was Volf, looking very pleased with himself indeed. Just as she opened her mouth to say something, she felt him crouch slightly.

“Don’t move. I don’t want you to bite your tongue. We’ll take the rooftops for a little while and come down somewhere we won’t be seen.”

Dahlia closed her mouth and nodded meekly. She wasn’t used to heights like this and was afraid of falling, clutching tightly onto Volf’s shirt. While taking care to avoid unwanted attention, Volf hopped nimbly from rooftop to rooftop until he found a place to descend. He watched their surroundings cautiously as

he dropped from a roof to a veranda railing and finally onto the empty street. It wasn't the smoothest descent, but Dahlia was just glad to be back on terra firma.

"I'm really sorry for grabbing you like that. I hope you're not upset."

"I mean, it took me by surprise, but I'm fine. Are you sure you're okay? You didn't hurt your shoulders or your back or anything?"

"No, I'm good." He set Dahlia down gently and looked up toward the roof they'd just alighted from. "Well, there's no sign of them now, whoever they were. We should stay vigilant, though. I wouldn't be too worried about a fight, but being ambushed with magic or throwing knives could be dangerous in close quarters."

"A fight would be dangerous too."

"You don't think I'd be able to protect you?"

"Of course I do," Dahlia replied immediately.

Volf had powerful strengthening magic and the sköll bracelet on his side. It was hard to imagine anyone coming out on top in a straight fight against him. However, she wanted him to understand that he wouldn't be the only one in danger if a fight did break out. There could be serious consequences if he forgot his own strength for a moment or if a bystander got caught up in the fracas. For some reason, the young knight seemed taken aback by her unhesitating reply, his eyes wide as he looked at her.

"I, er...didn't really mean that. I was just joking. I'd have no chance if I was against, say, a mage using long-range magic."

"I don't think you could really call it a fight at that point..."

The violent, destructive power of long-range magical attacks wasn't something one would expect to see in a mano a mano fight. Those spells belonged in large-scale military maneuvers, battles, or wiping out large numbers of monsters. Volf could never hope to stand against such power, unless, of course, he *did* become some sort of dark lord with command over the forces of evil. Dahlia blamed the alcohol for the strange imaginings running through her mind. Meanwhile, Volf let out a small sigh.

“Lately, there’ve been cases of thieves injuring their victims’ legs and then taking off with their possessions. If someone’s hurt, you see, the first thing people will do is call a doctor or a priest, rather than the guards. That gives the criminal more time to escape.”

“That’s awful.”

It was hard to imagine more cowardly behavior. The royal capital was relatively safe for a large city, but crime could never be completely eliminated. You still needed to have your wits about you, especially in a busy downtown area like this.

“I’m probably the reason we were followed just now. Apparently, there are people out there who like to keep an eye on me. It’s not the first time this has happened. It hasn’t been much of a problem lately, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what it was.”

“I think it’s much more likely that they just wanted money. No need to worry about it. Oh, and...thank you for saving me. I should’ve said that earlier.”

“Well, it was the sköll bracelet that let us get away, so in a sense, it was *you* who saved us, really.” With a slightly sheepish smile, Volf held out his left hand. “I know it’s a little improper, but I’m still worried. Would you mind holding hands until we get to the carriage station?”

“Oh, um, no. Not at all.”

Hand in hand, the pair walked briskly down the quiet lane. The night sky above them was surely sparkling beautifully, but this was no time for stargazing. The view from the rooftops had been gorgeous. Perhaps, Dahlia thought, on another clear night like this, she could bring Volf up to the tower’s roof to admire the heavens and—*Hold on a minute*. Right now, Volf was doing his utmost to lead her away from danger, while she was just strolling along with her head in the clouds. *Pull yourself together*, she told herself sternly, focusing her attention on walking. After they had safely traversed a few more streets, the carriage station finally rose into view.

“Will you be going out tomorrow, Dahlia?” Volf asked.

“No. I’m just planning to work in the tower all day.”

“Would you mind if I sent a servant over tomorrow morning to make sure you’re safe? I’d come myself if I were free, but I’ve got joint training.”

“Please do. I’d appreciate that.”

To be honest, she felt he was being overcautious, but she doubted he would back down even if she said as much. It would be easier just to indulge him. Being constantly on the alert since leaving the restaurant had left her feeling rather jittery; she didn’t want to argue.

“If you need shopping or anything else fetched, let the servant know; they’ll take care of it for you. From the day after tomorrow, I think you’d better arrange for a carriage to pick you up from the tower if you’re going out anywhere. I expect you’ll have company business to attend to.”

“I understand,” she replied meekly with a nod. “For the next few days, at least, I’ll make sure to take a carriage to and from home.”

Volf gave her a gratified smile, her reply seeming to have put his mind at ease. While taking care to match Dahlia’s pace, he cast his strengthening magic and listened carefully to the sounds around them. The multitude of voices and noises jangled uncomfortably in his ears, but he would keep this up until they had safely boarded their carriage.

Shortly after they’d left the restaurant, he’d sensed a presence behind them that was somehow unlike that of the other passersby. It didn’t feel hostile, exactly, but it seemed to be focused on him and Dahlia. The very second he’d realized that, he’d cast his strengthening magic. Despite the name, it wasn’t only strength that this magic enhanced; it also improved one’s hearing. Without looking back, Volf quickened and slowed his walking speed several times, listening to see how the apparent pursuers responded.

As far as he could discern, there were two sets of footsteps following in their wake. What struck him as unusual was that neither pursuer spoke a word. It therefore seemed unlikely that they were mere thieves or that they had any indecent intentions toward Dahlia. At one point, he detected a heavy clunk of metal, as though they were carrying shortswords or perhaps wearing cuirasses beneath their clothing. This raised a new possibility—that those stalking them were experienced in combat.



As soon as he and Dahlia had rounded a corner, he'd scooped her up and leaped for the rooftops. He knew it was forward of him, but their safety was foremost in his mind. The danger of earning her wrath was far preferable to whatever lurked on the streets below. Luckily for him, though, she'd been understanding, and he was grateful for her forbearance.

They'd managed to give their would-be stalkers the slip, but Volf was still uneasy, being no closer to figuring out their motives. In his mind, the most likely culprit was someone with a grudge against him, probably based on some senseless misunderstanding between himself and a woman. The thought made him sick, but what made him even sicker was that they were frightening Dahlia, and he didn't yet know what to do about it.

There was just one little thing that gave him comfort—the gentle warmth that he clasped in his left hand.

# The New and Improved Compact Magical Stove

Dahlia woke early and was soon busying herself in the workshop, setting out a variety of materials and parts and making notes on them all. The magical stove on the bench before her was considerably smaller than the one she had in her kitchen, but it was still too bulky and heavy for the knights to take on their expeditions. She wanted it to be lighter than the antiseptically enchanted waterskins and wineskins they always carried. That way, they'd only have to give up a few cupfuls of wine at most in order to fit it into their luggage.

However, Dahlia had set herself an ambitious goal. In order to reach it, she'd need to reduce her stove's weight by approximately half. She'd already miniaturized the original magical stove considerably to get it to this size, but it had become clear that the techniques she'd used then wouldn't be sufficient for this task. Drawing on all her accumulated experience of miniaturizing magical tools, Dahlia rapidly filled the pages of her notebook.

For the magical lantern, she'd pared down the thickness of the metal base and used thinner panes of glass. In the case of the stove, this would mean altering the base and utilizing different materials. To make a more lightweight version of her book-dryer, which prevented parchment from molding, she'd made the entire unit more compact and made the nozzle expandable to suit different sizes of books. Dahlia couldn't see that method coming in handy this time around.

"Time to push the limits!" her father had once declared as he took on the challenge of shrinking the cooling fan with zeal—a little too much zeal, unfortunately, as he ended up making it so light that it blew itself backward. They'd laughed it off and fixed the runaway fan to the wall, but it would be no laughing matter if the knights' stoves also made a bid for freedom. Still, there was something to be said for reducing the weight of metal by modeling the stove with plenty of curves.

Dahlia wrote down everything—every improvement she could think of that

could be made through alterations to the materials and design. She wrote until she'd emptied her brain of every last idea. When she finally drew a blank, she picked up the stove sitting on the desk and turned it over to tinker with the parts and materials. This gave her further inspiration, and she returned to her note making. She repeated this cycle countless times until her fingers were smudged black with ink and she'd amassed a thick bundle of notes.

Back when her father and Tobias had been in the workshop, she would always make tea midway through the morning and afternoon and remind them to take breaks when they'd been working too long. However, now that she was alone and could work uninterrupted, her sense of time—and the time itself—flew clean away. She was often glued to her workbench for hours before she reached a stopping point in her work. While this new routine had certainly been beneficial for her productivity, her body probably didn't appreciate it as much.

She'd just finished off her notes and was having a much-needed stretch when she heard the bell ring at the tower gates. It was Volf's servant. Volf had given her advance warning that he'd be sending them yesterday, so their arrival was not unexpected. The servant presented her with a letter and a small, light-blue box.

The letter was simply a reminder from Volf to entrust any shopping or errands to the servant. There was nothing she particularly needed, however, so the only thing left was to pen a reply to him. *I'll be at home all day, working on improving my compact magical stove*, she wrote. *I hope your training goes well!*

Dahlia wished she could write something a little less dry, but nothing more sprang to mind. Resolving to pick up a letter-writing guide next time she visited the bookstore, Dahlia handed her message to the servant and saw them off.

The little box they'd given her was filled with colorful konpeito. They were very like the candies the old man from the drinking-vessel shop had shared with her yesterday. Volf must have remembered how much she'd liked them. She popped a white one and a pink one into her mouth, enjoying the sugary sweetness as she returned to her work.

She spread out all the notes she'd made thus far and organized them by contents. Ideas that were feasible and likely to be effective went to the top of

the pile, while those that were impractical and held little promise went to the bottom. Finally, she used a paperclip to hold everything in place. Now all she had to do was work her way down from the top, trying every technique that she could.

The first step was to decide on her materials. She weighed a metal sheet she'd picked out, frowning as she saw it was heavier than she'd hoped. She could make it thinner, but only up to a certain point. It had to remain strong enough to withstand the intense heat the stove would generate. Dahlia found herself longing for aluminum or titanium, neither of which existed in this world. If she were making the stoves for someone with endless funds, she might have considered using monster shells or rare metals, but she wanted the knights to be able to take a fair number of stoves on their expeditions. They had to be affordable. In order to keep costs down, she would have to use common, everyday materials. She settled on an iron and copper alloy, slightly thinning the metal before shaping it into a stove. Once it was finished, she would enchant it with a weight-reduction spell.

Next, it was time to refine the shape. The books she'd borrowed from Fermo contained many useful tips for creating small, lightweight designs. She used them as a guide while she carefully remolded the metal sheet. Her first task was to reduce the stove's height until it was only just tall enough to accommodate a small magic crystal. Then, she rounded off the previously square shape until it was almost circular, leaving only a few centimeters straight on each side to prevent it from rolling around. From the bottom, it looked a bit like a circle with the edges cut off. This process alone shaved off quite a bit of weight.

Dahlia began turning the stove around and around in her hands, smoothing off any sharp edges that could present a hazard if not handled with care. Here and there, she used her magic to gently curve the metal and create smooth rims. She constantly felt for sharp points and rough spots, and her fingers were soon covered with stinging scratches. This was nothing new for her, though. Once satisfied, she created a receptacle for the magic crystal at the back and a sliding lid.

She decided that this particular model of stove would have just three settings: high, low, and off. She would also install a locking mechanism on the dial's off

setting to prevent it from being accidentally activated during transit or if dropped. Unlocking it would require a forceful turn. In truth, the most effective way to ensure safety would be to remove the magic crystal while transporting the stove, but that would take up valuable time. The lock was an effective compromise.

Once Dahlia was more or less happy with her design, she applied the weight-reducing enchantment and inserted a small crystal. She checked that every function executed correctly and that the heat output was as it should be. *So far, so good.*

Dahlia's heart thrummed a bit quicker in anticipation as she weighed the stove.

"Still too heavy. I knew it."

The weight needed to come down by a further ten percent if she was to reach her goal. Ordinarily, she wouldn't fuss over such a small discrepancy, but in this case, it was vital. She didn't want to burden the knights with a single gram of unnecessary weight. Besides, the stoves were of no use on their own; the men would also need to carry pots to put on them. Considering the weight and bulk of those pots was rather discouraging, but without them, cooking soups and stews would be impossible, as would boiling water. There was simply no way around it.

"Even a weight-reducing enchantment would only do so much..."

Finding herself up against a brick wall, Dahlia groaned in frustration. Then she was startled by a sudden clatter and nearly jumped out of her chair. When she looked toward the source of the noise, her gaze immediately fell on the magically sealed box containing the Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion. Looking closely, she noticed that the metal sheet on top of it was slightly out of position.

"It's...not still moving, right?"

For one moment, she pictured the sword menacingly crawling toward her, but she quickly shook her head to dismiss the thought. In this sort of situation, the more one hesitated, the more afraid one became. Dahlia quickly stood up, reassuring herself that there was nothing to worry about, and opened the box. Inside, the shortsword lay there unchanged. Once she was satisfied that nothing

untoward was going on and she'd laid her fears to rest, she shut the lid tightly and placed several metal sheets on top.

"Oh!"

The moment she closed the lid, it came to her. Until now, she'd been thinking of the magical stoves and the cooking pots as separate, but there was another way. A pot could serve as the stove's lid. While the stove was being transported, it would sit over the top like a cover, and when it was needed for cooking, it could simply be flipped over. Stove and pot would be part of the same unit.

It also occurred to her that she needn't necessarily include a receptacle for the crystal at the back of the stove. She might be able to set it into the top, beneath where the pot would sit. She would need to insert it in such a way as to avoid the pot coming into direct contact with the crystal, and she'd have to reinforce the stove here and there, but she could potentially save considerable weight here.

"Heh heh...I might've cracked this after all."

Giving physical form to these little flashes of inspiration was one of her work's greatest pleasures. She prepared two new metal sheets, molding one into a stove and the other into a cooking pot. She chuckled gleefully to herself as she worked, taking advantage of her solitude. At times like these, she was thankful to have the place to herself. She finished shaping the metal and was flipping through her notes when she came to a section concerning handles. It was a silly thing to have overlooked—without handles, the pot would be too hot to hold. However, they would get in the way during transport. This problem was swiftly solved—Dahlia crafted a handle that could be removed and then folded in half so as to fit inside the pot.

"Looking good..."

Buzzing with excitement, Dahlia weighed her second prototype. Once again, it was about ten percent heavier than a full wineskin. This time, however, the weight included that of the pot. The circumference of the pot was about as wide as the circle she could make with both hands, only a little bigger, and it was roughly five centimeters deep. One would find small pots of a similar size in

any of the city's stores and marketplaces.

The next step was to test the stove's durability. Then, she would completely disassemble it and reexamine every part for any areas that could be pared down further. After that, she would perform the all-important safety checks. All that was left for her to do was to draw up the blueprints, and then she would present her idea to Volf, Ivano, and Fermo for their appraisal.

Dahlia's train of thought was abruptly broken by a ravenous growl from her stomach.

"Huh?"

She looked out the window to see that the sun had already begun its slow descent toward the horizon. She'd forgotten all about lunch *and* afternoon tea. She briefly panicked as she became aware of how dry her throat was and the slight waver in her vision. Her health would soon deteriorate if she began working the way she had in her previous life, staying up all night, eating whenever she remembered to, and constantly toiling at her desk.

Everyone had busy days like that occasionally, but if they became a habit, even someone very young could end up collapsing or even dying from the strain. Dahlia was thoroughly disappointed in herself, and she resolved to keep an hourglass or a magical timer beside her from now on.

She quickly tidied up in the workshop and then climbed the stairs to the second floor. From the kitchen, she took some of her favorite walnut bread, cheese, ham, and a glass of milk, and sat down to eat. The living room felt very hushed. Compared to the raucous, colorful shopping streets that she'd visited with Volf yesterday, anywhere would, but she'd begun to think lately that the Green Tower might be a little too large for one person to live in alone. If she'd gotten married and left here as planned, she'd probably have used it as a storehouse or rented it out once she'd organized all of her belongings. She was still far too early in her career to consider taking on a live-in apprentice.

"Renting out a room wouldn't be easy either," she mused.

The kitchen and bathroom would be shared, and the only way in and out was through the first-floor workshop. It would be impossible to live with another person in that situation unless they were someone she trusted and got along

with very well. About to break her walnut bread in two, Dahlia paused. Like a movie reel beginning to spin, her memories of all the times she'd spent in the tower with Volf began to play out in her mind. Whether they were just talking, enjoying a meal together, or experimenting in the workshop, every minute they spent in each other's company was relaxed and happy. Perhaps *Volf* would be the ideal candidate for a housemate.

"It's a long way to the castle, though."

There were omnibuses that ran that way, but only at certain times. Relatively few people lived in this part of the West District, near the city wall. Carriages came from the city center often, but in order to catch one, you had to walk all the way to the district boundary. Volf—who lived in the barracks within the precincts of the castle—usually took a carriage here, but he almost always returned on foot. He'd assured her that he didn't mind, but she still felt guilty about making him walk all that way, especially late at night after they'd been drinking.

"I wonder how much a horse would cost."

The cost of a horse went beyond its purchase price; their upkeep was also very expensive, and since Dahlia didn't know the first thing about caring for horses, she'd need to hire a groom to look after it. Ivano had mentioned that once the trading company grew larger, he planned to buy horses and carriages and hire drivers, but how long would that take? Once again, Dahlia paused and cocked her head quizzically.

That was odd. Why was she thinking as though Volf was coming to live with her? He was already happily settled at the barracks, his work was at the castle, and he was frequently called away on expeditions. There was no logical reason for him to want to move into the tower. Besides, first and foremost, Volf was a man. It was unthinkable for someone in his position to come and live with her, a single woman on her own.

"You think such silly things when you're tired and hungry," Dahlia said to herself. "That's enough daydreaming. Time to eat!"

With a big bite of her walnut bread, she resumed her long-overdue meal.



# The Love Letter and the Royal Knights' Joint Maneuvers

“Sir Scalfarotto!”

Shortly after leaving a briefing on the day's joint maneuvers, Volf was stopped in the corridor by a woman calling out to him. Bracing himself for trouble, he turned to face her with a flat, impassive expression.

“How can I help you?”

A young woman in a pale yellow dress stood before him, holding a white envelope in her trembling hands. He had no recollection of her face whatsoever. Without comment, his friend Dorino clapped him on the shoulder before walking on ahead. He'd rather not have been left on his own with this woman, but with Dorino being a commoner, Volf knew he couldn't get him mixed up in these affairs.

“S-Sir Scalfarotto! Would...would you...would you do me the honor of reading this?”

“Forgive me. I cannot accept it.”

The girl's blue eyes immediately welled up at his curt reply. She couldn't have been much older than sixteen. Going by the design and style of dress, she was a mid-ranked noble and clearly had a guardian—mostly likely a parent or grandparent—with clearance to bring her to and from the castle. Volf needed to tread carefully. He wondered what her maid or chaperone was doing; she was the only other person he could see in the long corridor.

He had to admire the girl's courage in coming to hand this letter to him alone, but had she spared any thought for the potential damage to their reputations? Merely being seen speaking alone like this could lead to all sorts of problems. If, by some chance, she did end up at the center of a scandal and her parents kicked up a fuss, Volf was fairly certain he'd be the one to bear the brunt of it. However, the girl standing before him hadn't considered it at all; of that, he was

just as sure.

“I do not ask that you reply. Please, will you not at least accept my letter?”

“If you wish to contact me, I must ask that you do so through the Scalfarotto estate. I keep a very busy schedule, so my family informs me of the contents of my correspondence.”

He wanted to end this conversation as quickly as possible. In a roundabout way, he was telling her, “Send your letter if you like, but understand that it won’t be private.” Few were shameless enough to send a love letter knowing that it would be read by the recipient’s family. Those who did would simply find it returned. Few parents of young noblewomen would want to see their daughter wed to Volfred Scalfarotto. Even if he was the son of an earl, he couldn’t express a drop of magic, and he was continuously mired in scandal. Most would do everything within their power to oppose the match.

“Through the estate? But...but...”

She looked ready to burst into tears at any moment. Volf grew increasingly anxious to make his escape. Young girls like her were often far more troublesome than the older women who sometimes flirted with him. They had a tendency to be headstrong and impulsive.

“Please excuse me. I must return to my duties.”

He bowed, giving her a slightly wide berth as he strode past her down the corridor. Experience had taught him that around one in five women who approached him like this would throw their arms around him as he tried to leave. He now made a point of staying out of reach. Ensuring safety for both of them was the only thing he was concerned with. The quiet sound of weeping behind him only hastened his steps.

“I know you have your reasons, Sir Scalfarotto, but was that not a little cruel?” Standing right around the corner was a junior member of the Beast Hunters, fixing him with a reproachful stare. Clearly, he’d overheard. “You could have at least taken the letter.”

“My family’s given me clear instructions not to accept such things.”

“Is that so?”

“Look, come with me. The sooner we get out of here, the better.”

Volf kept walking, intent on putting as much distance between himself and that young woman as possible. His green-haired young colleague followed at his side, making no attempt to hide his disapproval.

“There’d be hell to pay if I took that letter and it spiraled into something serious.”

“But she was just a little girl. You just had to read it and that would have been the end of it, wouldn’t it?”

“If that were true, then we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Do you think she’d have proposed to you or something?”

Volf rarely took the trouble to explain these things to other people. Too often he’d been misconstrued as boasting. However, what with the unknown pursuers he and Dahlia had had to flee from yesterday and the love letter presented to him today, Volf was feeling somewhat low. He allowed himself to grumble for a change.

“I’ve had letters from young ladies just like her *informing* me that I’ll be attending some tea party or dinner party they’ve arranged. Some even set up a meeting with their father to gain his permission for us to court, demanding I show up at the exact time and date that suits them. I don’t get any say in it; it’s completely one-sided, and most of the time, I don’t know them at all, not even their names or faces.”

“It’s hard to imagine a young girl would send something so...well, scary.”

“Oh, those letters aren’t the scary ones. It’s the ones that say they’ll die if I don’t date them or the ones that have hair or nails inside that send a shiver up my spine. I think I even got one signed in blood once.” Dredging up these memories only further soured Volf’s mood. “Then there’re the ladies who spend pages and pages abusing their fiancé and begging me to steal them away. One even asked me to kidnap her on the day of her wedding. I’d never met her in my life.”

“Gods...”

The young knight at his side shuddered while Volf stared vacantly into the distance. The other man had probably never dreamed that any woman would go to such extremes. No doubt, he thought a teenage girl's love letter would be a sweet, harmless thing. Volf knew better. He'd read many that were downright licentious and others that threatened real harm. If anything, the violent passions of teenagers made them even more frightening than adult women.

"I don't know what sorts of things they've been writing lately," Volf continued. "As a rule, I don't accept any letters. If I'm forced to, or if they write to my family's estate, they're all returned to the sender's family. Even then, their family or their fiancé usually find some way of blaming me for it."

"Now it makes sense. Under those circumstances, I suppose you couldn't have handled it any other way. Anything else would risk giving her the wrong idea."

The reproach in the young knight's expression had vanished, replaced with heartfelt sympathy.

"If you liked her, why not go back and comfort her? She'd probably appreciate a shoulder to cry on."

"No, thank you. I'm engaged," the young knight replied immediately, shaking his head with vigor.

Volf hadn't meant to sound serious.

"To tell the truth, I was always a little bit envious of you, Sir Scalfarotto. Everyone always talks about how popular you are with women."

"If that's how you feel, I'll be happy to change places."

"No, no. Forgive me. I shan't ever envy you again. I can see how wrong I was about you. It's just...one hears rumors. They say you're, er, quite the playboy; that even those with a partner or fiancé aren't off-limits for you."

"Please... Courting an engaged noblewoman is about as good an idea as dancing the waltz in front of a fire-breathing monster. I get my fill of danger at work. I don't need it in my love life too."

"You've got a fair point there. Besides, you don't need a girl like that on your

arm to be popular.”

“I’d rather just have a quiet life!” Volf exclaimed, letting slip the unvarnished truth. Perhaps it was all the time he was spending around Dahlia lately—he was getting used to speaking his mind. The younger knight stiffened for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“Sir Scalfarotto, I never knew you were so...so serious! And so funny.”

“I can’t be both, Leonardi. Which is it?”

“Honestly, I think it’s half and half. Oh, and feel free to call me Kirk.”

“Will do. You can call me Volf.”

Switching from last to first names expressed a person’s desire for friendlier relations. Over the last month, the number of people who called Volf by his first name and would speak to him without formality had suddenly grown. It may have been a trivial thing, but it brought him joy nonetheless.

“I’ve always admired your strengthening magic, Sir Volf.”

“Thank you. I’ve always wished I could use magic like yours.”

With vivid green hair and eyes and a deep well of magical power, Kirk seemed to not merely wield air magic, but to have been blessed by it. Curiously, however, he’d elected not to join the mages’ corps, staying with the Order of Beast Hunters instead.

“That air magic’s all I have, though. Since I can’t use strengthening magic, I can’t risk getting too close to any monsters, and I’m always getting banged up. I always wanted to slay monsters just like my father did, but I suppose reality doesn’t care much about our dreams.”

“Your father was in the order too?”

“That’s right. He quit a long time ago and runs the family business now, but whenever he’s had a few drinks, his days with the Beast Hunters are all he talks about. I must have heard those same old stories a hundred times.”

Among all the divisions of the royal knights, the Order of Beast Hunters had the highest mortality rate by far. Volf was relieved to hear that Kirk’s father had safely retired from the order instead of dying in the line of duty.

“My father’s strengthening magic was really impressive, and I thought I’d be just like him. I’d have preferred that to my air magic.”

The world was full of people who thought the grass was greener on the other side. Before Volf stood a man whose wish was the exact opposite of his own. It occurred to him then that the sköll bracelet’s effects relied on air magic. It allowed Volf to harness the same magic Kirk wielded, letting him jump higher and move faster than he ever could before. That gave him an idea. What if Kirk could manipulate his power in such a way as to mimic the effects of strengthening magic?

“You can use your air magic to jump a fair distance, right?” Volf asked.

“That’s right. I can get quite far.”

“Well, do you think you’d be able to augment your movements by pushing the air against yourself? I imagine that would sort of do the same work as a strengthening spell.”

“Push the air against myself?”

“For example, when you jump, I’m guessing you bring the air rushing up behind you to give you a push. Now, let’s say you did the same kind of thing when you were swinging a sword—maybe you could have the air push down just on your arm, or just on your sword. And if you wanted to evade an attack, couldn’t you use a gust of air to push you to the right or left? Maybe you could even blow someone else out of harm’s way. I just figured air magic might come in handy for those sorts of tactics.”

When he and Dahlia crafted their experimental magic swords in her workshop, Volf found all manner of hypotheses popping into his head. The same thing was happening now; he thought aloud as new possibilities occurred to him one after another. Of course, from the point of view of someone who actually used air magic, what he was suggesting might have been utter nonsense. Kirk was staring at him with his mouth agog, apparently lost for words.

“I’m sorry,” Volf said. “I don’t really understand how air magic works, so that probably didn’t make any—”

“Sir Volf!” Kirk’s voice echoed down the corridor as he suddenly clutched Volf’s arm. “Explain that to me one more time! I *have* to try this! Please, will you come with me to the training ground?”

“But it’s almost lunchtime...”

“All right, five minutes for lunch, and then we train!”

Lunch wasn’t a meal to be rushed, and attending their afternoon drills without a proper break wouldn’t do them any good. Volf could think of many reasons to refuse his comrade, but as he looked into Kirk’s sparkling green eyes, just for a moment, he was reminded of Dahlia. All thought of refusal flew from his mind, and he was left with no choice but to nod.

“Oh, thank you!” Kirk exclaimed joyfully. “Let’s go, then—no time to waste!”

“*After* we stop by the mess hall, okay?”

Volf couldn’t help but return the young knight’s smile as Kirk beamed at him with almost blinding radiance. The sight of Volfred Scalfarotto being tugged by the arm through the corridors by a younger knight would be remarked on throughout the castle for several days to come.



On the expansive training ground of the royal castle, the knights were beginning to gather for the joint maneuvers. Polished armor and helmets flashed in the glaring midday sun, not so much as a wisp of cloud or breath of wind offering respite from the heat. The men knew they’d be drenched in sweat before long.

Broadly speaking, the royal knights of Ordine were broken up into four divisions. There were the Household Troops, the First to Fifth Knights’ Regiments, the Mages’ Corps, and the Order of Beast Hunters. The Household Troops were an elite, handpicked group whose duties largely revolved around ensuring the security of the royal family. Nearly all were mystic knights—those who wielded both magic and swords with equal skill. The First Knights’ Regiment guarded the castle, while national and border security fell under the purview of the Second to Fifth Knights’ Regiments. Each of the regiments also commanded a large number of soldiers. As the name implied, the Mages’ Corps

largely consisted of spellcasters, and they generally joined forces with the other divisions as required. Finally, there was the Order of Beast Hunters, tasked with subjugating dangerous monsters to ensure peace and safety within the kingdom.

At present, Ordine was enjoying a time of peace. Nonetheless, the Beast Hunters, like all the other knights, were ever prepared for the threat of war, monsters, and natural disasters. Theirs was a large kingdom, and as such, it required a large and well-trained force to defend it. That was the reason behind their punishing training regimens. Today's joint maneuvers were between select groups from the First Knights' Regiment and the Order of Beast Hunters—around fifty knights from each, most of them fairly fresh recruits.

"I want him out of action. His family doesn't care what happens to him; it won't bother them if he gets roughed up a little."

"Still, are you sure this is wise?"

"Surely we won't get away with it..."

In one corner of the baking-hot training ground, about twenty young men from the First Knights' Regiment were absorbed in intense discussion. A few of them were trying to rein in the apparent leader of the group, but he was paying them little heed.

"I'm not telling you to injure him; I just want him incapacitated. Take out your most agile opponent first—it's basic tactics."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Don't sweat it. We're all going to work together to crush the biggest threat first. Got it?"

"Y-Yes."

"Understood."

The domineering man rode roughshod over the others' concerns, leaving them with no choice but to reluctantly assent. A little distance from the uneasy group, several other knights stood furtively watching them.

"They're definitely up to something. Shouldn't we stop them?"



“Nothing any of us can do. That one in charge is a marquis’s son. Sounds like he’s got a grudge, if you ask me.”

“I heard that in college, a girl he was in love with blew him off because she liked Sir Volfred instead. And just recently, when his fiancée heard he’d be in these joint maneuvers with Sir Volfred, she told him to invite him over for a tea party. That’s why he’s got it in for the fellow—can’t come to tea if he’s injured. He’s been in a foul mood for two days now.”

“Got a lot of steam to blow off, then.”

They sighed bitterly. The young nobleman giving orders was a fool—there was no question of that—but they could spare him a morsel of sympathy. Putting themselves in his shoes, they could understand why he’d direct his frustration toward Volfred instead of the ladies in his life. They glanced over toward the far side of the field where the ranks of the Beast Hunters were shuffling around. Among them stood an unmistakable figure: a tall man with an exquisite profile and an aura of such coolness that the idea of him sweating seemed absurd. Even if they didn’t have an axe to grind, none of the knights would want a man like that near a girl they had feelings for.

“If only he had a little magic. With a face like that, I bet he could even marry a duke’s daughter.”

“He’s already involved with that dowager duchess. I think it’s just a casual thing for both of them, mind you.”

“I guess the gods don’t give with both hands, as they say. Still, I can’t see him having a hard life with those looks.”

“You think? I don’t envy him, myself. Looks are all well and good when you’re young, but what’re you left with once you grow old?”

“I get that, but all he has to do is marry into some rich family while he’s still young, and he’ll be set up for life.”

As the conversation meandered onto the topics of looks and marriage, Dorino, on the opposite side of the training ground, spread his arms in a long, slow stretch. He turned his back on the First Knights’ Regiment before he continued limbering up.

“They sure do like to run their mouths.”

“To be fair, I doubt they realize we can hear them.”

“Aha, the man with the target on his back. Been listening in too, have you?”

Despite the considerable distance, it appeared that Volf had also overheard the discussion. The two of them kept their own voices low as they spoke.

“My strengthening magic boosts my hearing too,” Volf explained. “Not that they’re exactly keeping quiet about it.”

“Jacked up already? Must be nice to have magic to burn.”

“What about you? You’ve been listening this whole time as well.”

“Well, I figured they might spill their battle plan. I’m just gathering intel.”

Peeking out from beneath Dorino’s black leather glove was a bracelet, glowing faintly red.

“Is that bracelet boosting your hearing?” Volf asked. “How much was it?”

“You’re really crazy about magical tools lately, huh? Anyway, it’d cost you a pretty penny, this thing. I’m borrowing it from one of the senior officers.”

Dorino gave his glove a tug, concealing the bracelet, just as a few of their comrades approached.

“Volfred, it appears that they plan to target you. Would you rather keep to the rear?”

“You heard too, Sir Alfio?”

“My ears are particularly keen today, you’ll find.”

Alfio was their commanding officer for this exercise. Volf noticed that his hands were clad in the same gloves Dorino wore; he, too, must have been concealing an accessory. Although his smile was cheerful, there was a distinctly cold, steely look in his dark-brown eyes. He was obviously deeply displeased by the men singling Volf out and their general attitude toward the exercise. He had no time for those who brought personal grudges into work, nor those too weak-willed to correct them.

The First Knights’ Regiment was large and counted many nobles among its

members. They included a certain number of young noblemen with a tendency to look down their noses at the Beast Hunters, usually due to rumors or their own preconceptions. One didn't get into the First Knights' Regiment without demonstrating considerable power, but to say it boasted the cream of the crop would be untrue.

Moreover, the Order of Beast Hunters offered much greater opportunities for development—it was a forge in which men could temper their skills and strength. They had to be ready at a moment's notice to trek into the wilds and risk life and limb against ferocious monsters. The knights who braved these battles, where social standing was meaningless, emerged stronger and ever more closely bonded with their comrades.

Fostering solidarity was also the purpose of the joint maneuvers. Few continued to look down on the Beast Hunters once they had actually met them in battle; in fact, the experience often spurred the other knights to train harder. Of course, this approach wasn't foolproof. A few, sadly, would always be too pigheaded to learn their lesson.

"You, uh, don't suppose they're listening to us too, do you?" Volf asked cautiously.

"One of the senior officers warned me about that," Dorino said. "I keep an anti-eavesdropper in my pocket now. I've got it activated."

"I have a bangle that does the same job. A lot of monsters out there are too clever for their own good. The last thing you want is them overhearing your battle plan," Alfio added. He and Dorino were keeping their backs toward the men from the First Knights' Regiment.

Another question occurred to Volf. "Why do you think those guys aren't using anything like that?"

"Those at the rear are. It's just those greenhorns at the front announcing themselves for all the world to hear. For distinguished nobles, they certainly seem to have been living a charmed and peaceful existence thus far. I believe it is our duty to give these promising young knights a thorough education."

Alfio's words sent the hair on the back of Volf's neck sticking straight up. Nobles were known for keeping anti-eavesdropping devices on their person at

all times, but Volf had to admit he'd never thought of bringing one to the training ground.

"I've never brought one with me even once."

"Yeah, but you've never been the one making the plans," Dorino countered. "You don't let slip anything that might cause us problems; you just follow your orders at the vanguard."

"I suppose so."

Until recently, the Beast Hunters' strategizing had been left entirely to the senior knights. It was only within the last month that Volf had begun to speak up and propose plans, spurred solely by his selfish desire to get home quickly.

"Oh, I think you're one of us now, Volf. Come on, let's put our heads together," said Alfio.

"Yeah, this might make things easier," Dorino agreed.

"Well, I'll help if I can, but I'm a long way from being any kind of strategist. We're helmet-knocking today, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Helmet-knocking" was a type of mock battle. Both sides would establish a position at opposite ends of the field. Behind them, they would erect a pole and hang a helmet upon it. The first side to knock the helmet off the opposition's pole was the winner. There were few restrictions as far as tactics were concerned. They could knock the helmet down with magic, break through with a violent attack, or close ranks and muscle into the enemy with a defensive formation. Only low-level spells were allowed, and all weapons were dummies. Even with those precautions, however, the scrimmage always resulted in a few injuries, hence the healers and priests stationed at the edge of the field.

"I suggest we finish this quickly with a full-frontal assault!" Dorino said firmly. "I'd rather not be out in the heat a minute longer than we have to be."

"Tackle them head-on, eh? And how would we go about it?"

"Volf, I reckon they'll send about twenty men charging forward on their front line. Think you'd be able to leap over their heads?"

“Yeah, should be. Want me to solo it?”

“Don’t even think about it. I’m coming with you. Could you still make that jump while carrying me? I’ll kick off as hard as I can, but I’ll need your help to make it all the way.”

“I think I could.”

“Right then, we’ll go in together and stir things up. They’ll be after you, of course, so keep moving. Once they’ve broken formation, the young guys can go on the attack, least experienced first. A third of them should stay and defend our position.”

“Very good. That may work.” Alfio gave an approving nod, then turned to consult the other knights while Dorino spoke to Volf.

“When we jump, I want you to grab my armor and throw me at their position, all right?”

“Won’t that be a little uncomfortable?”

“A few seconds won’t kill me. I just don’t want you scooping me up like I’m your blushing bride. I don’t care how much easier it’d be.”

Volf was instantly reminded of how he’d swept Dahlia off her feet the previous night—in a strictly literal sense. She’d fretted about her weight, but he’d been struck by how feather-light and soft she was. He remembered it all so clearly, from the feeling of warmth in his arms to the tickle of her red hair brushing against his neck.

“Volf, will you quit grinning like that? We’re about to go into battle. They’ll be calling you the Dark Lord forevermore if you keep that up.”

“Huh? I was grinning?”

“From ear to ear.”

“I won’t let it happen again.”

A sense of guilt fell heavily over the young knight. Why was he having thoughts like these about a dear friend? He mustn’t have been getting enough exercise lately, he thought to himself. These joint maneuvers would be a good opportunity to expend his pent-up energy.

“You don’t need to feel *that* bad about it.”

“I’ve got it!” Volf said suddenly. “What we need is a new approach—something we’ve never done before!”

He racked his brains for a strategy that would allow him to go all out without standing out too much; a strategy the opposition would never see coming. All of a sudden, inspiration struck, and he turned to his friend with a smile.

“Tell me, Randolph, have you ever wanted to try fighting at the vanguard?”

“Hey, why *Randolph*? He’s a shieldman!”

“Could be interesting, but I’ll warn you: I’m a lot of weight to swing around,” Randolph said doubtfully. “I can’t jump that far, so you’d be doing the heavy lifting. I’m not quick on my feet either.”

Unusually for a Scarlet Armor, Randolph’s choice of arms was a large shield. He was vulnerable against fast-moving monsters; in those battles, he assumed a defensive position at the rear of the force. On the occasions when they were forced to retreat, he would hold the line and fiercely protect the other men until they’d safely fled from the fray. He was a bear of a man, considerably taller and heavier than Volf. Even for Volf, lifting him would surely be a strain.

“Kirk, got a minute?” Volf asked. “Do you think you could push the three of us over there with your air magic? At the same time, preferably.”

“Absolutely! If we do it just like before, even three people should be no problem.”

“Like before?” Randolph echoed.

Kirk nodded. “Yes, during lunch, Sir Volf and I practiced some techniques that’ll make my air magic much more useful in battle. I can augment my movements by pushing air against my body. It works on others too!”

“You don’t say? That *does* sound interesting.”

“The effect is rather forceful, though. I’ll be pushing you all from behind as hard as I can,” Kirk explained.

Randolph gave a shrug. “That’s no problem. If my back can handle a kick from Volf, it can handle your magic too.”

“A kick from...Sir Volf?” Kirk said, puzzled.

“Once, when I was about to be swallowed by this overgrown cragsnake, Volf kicked me out of its way and saved my skin. He managed to keep its jaws wedged open with his sword until the mages shot magic down its throat and killed it.”

“Wow... I wish I could have seen that,” Kirk said wistfully. “When was it?”

“When, indeed...?” Randolph mused as he searched his memory. “About three years ago now, I think. You were stuck in that cragsnake’s mouth for a while, weren’t you, Volf? Got yourself impaled on its fangs.”

“Oh, yeah. Its breath was *putrid*. Gods, don’t remind me.”

As Volf’s expression twisted into a revolted grimace, the other knights burst into laughter. It was refreshing to see such a genuine reaction from him. It made him a bit more human, somehow.

“You’re telling us its *breath* was the worst part?!”

“You’re supposed to say ‘Yeah, it hurt like hell!’ or ‘It was agony!’ Something like that!”

“Look, my nose gets a lot more sensitive when I use my strengthening magic. I had it running at full power, so even breathing through my mouth didn’t help.”

“So *that’s* why your eyes were watering.”

“I used to envy that strengthening magic of yours. Not anymore.”

Time was now running short, so the men steered the conversation back to the matter of their battle plan. Volf’s proposed idea earned a few laughs at first, but the men’s faces soon clouded over with consternation when they realized he was serious. Alfio, however, heard Volf and Kirk out and made the decision to enact their plan.

Including both the First Knights’ Regiment and the Order of Beast Hunters, there were about a hundred men gathered on the training field. All these knights staring one another down as they waited in formation was a rare and impressive sight. Volf stood in the center of the frontmost line. He was armed with nothing but a small mock sword that he kept sheathed at his left hip,

leaving his hands free.

The hostility radiating toward him from one section of the opposition was impossible to ignore, but oddly, he found something comical about it today. It wasn't Volf's first time being targeted like this in training. He'd had opponents gang up on him many times, riled up by jealousy or some misplaced rancor. Although he had never faced quite so many at once before, he was far from discouraged. In fact, their numbers had inspired a daring new battle strategy. He'd never given much thought to strategizing before, but now he was finding it surprisingly enjoyable.

"We're in your hands, Volf," Dorino said quietly.

"Sorry I'm not lighter," Randolph added. "Give it your best shot."

Volf looked at the men on his left and right, nodding to each with a smile.

"Helmet-knocking, commence!"

The moment the starting order rang out, all three of them dashed forward. From the other side of the field rushed a wave of men making a beeline for Volf. Moments before they clashed, Volf sprang skyward, casting his strengthening magic at its fullest power. In his right hand, he clutched Dorino's armor, and in his left, Randolph's. The sköll bracelet Dahlia had made him was a tremendous help. He found his right arm sagging slightly with Randolph's weight, but they achieved more than enough lift.

The men below could only stare up in shock; even their polearms wouldn't reach them. A moment later, a force that felt less like a gust of wind and more like a solid ball of air slammed into the three knights' backs.

"Whoa!" Dorino yelled, obviously unprepared for the impact.

The magic sent them sailing higher and farther through the air; it was an extraordinary feeling, the height and speed causing a swooping sensation in the pits of the men's stomachs.





“Aha ha ha!” Randolph laughed heartily.

Although he also possessed strengthening magic, his size and weight had kept him from ever achieving heights like this. Flying so high and so fast for the first time must have been exhilarating. Looking down and seeing their opponents shrink away beneath them was also a delight.

“Your time to shine!”

Volf thrust his comrades forward.

“On it!”

“Let’s go!”

Having cleared an unbelievable distance in mere moments, Dorino and Randolph dove right into the middle of the opponents’ position. Volf, usually the first to infiltrate enemy territory, alighted behind the other two and immediately turned back, making a dash for the area held by the Beast Hunters. He was now chasing behind the lines of men they’d just leaped over. Completely thrown off their stride, the men who’d been aiming for Volf doubled back, wrecking the formation.

Volf zigzagged across the field, darting erratically among his pursuers. By the time they raised their weapons to strike him, he was gone; magic was hopeless because they’d hit their comrades. If they tried to grab him, he’d jump out of reach, and those few who did manage to get a grip soon found themselves hurled away through the air. Even when they tried to swarm over him in numbers, he simply launched himself high into the air, and there was no knowing which direction he’d fly in.

“Stop dancin’ around!”

“Damn you!”

From the point of view of those chasing him, nothing could be more infuriating. To add insult to injury, Volf had an enormous grin on his face all the while. He was having the time of his life with the sköll bracelet.

Seeing the First Knights’ Regiment’s formation fall completely to pieces, the young men of the Order of Beast Hunters charged them in neat, orderly ranks.

Just before the two sides clashed, Volf jumped over the heads of the young Beast Hunters, making a dash for the helmet-topped pole that marked his side's position. As soon as he reached it, all the more experienced knights rushed forth in formation, leaving only himself and Alfio standing at the pole. One might think that that left them rather vulnerable, but by the looks of the battle in front of them, no enemy would be getting near them anytime soon.

“Shouldn't be long now.”

Both men narrowed their eyes as they peered at the opponent's position. Dorino and Randolph's spectacular flying infiltration had completely blindsided the enemy. Randolph stood with his shield raised, facing off against several knights at the end of the field. Dorino, meanwhile, made a break for the helmet, but he was rebuffed by the men defending it and soon found himself pursued, fleeing to the right. Reinforcements from both sides were on the scene within seconds, and it turned into an almighty scuffle. However, a clatter of mock swords and fierce, resounding bellows from the Beast Hunters' side of the fight suddenly paused the action again.

“It's about time,” said Alfio.

Randolph, having dealt with the enemies harrying him, set his sights straight ahead. He hurled his shield forward, barreling into the knights with unbelievable speed for someone of his size. Those who tried to stand in his way were knocked aside like bowling pins. Some stood rooted to the spot with their weapons raised, swinging only once it was much too late.

The man who stole today's show was neither Volf nor Dorino, but Randolph. With an ursine physique to rival even the vice-captain's, Randolph had weathered countless battles, putting his life on the line day after day as he defended his comrades with his great, broad shield. It would have taken at least three times as many men to stop him as he charged across the training ground like a raging bull, his might multiplied by strengthening magic. Arriving at the enemy pole, Randolph at last drew his mock sword from his left hip. With a crack of splitting wood, the pole toppled, the silver helmet spinning high into the summer sky.



“You have my thanks, Volf. I haven’t had so much fun in ages,” Randolph said, beaming.

“I’m glad it worked out,” Volf replied. “I enjoyed myself too. I’ve never made it through a whole exercise without having to draw my weapon before.”

Following the battle’s conclusion, each side gathered on the training ground for a simple debriefing session. After Alfio confirmed the success of their battle plan, the Beast Hunters split off into groups to talk among themselves. Some already had their minds on dinner and evening drinks, chatting merrily as they discussed where to go.

“I should thank you too, Leonardi. I never knew how much fun it could be up there in the sky.”

Kirk stiffened, unaccustomed to seeing the usually taciturn man grinning like a schoolboy. “It was nothing! I mean, all I did was give you a push, and my control is still very poor...but I’m very glad you were able to get the helmet, Sir Goodwin!”

“Call me Randolph. Shout ‘Goodwin’ around here and you’ll get half a dozen replies.”

“R-Right, Sir Randolph. You must call me Kirk, then.”

In just one day, Kirk had managed to get on a first-name basis with two of his seniors in the order. He was delighted.

“Kirk? Very well. You know...the sky is a true marvel. It felt wonderful.”

“Sir Randolph?”

“Randolph?”

Contrary to his words, Randolph’s expression was terribly bitter.

“I say this at the risk of appalling my ancestors, but...I wish I had air magic instead of earth,” he said solemnly.

Kirk and Volf exchanged glances and smiled.

“The grass is always greener, huh?”

“True, true,” Randolph agreed. “We should all be grateful for what we *do*

have.”

The men on this side of the field laughed and chatted amicably, but the mood on the First Knights’ Regiment side could not have been more different. Half of the men stood in silence while the rest bickered wearily.

“Why couldn’t a single one of you lay a blow on him?! Explain yourselves!”

“Easier said than done...”

“There was someone helping him with air magic; we didn’t know which way he’d go next.”

“To think that this many men would be so utterly useless... It’s pathetic.”

“That’s enough. How about asking yourself who’s to blame for this ‘pathetic’ defeat?”

One of the senior knights, who hadn’t said a single word all day, turned to the petulant young nobleman with a dark look in his eyes.

“What did you just say?!”

“Ganging up on a man just because *you* can’t keep a girlfriend... You make me laugh. Instead of whining, why not try catching up to him first?”

“How dare you speak to me like that!”

“Nobody in this regiment gives a damn what house you come from, you clueless pup. I’ve only kept quiet this long because the commander told me to watch your performance. He *had* been thinking of offering you a captaincy. That’s down the drain now, I can tell you that.”

“Wha—?!”

The young knight was struck dumb. Around him, the others seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. However, the senior knight’s accusing stare was soon boring into them as well.

“And as for all of you who didn’t say a word to stop this, you’re a disgrace to the First Knights’ Regiment. Once I report to the captain, it’ll be back to basic training until you find your backbones.” His voice rumbled like thunder as he upbraided the other men, whose faces turned several shades paler.

The First Knights' Regiment was one of the kingdom's largest forces. However, its numbers were made up of many fresh recruits and transfers from other regiments. Those whose skills or attitude were discovered to be lacking were immediately sent for retraining or transferred. It hadn't occurred to the young men gathered here that they were not only being watched during drills, but also during joint maneuvers and expeditions, nor that a knight without any social standing to speak of would be assigned as their monitor. Some stared shamefacedly at the ground, others heaved sighs, and a few groaned in frustration while the senior knight continued to glare at them, his anger unabated.

From the other side of the field, Alfio watched with a gratified smile. All that remained was to tidy up, and their work would be done for the day. Since they'd finished up far earlier than expected, many of the knights were looking forward to a leisurely evening of drinks and entertainment. But just then, the chatter abruptly died down, and Alfio saw the group of men walking ahead of him part to the left and right. Wondering what was going on, he peered in the direction of the disturbance and caught sight of someone in the long black robes of the Mages' Corps walking against the flow of people.

"Hello there, Volfred. Finished early, I see."

The one parting the crowd was none other than Guido Scalfarotto, a major in the Mages' Corps. He approached his younger brother, Volf, with a warm smile.

"Brother!" Volf exclaimed. "Is something the matter?"

They'd made no plans to meet and he'd received no letters from Guido recently. Could it be that something had happened to their father or their other brother? Dozens of curious eyes turned to watch the pair. With his blue-tinged silver hair and azure eyes, Guido looked so unlike Volf that no one would think they were brothers until told as much.

"I'm sorry to drop in on you like this. Do you have plans for the rest of today?"

"No, none at all."

"I've found a place that serves excellent rock oysters. What do you say we go together? I heard you were wrapping up your maneuvers here, so I thought I'd come and find you before you left the castle."

“I’m very grateful for the invitation. I’d be delighted to come.”

“Perfect. We’ll go as soon as you’ve changed, then. Oh, there’s no need to hurry, though. I have some paperwork to tidy up in the office. I’ll wait for you there,” he said happily, paying no mind to their audience. He turned to the two knights at Volf’s side. “Goodwin and Barti, isn’t it? You have my thanks for looking after my little brother. You must both come visit Volfred’s estate sometime. You’ll be more than welcome.”

“It would be an honor.”

“That is very kind of you, sir.”

Both of them smiled and bowed respectfully, after which Guido turned back to Volf and bid him farewell for the moment before returning the way he’d come.

“So, Volf, that was...your older brother, Sir Guido?”

“Yeah, that was him.” He didn’t blame Dorino for checking; they really did look nothing alike. As he looked back at the other knight, something in his expression puzzled Volf, and he cocked his head. “Something wrong?”

“Oh, no. It was just funny seeing him with you, acting just like a regular big brother. Whenever I’ve seen him leading the Mages’ Corps in practice drills, he’s been this...cool, calm, and collected ice mage, you know? He seemed so much warmer just now.”

“Yeah, he’s certainly different when he’s on duty.”

Until quite recently, his own image of his elder brother had been much the same as Dorino’s. However, he didn’t have the will to explain how estranged they’d been until just a short time ago. Curiously, he’d had far less trouble telling Dahlia.

“Hand me your weapon, Volf. I’ll put it away for you, so go on ahead. It wouldn’t do to keep your brother waiting.”

“Thanks, Randolph. I appreciate it.”

After handing over his mock sword, Volf left hurriedly for the barracks.

“So much for his family not caring about him. Those two sure looked like

buddies to me.”

“He came all the way out here just to invite him out to eat... *My* brother wouldn’t even do that.”

“Some idiot said they didn’t like each other because of having different mothers... Who was it?”

A few men from the First Knights’ Regiment muttered among themselves as they came up behind Dorino and Randolph.

“He mentioned ‘Volfred’s estate,’ right?”

“I thought Sir Volfred lived in the barracks and never went home.”

Dorino and Randolph stopped in their tracks and turned on the group behind them.

“A Scarlet Armor puts their life on the line every time they go into battle,” Dorino said. “Is it any surprise that they’d want to distance themselves from their family? It’s exhausting having people worry about you every time you leave on a mission.”

“It isn’t that Volf *can’t* return home. He spends most of his time here so as not to waste time traveling when he could be training,” Randolph added.

One of the younger Beast Hunters joined them then, facing down the knights from the First Regiment, who were clearly growing uncomfortable.

“When Sir Volf was abducted by the wyvern, the Scalfarottos sent mages to assist in searching for him,” he said defiantly. “His family clearly cares for him a great deal.”

“But I mean...he never shows up at their tea parties, does he?” one knight argued.

“He won’t even go to other families’ dinner parties or balls, I’ve heard.”

“Unlike you, we Beast Hunters can be summoned for missions at a moment’s notice. We can’t go promising to attend the likes of tea parties and balls even if we’d like to. It’s a lot more impolite to cancel on the day than to turn down the invitation in the first place, don’t you think? I haven’t attended any gatherings myself recently. Very few of us can.” The young knight turned to some of the



senior Beast Hunters. “Isn’t that so?”

“That’s right,” one agreed. “I never accept invitations unless I can guarantee my availability.”

“Nor I. I only commit to very important events or those I know I’ll be free for.”

“You see?” Kirk said. “Monsters have no regard for our plans, after all.”

His green eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded the surly knights in front of him. His hair waved as though blown by a breeze, although the air around them was completely still.

“If I may... I have a question for those senior members of your regiment.”

“Yeah? What would that be?”

“Well, as I’m sure you’re aware, Sir Guido is expected to be made a marquis once he succeeds his father, Earl Scalfarotto. Given how fond Sir Guido is of his younger brother, was it not rather *dangerous* to allow your men to gang up on Sir Volf?”

“Why, you...!”

“Sir Volf isn’t the type of man to go snitching about what you did. I don’t believe any of our men are either. However, I can guarantee that there will have been young ladies, maids, and others watching what happened today from the surrounding buildings. We can only hope that no rumors reach Sir Guido’s ears.”

Kirk’s gaze wandered to the several tall buildings situated in the vicinity of the training field. Even from here, he could clearly see a number of women peeping from the windows. The knights were rendered speechless. Kirk smiled pleasantly at them.

“I hear those new binoculars afford excellent views.”

Leaving the men of the First Knights’ Regiment to stew in their own juices, Kirk and the others headed toward the Beast Hunters’ quarters. Only once they were well out of earshot did the group dissolve into laughter.

“Now *that’s* how you do it, Leonardi!”

“Ah, the future’s bright with kids like you on the team!”

Kirk found himself being heartily slapped on the back by his comrades. Once the shower of praise finally abated, Randolph clapped a hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Your drinks are on me tonight, Kirk.”

“Thank you, Sir Randolph. That’s very generous.”

“Never saw that coming, Leonardi. Always thought you seemed quiet as a lamb.”

“Please call me Kirk, Sir Barti.”

“All right, then call me Dorino.”

“Well, Sir Dorino, to tell you the truth, my heart was pounding back there. I think it still is, actually.”

As he looked down at his palm, he saw his hand trembling slightly, and there was a faint sheen of sweat on his brow. After putting away his mock sword, Kirk gave his hands a good shake to get the jitters out. Behind him, a few of the other men were still laughing about the earlier encounter.

“Regretting what you said now, Kirk? Or are you worried for your family?” Dorino asked.

“No. No, I don’t regret it. I don’t *think* it’ll cause any problems at home.”

“Your father—he’s a viscount, if memory serves?” Dorino said, and Kirk nodded. Dorino leaned close to him, speaking in a whisper. “If anyone from the First Regiment tries to give you trouble, let us know right away. We’ll sort it out between us, one way or another.”

“You have my word. Thank you. My, er...grandfather might not be very pleased if he finds out about this,” said Kirk, his face etched with worry. Dorino was puzzled.

“Huh? Your grandfather?”

“This is just between us, but...my mother is the youngest daughter of a former marquis. My grandfather often comes to our home to visit her in

secret.”

What a small world it was sometimes. Dorino patted the young man on the shoulder and steered the conversation to a much more pressing topic: where they’d be going for dinner.

# Rock Oysters with Guido

Located in a quiet corner of the nobles' quarter was a white brick building, three stories high and tastefully embellished with blue accents. In a private room on the third floor, overlooking a large, lush garden, Volf and his elder brother, Guido, sat opposite each other at a table. Beyond the garden, dots of warm light illuminated the streets below.

It occurred to Volf that he might be a little underdressed for this restaurant, and he reached up to fasten his top buttons.

"You can relax here, Volfred. That's what this room is for."

Guido took off his dark-blue coat and draped it over the back of his chair. Had either of the men's servants been in the room, they would've been greatly perturbed by such a casual gesture, but the only ones in the room were the two brothers and a server. They were each poured a glass of white wine; Guido was the first to raise his.

"I'm so glad we can finally enjoy a drink together. Here's to this long-awaited dinner with my brother."

"And here's to our good health and good fortune. Cheers."

The clink of their glasses rang out loud and clear in the quiet room. The white wine was light and soft, perfect for soothing a dry throat.

"I was quite far off, but I saw you in your joint maneuvers earlier. One would think you were playing a game of tag."

"It was my job to cause chaos and confusion."

Volf smiled vaguely, not inclined to reveal that he'd been targeted because of another man's jealousy. Guido gazed at him steadily with a similarly faint smile.

"You've been good at tag ever since we were little. I remember the four of us all dashing around the back garden."

"Ah, yes, I remember. We often played in the gardens at the main house."

“I can still see Fabio tumbling head over heels trying to chase you. Eraldo almost cried. ‘I ran away as fast as I could and Volf *still* caught me!’”

Volf recalled more innocent days playing tag with his older brothers—Guido, the eldest, Fabio, now long gone, and Eraldo, who worked far away at the kingdom’s border. Despite the gaps in age between them, they’d played with Volf often when he was young. He felt a pang of nostalgia as the almost forgotten memories resurfaced vividly in his mind.

“I remember once,” Guido continued, “on the morning of a relative’s wedding, we all played tag together. Our mothers gave us hell for it afterward.”

Volf, too, cast his mind back to that day. The four boys had gotten bored during the long wait before the ceremony and sneaked into the gardens to play. There, they’d lost all track of time until their mothers came searching for them.

“It was raining, as I remember,” Volf said. “We got our best clothes covered in mud.”

“That we did. Mother was *livid*. I never thought I’d get my bottom smacked at the age of fourteen.”

“You got smacked too?”

“Mm-hmm. We all did; Fabio and Eraldo as well. Mother even gave the others permission to hit me too. Lady Vanessa hurt most of all; left me in no doubt of her strength, that’s for sure. The number of smacks we each got was the same as our age, so I got the worst of it... It hurt to sit down all day.”

Volf still remembered his mother spanking him while he cried, but he’d never realized his brothers had suffered the same punishment. He hesitated, unsure as to whether he ought to laugh, but Guido smiled at him and poured him another glass of wine. Volf thanked him and returned the favor before he also took his coat off at last.

“I meant to say this earlier, but thank you for coming to find me today.”

“Think nothing of it. Ordinarily, I might have just stayed in the office, but I happened to overhear a little, er, *chatter* from the First Regiment. After that, I felt I had to come and see you.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

“It’s nothing, really. I just acted on impulse. To be frank, I was...a little pissed off.”

Volf’s wine glass stopped halfway to his lips. He’d never expected to hear his brother say such a thing. Guido had obviously been well aware of the men targeting Volf during the training exercise.

“Men like that, who would gang up on another with the aim of injuring him, do not deserve to call themselves knights. Not to mention how absurd their reasons were.”

“Well...”

Volf couldn’t recall seeing Guido look angry before. He thought he ought to say something, but no words came to mind.

“I mean, do they realize who you *are*—who the Scalfarottos are? And as for us growing apart, it was no fault of yours. It was my cowardice that’s to blame for that.”

“You weren’t to blame, Guido.”

“Forgive me. I shouldn’t be spoiling our evening with this sort of talk. Let’s say no more about it.”

Just as they finished their first bottle of wine, the first course arrived.

“Look at the size of them,” Volf said in astonishment.

“’Tis a good year for rock oysters, it appears.”

The rock oysters served on platters before them were larger than the palm of Volf’s hand. The upper halves of the shells had been removed, revealing the lustrous, creamy-white flesh underneath. After garnishing an oyster with a generous squeeze of lemon juice, Volf cut the meat free and carefully lifted the shell, taking care not to spill any of the liquor.

With his first bite, Volf’s mouth was flooded with the rock oyster’s incomparably rich and sweet flavor. As he chewed, he savored the taste of the ocean and gradually began to appreciate how the flavors differed in each part of the large shellfish. While it didn’t have the characteristic milkiness of winter

oysters, the meat was rich and intense, with pleasing elasticity. The ocean had already seasoned it with the perfect amount of salt; there was no need to sprinkle on a grain more. The oysters were extremely fresh; even sipping white wine in between bites revealed no hint of fishiness. Volf loved the sort of oysters hauled in during wintertime, but this summer's catch was no less of a delight.

"What do you think?" asked Guido, happily preparing himself another. He was clearly fond of them too.

"They're superb."

"Excellent. I'll order us some more. Now, would you rather have them cooked plain or in butter?"

"Hard to say when they're this good raw..."

"We'll have both, then. Along with something more to drink, I daresay."

Guido cheerfully ordered more oysters and a beverage with a very long name. While savoring his second oyster, Volf found his thoughts wandering to Dahlia. The two of them hadn't eaten oysters together yet. If she happened to like them, it would be well worth taking her out to sample these rock oysters too. Then, once winter drew in, they could enjoy winter oysters together and see which they liked best. Volf sipped absently at his wine while he thought to himself, and before he knew it, his glass was empty once again.

"You can certainly handle your drink, Volfred. Are you a kingsnake, by any chance?"

"My comrades call me a sea serpent."

He hesitated to say it, given that a kingsnake was evidently his brother's idea of a heavy drinker, but there was a positive side to being a sea serpent—namely, that one basically never got drunk.

"A sea serpent? Goodness. You must've gotten that tolerance from Lady Vanessa."

"Do you think so? I don't remember her drinking all that much."

"At dinner, the two of you used to drink from identical glasses—grape juice in

yours, red wine in your mother's. She emptied her glass every time she took a drink, so it never stayed full for long. I felt sorry for the poor servers; they never knew when they ought to pour her another."

*"Mother!"*

The truth of Lady Vanessa's drinking habits almost made Volf sputter out his wine. Where in the world had she learned to drink like that?

"You tried to copy her by gulping down all your grape juice and choked yourself half to death... We all kept an eye on you after that to make sure you didn't try it again."

"I...don't remember that," Volf replied haltingly, his cheeks colored with embarrassment.

Guido smiled apologetically. "Do you find it difficult to talk about Lady Vanessa?"

"No, that's not it. I love hearing stories like this. I was just surprised, that's all. When I remember her, what I see is this proud, noble knight."

"Ah, I see what you mean. Lady Vanessa was a paragon of a knight; no one could deny that."

It gladdened Volf to hear Guido praise her in those terms, commenting on her character and not her beauty.

They continued their meal, savoring more delicious oysters and toasting each other's health. When their plates were finally empty, Volf found himself presented with a new glass by Guido's servant. This man with rusty-red hair had evidently arrived to replace the server who'd attended them at the beginning of their meal, although he had no idea *when* the switch had taken place. That drink with the extremely long name Guido had ordered turned out to be a red wine. Its sweet, floral aroma belied a very dry, full-bodied character with a lingering aftertaste.

"Unusual, isn't it?" said Guido. "Deliciously dry, but the aroma deceives you."

His brother had read him like a book.

"Very unusual. What is it called?"



“‘O Ephemeral Goddess Who Hath Stole My Heart, ’Tis You, My Dearest Wife’ ... Not exactly a typical name for a wine, and hardly one to order in your wife’s presence.”

“It’s memorable, I’ll give it that.”

“I’ve heard that the vintner created this wine in memory of his late wife. She must have been quite a woman.”

This wine was named either very well or very poorly, but Volf couldn’t decide which. Regardless, he was soon won over by its beautiful ruby-red hue, sweet aroma, and resonant, bold flavor.

“Now, Volfred, time is ticking, and there is something I wish to say to you. I must apologize.”

“If this is about what we discussed the other day...”

“No, something else. I’m very sorry for unsettling you and Chairwoman Rossetti yesterday evening.”

The flavor of the wine evaporated from Volf’s tongue in an instant.

“Those were your men?”

“Yes. I...asked them to see that nothing untoward happened to you while you were out in town, but it seems that all I achieved was to disturb your evening. I should have told you of my intentions beforehand.”

“Well, that explains it.”

The origin of those mysterious pursuers had been bothering Volf ever since he’d first detected them. He was relieved to hear it was Guido who’d sent them, but what he couldn’t help wondering was, why now?

“What made you do that all of a sudden?”

“I’m well aware of your strength. I have no doubt that you could defend *yourself*, come what may, but it’s not so easy when you need to protect someone else. I couldn’t help but worry.”

“I understand.”

Admittedly, the thought of fighting to protect Dahlia should the worst happen

frightened Volf too. It had never occurred to him before to bring bodyguards, but perhaps, depending on where they were going, it would be wise to do so.

“Should you ever require an escort, don’t hesitate to let someone at the estate know,” Guido said, seeing straight through him once again.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Another thing—I’ve purchased a plot of land on the edge of the West District, quite near the Green Tower, as it happens. I intend to build a stable and keep horses and carriages there. I noticed the land was available and thought it might make a fine investment.”

Guido had begun to speak a little more rapidly than before. What’s more, his eyes were suddenly avoiding Volf’s. There was little foot traffic along that part of the West District; no carriage station situated there could hope to turn a profit.

“Guido—”

“Why, I imagine *you* could make good use of it, Volfred. It’s a long way from the castle to the West District, after all. I’ll see to it that both horses and carriages are available to you, so you may take them to and from the castle, to the other districts—wherever you wish. Constructing the buildings will take some time, but I daresay we can knock up something temporary for a horse or two within a week,” he continued cheerfully.

Surely, having laid his cards so clearly on the table, he couldn’t expect Volf not to have twigged by now.

“Guido, you’ve been keeping tabs on me ever since I got back from my expedition, haven’t you?”

The man hesitated for a moment before confessing. “I have.”

It would seem Volf had been tailed since the day after the harpy hunt, at the earliest, when he’d gone to visit Dahlia at her tower. It could only have been his excitement about seeing her that had kept him from noticing.

“I appreciate your consideration. I’ll make good use of the horses. However, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d be grateful if you could give Chairwoman Rossetti and

me a little space while we're together." Volf's tone was calm and even—almost peculiarly so.

"Of course. I'm awfully sorry."

An uncomfortable silence fell until Guido cleared his throat.

"There was one other matter. I have something to give you."

His servant approached with a black leather case, opening it and producing a bundle of parchment. He gently placed it down on the table in front of Volf.

"A full report of Chairwoman Rossetti's personal history."

"You investigated her?"

"Yes. For your safety," Guido said curtly. His blue eyes looked very much like their father's as he regarded his younger brother. "She was a studious young lady, devoted to her research, without so much as a hint of scandal soiling her reputation..."

"Well, of course, this is Dahlia we're—"

"*Until* she broke off her engagement and soon after began appearing around town in your company."

Volf could easily guess what kind of gossip had spread through the city, and he knew he was to blame for it. He couldn't stand to hear anyone speak ill of her on his account.

"Dahlia is a good friend. Whatever's being said about her is none of her fault; I'm the cause."

As he looked Guido squarely in the eye, he was surprised to see the other man smile faintly and nod.

"She is a talented magical toolmaker, a diligent, levelheaded woman, and a cherished friend of yours. I understand that perfectly."

"Thank you, Guido."

"Would you like to take this report back with you?"

"I don't need it. I'll ask her myself if there's anything I want to know."

“I had a feeling you’d say that. Well, if you don’t want the full report, take this, at least.” Guido handed him a single folded piece of parchment. “Much of the information dates from her college days; her tastes may have changed somewhat since then. Still, you may find it useful.”

“Favorite colors: white, light blue. Favorite treats: cheesecake...”

There were notes on her favorite and least favorite foods, the meals she frequently ordered at the college dining hall, and much more. Only someone very close to Dahlia could have known all this. Volf was intensely curious to know who that someone was.

“Guido, where did you get all this?”

Once again, Guido hesitated. “I contacted the Intelligence Office.”

“You...what?”

For several seconds, Volf could only sit with his mouth agape. He could fully understand his brother, out of a desire to protect him, carrying out a background check on Dahlia to be sure she didn’t pose a threat. However, this was not—*unequivocally not*—the type of request for which one called upon the kingdom’s Intelligence Office. Volf’s eyes nearly watered at the thought of what it must have cost, or what Guido must have done to earn such a favor.

“What were you *thinking*?!”

“Oh, I have an acquaintance there, you see. They were kind enough to bend the rules a little for me. I didn’t break the bank, don’t worry.”

“Still, I’m not sure it was necessary to go *that* far...”

“The more you can find out about a woman, the better. Believe me, if you find out months later that she was politely smiling through a dinner she despised, or that you were sending her bouquets of flowers with a smell she couldn’t stand, you’ll want the ground to swallow you up.”

“Guido...”

“I want you to learn from my mistakes, Volfred,” he mumbled dolefully.

Volf bowed his head in thanks and pocketed the notes.

“By the way, I’ve acquired the fairy glass you asked for,” Guido said, switching tack. “I can have it sent to you tomorrow. I’ll get you some more as soon as it’s found.”

“Thank you. I’ll pay you shortly.”

“No need. Please, let me indulge you. It’s the least I can do as your big brother. Goodness knows I haven’t done anything for you these last ten years or so.”

“Well...all right. Thank you. That’s very kind.”

Volf felt he’d already been thoroughly spoiled today, but he couldn’t bring himself to refuse his brother’s earnest plea. For a second time, he bowed his head in gratitude. He tried to think of something he could give Guido in return, but he drew a blank. He had no idea what sorts of things his brother liked. The most sensible thing at times like this was simply to ask.

“Is there anything *you’d* like, Guido? If it’s within my reach, I’ll be happy to get it for you.”

“Me? Ah, yes...there is something. As long as it’s all right with you, I would like to call you Volf, as I used to when we were young.”

“Huh?”

Volf’s voice jumped nearly an octave in his surprise. It was true that Guido used to call him that when he was small, but it felt quite embarrassing to be asked, after all these years, whether he would allow it once again.

“Y-Yes... Of course you can call me that. There was no need to ask.”

“Oh, perhaps you could go back to calling me Dear Brother Guido too.”

“Spare me that. Please.”

Guido laughed out loud at his brother’s grimace. “By the way, Volf, are you serious about relinquishing your rank to become a commoner?”

“I am. Not in the immediate future, but one day.”

“This may sound somewhat harsh, but please listen to what I have to say. That transition is not as simple as you might imagine—not in your case.”

Volf stiffened at the sudden change in his brother's tone.

"I know that you are frequently accosted as it is. If you sever your connection to the Scalfarotto family, there will be some who will try to take advantage of you."

"But surely I won't be of much interest without the family connection."

"You need not be anyone or do anything of note to attract unwanted attention. Through no instigation of your own, you are approached with declarations of love from perfect strangers and subject to attacks from jealous fools. Is that not so?"

"Well, I..." Volf faltered, unable to rebut this undeniable truth.

"This state of affairs will only worsen if you become a commoner. It is entirely possible that the hostility directed toward you will also extend to your future family and loved ones. If that happens, you will need the power to protect them—power that our family can easily provide."

"Power..." Volf sighed.

Until this moment, he'd thought that all those troubles would end once he quit the family. He'd assumed that, as long as he had those miraculous fairy-glass lenses, he could live quite peacefully as a commoner, furthering his career as a knight or finding other work to build up his savings. He hadn't dreamed that he'd still be pursued even without his noble rank, or that he might put his loved ones in danger. Left despondent by his own naivete, Volf fell silent.

"Ideally, I would have one of our relatives adopt Chairwoman Rossetti so that you might wed her."

"We aren't in that kind of relationship. Dahlia is a magical toolmaker and the chairwoman of her company. She's not in a position to change her name or her career, and I wouldn't want her to either."

Volf refuted his brother's misconception quickly and firmly, but Guido did not back down.

"You are both very young. Your feelings may change. There may come a day when you realize you wish to spend your life with this woman."

“I do want to stay by her side, as her *friend*—even if I end up working for her company. We both agreed that our relationship would be one of friendship.”

As he spoke, he felt a dull ache in his chest. Since the day they’d promised each other that bond of friendship, he’d grown closer and closer to Dahlia. However, there was no denying the fact that if he were to become a commoner now, he would be putting her at risk—risk that he would have no power to protect her from.

“Volf, please understand that I am not forbidding you from becoming a commoner if that’s what you desire. All I ask is that you think very carefully about this decision, particularly with regards to your safety.”

“Thank you. I can see now how naive I’ve been. I promise to keep your advice in mind.”

“Don’t blame yourself. Father or I should have said something sooner. I hope you’ll feel comfortable enough to share any worries or concerns with me from now on. I’ll always be available to you.”

“I will. I’ll let you know if there’s anything I need.”

Hearing that brought a warm, brotherly smile to Guido’s lips, and he nodded.

## Interlude: The Atonement of a Coward

With the hour growing late, Guido let Volf take the carriage first to be dropped off at the barracks while he remained at the restaurant. Keeping up with his brother's pace of drinking had left him ever so slightly woozy. Still, it wasn't a bad feeling—quite pleasant, in fact.

As his younger brother had waved him goodbye with a cheerful smile, he couldn't help noticing how tall Volf had grown, far taller now than himself. He tried to recall just when it was that Volf had overtaken him, only to find, with a tight twinge deep in his chest, that he had no such memory.

Guido, the eldest son of Earl Scalfarotto, had three younger brothers. The closest to him in age was Fabio, the son of the earl's second wife. After him was Eraldo, a full brother to Guido. Finally, there was Volfred, the only son of the earl's third wife. Despite their gaps in age and different mothers, Guido had always thought they'd gotten along remarkably well. Even their mothers were always amiable. They were much closer to the four boys than to their husband, whose duties kept him largely absent throughout his sons' childhoods.

Guido had been in elementary school when he'd heard that his father, Renato, intended to take a third wife. The news hadn't come as a shock. Around that time, talk had first begun to circulate of the next Earl Scalfarotto—namely, Guido—being made a marquis. In his mind, it made sense for his father to establish further connections with the high-ranking nobility. However, the day he was introduced to Vanessa saw all of his expectations defied. This woman was no noble, but a commoner, the daughter of a baron conferred with a nonhereditary title. She was young, and a knight, to boot.

With her lustrous ebony hair, snow-white skin, dark and mysterious eyes, and exquisite, doll-like features, her beauty was arresting. However, *socially* speaking, she was no proper match for an earl. She hadn't so much as been adopted by a noble. As he watched the care and tenderness with which his father attended to Vanessa, a suspicion came over him. Could his father, at his



age, have fallen in *love*? It was difficult to believe. It was only after that, when he learned that Vanessa had been the personal bodyguard of Altea Gastoni and was proficient in ice magic—even able to produce an ice sword—that Guido became somewhat more convinced of her merits.

Unfortunately, his younger brother Fabio appeared not to share that conviction. Fabio harbored a wish to become a knight instead of a mage. He'd been clearly unimpressed with his father's choice of wife.

Soon after Vanessa came to live on the estate, he said to her, "If you truly are a knight, I should like to spar with you."

Guido had joined in, half-jokingly. "As would I. To spar with a mystic knight is a rare opportunity."

Eraldo sensibly kept silent, but simply due to his being there, he was roped in as well. Fabio and Guido would be punished for their impudence soon after, made to spend their allowance on magic textbooks.

"I wonder which of us ought to meet you first. It may only last one round," Fabio had sneered, to which Vanessa had offered a serene smile.

"Then you may all come at once."

Back then, all three of them were still just young boys. Born into the Scalfarotto household and taught magic from the moment they could understand it, they were proud, precocious children. Guido, for his part, had imagined his water magic to be quite powerful. Fabio had received some training in swordsmanship and showed promise.

As they stood before Vanessa in the back garden, they were confident that with their powers combined, the three of them couldn't possibly lose. They attacked with all guns blazing, but the battle, naturally, was over before it had begun. Vanessa didn't pull her punches, and she blew them away swiftly and decisively. Anyone watching would have laughed themselves silly at such a spectacular defeat.

Deftly evading their water magic and swords, she produced a platform of ice and leaped from it high into the air. None of them could have foreseen her next move as she bore down on them, bringing her fists down hard upon their

heads. Vanessa fought entirely bare-handed, not even bothering with a mock sword. Within no more than a couple of minutes, all three boys were cowering on the ground, clutching their aching skulls.

“Honestly, is this the best you Scalfarotto boys have to offer?” she nonchalantly chided them afterward.

Painful as the experience was, Guido was filled with admiration for her. His feelings were not so positive when, early the next morning, he and his brothers were dragged out for training. They had to build their stamina, Vanessa said as she had them run laps. She declared that no son of Earl Scalfarotto should be without basic combat training and set about teaching them that too. The boys rarely went to bed without aching muscles after that day.

Guido recalled bearing a tiny bit of resentment toward their father, who had obviously given his blessing to the whole endeavor. His and Fabio’s mothers had merely looked on in amusement. Of course, it wasn’t all hardship; Fabio, at least, had seemed delighted to receive the extra instruction in swordsmanship.

At the beginning of the boys’ training regime, knights had kept watch over them to prevent accidents, but they, too, were roped in somewhere along the way. Guido was given a renewed appreciation for Vanessa’s strength when he saw that even those knights couldn’t best her in sparring. As he came to know her better, he found that she was utterly guileless—unsophisticated, some might say. She took whatever she was told at face value, often struggling to read between the lines. However, it was thanks to that ignoble honesty that the boys felt comfortable talking to her openly.

The next year, Vanessa bore the earl a fourth son: Volfred. He was an enchanting child with the countenance of an angel. He took after his mother, sharing her ebony hair and snow-white skin, though his eyes were a rich golden hue. His brothers were slightly disappointed not to have a little sister, but they promised they would never tell him so and would always look after him. As the eldest, Guido had been rather proud of shouldering the responsibility to protect all of his younger brothers.

Even their father must have been unable to resist Volfred’s charm. In spite of his hellish schedule that kept him away from early morning until late in the

evening, he never failed to pay his newborn son a visit at the end of the day.

“He never puts the light on and he creeps in so stealthily; I’m never sure whether it’s Lord Renato or a burglar!” Vanessa had complained, laughing uproariously with the earl’s other wives.

Volfred grew rapidly. His older brothers began calling him “Volf” for short. Although they were burdened with schoolwork and their lessons on noble etiquette, they played with him often. Unfortunately, it transpired that Volf didn’t possess the water magic the Scalfarotto line was known for. He had none at all, in fact, aside from common strengthening magic. Cruel whispers began to travel around the estate.

“A Scalfarotto and not a drop of water magic in him. His parents must be so disappointed.”

“I can’t fathom how they could’ve produced a child like that.”

Volf was still too young to understand what was being said about him and why, but Guido wasn’t, and he challenged the gossips whenever he could. Although he was older, he was still a child, and most simply fobbed him off with vague excuses. Guido, Fabio, and Eraldo swore that if these foolish remarks pursued Volf as he grew older, they would stand up for him and defend him at every opportunity.

Heir to the Scalfarotto estate, with a wish to become an elite mage, Guido found his days growing ever more hectic, eaten up with lessons and study. His brothers were soon absorbed in pursuits of their own. Fabio, increasingly infatuated with the sword, sparred with the household’s bodyguards almost daily. Eraldo devoted himself to books and research, hoping to gain true mastery over water and ice magic. Volf began to train under his mother as a knight, a worthy pursuit that would make the best use of his strengthening magic.

Guido was filled with admiration for every one of his younger brothers. He couldn’t say for sure when their bonds, which had once held them so close, had begun to unravel.

Around the time he entered high school, the earl’s second wife fell ill and returned to her parents’ home to convalesce. All he’d hoped was that she’d

soon be well again, not giving much thought to *why* she was returning home so often. Looking back now, however...he couldn't help thinking that *someone* should have read the signs.

One day, Guido, his mother, Volfred, and Vanessa set out in carriages on a trip across the earl's domain. Guido was looking forward to doing some horseback riding with his younger brother. When the carriages were suddenly attacked, he was frozen with shock, which quickly turned to terror. The idea that his own small circle of relatives could be behind it never crossed his mind for a moment. Bandits were an ever-present danger—they might be killed. These terrible thoughts paralyzed the young Guido, and then he found himself pulled into his mother's arms. She held him to her with all her might.

"It's all right, my darling. The guards will protect us."

She was trembling even more violently than he was, but he couldn't fend her off. By the time everything had gone quiet and they finally dared to venture outside, it was all over. Vanessa's body lay in two pieces on the ground. Volf crawled in a pool of blood, still desperately trying to fight. Dead knights lay scattered on the bloodstained grass.

Guido trapped the few remaining assailants with his ice magic, and the knights still alive quickly restrained them. Somehow, the party managed to return to the estate in the capital. It was then that Guido witnessed his father's wrath for the first time in his life.

"They will pay... *I will make them pay!*"

As Renato roared in cold fury, blood trickled from his clenched right fist, falling to the floor as scarlet crystals of ice. The air began to shimmer with thousands upon thousands of ice crystals, and total silence fell over the room. Suddenly, the servants collapsed, and even some of the knights dropped to their knees or instinctively clutched their weapons. Guido's teeth chattered; he couldn't speak, overcome by the horrifying, murderous rage emanating from his father.

It was the father of the earl's second wife who'd ordered the attack. As soon as this knowledge reached him, Renato was quick to act. He took the finest mages in his employ and stormed to the home of his second wife's parents.

What he did there, Guido had never been told. The next day, it was announced that the second wife's father had passed away from illness and that his eldest son would inherit the estate.

Fabio disappeared that same day. He had set out on a long ride and become separated from his escort somewhere along the way, so the story went. His body was carried back to the estate late in the night. He'd died from a fall, they said. His face was whiter than candle wax, his cheeks as rigid as marble. Guido knew the symptoms of poison when he saw them. He couldn't bring himself to ask whether it had been suicide or his father's order that had killed his brother. To this day, he didn't know.

On the day of Fabio's funeral, a knight committed suicide. They had guarded the boy for years and had been one of his escorts on the day he went riding, never to return. Having already lost her father and her son, the earl's second wife wept inconsolably over the knight's body. Renato said not a word. Soon after, she announced that she would enter a convent and left the estate immediately. Guido had never seen her since.

He began to have nightmares of the day Vanessa was killed, forced to relive the horrible events over and over again in his sleep. He was often sick as soon as he awoke, and he struggled to eat his meals. Naturally, his mother was deeply concerned about him, but having her near at hand only exacerbated his suffering. Each time he looked at her, he was reminded of how weak he'd been as he'd huddled in her arms, safe inside the carriage, while others fought for their lives outside.

Guido's mother, on the other hand, could no longer stand the sight of Volf. She would freeze up or even faint in his presence. He put it down to irreconcilable guilt. On their father's orders, Volf was sent to live in a separate villa with only maids for company. Eraldo moved out the same day; he would take up residence in his school's dormitory so as to have more time for his studies and research.

On that terribly quiet night, Guido found himself outside Fabio's room. It still felt as though his brother were there—as though, just on the other side of the door, he was swinging his wooden sword like always, and he would come running out if only Guido called to him. But the room was empty, tidier than

Guido had ever seen it. The only thing on the desk was a bestiary he had lent to Fabio just a short time ago. Looking closely, he noticed a piece of white paper slipped between the pages. It bore just a few words, written exceptionally neatly for Fabio.

*Thank you, Lord Guido.*

Not “Dear Brother,” not “Brother Guido,” just his name and title. It appeared that even his right to call himself Fabio’s brother had been taken away from him. The moment he realized that, both the paper and the fist that gripped it froze with a crackle. It was too late for apologies, but perhaps freezing to death, right here in this spot, would make some sort of amends. It was an absurd, senseless thought, but he couldn’t shake it from his mind, and all the while, the ice crept over him, thicker and thicker.

That moment, his friend and servant burst into the room and punched him with all his might. Guido was left sprawled on the floor, blood flowing from his mouth while he was made to drink a potion. He was given such a tongue-lashing that he cried like a baby, sobbing the whole story out to the man, who listened patiently before plying him with strong liquor until he fell asleep.

The following afternoon, despite a pounding headache, he somehow managed to drag himself out of his bed. The servant with the rusty-red hair was there to greet him.

“Good morning, Lord Guido Scalfarotto.”

The man had never before called him by his full name, only “Lord Guido.” He understood the significance at once. He was not just any Guido. He was Guido Scalfarotto, the eldest son of Earl Scalfarotto. His was the house that had allowed Vanessa to die and traumatized the young Volf; it had driven Fabio to his end and cast out the boy’s mother. And, years from now, this was the house Guido would succeed.

No matter how wretched he felt, no matter how consuming his survivor’s guilt, he couldn’t run from his duty to inherit and shape the Scalfarotto legacy. Tears and tantrums didn’t become him. He could no longer allow himself such weakness. If he could only increase his power, solidify and extend the Scalfarottos’ influence, then such terrible events need never happen again. For

the time being, the best he could do was to pour all his energy into becoming a worthy, competent heir—so he believed to this day.

After a drink of ice water to sober him, Guido finally looked up and turned to the servant waiting dutifully at his side.

“I want the name of every man who tried to attack Volf during the joint maneuvers today,” he said coolly. “If they are unmarried, find out if they have a fiancée.”

“Very good, sir. I shall pass the message on.”

“In fact, I’d like a list of all the participants. I also want to know of any members of the First Regiment—no, of the Second and Third Regiments too, and the Mages’ Corps—who might have reason to bear ill will toward Volf.”

“Certainly, sir,” he replied with a nod. He stepped from Guido’s side to face him. “Pardon me, Lord Guido, but may I speak freely?”

This man had served him for many years; they’d been friends since Guido was at school. He was looking at the silver-haired man with consternation. There was even a touch of anger in his russet eyes.

“Of course, Jonas. I think I know what you’re going to say, but go ahead. Sit down; it’s just the two of us.”

“Thanks.”

He seated himself opposite Guido. His eyes, a shade darker than his rusty-red hair, were unwavering as they stared at him across the table. Guido placed a glass in front of him and filled it nearly to the brim with red wine.

“You need to stop wandering off on your own, Guido. I know you were on the castle grounds and there was no one but knights around, but your guards in the Mages’ Corps were beside themselves.”

“I lost my temper. I’ll be more careful in future.”

“This city’s been a hotbed of jealousy ever since your promotion to marquis was confirmed. For goodness’ sake, tread carefully.”

“I will. I mean it.”

“Just look at you, slinging your coat over your chair, eating oysters with your bare hands... What would your mother say?”

Jonas’s eagle eyes could be a nuisance sometimes, but he was absolutely right. Guido’s coat hung untidily over the back of his chair, and there were shallow cuts on his fingertips where he’d gripped the jagged oyster shells, betraying his inexperience.

“Keep it a secret, will you? I just wanted to put Volf at ease. Though I admit, I always wanted to try this.”

His impish smile was met with a sour look from Jonas. The man did finally deign to take a sip of wine, at least.

“What about you, Jonas? How did you find the meal?”

“The meat was decent enough. The oysters...I wasn’t so sure about.”

His answer was rather ambivalent, but he didn’t appear to be lying. He’d eaten his meal in a separate room, and by the sounds of it, he hadn’t particularly enjoyed the oysters. Perhaps he didn’t have the palate for them.

“I might take Volf out for some good steak next time. Why don’t you join us?”

“If you mean as your bodyguard, I’ll go, yes.”

“We’ll have a private room. Surely you could sit with us.”

“Guido, I’d strongly prefer you didn’t take meals alone with Sir Volfred. He’s third in line to inherit the Scalfarotto estate. If anything happened to you...”

“What, you think he wants me out of the way so *he* can become the marquiss instead?”

“That’s hardly likely. I just wish you would think carefully about your position and your own safety.”

“For my part, I’d like to grant any wish Volf makes of me, but—”

“Guido!”

“I’m joking.” With a hollow laugh, Guido shifted his gaze to the window, staring out into the blackness. “If Volf hadn’t been there to protect me that day, I wouldn’t be alive now.”





Guido had lost count of how many times he'd been forced to relive that dreadful day in his sleep. Even if the nightmares left him in peace one day, some images would remain etched in his memory for eternity. He would never forget the sight of his little brother dragging his mutilated body through a pool of blood, his right leg and arm reduced to stumps, bones protruding from his left hand. Even in this desperate state, the boy had still gripped his sword, trying to haul himself onward. All alone, beside his mother's motionless body, he had still been trying to fight.

When Volf was taken to the temple, Guido had watched him as he'd cried in his sleep. Guido's cowardice had cost his little brother everything, and he was crushed by the guilt. He couldn't bring himself to embrace Volf or offer even the smallest comfort. Unable to face his brother, he'd simply run away.

He'd run and run and run, leaving the young Volf to endure his loneliness and nightmares all alone. Guido knew better than anyone who truly deserved punishment. It wasn't their father's fault for taking three wives. It wasn't his mother's fault for trying to protect him. It wasn't the second wife's fault for getting caught up in her birth family's schemes.

Who was it who'd trembled like an infant in his mother's arms inside the best-armored carriage without even trying to lend his power to the fight? Who was it who'd spared no thought for Fabio after the attack, nor spoken to Eraldo, and had abandoned Volf out of guilt? The source of all this misery was none other than his craven self. A thousand nightmares would be far too light a punishment. Even after ten thousand pleas, he would still not be worthy of forgiveness. He'd allowed his younger brother and the many brave knights to sacrifice themselves so that he could survive the attack without so much as a scratch.

Volf should have resented him, hated him, held him in the utmost contempt—until now, that was how Guido had always assumed he'd felt. Now that he knew how wrong he'd been, however, he was determined never to let guilt or anything else separate him and his brother ever again. Even if Volf himself tried to push him away, he would stand firm. How could he do anything else, knowing what he knew now?

“He’s my little brother. I think it’s only natural that I should want to protect him this time.”

To stand guard over Volf was the only option left to him—the sole means of atonement for his cowardice.

## Working with Pride

“Here’s how the arrangements have progressed thus far.”

In the office within the Merchants’ Guild rented for the Rossetti Trading Company, Ivano apprised Dahlia of the latest developments in the company’s operations. It had been two weeks since their meeting with the Tailors’ and Adventurers’ Guilds. According to Ivano’s report, arrangements for mass-producing Dahlia’s toe socks and drying insoles were almost complete. With regards to the manufacture of these items, there would be no need for any further meetings with the guilds, but there was another duty that the company could not avoid. As soon as the first shipment of socks and insoles was ready, Dahlia would have to pay a second visit to the castle. There was still a fair amount of time to prepare, but a sense of dread had already begun to hang over her.

“If I may, Miss Dahlia, you’re looking a little down in the dumps.”

“Well, you know what happened last time.”

During her first visit to the Order of Beast Hunters’ quarters at the royal castle, the conversation had strayed into the topic of athlete’s foot, which had led to an insinuation that she was a sufferer herself. In her rush to defend herself, she’d shouted at Volf in front of all the other knights, completely forgetting her manners. She wished that that first visit could be enough, but protocol demanded otherwise.

“You’ll be fine. I’m sure Sir Volf was just trying to break the ice for you last time. They’ll all have forgotten about it by now. This next visit should be a simple formality.”

“Formality or not, there’s still so much castle etiquette to learn...”

“Oh, yes, of course. I need to brush up on that myself.”

The pair sighed in unison.

Dahlia had crammed furiously in preparation for her first visit to the castle,

but it seemed her inexperience had soon betrayed her. When the opportunity had arisen, one of the Beast Hunters, Randolph, had kindly given her some pointers. “If you speak to some of the merchants who visit the castle regularly, I’m sure they’ll be happy to offer you further instruction,” he’d said. To that end, Dahlia had asked Gabriella for some introductions. However, she couldn’t help wondering whether the sorts of companies that supplied the castle would even give a newcomer like her the time of day. In truth, she felt very uneasy.

“Ah, there’s something else. We also received a letter and a package from the temple earlier today,” Ivano said.

“The temple? Have you made some kind of arrangement with them?”

“I visited the other day to offer them a small portion of our profits from the toe socks and insoles as a donation. The letter is just a note of thanks. Now, please take a look at this.”

Ivano produced a middling-sized silver box with a magical seal.

“A magically sealed box?”

“There are white crystals inside. I haven’t seen anything like them before. Do you know what they are, Miss Dahlia?”

Nestled inside the box were a number of pure white crystals. Dahlia picked one up and found it surprisingly heavy. The magical power she felt flowing from it reminded her of a fresh, cool breeze.

“I believe these are purifying crystals.” Purifying crystals were on the expensive side, and Dahlia had heard that buying them in bulk could be difficult. “Do you suppose they’re telling us athlete’s foot should be treated with crystals rather than socks and insoles?”

“No, I don’t believe that’s it. They seemed extremely pleased when I delivered the notice regarding our donation.” Did the temple have some objection to their company? Were they dissatisfied with the proposed donation? It was impossible to say. “Wait a moment. Miss Dahlia, something appears to be stuck inside the lid of the box.”

“Perhaps that’ll explain things.”

Ivano peeled the small, neatly folded piece of paper away from the lid and handed it to Dahlia. She unfolded it and began to read.

“‘Purifying crystals offer effective relief from ailments of the foot. In the event that you cannot visit the temple for treatment, please make use of these instead...’ Ivano, what they *mean* is that we should distribute these to anyone in the Beast Hunters who needs them, isn’t it? I mean, they’re not for *me*. They haven’t gotten the wrong idea, have they?”

“I...shouldn’t think so.”

Despite her emphatic pleas for reassurance, Ivano’s response didn’t inspire confidence. In fact, she noticed his gaze begin to wander uncomfortably. Fighting back despair, Dahlia picked up one of the crystals.

“Ivano, do you...want one of these?”

“Yes, please! I don’t want to leave the slightest chance of it coming back.” The man’s sincerity was clear.

“Help yourself.”

“Thank you!”

Ivano took three of the crystals in a leather pouch. As Dahlia watched him, her gaze stopped just below his indigo-blue eyes. The dark circles beneath them were so obvious, she wondered why she hadn’t noticed them earlier.

“Ivano, you have bags under your eyes. I want you to go home at the same time as the guild staff from now on.”

“I’m...not sure that’ll be feasible.”

“Then please slow our operations down. I’ll help you with any essential tasks where I can. I’m able to copy documents and take care of the ledgers.”

“That will be too much of a strain on you, Miss Dahlia.”

“It’ll be an even bigger one if you work yourself to exhaustion. It’s just the two of us running this company, remember?”

Ivano, gazing out of the window, reached up and rubbed his eyes. “Very well. You’re right, of course; we can’t afford for either of us to be out of action. I’ll try

to take it a little easier.”

“Yes, please do.”

“For the time being, I’ll pay someone from the guild to undertake the copying work. I’ll also begin recruiting for permanent employees. Once I find some promising candidates, I’ll hire them for a probationary period, and then, if you’re agreeable, I’ll arrange for them to interview with you. Would that be acceptable?”

“Of course. This is still rather a lot of work for you, though, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. We’re not at the stage where I need to train anyone yet, and we don’t yet need to manage our own clients and manufacturing.”

“Yet” was the key word; all of that lay ahead. At present, the Rossetti Trading Company consisted only of Dahlia and Ivano. They didn’t deal with their clients directly, instead conducting all their business through the Merchants’ Guild. Their products were stored not on their premises—for they had none—but at the Merchants’ Guild, or they could be delivered directly to the castle by the Tailors’ Guild. Dahlia was thankful for such convenient arrangements. When Dahlia imagined all the clients and products they would have to manage in the future, she couldn’t help feeling a bit apprehensive.

“It’s so exciting, thinking about all that’s ahead of us.”

Ivano’s words took her by surprise. “Huh?”

“More people and products are what’ll breathe life into this company. I want to get us our own building—warehouses and stores too. That’ll expand our opportunities even further.”

“I’ve hardly ever seen you look so happy, Ivano.”

“What can I say? I’m a merchant. Let me put it like this: imagine you had a vast warehouse of materials for your toolmaking, more than enough for your needs, with even rare materials easily available. Wouldn’t you be excited?”

“I must admit I would be.”

Suddenly, she understood the source of Ivano’s glee. It would undoubtedly be thrilling to see new doors open up with every step they took, although Dahlia

was keenly aware that possibilities and responsibilities were two sides of the same coin.

“Are there any materials you’d like to order at the moment, Miss Dahlia? I need to replenish our supply of parchment, so if there is anything you want, I’ll be happy to order that too.”

“There are a few things, actually. I’ll write a list.”

She’d ended up using much more kraken tape than expected last month. Her stocks of slime were also running a little low, and there was a particular type she had a mind to use in a future prototype. Her list read:

*10 rolls of kraken tape*

*3 magically sealed boxes (silver)*

*5 cans of green slime (powdered)*

*2 cans of yellow slime (powdered)*

*1 black slime (powdered)*

Although she was only asking for a small amount, she had a feeling the black slime powder might present a problem. She simply didn’t know how readily available it was, but she figured there was no harm in trying her luck. Due to its dangerous properties, it could probably only be safely stored in a magically sealed silver box, and it would be difficult to transport as well. She was fully prepared to be told it was an impossible request.

“They’ll think I’m harassing them if I’m not careful,” she muttered to herself. Her pencil hovered over the list as she debated scoring out the last item until Ivano deftly plucked the paper from her fingers. “Ivano, I haven’t finished yet!”

“If they don’t have it, you can just cancel the order and try elsewhere. I’ll add these to the order form and take it to Orlando & Co. I need to pay a visit anyway to pick up your fairy glass, and we’ll get the best prices there.”

The chairman of Orlando & Co., Ireneo Orlando, had promised to sell materials to the Rossetti Trading Company at wholesale price for the next three years. It would be foolish not to take advantage of his offer. Dahlia bore no ill will toward Orlando & Co., in spite of her abruptly annulled engagement to



Ireneo's brother, but she was still thankful not to have to visit in person.

"Are you sure you don't mind, Ivano? I really ought to do this myself."

"Not at all; it's what I'm here for. In the meantime, boss, perhaps you could see if Madam Gabriella has arranged those introductions for you."

With a grin, the blond man stood and strode swiftly from the room.



Some time passed before Dahlia was able to see Gabriella, the vice-guildmaster. She'd made an appointment in her capacity as the Rossetti Trading Company's chairwoman, but it appeared Gabriella's previous meeting had overrun. Dahlia kept herself occupied by working on her plans for her new magical stove, so the time wasn't wasted.

"Forgive me, Dahlia. I'm afraid my last meeting dragged on a little."

"Oh, no, it's perfectly fine. I'm sorry I'm always bothering you."

"Consulting me about your business is not 'bothering' me, Dahlia. The guild is here to assist you. Never hesitate to ask if there's something we can do for you."

The woman appeared somewhat fatigued as she sat down on the sofa in her office. Dahlia had a feeling there was more to her somber appearance than the dark blue dress she wore today. Perhaps, like Ivano, she'd also been overworking herself lately.

"Now, regarding your lessons in etiquette for the castle, I reached out to two companies and both are willing to lend their assistance. The first is the Zola Company, and the other is Bartolini Trading, whom I was in talks with just earlier. Personally, I recommend the Zola Company. The chairman is a magical toolmaker like yourself."

"Would he happen to be a Mr. Oswald Zola? The one who owns that magical tool shop, the Goddess's Right Eye?"

Surprised to hear Gabriella mention that name, Dahlia couldn't contain her curiosity. Now that she thought of it, Oswald's shop was a grand building situated in the nobles' quarter. It was hardly far-fetched that he might chair a

trading company and supply the castle as well.

“The same. Perhaps you’ve made his acquaintance already? He’s agreed to instruct both you and Ivano—one gilt silver for two hours. I should warn you, though, people often get the wrong idea about Oswald...”

“Um, if it has anything to do with his wives, I’m aware of that. Oswald was a friend of my father’s. I met him just the other day.”

A man like Oswald, who had had no less than three young wives, was bound to become a source of gossip. However, the fact that he had been her father’s friend was far more important to Dahlia.

“Well, I’m glad you know him through Carlo. He has a very kind and gentle manner, and it’s not unusual for ladies to take a shine to him and misconstrue his intentions. In truth, he’s much more dependable than he might appear.”

Her description reminded Dahlia of Volf. Contrary to what one might imagine, it wasn’t easy being an object of universal adoration. In Volf’s particular case, Dahlia felt nothing but sympathy. It was possible that Oswald shared his plight.

“I know firsthand what sort of trouble can arise. Our eldest daughter was only in elementary school when she started going to the Goddess’s Right Eye and buying all sorts of things... The next thing we knew, she was going to send an embroidered handkerchief to Oswald,” said Gabriella with a motherly look of consternation.

A gift of an embroidered white handkerchief from a noblewoman held a special significance. It declared, “You are my first love.”

Since children could only enter elementary school upon passing the entrance exams, not all did so at the same age. However, students were typically nine to fourteen years old. Dahlia had to admire the young girl’s moxie. Few would be so sure of themselves and so bold as to declare they’d found their first love at that age.

“So, what became of the handkerchief?”

“My husband stopped her before she could give it to Oswald. She didn’t speak to us for a full two weeks after that. Leone was in a foul mood too. He wandered about muttering, ‘Damn you, Oswald, hurry up and die already.’”

“Goodness...”

Dahlia wasn't sure it was entirely fair of him to blame Oswald for his daughter's behavior, but she understood how concerned he must have been as a father. Not only was there a considerable age gap between the two, but Oswald had also been married several times before. He was hardly a desirable suitor for the guildmaster's daughter. Now that Dahlia thought of it, however, Oswald might still have been married only once at the time this incident took place.

“Well, love is like the measles, as they say. She gave up on him soon enough, and she's happily married now. We can look back on it and laugh.”

“That's a relief.”

“One never runs short of stories about Oswald, that's for sure.”

“Something tells me I'd be happier not hearing them.”

She was afraid that if she heard any more, she'd be unable to keep a straight face in front of Oswald next time she saw him. He was doing her a considerable favor by agreeing to tutor her in the proper etiquette for the castle. The last thing she wanted was to appear rude. She resolved not to pry too deeply into his past, no matter what others might tell her about him.

“Mr. Oswald must be a busy man, what with his company and his shop to run. Are you sure I won't be taking up too much of his time?”

“You needn't worry about that. He has ample staff to assist him in all his business. He told me once that he actually devotes about half of his time to research. As a rule, he only accepts orders that come with plenty of leeway, and he always takes a vacation when he needs one.”

Oswald appeared to have achieved an enviable work-life balance. Dahlia wondered whether he might teach her and Ivano a bit about that too.

“As you are a woman, you'll not be considered impolite for insisting Ivano attend your lessons with you. Please do so. While I believe Oswald ought to be quite content with three wives, I would advise caution nonetheless.”

“Caution? Surely there's nothing for someone like me to be cautious of.”

“Someone like—Dahlia, is that supposed to be modesty? Or do you truly have that little confidence in yourself? I cannot tell.”

“Well, of course I...don’t have confidence.”

Under Gabriella’s intense, dark-blue gaze, Dahlia’s voice shrank to a murmur.

“You’ve never been a peacock, I grant you, but a little makeup soon brings out your beauty. You’re a company chairwoman with access to the castle and a toolmaker with a promising and profitable future near at hand. You’re well educated and the daughter of a baron. Despite all of that, you still doubt your attractiveness?”

“No one’s ever told me I’m beautiful before, and as for my company, it’s only Ivano and me. It was just luck that I hit on a couple of successes this time. Every time an enchantment fails, I lose money, and you never know how long an invention will keep selling. I may be the daughter of a baron, but I don’t think that means much anymore. Not now that he’s gone.”

Everything Gabriella had pointed out only sounded good if one didn’t dig too deep. The truth was that she was a very ordinary person, and the nature of her work meant that her finances were always unstable. Her being the daughter of a baron meant very little now that her father was dead. She had no other close relatives; as far as family was concerned, she was virtually alone.

“Believe in yourself, Dahlia. Chairman Bartolini, whom I was talking to earlier, came to me in the hopes of arranging a marriage interview with you for his son—less than three months since you broke off your last engagement. That was what was taking so long.”

“A *marriage* interview?”

“Yes, a marriage interview. It’s not the done thing, you know, for nobles. Marriage interviews are never conducted less than three months after one party has broken off an engagement or divorced, but he was adamant that you at least go to dinner or some such with his son. Bartolini is an earl, and you would be his son’s first wife. Not a bad proposition by any measure. What do you say? Would you like to meet him?”

“I’m afraid I have to decline,” Dahlia replied flatly. “I have no interest in

romance or marriage.”

Gabriella narrowed her eyes. “So, would you like me to decline *all* offers that may come your way?”

“Yes, please do.”

“If you’d like to put them off, I imagine continuing to keep company with Sir Volfred will be a fine deterrent. Fair warning, though—it may chase them off for a good long time, or indeed forever.”

“That sounds ideal,” Dahlia said blithely, seemingly completely unfazed.

Something in Dahlia’s expression reminded Gabriella of her own beloved daughter, pouring her heart into every stitch as she embroidered a snow-white handkerchief. Now, as back then, there was little she could do but watch over Dahlia, pretending not to notice her true feelings. Then again, she was older now, and she had in her grasp a modicum of power.

Too softly for Dahlia to hear, Gabriella whispered to herself, “And if your deterrent drags his heels, don’t you worry. I’ll fire a shot across his bow.”



After leaving the vice-guildmaster’s office, Dahlia made straight for the nearest carriage stop to catch a ride home. Gabriella’s story about the embroidered handkerchief had reminded her of her father. She’d embroidered one herself once when she was much younger, perhaps six or seven—just old enough to handle a needle and thread. It was Sofia, the maid, who’d given her the idea.

“One day, you shall embroider a handkerchief of your own,” she’d said to the young Dahlia. “You see, it is traditional for a noble lady to present an embroidered white handkerchief to her first love.”

Dahlia hadn’t quite understood. At that age, her memories from her former life had still been dim and distant, and they contained no experience of romance, in any case. For some reason, that was perhaps linked to her physical development, she’d always had difficulty comprehending memories from stages of life she hadn’t yet reached in this world. Nonetheless, the words “first love” had made an impression on her, and she asked her father whether *he* had ever

received a handkerchief.

He'd looked very grave as he'd replied. "An embroidered handkerchief? No. No one's ever given me one."

Carlo avoided Dahlia's gaze, and she couldn't help noticing something melancholy in his expression. It saddened her as well to see him that way. For whatever reason, her mother must have been unable to give him one.

"Would you still like someone to give you one, even now?"

"Yeah, I suppose it would be nice."

"Even if it was me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Not from my own daughter," she'd expected him to say. "Save it for your future sweetheart." Or perhaps he'd tell her, "Well, go on, then," and reluctantly indulge her. Her predictions were soon proven wrong.

"You bet I would!" he said immediately. "There's nothing else I'd like more!"

Looking back now, Dahlia was sure that he'd just been trying not to hurt her feelings, but she had taken his words to heart and, under Sofia's instruction, had begun embroidering him a handkerchief. They settled on a very simple design of a wild rose, using thread the same shade as Dahlia's hair. Dahlia was determined to present him with it on the day of the winter festival.

She worked on it through every spare moment she had, even getting up at night to continue her needlework in secret. It must be remembered, however, that she was just a young child at the time, not even old enough to attend elementary school. The lines of her design were crooked, and the fabric was puckered—in all honesty, it was a mess. Not only that, but it was speckled with little red dots where she'd clumsily pricked her fingers on the needle. Upon its completion, it looked less like a token of love and more like something that needed exorcising.

"It's cursed! I cursed it!" she'd wept to Sofia, who'd consoled her as best she could.

"It's all right, dear; you did very well."

Sofia had taken the handkerchief and carefully washed, starched, and ironed

it. By the time she was finished, it was looking much more presentable.

“Father? I made you something.”

On the morning of the winter festival, Dahlia brought the handkerchief down to her father in the workshop. However, he didn’t take it from her right away. With a solemn expression, he rose from his chair and then knelt down on one knee before his daughter. He placed his right hand upon his chest in a refined noble gesture of gratitude before at last accepting the gift.

“Thank you, Dahlia. I’ll cherish it.”

Seeing her father beam at her filled Dahlia with a swell of joy, and she returned his smile. If that had been the end of it, it would have been a very heartwarming memory indeed, almost mawkishly so. However, the next thing her father had done was to playfully tousle her hair, ruining her winter festival hairstyle. Irma had arrived earlier that morning, insisting that Dahlia must have something special for the festival. She’d spent an age carefully braiding Dahlia’s hair and even decorated it with pretty floral ornaments. When she returned with refreshments a little while later, she was furious, and she made sure Carlo knew it before sitting down to fix Dahlia’s braids. Dahlia could never think about her handkerchief without revisiting this final act as well.

She doubted that little square of cloth was anywhere to be found in the tower now, but the memories of her father’s large hands mussing up her hair and Irma’s angry pout still remained to make her giggle.

Beneath a clear blue sky, Dahlia stepped from the Merchants’ Guild with a smile.



Ivano did not go directly to Orlando & Co. when he set out to collect the fairy glass. He had several other companies to visit first in order to inform them of his quitting the Merchants’ Guild to join the Rossetti Trading Company. They were all astonished, both by his change of employment and by his new name. However, Ivano had a feeling this news would create some positive buzz.

Considering the outlets and advertising they would need in the near future, it wouldn’t hurt at all to rouse some curiosity and get their name on the lips of

the city's merchants. It was Dahlia's failed engagement to the Orlandos' second son, Tobias, that had first brought her under public scrutiny. However, her activities since then had drawn much greater attention. Not only had she founded her own company, but she had done so with the backing of the guildmaster and Volfred Scalfarotto, no less. In no time at all, she'd developed her enchanted toe socks and drying insoles, which had garnered her access to the castle. It was these extraordinary achievements in such a brief period of time that had truly begun to turn heads.

The only problem was that few had had the opportunity to actually talk to Dahlia about these recent successes. Dahlia's comings and goings between her tower and the Merchants' Guild were always for business. Any other time she went out, she was almost always accompanied either by Volf or by Ivano himself. There were no sister companies among her guarantors, and she had no close relationship with any other company chairs. What's more, her guarantors included a son of Earl Scalfarotto and the Merchants' Guild guildmaster, Viscount Jedda. A newcomer though she was, she could not be taken lightly.

As much as some in the business community might desire information or to establish a relationship, Dahlia was not exactly easy to approach from an outsider's perspective. Ivano, on the other hand, being a former guild employee—still on their books, officially—had become acquainted with a great many of the city's business leaders and assisted in their dealings often. His presence was guaranteed to reassure some of them enough to reach out, and he was determined to take on as many inquiries and business dealings as he could handle. After that, it was all up to his prowess as a merchant.

Ivano climbed back aboard the carriage. Knowing he had a little time before he'd arrive at his next destination, he closed his eyes. Fatigue washed over him in an instant. Just as Dahlia had surmised, he had indeed been spreading himself thin lately. He fell into a doze, and suddenly, he saw a familiar red marsh open out in front of him.

"You good-for-nothing—where the hell have you been?!"

It was his uncle, roaring at him while tears streamed down his face. The man's fist struck him, but he didn't really feel the pain. Ivano had come home that morning in fine spirits, having spent the night at his girlfriend's place. But all



that had greeted him upon his return were his maddened uncle and the sight of three bodies shrouded by a hemp cloth. Out from beneath the cloth peeked three pairs of shoes—his mother’s, his father’s, and his younger sister’s. His uncle grabbed his arms, trying to stop him as he made to pull back the shroud, but he did it anyway. At that moment, he must have seen three faces, lifeless, yet far from at peace. However, he couldn’t recall anything of their expressions. It was as though they had all donned blank white masks.

His father had left a scrawled suicide note.

*I am so sorry. We’ve lost the store because of my mistakes. We’ve lost everything. Your sister has always been sickly, so we will take her too. You must live on without us.*

Ivano had nearly vomited when he’d read it. He could hardly recognize his father’s hand in those shaky, scribbled words. His father had always been neat and precise in everything he’d done. Ivano had known the business was in a rough spot, but his father had always reassured him that everything would turn out all right somehow. Only nineteen and newly in love, he’d thought of nothing else. He’d been blind to what was happening right in front of him.

Darkness began to envelop the bloodred marsh, anguished cries echoing on and on into the gloom.

“Couldn’t I dream about my first date with my wife or something?”

Ivano sighed. That nightmare hadn’t troubled him in some time. He gave his head a little shake, as though to chase the lingering images away. Whenever memories from before he’d come to this city surfaced in his dreams, it felt as though he were looking at them through someone else’s eyes. For him to still be unable to recall his family’s faces after all these years, even in a nightmare... It was too miserable to make light of, but he wasn’t going to allow a nightmare to get the better of him. He never had before, not even back when he’d first arrived here.

He’d been unable to face the funeral arrangements for his parents and sister, so his uncle had taken care of it for him. Once the service was over, the man had approached him with a little money and suggested he leave for the royal capital. Between the sympathetic and curious stares, the callous gossip, and

reminders of his family at every turn, remaining in his hometown would have been suffocating. And so, one evening, as a crimson sun sank below the horizon, he stole away from the place he'd been born. However, contrary to what some might have expected, Ivano did not sink into despair and vanish into obscurity. The sole reason was that he had not left that town on his own. His girlfriend—now wife—had come with him.

When she first suggested to him that they leave together, he refused point-blank. He had no desire to drag her through any more hardship. He told her again and again, "Your family is here. Your work is here. I can't give you a single reason to come with me; I have nothing." But she wouldn't listen.

The evening he intended to disappear from the town in secret, he found her waiting for him, bags packed, at the carriage stop. He could only stand there, struck dumb with amazement, as she declared, "I'll be your family now!" and thrust an engagement bracelet onto his wrist without even waiting for a reply.

The bracelet was silver, set with blue moonstones. To this day, Ivano had never seen one more beautiful.

"We have arrived, Mr. Mercadante," the driver called.

"Thank you."

Ivano double-checked his shirt and tie, making sure his top button was fastened and his blue tie was straight and tight. His dark-blue three-piece suit was sweltering under the fierce sun, but Ivano was not about to let a little heat undo his impeccable appearance. He carefully dabbed the sweat from his brow and nape with a handkerchief before calmly pushing open the doors of Orlando & Co. He approached the front desk, announcing himself loudly enough for all around to hear.

"Good day. I am Ivano from the Rossetti Trading Company. I have an order to collect from you and another one to place."

Instantly, the murmur in the office grew quieter, and Ivano became aware of many inquisitive glances darting his way. Ivano had a number of acquaintances here at Orlando & Co., but he had a distinct feeling that it was the name Rossetti, not his own, that had brought down this peculiar atmosphere.

“One moment, please, sir.”

The young woman attending the desk didn't appear to be Tobias's new wife Ivano had heard about. She bowed politely before disappearing into the back rooms.

“Ivano...?”

Hearing a familiar voice, Ivano turned to face the owner with a placid expression. It was Tobias. He looked a little thinner since Ivano had seen him last, and a little paler in the face.

“How nice to see you, Tobias. It's been a while.”

“And you. Er... If I may, how do you come to be representing the Rossetti Trading Company while working for the Merchants' Guild?”

“I resigned from my post at the guild. I'm employed at the Rossetti Trading Company now, and let me tell you, I don't think I've ever been busier.”

He hadn't officially quit the guild quite yet, but Tobias didn't need to know that. Ivano surprised even himself with what a champion he was becoming for Dahlia. He wanted to leave her former fiancé in no doubt as to where his loyalties lay.

“Chairwoman Rossetti is working extremely hard as well, but flourishing.” Suddenly aware of his own wickedness, Ivano gave Tobias the sunniest smile he could muster.

“Indeed...?”

Ivano braced himself for a remark or prying question, but the man's quiet reply was neither—anticlimactic, if anything. He actually looked relieved.

“She's...doing well, then.”

“Yes, very well indeed,” Ivano answered simply, uncertain of Tobias's meaning. He saw the other's lips move almost imperceptibly.

“I'm glad.”

Ivano made no response to the barely audible whisper. That bridge had been burned. He had no intention of telling Dahlia anything that might weigh

uncomfortably on her mind.

“Thank you for your patience, sir,” said the receptionist, reappearing. “Please come this way.”

“Thank you.”

Followed by a dozen pairs of eyes, Ivano was shown to a reception room where he found the company chairman, Ireneo, waiting for him. Were his eyes playing tricks, or was this man also looking a little thinner than he used to? He also couldn't help noticing the dark circles beneath the man's eyes—not that he was in any position to criticize. Those dark, almond-shaped eyes, very much like Ireneo's predecessor's, fixed on Ivano. For just a moment, he felt a distinct sensation of being appraised.

“Welcome. Do come in. I apologize for all the trouble my fool of a brother caused for you recently.”

“Oh, no need for apologies, sir. I am no longer with the guild; I work for the Rossetti Trading Company now. I've heard from the chairwoman that the matter is entirely settled, so let us speak no more of it.”

Ireneo invited him to sit down upon a sofa, and a clerk served them both tea. As the clerk left the room, Ireneo placed a silver, magically sealed box on the table.

“This is the fairy glass requested by Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“Thank you very much.” Ivano opened the box, inspecting the iridescent crystals inside. “Beautiful, isn't it? I'm sure she'll be delighted.”

He'd known more or less what to expect, having heard Dahlia describe fairy glass before, but the beauty of the real thing far surpassed what he'd pictured. Light in every color of the rainbow danced among the delicate, glittering, crystalline shards. He could see it shining more beautifully than any gemstone in a piece of jewelry.

“I have another order to place. I'm sorry it isn't larger. Please let me know if there is anything too difficult to procure.”

Ireneo took the order form from him. His brows furrowed for a few seconds

as he examined it, but his cool, impassive expression soon returned.

“I believe this should all be within our capability to find, although the black slime powder may take a little more time to locate.”

“You have my gratitude. Now then, I’ll just sign this for you...”

Ivano placed his signature upon the receipt for the fairy glass, deliberately writing it a little larger than usual, and handed it to Ireneo.

“Is that all in order?”

“Yes, Mr...Mercadante, is it?” Ireneo queried, hesitating as he read out the name and fixing Ivano with a quizzical look.

“Yes, that is my name. I am Ivano Mercadante.”

“Pardon my curiosity, but may I ask what’s prompted this name change? Have you been adopted into another family, perhaps?”

“No, I’ve simply gone back to my original one. My father was Oris Mercadante.”

Ivano saw the other man’s eyes widen.

“You don’t mean...the chairman of the Mercadante Company?”

“Yes, indeed. I am his son. I never imagined that you would remember our name. What an honor. Your ever-forethoughtful father was the first to cut ties with us, as I recall.”

Ireneo was unable to disguise his shock. With a twisted sense of satisfaction, Ivano smiled coldly.

It had been sixteen years ago. A company his father had been a guarantor for had gone under, leaving the Mercadante Company saddled with considerable debt. As word of this spread, the company’s business partners began to make their excuses and sever ties one by one. The effect snowballed, and Ivano’s father was soon left high and dry.

Orlando & Co. had been one of the first three companies to jump ship. Cutting off a failing partner was common sense for any business; Ivano didn’t resent them for it, but the names of those companies and even the order in

which they'd left all remained etched in his memory. Ireneo, of course, would only have been in his late teens at the time, just learning the ropes—the same as Ivano had been. He had no grounds to hold anything against the man.

“Forgive me for dredging up the past,” Ivano said. “I’ve no intention of making trouble over ancient history. I was just pleased to hear that you still remember my father.”

Hearing that, Ireneo quickly regained his composure.

“Yes, I recall that your grandfather was also a very shrewd and talented man.”

He had to admire Ireneo’s mettle. There could be no doubt that he had the ideal character to run a sizable company like this. The man clasped his hands, and his dark eyes glanced at Ivano once again.

“Would you say you are more like your father or your grandfather, Mr. Mercadante?”

Keeping his expression impassive in response to that barbed question took all of Ivano’s resolve.

While famous as a shrewd businessman, Ivano’s grandfather had often been privately criticized for his ruthlessness. His father, by contrast, was respected as a kind man of integrity, but he was ultimately too soft for the cutthroat world of business. Some time after inheriting the successful company Ivano’s grandfather had built, his father had lost everything trying to help a friend in need. Ivano, powerless to change his family’s tragic fate, had simply fled.

During these sixteen long years, even after he had abandoned his old name, the bitterness clouding his heart had never ebbed. As a member of the Merchants’ Guild staff, his role had been only to support others in their entrepreneurial endeavors; all the while, he had constantly imagined what *he* would do were he in their shoes. Now, at long last, he had flown from under Gabriella’s wing to become a merchant in his own right. He didn’t intend to run from anything ever again. Bruised and battered though it was, he had never let go of his pride as a merchant. The name that he had chosen to bear once again belonged neither to his grandfather nor his father; it was his own.

“My wife says I don’t resemble either of them. Sons are more likely to take

after their mothers, in her view.”

It was a subtle jab; Ivano had noticed that he’d seen very little of Ireneo’s mother in Orlando & Co.’s offices lately. This was unusual, and he could only guess that there had been some mishap involving a noble. Regardless, Ireneo’s courteous smile did not falter.

“I’m told I take after my father, myself,” he said.

“Indeed? I’ve always heard that he was blessed with the gift of foresight. If only we could all be so lucky.”

Of course, had the former chairman truly been so prescient, he would surely never have allowed his son to hurt or abandon Dahlia the way he had. From Dahlia’s perspective, the separation had turned out to be an enormous blessing in disguise, but who knew the true cost to Orlando & Co.?

Ireneo slightly arched an eyebrow. It appeared he’d struck a nerve. “I pray that our business shall be fair and prosperous.”

“As do I, sir. Fair and prosperous,” Ivano replied, echoing the phrase as they both extended their hands and shook.

It amused Ivano to find that each of their palms was as damp with sweat as the other’s.

Whether their two firms would flourish side by side in the coming years or meet in a fierce clash, Ivano couldn’t say. Whatever fate had in store for them, though, he was resolved to meet it head-on. Besides, would they really be merchants if they weren’t staring each other down with these practiced smiles, each trying to read the other’s mind and guess his next move? This time, Ivano was stepping into the world of business on his own terms, and he was not alone. Fortune had blessed him with the company of a goddess who turned all she touched to gold; at her side, he felt invincible.

“The Rossetti Trading Company looks forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman.”

This time, Ivano’s smile came from the heart.



“There’s something else I need to apologize to you for.”

Yesterday evening, Volf had sent a messenger to the Green Tower. According to his letter, there was an urgent matter he needed to talk to Dahlia about, and he asked whether they could meet sometime the next day or the day after. Dahlia had agreed to see him around midmorning.

He duly arrived bearing a box of cake. She showed him up to the second floor, and before he’d even taken a seat, he bowed his head in an apology.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“The people following us the other night were guards sent by my older brother.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s good to know. It wasn’t anyone sinister, then.”

Dahlia held a hand to her chest as she sighed with relief. She’d been concerned that someone might have been out to harm Volf. She invited him to sit down, and he finally obliged. However, his expression was still troubled.

“There’s...one other thing. My brother’s been researching you, and I’m afraid I heard a little bit of what he found. I’m deeply sorry. He did it out of concern for me.”

“Erm, Volf, is that all?”

“He went prying into your affairs behind your back. Aren’t you angry?”

“Well, it doesn’t exactly feel good, but you *are* the son of an earl. I can appreciate him being worried about you spending time with a commoner like me. Besides, it’s not as though I have much to hide. My past isn’t all that interesting.”

She didn’t have a criminal record, nor had she been a high-flying honor student; there was little of note in her activities. She’d spent her childhood in the tower and the surrounding neighborhood and her student days going between the tower and school. Even since becoming a professional toolmaker, she’d never traveled far, spending her time between the tower and other places of business. Beyond that, she’d only ventured into town to eat with her father or friends or to go shopping. It was only in this last month that she’d started to



go out far more frequently, and that was mainly with Volf.

All she could think of that might be of interest were her inventions—her waterproof cloth, toe socks, and so on. There was the matter of her engagement, of course, but it had been her former fiancé who'd instigated that affair, not her.

Just then, a thought stopped her in her tracks. How long had those guards been following Volf, exactly? If they'd been tailing him since she and Volf had set out that day, they might have seen her clutching his sleeve as they moved through the crowds. They might even have seen him scoop her up into his arms as he leaped for the rooftops. The very thought made Dahlia want to curl into a ball of shame and roll under the table. She felt her cheeks heating up.

"Dahlia?"

"I was just thinking about what we did the other day. It's rather embarrassing. I was holding on to your sleeve like a child."

"Now you mention it...I wonder how much detail they reported back to him."

It appeared that Volf was also reflecting on his behavior. Dahlia noticed his cheeks redden—a rare sight—before he put a hand over his eyes and hung his head.

"A-Anyway, thank you for the cake," she said quickly. "Why don't I make us some tea?"

"If...you don't mind..."

Volf didn't move until Dahlia had gone to the kitchen.

"Now, drink up while it's hot. This cheesecake looks delightful."

With a hot cup of tea and a plate of cheesecake in front of him, Volf appeared to perk up a little.

"No matter what I do, I seem to end up apologizing to you in the end."

"Don't be silly. You've nothing to worry about."

He still looked somewhat dispirited, dropping a whole three lumps of sugar into his tea—unusual for him.

“My brother’s bought a bit of land in the West District. He’s going to have a carriage station built there. Says it’s an investment.”

“That’s welcome news. It’s so difficult to get a carriage in this part of town, some people even move away because of it.”

“It’s that much of a problem?”

“Yes. The omnibuses aren’t very frequent here either, so if you have urgent business, or if someone gets sick or injured, you can end up in a real bind. I’m sure the locals will be delighted.”

It wasn’t rare for Volf to travel around the city by carriage, but he mostly went on foot. Perhaps his strengthening magic and swift feet had somewhat blinded him to the helpfulness of readily available carriages.

“We’ll have one of our carriages stationed there too; you’re more than welcome to use it for traveling to the guild or anywhere else in town. I’m away on missions so often, the horses’ll get bored otherwise.”

“By one of yours, you mean the Scalfarottos’?”

“Yes, but I’ll make sure it’s not anything too grand. I could even have your company name put on it if you like.”

“Oh, no, that’s all right. Ivano’s already made plans to buy a company carriage.”

“Fair enough. Please use this one in the interim, then. You’re a chairwoman now; you should avoid traveling alone where possible.”

There was something in Volf’s tone of voice that bothered Dahlia. About to slide her fork into a piece of cheesecake, she paused and leveled her gaze at him. He was the first one to glance away.

“Has something else happened?” Dahlia asked.

“Well...sort of.”

“If it’s something you’d rather not talk about, I won’t force you, but if you *do* have something to say, then please get it out.”

She could promise nothing more than to listen, but that might be enough for

him to get whatever was troubling him off his chest. His gaze remained glued to the floor as he spoke.

“Thankfully it was just my brother’s guards this time, but I can’t help thinking what could happen if someone with a grudge against me tried to take it out on you. It scares me.”

“Nobody’s going to come after me, Volf.”

“You can’t know that. You never know who could be out there plotting against you or how they’re going to act. I learned that recently.”

“There has been something, hasn’t there? Tell me.”

“During the joint maneuvers the other day, a group of knights tried to attack me. Apparently, the leader’s fiancée had ordered him to invite me to a tea party. He wanted me injured so he’d have an excuse not to.”

“A group of knights? Gods, Volf, are you all right?!”

She couldn’t see any obvious wounds on him, but perhaps he’d just been patched up with healing magic.

“Thanks to the sköll bracelet, they didn’t put a single scratch on me. My comrades had my back too. Those men won’t get off lightly. I should think they’ll be sent back to basic training.”

“But this is awful! How could they do something like that?”

“The one giving orders was the son of a marquis. The others probably felt they couldn’t refuse. My brother came all the way out to the training ground to make sure I was all right. I doubt anything like that’ll happen again.”

Volf’s elder brother was slated to become a marquis once he inherited the Scalfarotto estate from his father. Volf had mentioned that they’d recently begun talking again after some years apart. It was comforting to know that someone in such a powerful position would be looking out for him. Even so, what those knights had done was unconscionable. Such behavior was far beneath men of their station.

It wasn’t as if Volf had even done anything wrong! Why hadn’t that man taken the matter up with his fiancée before taking his temper out on someone

completely innocent? It was all Dahlia could do to control her anger as she sipped her tea. Glancing at Volf, she saw that his golden eyes were filled with melancholy. He opened his mouth to say something, closed it, and then, after a pause, he finally spoke.

“Taking everything into account, I think for your safety’s sake, it’d probably be best if you kept your distance from me, except when really—”

“I will not.” The words shot out before she had even half a moment to think. “Oh, Volf, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt like that.”

“No, don’t be. To be honest, I feel exactly the same way. That’s what I was about to say—this is what’d be best for your safety, but it’s not what I want, selfish as that might be.” Volf smiled gently, the darkness that had dwelled in his eyes moments ago now gone. Dahlia was deeply relieved to see it.

“I’m sorry. I just want you to be careful and let me do what I can to protect you. Not that that’s a whole lot; it’s thanks to my brother that you’ll have that carriage to use.”

“You do more than enough for me. The carriage will be a lifesaver.”

“I’m glad. Use it as often as you like. I know I’m probably worrying too much, but if you notice anything strange while you’re out in town or wherever, let me know right away, will you?”

“I will. I promise.”

Dahlia nodded and brought her teacup to her lips.

“If only I were just an ordinary commoner, I could be with you without all this fuss.”

Volf’s words were muttered so softly, Dahlia barely caught them. She’d already known that he felt this way, but hearing it spoken aloud made it that much more heartrending. Volf was a nobleman, she a commoner. For them to simply spend time with each other as friends was, in itself, abnormal. The relationship they’d managed to build in the short time since they’d met was nothing short of a miracle.

Dahlia had been surprised at herself when she’d interrupted Volf so forcefully,

instantly bristling at the suggestion that he distance himself from her for her safety. She realized something then. Be it as a friend, a useful magical toolmaker, or a business associate, Dahlia wanted to remain right by Volf's side for as long as she possibly could, talking with him, laughing with him, and making memories. This wish had been born without her even noticing it, and now it was nestled deep in her heart.

Was it jealousy? A desire to monopolize a friend she held dear? Was she trying to preserve the feeling of ease and comfort she enjoyed so much in his company? Or was she simply terrified of being left alone?

She'd never be able to admit to his face how attached to him she'd truly become. Whatever these emotions were, they had a grip on her that she wouldn't be shaking off for a long time to come.

What could she do to ensure that she wasn't a burden on him? To ensure that he wouldn't *need* to protect her? She could throw herself into crafting useful new inventions, aim to be made a baroness, and expand the Rossetti Trading Company, but these would all surely be trifling accomplishments in the eyes of the Scalfarottos. Still, it was better than doing nothing.

She would work to better herself and her company the way she knew how—little by little, step by step. She wanted to earn the right to stand as an equal at Volf's side, if such a thing was possible. At the very least, she wanted to become strong enough that he would never need to worry about her for as long as they were together. It wasn't much, but she still had her pride.

"This tea's gone a little cold, hasn't it? I'll brew us a fresh pot."

Dahlia couldn't quite bring herself to look Volf in the eye as she smiled and rose to her feet.

# The Magical Toolmaker, the Knight, the Craftsman, and the Merchant

“I am Fermo from the Gandolfi Workshop. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Volfred Scalfarotto of the Order of Beast Hunters. Delighted to meet you also.”

Fermo stood and bowed politely, but he looked even less friendly than he had when Dahlia had first met him, not even making an attempt at a smile. Whether he was nervous or simply on his guard due to Volf being a nobleman, she wasn't sure. The tower's workshop began to feel awfully claustrophobic.

Volf sat at Dahlia's side, Fermo opposite Dahlia, and Ivano next to Fermo. It was a rather motley crew to be sitting around the same table. Dahlia's plan for this afternoon had been to consult with Fermo about the improvements to her compact magical stove. With it being a magical tool, she thought the most sensible venue would be her workshop, where she could make adjustments while discussing the process with the craftsman. Knowing Dahlia lived alone and also wanting some input on the discussions, Ivano had decided to accompany Fermo. Volf, who'd arrived that morning, turned out to have the whole day free and had elected to stay.

It was Volf who'd sparked Dahlia's interest in improving the stove in the first place; it was born out of her desire to make his expeditions a more pleasant experience. Everyone gathered here had some connection to the company, and Dahlia reasoned that if they all put their heads together, they might come up with good ideas.

However, she hadn't reckoned on Fermo becoming quite so prickly, and she wondered if he'd had a bad experience with a noble before. She was afraid that Fermo's hostility might sour Volf's mood as well.

“Er, Mr. Fermo?” she inquired tentatively.

“I’m not familiar with noble customs and manners. I wouldn’t want to cause Sir Scalfarotto any offense.”

“Please don’t worry about any of that,” Volf interjected.

“I had a feeling this would happen.” Ivano, watching Fermo and Volf with a rueful smile, turned to Dahlia. “Before we get down to business, perhaps we ought to have a chat and break the ice a little?”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll go and put the kettle on.”

“That’s very kind. Thank you.”

It was a little early for afternoon tea, but if it would help to settle Fermo’s unease, she wasn’t going to argue about it. She hurried up to the second floor.

“Right then, gentlemen, while Miss Dahlia’s occupied, what d’you say we cut the niceties and get cozy with each other?”

“Scuse me?”

“What was that, Ivano?”

Taken aback by his abrupt change of tone, the remaining two men stared at Ivano dubiously.

“There’s not much time, so I’ll get to the point. Mr. Fermo, Sir Volf here isn’t keeping Dahlia as his lover. They’re friends and colleagues.”

“Ivano, what’s this all about?” Fermo asked.

“From what I’ve heard, the guild’s a hotbed of rumors at the moment,” Ivano continued. “I don’t doubt you’ve heard some of them, Mr. Fermo, and you’re rightly concerned about Miss Dahlia. Especially with your appearance being what it is, Sir Volf.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?” Volf grumbled, making no effort to hide his scowl.

Seeing that, Fermo reached up and awkwardly ruffled his salt-and-pepper hair. “So that’s how it is. Pardon me. I heard all sorts of things at the guild today, and it got my dander up a little.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Gandolfi, I’d appreciate it if you could tell me

exactly what those things were,” Volf said.

“Well, sure, but it ain’t too pleasant. Er, I mean, I’m afraid it wasn’t very complimentary, Sir Scalfarotto.” Realizing he’d slipped into too casual a manner of speaking, Fermo quickly corrected himself.

Volf shook his head in response. “Let’s talk as equals. All this formality just gets in the way. This is how I’m used to speaking.”

“I don’t know...”

“Mr. Fermo, I talk informally as well when it’s just us folk from the company,” said Ivano. “You’ve no need to worry. Anyhow, I’d like to hear about these rumors myself.”

“Well, all right. That suits me; I’d trip up sooner or later anyhow. Call me Fermo, then.”

The craftsman twisted open the top button of his shirt and let out a shallow sigh. He knew there was no point in concealing or sugarcoating what he’d heard, so he told it to them straight.

“Well, the first person who spoke to me said, ‘Miss Dahlia left her fiancé, the Orlandos’ second son, to focus on her work, and *then* she took up with Sir Scalfarotto so she could found her company.’ Another one told me, ‘That Miss Dahlia’s just cozying up to Sir Scalfarotto so he’ll pay her business expenses.’ Then someone else said, ‘After her engagement was broken off, Sir Scalfarotto took advantage of her and snatched her up first chance he got.’ Out at the carriage stop, I heard, ‘Miss Dahlia even got Ivano wrapped around her finger and poached him from the guild.’”

“Later on, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to describe these people to me,” Ivano said. “They’ve got good imaginations, but not even the slightest grasp on the facts.”

“Where do they *get* these ideas? Dahlia was already a chairwoman by the time I met her, and we’ve only ever been friends.”

While Ivano’s face held a calm smile, the pen in his grip was slowly bending. Volf looked grim and let out an exasperated sigh.



Fermo, watching the mismatched pair, spoke up. “Miss Dahlia always seems like such a sensible, hardworking young lady to me. How’d that kind of gossip even get started?”

“Well, some of it will have come from Orlando & Co. itself in order to salvage Tobias’s reputation. Miss Dahlia consented to them spreading word that she and Tobias had split so she could further her career. Unfortunately, it seems that some people are putting their own crass spin on it. Of course, you have to consider that she’s a single woman chairing her own company, doing well enough to have been invited to the castle, and she’s an extremely talented craftswoman to boot. That sort of person attracts a lot of envy.”

There were the women who’d pestered Dahlia for an introduction to Volf. There were those who resented a talented young woman like her founding her own company. There were bitter individuals filled with envy who were happy to repeat any rumor they heard, regardless of how little truth it might contain. Jealousy had a way of twisting and distorting reality to suit its purposes.

“Well, that explains it.”

“Mr. Fermo, it may not really be my place to tell you this, but I think it’d be better if you knew the truth of the matter. Until recently, Miss Dahlia was engaged to the Orlandos’ second son. But he found himself another woman and decided to end their engagement on the day before their wedding.”

“Unbelievable.”

“That’s one word for it. After that, knowing she’d no longer be able to procure her toolmaking materials through Orlando & Co., Miss Dahlia decided she’d found her own trading company. That just shows you what an enterprising spirit she has. Sir Volf, as her friend, became a guarantor for the company, and I, seeing an opportunity for myself, approached Miss Dahlia of my own volition. Madam Gabriella will be happy to confirm these details.”

“It’s just as he says,” Volf chimed in. “Dahlia’s never been at fault in any of this. Any unpleasant talk about our relationship is entirely my responsibility.”

His golden eyes gazed entreatingly at Fermo. As he looked back at the young knight, the man finally understood how deeply mistaken all the gossip and rumors had been.

“I understand. Next time I hear anything like that, I’ll put ’em right.”

“No, no, I’d like you to let it slide. Although I would appreciate any information about the people spreading these rumors. In fact, it would be safer if people believe Sir Volf is keeping Dahlia as a lover.”

“Ivano, wait. What about Dahlia’s honor?”

“Our priority at this moment is to protect her from real harm. Her honor will be safe once the company expands and grows more powerful. It’s been less than a month since her engagement ended, yet we’re snowed under with business proposals from other companies, and there’s even been talk of marriage interviews. If we announced to the world that the two of you are just friends, how long do you think it’d take for the letters of introduction to start pouring in?” Ivano asked with a blithe smile.

The only movement Volf made was to cock his head. “Marriage interviews? With Dahlia?”

“Yes. You hadn’t heard? Somebody requested one through Madam Gabriella, though she turned them down on the spot, of course. Seemingly, Miss Dahlia has asked her to reject all such requests from now on.”

“Who did this request come from?”

“Viscount Bartolini. He hoped to set up an interview with Miss Dahlia for his son.”

“I see.”

Leaving the suddenly stony-faced Volf to his thoughts, Ivano turned his smile on Fermo. “By the way, Mr. Fermo, there’s something I’d very much like to find out from you.”

“What’s that?”

“Breasts or behinds?”

“Now what kinda question is that to ask a sober man? I don’t mind a little fun, but that’s too far,” Fermo said disapprovingly.

However, Ivano was unfazed. “I find the answer tells you a lot about a man’s nature. So, which is it?”

“Well, breasts, if you must know, but it’s the back of the neck I like best, truth be told.”

“Back of the neck? You’re a rare breed. Ah, *that* explains why your wife always wears her hair up.”

“Mr. Ivano, can I ask why you’ve been paying so much attention to my wife’s hairstyle?” Fermo’s deep-green eyes fixed Ivano with an uncommonly thorny stare.

“Ivano, weren’t we meant to be ‘getting cozy’?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it! Mr. Fermo’s wife’s been visiting the guild for a long time, so I’ve seen her often, that’s all. It’s part of the job at the guild to make sure you remember people.”

“Uh-huh. So, what about you, Mr. Ivano, Sir Volf? Which side are you on?”

“Breasts for me.”

“Behinds.”

Fermo nodded at the immediate replies. “While we’re on the subject, I’d like to ask what your age range is. ‘Specially you, Mr. Ivano.”

“Hey, hey, I only have eyes for my wife!”

“I...” Suddenly, Volf’s gaze darted upward. “We’ll have to leave it there. Dahlia just opened the door upstairs.”

“You’ve got good ears, Sir Volf,” said Ivano.

“I learned my lesson last time,” he replied.

The first time Ivano had drawn him into a conversation about the female body, Dahlia had overheard. He could never forget the frigid smile she’d given him after that. He regretted the episode enormously and wished he could just erase it. Not prepared to take any chances this time, he’d cast his strengthening magic at full strength and listened intently to the sounds from the floor above all throughout the conversation. Not only that, but at the moment Ivano had broached the subject, he’d activated the anti-eavesdropper in his pocket at full power.

“And I think that’s my cue to tell you all about my latest mission!” Volf announced.

“An excellent idea!”

“Honestly...”

Fermo couldn’t help smiling faintly at the other two as they swiftly changed the subject without missing a beat. At his age, he ought to have known better than to give any credence to gossip. After everything he’d heard, he’d been picturing a slimy aristocrat with nothing but good looks to boast of and a greedy merchant lured from the guild’s staff by the promise of gold. But having met them and talked to them, all he saw now was a pair of straightforward, honest men. He completely understood now why these two stood at Dahlia’s side and indeed why she allowed them to. Fermo found himself hoping that he might also have a place in this little circle. It looked like it would be a fun ride.

“Yeah, let’s hear all about it, then. I’ll bet it’s a good story.”



By the time Dahlia brought down the tray of tea, all three men were merrily chatting about Volf’s recent harpy hunt. There wasn’t a hint of the awkwardness that had made the air so stifling earlier; in just these last few minutes, Fermo and Volf had gotten on a first-name basis and were talking as equals. Their loud, cheerful voices almost made her a little jealous.

“I’m glad to see that you’re feeling more comfortable, Mr. Fermo.”

“Mr. Ivano here’s got a real way with words. Feels like we’re all friends now,” he replied, smiling cheerfully.

Feeling very relieved, Dahlia served the tea. Once they’d all emptied their cups and had a little time to relax, Dahlia retrieved two of her new stoves from a shelf.

“Here are the stoves I’ve been working on. I’m thinking of calling them ‘camp stoves.’”

All three men peered intently at the items as she placed them down on the table.

“Wow, look at the size of them!” Volf exclaimed. “What a difference.”

“They look very easy to transport.”

“Mind if I pick one up?” Fermo asked.

“Not at all. Feel free to disassemble it too, if you like. The lid doubles up as a pot.”

After taking off his jacket and hanging it over the back of his chair, Fermo wasted no time in removing the lid. He began carefully disassembling the stove, taking time to inspect each component as he went, such as the magical crystal compartment and the heat dial.

“You’ve done well to pare it down this much,” he said at last.

“Thank you. Those books you gave me were extremely helpful.” Dahlia was buoyed by the craftsman’s praise, but she noticed that Volf was looking somewhat uncertainly at the pot that served as the stove’s lid. “Is something bothering you, Volf?”

“Oh, not really; it’s just a small thing. I was just wondering whether this pot would be big enough. We’ve got a lot of big eaters in the Beast Hunters, you see. I guess you don’t need to cook all your food at once, though, so it’s not necessarily a problem.”

The Order of Beast Hunters was made up entirely of adult men. Their expeditions were physically demanding, so they’d require hefty meals to keep them going. She’d been so focused on shrinking the stove that she’d completely forgotten to factor this in.

“Why not simply make the pot a little deeper?” Ivano suggested.

“That would make it taller and bulkier, though.”

“Well, how about making it collapsible?” Fermo suggested. “You’d just need to have the sides made out of a series of linked S-shaped sheets. It should be doable with the same steel and copper layers you’re using now.”

“Won’t that work be awfully expensive, Mr. Fermo?” Dahlia queried.

“It wouldn’t be cheap, I grant you.”

Linking thin S-shaped metal sheets to create a concertina effect was a technique used in crafting metal hoses. Shaping the metal correctly required considerable time, effort, and precision. It was a good idea, but the expense of employing a craftsperson to carry out this part of the manufacturing would be too great.

“Would you say it actually needs to be as small as this, Sir Volf?” asked Ivano.

“Well, this size is fantastic, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world if it was a tiny bit bigger.”

The very simplest solution would be to create a prototype one size larger than these ones on the table, but that would inevitably increase the stoves’ weight and bulk. What a conundrum this was.

“If there’s anything else that strikes you, please let me know,” said Dahlia.

“Since we can afford a little extra weight, it might be good to have a lid for the pot, for when you’re cooking stews and the like. A frying pan would be great too, though that’s probably pushing it a little,” said Volf.

“I could make a frying pan out of some thinnish metal sheeting and have it double as a lid for the pot.”

“You might as well make a pair of stacking pots,” Fermo responded. “That’ll give you a large pot and a shallow pot that can also be used as a frying pan.”

That entailed making two pots of slightly different sizes, so one would fit snugly inside the other. It would be a neat solution, but it would add a little too much weight for Dahlia’s liking.



“What sorts of handles would you put on these stacking pots?” she asked Fermo.

“I’d make them out of thick wire and have them fold in against the side of the pot. You’d need to make sure there’s enough of a size difference between the pots to accommodate that. If one strand won’t be strong enough, you can use two and have them fold to the left and right.”

“Isn’t it more compact with removable handles?”

“I think you’d be better off with fixed ones. They’d be too easy to lose otherwise.”

“Looks like it’s going to get expensive no matter what we do.”

“Can’t be helped. If it’s necessary, it’s got to be paid for.”

Each of them—the magical toolmaker, the knight, the craftsman, and the merchant—had their own points of view and priorities, leading to the conversation meandering haphazardly as they tried to find reconciliation.

“What did you have in mind for the selling price, Miss Dahlia?”

“I was thinking about three gilt silver.”

“And how does that compare to the cost of materials and labor?”

“Materials come to about one gilt silver, one silver. In terms of labor, each stove takes roughly two hours to produce.”

“You’ll either need to raise the price or cut the cost of materials somehow. As a rule, you need to be making at least a fifty percent profit after material and labor costs.”

“Fifty percent? That’s high.”

“Running a company isn’t the same as running a workshop. If your profit margins are too low, you won’t have anything left over for research and development or advertising. How would *you* go about cutting costs in this situation, Mr. Fermo?”

Ivano held up one of the stoves, addressing Fermo with the unmistakable tone of a merchant. After mulling over the question for a few seconds, the



other man shook his head.

“That’s a tough one. You could always thin the metal further, but you’d be weakening the whole structure.”

“I don’t see a problem with raising the price,” said Volf.

“You’re sure there’s that much room in the order’s budget? That’s taxpayers’ money, you know, not to mention the fact that you’ve got a vested interest in this company. It’s hard to see you swinging that one.”

“Don’t worry about that; we’ll pay for these out of our own pockets,” Volf said assuredly as he ran his hands over one of the stoves. “These stoves will be a godsend. While we’re out in the field, we eat rye bread and dried meat morning and evening, plus some lukewarm soup with dried vegetables if we’re lucky. For lunch and snacks, we get cheese, nuts, and dried fruit. Now and then, there’s a glass of wine with dinner. That can go on for anywhere from two days to over a month.”

“I didn’t realize... That sounds dreadful.”

“How do all the nobles cope with that?” Fermo asked.

“I suppose we just get used to it. It’s definitely not unheard of for some men to quit because of the food or even get sick from it, though.”

“But it must affect your missions if it’s that bad. Something’s got to be done about it.”

“Yeah, I agree. Considering how any of those meals could be our last, you’d think they could make them a little more...”

Volf trailed off and fell silent, and so did the other three. For the men of the Order of Beast Hunters, every expedition meant risking life and limb. Every time they set off into the wilderness of Ordine, they knew they might not return and that every meager meal along the road could be the last they ever had. For many, that would have become reality. Volf would have seen it with his own eyes. He himself was one of the Scarlet Armors, those said to be more at risk of being killed in battle than any other in the order.

“I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have put it like that,” he said. “It was just an example.”

“No, no, it’s an important thing to consider,” Ivano replied. “I’ve...seen the funerals myself, last year and this year.”

“We have more mages and priests with us these days, so there aren’t as many casualties as there used to be. But that’s the trouble with monsters—they’re unpredictable. No matter how careful you try to be, there’ll always be accidents.”

While Dahlia could hear this conversation perfectly, she was doing her utmost not to listen. Her lips pursed, she stared silently down at one of the stoves on the table.

“Say, are these things safe to use inside tents?”

To her relief, Fermo stepped in to change the subject.

“They are, yes,” she replied hurriedly, “Although they still represent a fire hazard and should only be used in places with good ventilation. Since the pot sits directly on the heating element, this version can be used outside even when there’s a breeze.”

“Now I want to go on a mission just so I can cook on one of these, and then come straight back.”

Volf, perhaps a little perturbed by the earlier conversation, wasn’t making much sense. There was no need for him to go on a mission; they could test the stove outside right away.

“Um, why don’t we try it out in the yard? I can bring out a regular stove too for comparison.”

“That’s a great idea,” he replied. “I’d love to see it in action. Will we try boiling some water or something?”

“No, I’ll chop up a few ingredients. I’m interested to see what it’s like to cook on. Wait here; I won’t be long.”

“Oh, in that case, I’ll come help you.”

“While you do that,” said Ivano, “Mr. Fermo and I will see what we can do about cutting these costs, then.”



As Dahlia and Volf left for the second floor, Ivano took a compact magical stove and placed it next to one of Dahlia's new camp stoves. Though he didn't fully understand the inner workings of these objects, he could appreciate what an impressive feat it was for her to have achieved such a reduction in size and weight. Fermo sat in silence beside him for a few seconds, gazing toward the stairs.

"Those two... They *are* a couple, right?"

"Just friends, so it would seem," Ivano replied without hesitation to the abrupt question. He glanced over to see a perfect picture of puzzlement on Fermo's face.

"Friends?"

"They're from very different worlds, after all. He's the brother of a future marquis; she's a commoner."

"I can't pretend to know how these things work for nobles, but is it really that big a problem? I mean, Miss Dahlia's a company chairwoman; that's got to count for something."

"If they were just lovers, as the rumors say, things would be easy. However, Miss Dahlia will be traveling a rocky road if she seeks to walk at Sir Volf's side as an equal. I heard as much from a noblewoman who's been there. That's why I'd like her to eventually become a baroness."

"You think that'll make her happy?"

"I can't be sure, but if she's going to take the road less traveled, I'd feel happier knowing she's properly prepared."

Fermo looked just like a worried father fretting over his daughter. Seeing that reminded Ivano of Carlo. Ivano consciously injected some cheer into his voice as he spoke again, changing tack.

"How would you like a new workshop, Mr. Fermo? Say, three times—no, *five* times bigger than your current one."

"I never know what you're going to say next."

"Just think of it—all the space you could want, the latest equipment, access to

rare metals and materials, a glasswork studio next door, with artisans, mages, and magical toolmakers at your disposal... How about it?"

"I don't have that kind of ambition, Mr. Ivano. I'm happy keeping things at a scale I can manage with my own two hands. Besides, I'm getting a little old for dreams like that."

He leaned forward onto the table, his deep-green eyes slightly narrowed as he looked back at Ivano. Seeing that mixture of uncertainty and interest in the other man's gaze, Ivano rethought his choice of words.

"That wasn't the right approach, was it? All right, I'll be straight with you. What would you say to one day becoming an exclusive supplier to the Rossetti Trading Company—or rather, to Miss Dahlia? We're not at that stage yet, but I'm looking to secure suppliers whom I know are absolutely reliable."

"So that's what it's all about... Have you spoken to Miss Dahlia about this?"

"No, the idea's mine."

"Well then, I'll have to decline. It's not that I've got anything against you; I just don't think I—or we, in fact—should be doing anything like that without Miss Dahlia's say-so. Wouldn't be right," Fermo replied, half sighing the last part.

Ivano smirked at him. "Come now, Mr. Fermo. You're a man. Why not do a little something to woo her? Or are you no longer the red-blooded craftsman you once were?"

"Hey."

The provocation brought a glimmer to the man's deep-green eyes that danced like a reflected flame. However, he quickly closed his eyes, and after a moment's silence, the corners of his mouth twitched upward. By the time he looked over at Ivano again, the fire had vanished.

"Good try, but I'm not rising to it."

"Such a pity. I suppose you've been in this game too long to fall for tricks like that."

"A little longer than you, anyway."

"Just out of interest, what *does* it take to get under your skin?"

“Well, if anyone tried to threaten my family or friends, that’d do the trick, or, er...if a lady I admired was in some sort of peril,” Fermo said with a grin.

Ivano sat with his hands clasped and his head hanging low. “I need to up my game. This’ll take a bit of thought...”



In the tower kitchen, Dahlia was chopping vegetables while Volf sliced meat. An idea suddenly struck Dahlia, and she removed some of the bottles of juice and sparkling water from her bucket of ice water, replacing them with white wine and dark ale.

“Are we having drinks?” Volf asked.

“Well, we’re all here, so I thought we could make a little Rossetti Company get-together out of it. Ah, I’ve got plenty of cheese, so let’s do fondue as well.”

“Thanks, Dahlia. That’d be great. I know we’re just doing this to check out how the stoves work, but I’m really looking forward to it now.”

Volf’s cheer was infectious, and Dahlia found herself smiling too.

Luckily, the yard surrounding the tower was fairly spacious and its walls were high, meaning they’d be hidden from prying eyes. What’s more, her nearest neighbors had recently moved to the Central District for work, leaving the two properties to the left of the tower empty. Dahlia didn’t imagine that their little party was going to get *that* wild, but they could certainly enjoy themselves without disturbing anyone.

“I got a message from home to say that your fairy glass has arrived. I’ll bring it next time I visit.”

“Thank you. I managed to get some from another source too, so that’s two pieces. Now I’ll be able to make you a spare pair of glasses.”

“I really appreciate it. I’ll definitely feel better knowing I have a spare. I wear those glasses all the time when I go out now.”

When she’d been out and about in town with him recently, Dahlia had noticed that they attracted far fewer stares while Volf wore his fairy glass spectacles. Now that she thought of it, it wasn’t only Volf who benefited from

them—whoever happened to be accompanying him could feel more at ease too.

“By the way, um...” Volf began hesitantly. “I heard that someone asked to arrange a marriage interview with you.”

“Yes, I turned them down right away. Marriage is the last thing on my mind. I was quite shocked that anyone would ask me in the first place.”

She assumed he’d heard from Gabriella or Ivano. According to what Gabriella had told her, it was possible that further proposals might arrive addressed to her company. She wasn’t surprised that Volf might have some concerns and want to ask her about it. Still, she wished he would stop staring like that with those gleaming golden eyes of his. It was quite discomfiting.

“But...let’s suppose you were invited to an interview, and it was a very favorable match—someone who could offer you all sorts of benefits. Would you think about it then?”

“No, I’m happy as I am. I like my freedom.”

Having said that, Dahlia began to wonder what it was that would make someone a “favorable match.” Was it their rank? Their wealth? Their pedigree? At this point in time, the whole idea of marriage held no appeal for Dahlia. She’d much rather be free to do her work as she pleased. She wanted to keep crafting her magical tools and swords with Volf, going where she liked, eating her favorite things, drinking and laughing with him... For as long as possible, she wanted everything to stay just the way it was right now. But she couldn’t quite find a way to put that into words.

“What would you do in that situation, Volf? Would you consider it?”

“No. You’re right. Things...are perfect the way they are,” Volf replied with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. For reasons even he didn’t quite understand, he couldn’t bring himself to look the red-haired woman in the face.



With drinks and ingredients in hand, Dahlia, Volf, Fermo, and Ivano stepped out into the dazzling afternoon sun. They spread a large sheet of waterproof cloth out upon the lawn, staking it down at each corner. Dahlia placed one

compact magical stove and one camp stove side by side upon the cloth.

“I’ll cook the meat and vegetables on this one and make cheese fondue on the other.”

“Cheese fondue? Is that like melted cheese that you spoon out of the pot?” Fermo asked.

“No, no. You use the cheese as a dip for vegetables, sausages, bread, and so on.”

Dahlia looked over at Volf, and he nodded at her with a bright smile. He already had the plate of ingredients for the fondue in his hands. It looked like they were all set.

“I’ll let you take charge of the fondue, Volf. In the meantime, I’ll get these sausages cooking.”

Sausage-on-the-bone was one of Marcello’s favorite foods. Dahlia had bought the ones she was about to cook from a store he’d recommended. They were generously seasoned with black pepper, and even just one made for a very satisfying snack.

“All right, then, we’ll have a toast once everything’s cooked. Until then, let’s think up some more ways to improve the stove, shall we?” Dahlia suggested.

“We often camp in places where the ground’s quite uneven, so a nonslip bottom might be good,” Volf said.

“Maybe I could add a sort of jagged rim around the bottom.”

“That won’t do it,” Fermo interjected. “It’d be time-consuming to make, and it wouldn’t work anyhow.”

“What about adding some strips of kraken tape, then?”

“That’ll add height. There’s no need for monster materials; all you want is a bit of gumfoot.”

Gumfoot was a material made from the boiled and dried fruit of a certain plant. The elasticity of the fruit, reminiscent of gummy candy, made it useful for preventing objects from slipping. The only downside was that it wore down rather quickly.

“Gumfoot isn’t very durable, though,” Dahlia pointed out.

“Sure, but it’s easy to replace. You could put a hole in each corner for a gumfoot insert and have customers renew them as needed.”

“Ah, that’s an excellent idea! Supplying the replacements would give me a regular source of income.”

The cheese began to melt into the white wine, the distinctive aroma wafting from the pot. Volf adjusted the heat to ensure it didn’t burn, then demonstrated how to eat the fondue with a piece of sausage and bread on a skewer. Ivano cautiously followed his lead.

“This pot *is* a little small, isn’t it?”

“Young people have big appetites. That’s why you need those collapsible sides.”

Only when she tried dipping a piece of bread into the fondue did she appreciate just how shallow the pot was. Then Fermo took a bite of some cheesy bread; it was good, but his mind was occupied with thoughts of a collapsible cookpot.

“Don’t the bottoms of these stoves get rather hot, Miss Dahlia?” Ivano asked.

“No, there’s a special material in the bottom that reflects the heat from fire crystals, so it only goes upward. The whole stove warms up somewhat when it’s being used, of course.”

“That’s good to know. There’s little risk of it causing a fire, then,” he replied, looking pleased as he turned over a sausage cooking in the other pan.

Ivano had a point; the last thing the knights wanted was for any of their tents to go up in flames. That reflective material was indispensable in ensuring the stoves’ safety.

“Don’t you always light bonfires when you make camp?” Fermo asked Volf. “I thought you’d do that every night for safety.”

“Only about half of the time. Some monsters are attracted to fires, and sometimes there’s too much risk of the fire getting out of control. On rainy days or in marshland, we can’t light fires even if we want to.”



“There are monsters that actually approach fires?” asked Ivano.

“I think generally they’re either looking to prey on humans or they haven’t seen people or fire before and they’re curious. There are exceptions, though. Giant moths are drawn to lights at night, so we try to avoid lighting fires in areas where they live.”

“How giant *are* those moths, exactly?”

“They’re about half as big as me. One swipe of a sword will kill them, but they can still be a real nuisance if they show up in a swarm.”

Half as big as Volf still made them about one meter tall. The thought of a swarm of moths that size was utterly nightmarish; a shiver ran up Dahlia’s spine as she pictured the scene. She glanced over at Fermo to see that the man’s face had turned ashen.

“Um, do you dislike moths, Mr. Fermo?”

“The likes of those giant moths oughta be wiped out for good...”

“Y-You feel that strongly?”

“I traveled out to the western mountains once and forgot to take my insect repellent. One of those things grabbed hold of me. I was itching for days afterward; it drove me crazy.”

“Giant moths have a poisonous powder on their wings,” Volf explained. “It’s incredibly irritating if it gets on your skin.”

Volf and Fermo shared identical expressions of loathing. The moth’s poison must have caused some serious discomfort.

“It’s that bad?” Ivano asked.

“Are you kidding? It felt like I had a dozen mosquito bites on every bit of skin that powder touched!”

“I got the stuff on my head and I seriously thought about tearing all my hair out right there and then,” Volf recalled.

“Wow...”

Just hearing about it almost made one want to start scratching. Dahlia swore

to herself that she would *never* visit the mountains without insect repellent and anti-itching salve.

“Oh, that reminds me!” she exclaimed. “I saw some cheap anti-itching salve in these metal containers that had flexible folds in them. Couldn’t we use that metal to make a pot that could fold down?”

“Anti-itching salve... Ah, you mean scrap magisteel! Did it look gray and like it had black sand mixed through it?” Fermo asked.

“It did, yes. So it’s called scrap magisteel?”

Magisteel was a kind of metal that had been enchanted to increase its durability. Scrap magisteel was made from spare bits and pieces of magisteel as well as melted-down magical tool parts. It was treated to remove most of its magical properties, but because it was difficult to re-enchanted, it was significantly cheaper than pure magisteel.

“I’ve heard that scrap magisteel isn’t suited for kitchenware,” Dahlia said doubtfully.

“As long as the surface is properly treated, it’d make a fine pot,” Fermo replied. “It used to be used on the inside of canteens. Only magical toolmakers can shape the stuff, but if it’s strength you want, you won’t go wrong with scrap magisteel.”

Dahlia hadn’t thought of that. It would take a magical toolmaker to shape the metal and an artisan to treat it and make it suitable for use in cooking. The pot she envisioned would be impossible to create without both sets of expertise.

“And how much does this metal cost?” Ivano asked bluntly.

It always came down to money. This was one thing that hadn’t changed from Dahlia’s past life to this one. It was very seldom that one was freed from budget restrictions and given carte blanche to use any materials one wanted.

“It’ll be about twice the price of the metal you’re using now,” Fermo estimated.

“There aren’t many lightweight, foldable materials like that, so perhaps it isn’t surprising,” Dahlia said. “We’ll need to order it in bulk or think of some other

way to cut costs.”

“Yeah, you’re right. For the time being, I think what you oughta do is make a list of all the points for improvement we came up with today and try making a new prototype based on that.”

“I don’t like to bother you when you’re busy, Mr. Fermo, but when the time comes, could I chat with you about that surface treatment you mentioned?”

“Of course you can. I’ve always got time to talk about things like that. Call on me whenever you like.”

As Dahlia and Fermo chatted, smoke began to rise from one of the pans. One of the sausages-on-the-bone had begun to burn. Dahlia hurriedly handed out plates and forks to the others.

Everyone decided on dark ale for the first toast. Once they all had a small bottle in hand, Dahlia did the honors.

“Well, um, in honor of the Rossetti Trading Company’s first gathering, I propose a toast. Here’s to a prosperous tomorrow for all!”

“Here’s to the Rossetti Trading Company!”

She’d been a little unprepared for that, but it seemed to go down well enough.

Sausages-on-the-bone weren’t easy to eat politely, and she soon gave up, taking a big bite and savoring the burst of meaty juices that filled her mouth. She immediately followed up with a gulp of dark ale so as not to burn her mouth. While the ale took the edge off of the black pepper’s bite, the flavor of the meat lingered on her tongue, and her throat was soothed by the chill and bitterness of the drink.

“Ah, that hits the spot! You can’t beat lunch out in the afternoon sun,” Ivano said happily.

“Would you like another sausage, Ivano?”

“I’d love one! Thanks very much.”

“Mr. Ivano, weren’t you talking about going on a diet on the way here?”

“I don’t have time to dwell on the past. Not when the ale’s this good!”  
Cheerfully brushing off Fermo’s comment, Ivano gulped his ale down.

“These sausages go great with dry white wine too, Ivano,” Volf chimed in.

“Oh, they do? Could you spare a glass, Miss Dahlia?”

“Of course!”

“You’re as bad as each other.” Fermo sighed and plonked himself down on the sheet.

He had to admit, there was little better than the taste of a dark ale enjoyed outside in the yard with a gentle breeze. However, there was still a great deal left to discuss regarding the camp stove. It was a little early for them to be letting their hair down. Remembering something that had come up earlier, Fermo began to mull over the surface treatment that would be required on the stove’s pot, but he was soon interrupted as Dahlia approached him with a plate and a glass.

“Here’s another sausage and some white wine. They’re a great match.”

“Thanks. Very kind of you.”

Even if he’d wanted to, Fermo couldn’t have denied what a sublime combination the sausage and wine made.

“Pardon me, Miss Dahlia, but could I have some water as well? I’m afraid I might drink too much at this rate.”

“No problem. I’ll pick up a few other bits and pieces too,” Dahlia replied with a smile, getting up and disappearing back inside the tower.

Volf was about to follow her, but Ivano grasped the man’s sleeve and whispered in his ear. “A moment, Sir Volf?”

“What is it?”

“I’ve thought of a way to bring down the cost of this stove. What we need is a long-term contract with the Beast Hunters like the one we have for the drying insoles. With that, we could obtain our materials much more cheaply—suppliers give significant discounts if you make a long-term arrangement with them. What I’d like you to do is present this stove to your captain.”

“Right. I intended to show it to him from the start. I’ll mention it as soon as I get a chance.”

“Could you demonstrate it when the first shipment of insoles is delivered, perhaps?”

“I’m not sure... That’s not really within my power,” Volf explained with a frown.

Mentioning it to the captain would be no problem, but conducting an official demonstration to the unit was a very different matter. A Scarlet Armor he may have been, but he wasn’t an officer. He had no right to conduct demonstrations or anything of the kind.

“If the reaction’s lukewarm, you should try putting a word in the captain’s ear. Say to him, ‘Don’t you think we should adopt this before the other kingdoms do?’”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, let me put it this way: it isn’t only monsters that knights might want to avoid during expeditions, but also other humans, correct? I imagine there’d be many interested parties who’d buy these stoves in large quantities if we explained how they can allow forces to move through any terrain without creating any conspicuous smoke or leaving behind evidence of fires. If making a mint was our only concern, we needn’t particularly care which kingdom we sold to either.”

Volf’s face grew stern. “Have you spoken to Dahlia about this?”

“I don’t think there’s any need to. I’d take the same approach with any product. Once you’ve created something useful, it’s only a matter of time before it’s noticed and you attract the attention of either the military or of...less savory characters, shall we say. That’s why I want to land a deal with the royal knights as quickly as possible. It’s for the sake of the company and Miss Dahlia’s safety.”

“I understand. I’ll do whatever I can to make it happen. If there’s any kind of trouble in the meantime, let me know right away.”

“I will. Oh, I’m sorry to have held you back. Miss Dahlia shouldn’t have to

carry those drinks all by herself. I'll let you go give her a hand."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Volf nodded and placed down his glass before heading inside the tower. Watching Volf's retreating back out of the corner of his eye, Ivano stretched his muscles.

"Hey. What do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, Mr. Fermo. You overheard?"

Without turning to face the man behind him, Ivano pulled two more bottles of dark ale from the bucket.

"I wasn't eavesdropping, if that's what you're thinking. But look, if the royal knights start taking these little stoves everywhere, the other kingdoms'll find out about them in no time anyway, won't they?"

"I suppose they will. Well, at least it'll send a message that we're ahead of the curve. Now, you didn't hear it from me, but I do hope the captain will appreciate what Sir Volf's doing for the order. Ideally, he'd appreciate it so much that he'd get Sir Volf out of that scarlet armor and have him work with us as a liaison officer or some such. Ah, if only."

Ivano's tone was flippant, but Fermo sensed a grain of sincerity in the man's words.

"Sure you're not trying to run before you can walk, Mr. Ivano? You'll end up flat on your face if you're not careful."

"I'm fully aware that I'm rushing things. That's why we need your support! Then none of us will need to worry about taking a tumble." Although he spoke cheerfully, his dark blue eyes appeared to weigh and measure Fermo's every reaction. "Now that things are getting dangerous, Mr. Fermo, aren't you worried about that lady you admire so much?"

This man was a merchant right down to his bones—a man who, though he was fully aware of the intense determination and passion of artisans, didn't truly understand it. Volf was the same; every bit a knight and a nobleman in spite of his laid-back demeanor. It was Dahlia whom Fermo felt closest to.

Though she was a magical toolmaker and he a small goods craftsman, both of them used their hands to fashion raw materials into useful objects.

Dahlia had come to the aid of his wife and his workshop, and he'd been inspired by her talent as a craftswoman. Now Ivano had saddled him with a share of the responsibility of keeping her safe. That man truly had a wicked streak.

"You're a fiend, you know that?"

"A *friend*, Mr. Fermo. The R is important. As a matter of fact, I'm known for my friendly disposition. Madam Gabriella taught me well." Ivano now looked completely serious, his previous mirth gone without a trace.

Fermo couldn't hold back a deep sigh. He'd never expected to find such slyness in a man younger than him. Now that Ivano mentioned it, there was something about his demeanor that reminded Fermo of the vice-guildmaster. The way he easily backed down only to strike at the first sign of weakness was practically Gabriella's signature technique. Fermo shuddered to think what would come of getting on the merchant's bad side, but on the other hand, he made a formidable ally.

"All right, all right. Whatever you're up to, you can count me in, *Ivano*."

"Ha ha! Not as stubborn as I thought, then, *Fermo*."

Ivano cracked open the bottles of ale and thrust one into Fermo's hand. The pair brought their bottles together with a resounding clink.

"Here's to the Rossetti Trading Company's glorious future, and to the chairwoman's loyal associates!"

"Here's to the bright future of the good chairwoman, her fat assistant, and her shilly-shallying knight. Cheers."

Fortunately for them, there was nothing but the grass to overhear their toast.

# The Man-Made Magical Sword: Third Attempt—The Frozen Blade

That evening, in the tower's workshop, Dahlia and Volf sat sipping refreshing glasses of sparkling water with lime. A carriage had arrived to pick up Ivano and Fermo a little while earlier. Dahlia had noted that they seemed to be on much friendlier terms, perhaps having bonded over drinks.

"Dahlia, are there any other rare materials you're looking for? Besides fairy glass, I mean," Volf asked her, gazing at the fairy glass that he'd only seen as powder before.

The scintillating crystals sitting on the workbench seemed to soak up the warm orange glow of the sunset. The blend of colors was mysterious and spectacular.

"Well, I've just put in an order for some black slime powder, since my supply's running low."

"Is it essential?"

"I don't necessarily *need it*, no, but I'm sure it'll come in handy."

"Can't you use other kinds of slime instead?"

"I do use other kinds. I definitely need to do a bit more research on them, though."

Most people were familiar with the four most common varieties of slime, namely blue, red, green, and yellow slimes. All slimes possessed some weak elemental magic: water, fire, air, or earth. The type was indicated by their color.

Volf's sworn enemy, the black slime, had extremely corrosive properties and was challenging to handle. However, Dahlia was confident that it could prove useful in the right situation. That said, her most recent attempt to harness its power had given birth to the Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion, a shortsword that would quickly burn the hand of anyone who tried to grip it. She would need to



give some careful consideration to her next experiment.

“Do you see slimes often, Volf?”

“When I’m out on expeditions, yeah. We don’t bother killing them unless they’re in large numbers, though.”

Slimes were common in the wilds of Ordine; it wasn’t surprising to come across the odd one while traveling. A lone slime needn’t be feared, but large groups could be deadly. Dahlia had heard of even skilled adventurers being overwhelmed by hordes and losing their lives.

“Are silver slimes used for anything?” Volf asked. “Those are rare.”

“Not that I know of. I don’t think there are enough of them.”

Dahlia had heard of silver slimes being found in the dark depths of mines, but she’d never seen one with her own eyes. She had no idea what their properties were and had never heard of them being sold as a material.

“It’s just that they look sort of metallic, so I thought they must have some kind of use. What about mutant monsters?”

“They’re not used often. It’s impossible to guarantee a steady supply, so they’re not practical for ordinary magical tools.”

As was the case with most monsters, there was often a degree of regional variation among slimes, with some individuals exhibiting atypical characteristics. Such individuals were rare, however, rendering any materials derived from them unsuitable for mass production.

In the old days, slimes had been called “sword-eaters” and were infamously unprofitable. Times had changed, however, and there was now a stable market for slime-derived materials. This had even given rise to the Adventurers’ Guild’s foray into slime farming.

“One creature I’d love to see for myself is the legendary white slime,” Dahlia said thoughtfully.

Although they were believed to exist, neither Dahlia nor anyone she knew had seen one or even heard of someone who had.

“The white slime, huh? I’ve heard that they’ll actually heal you. I’ve never

seen one on my travels, though. I remember, when I was at school, I heard a rumor that there was one at the temple.”

“I remember hearing that too. Wasn’t it meant to be one of the Seven Wonders of the Royal Capital?”

“Now that’s something I haven’t heard in a long time.”

Teenagers were strangely drawn to mysterious and scary stories. No one made it through high school here without hearing all about the Seven Wonders of the Royal Capital, one such collection of mysteries. Dahlia could still recall some students whispering with complete certainty, “There’s a white slime at the temple that can heal you with its magic!” For her part, she’d never heard of anyone who’d been treated by this slime.

“If you can use black slime powder to enchant a blade, then why not white slime powder too?” Volf wondered aloud.

Logically, it should work, but Dahlia’s head tilted, her expression dubious as she considered the rumored properties of the white slime.

“White slime is supposed to have healing properties, right? There wouldn’t be much point in a sword that would heal everything it stabbed.”

“You could use it to torture spies,” Volf suggested. “It wouldn’t kill them because the wounds would heal up right away, but it would still be incredibly painful. Don’t you think that’d be pretty effective?”

“Volf, stop it! That’s an awful thought!”

How did he always manage to say these things with such a carefree smile?

“Sorry, sorry. In all seriousness, it’s possible that a sword like that would work well on the undead.”

Dahlia had never thought of that, but it made perfect sense. She’d always heard it said that restorative magic was the best weapon against undead monsters. When the need arose to exterminate some, a sword enchanted with white slime powder might come in handy. However, it occurred to Dahlia then that it was priests who typically dealt with these monsters, exorcising them with purifying magic.

“Which do you suppose would be more effective against the undead—a priest using purifying magic or a sword enchanted with white slime powder?”

“It’d have to be the priest. It’s incredible what the high priests can do. We knights can swing our swords all day and those monsters will keep coming back, but a high priest can clear a whole field with a single incantation.”

That did indeed sound impressive. Besides, it was probably a kinder end for those unfortunate souls. Being blessed by a priest sounded like a much gentler path to the afterlife than being hacked apart by a sword.

“So high priests don’t fear the undead at all?”

“Not one bit. We guard them to an extent, but it probably isn’t necessary. They never look anxious. I remember one joking afterward that the living are far more frightening.”

This priest who could bless the undead with a single incantation sounded like a very wise man.

“A few of my friends told me I ought to go and get blessed as well,” Volf said.

“Does purifying magic have any effect on living humans?”

“I was just doing my job and taking out as many of those monsters as I could, but then all the guys started calling me the ‘Dark Lord...’ Apparently, I was supposed to go and get the darkness purged out of me.”

Dahlia felt very sorry for him. It seemed that because he made his exploits on the battlefield *look* so easy, the true extent of his efforts was going unappreciated. Just as she was trying to think of a way to cheer him up, her attention was drawn to the quiet clinking of the ice in her glass.

“Volf, what do you say we try making an imitation ice sword?”

“Imitation ice sword?”

“It should be a bit simpler than the magical swords we’ve been experimenting with lately. I’d like to try applying magic to a blade to create something like that imitation ice sword we talked about in the park the other day.”

The way Volf’s puzzled expression suddenly blossomed into a boyish grin almost made Dahlia laugh.

“I’ll set an ice crystal into the handle and apply a reflective material so that the magic flows onto the blade. Hopefully, when you draw it, it should be encased in a layer of ice. Its bark will be worse than its bite, but I think we’ll be able to learn something from the process.”

“That sounds like fun!”

She could tell by the gleam in his eyes that she had him hooked, and she began to explain in greater detail. “If I were to enchant it, I’m afraid all I’d manage is a sword that would stay cold for a little while. But if I set an ice crystal into the handle, then I think we’d get something closer to the genuine article. I won’t enchant any of the other parts, so we won’t have trouble with magical antagonism stopping us from assembling it. Of course, it might end up being a waste of a perfectly good shortsword...”

“Never mind about that; I’d love to see this. What’s cooler than an ice sword?”

Volf’s golden eyes were now positively sparkling as he looked at her intently. Even the fairy glass wouldn’t outshine them.

“All right, it’s settled, then. Let’s give it a go.”

It was time to take on a new challenge in their quest for the magical sword.



Dahlia had eyes for nothing else once she entered her creative zone, but Volf was more than happy to watch her in silence. Once he’d disassembled the sword for her, she used her magic to create a pocket inside the handle. She carefully lined this pocket with a reflective material and then slipped in a magical pipe through which an ice crystal could be inserted. Next, she used the magic flowing from her fingertips to draw perfectly straight lines down from the handle to the blade—channels that would allow the ice crystal’s power to travel from one part of the sword to another. There was something mysterious and alluring about the pale bluish glow those magical channels left in their wake.

Dahlia created a switch at the base of the handle that would activate the crystal’s power when pushed. Having it activate in response to the user’s magic would have been a neater solution, but since Volf was unable to express any

magic, they settled upon this mechanism instead.

“Okay, now all I need you to do is assemble it.”

“No problem.”

Volf inserted the ice crystal into its pocket and then reassembled the shortsword. To be on the safe side, he double-checked that the blade and handle were securely attached. Within moments of him pushing the switch, the blade turned white and freezing cold to the touch. Gradually, a layer of thin ice began to spread over the metal, extending past the tip. It was enchanting to watch the gleaming silver blade become veiled in white ice that turned clear as glass as it grew like an icicle beyond the point.

Unfortunately, it was now impossible to sheathe, but it was fair to say they’d successfully created an ice sword of sorts. Today’s session had been a much smoother and quicker exercise than the previous two.

Dahlia had been keen to emphasize that the sword would only be an imitation and that it was only a very simple experiment, but Volf was having a great time. Just as he was admiring her handiwork, however, he noticed a distinct chill beginning to creep into the handle. Looking closely, he saw a faint film of what looked like frost forming over its surface.

“Now why’s it doing that? I made sure the crystal compartment was properly lined,” Dahlia muttered to herself, her brows knitted. “Maybe that material doesn’t work well on ice magic. Or perhaps it’s the position or the angle of the crystal that’s the problem.”

Evidently, she hadn’t anticipated this.

“Freezing cold from the handle to the point...I say we call it the Frozen Blade.”

“Giving it a fancy name won’t help. What use is it if it freezes anyone who holds it? Please put it down. I don’t want you to get frostbite.”

“It’s not all that bad. Feels nice and cool, actually.” In truth, it was extremely cold, but Volf was reluctant to hand the sword back to Dahlia, knowing she’d probably take it apart at once. “There’s plenty of hot weather ahead. I could take this with me on expeditions to keep me cool.”

“Volf, please. Can’t you use ice crystals for that like everyone else?”

“But the Frozen Blade is so much more romantic.”

“It’s unnecessary baggage, that’s what it is.”

Dahlia’s obstinance left Volf a little crestfallen. He wished she’d think it over a little more—it would cheer him up to no end to have this sword to gaze at during quiet moments on the long, hot summer expeditions. He could keep it at his side during night watch too. Not only would it bring him relief from the heat, but it would also be beautiful to look at, and its maker was none other than his dear friend and talented magical toolmaker Dahlia. What could be more perfect?

“Anyway, let’s at least turn off the switch. Frostbite’s no joke,” Dahlia said briskly.

However, something had piqued Volf’s curiosity. “Dahlia, I’d like to see what happens if I give the sword a swing with the switch held down. I’m wondering whether that might break the ice off.”

“I don’t mind, but *please* be careful not to hurt yourself. That ice could go flying anywhere.”

“I will be. All right, I’ll step outside for a minute.”

So as to avoid any errant shards of ice causing havoc in the workshop, Volf took a few steps outside the tower’s front door and gripped the sword in his right hand. He pressed down on the switch as hard as he could and swung the sword toward the empty yard.

“Ngh!”

“Volf!”

He didn’t know which came first: Dahlia’s shout or the shock of what he’d done. The ice surrounding the sword had thickened in an instant and, more worryingly, spread up the handle and encased his hand.

“Volf, I’m so sorry! I should never have—”

“No, no, it was my mistake. I was pressing the switch too hard and I pulled it back before I swung it.”

Now the handle and his hand were locked in pure-white ice. It looked as though he'd stuck his hand inside a snowball. Despite the extreme cold, the sheer oddness of the sight before him made him laugh.

"Um, just wait there for a moment! Oh, the bath! That's it! I'll run some hot water so we can get that melted off!"

"There's no need. I can just break it."

"But you could break your hand as well!"

"I'll be fine if I use my strengthening spell."

"But if you slip and cut yourself or something—"

"Then I can use a potion or go to the temple if it's that bad. I'm telling you, there's nothing to worry about... Dahlia?"

Dahlia was gripping his left arm more tightly than she'd ever held him before. Her lips were pressed tightly together, her shimmering green eyes silently begging him to listen. Any thought of arguing with her instantly flew from his mind.

"Volf, let's go to the bathroom, okay?"

"Okay."

She marched him up to the bathroom on the third floor and sat him down in a chair. In her haste, Dahlia failed to properly adjust the temperature of the water, and what gushed out from the dispenser was barely lukewarm. He could only watch her in silence as she clumsily splashed water this way and that. He offered no resistance when she grabbed his arm and began to hurriedly douse it with hot water. Fortunately, the ice melted quickly and left no damage. The sword's switch had evidently deactivated too, as the ice had ceased to grow.

"It's all gone now, but are you really sure you're all right? Your hand doesn't hurt?"

"No, I'm totally fine. See? I can move my fingers and everything. No harm done."

"I'm so glad. I'd never have forgiven myself if you'd gotten hurt. Oh, but Volf, your shirt! It's soaked. I'm awfully sorry."

Being fussed over like this left Volf feeling somewhat bashful.

“It’s fine. I promise.”

Although she’d already released him, the warmth of Dahlia’s hands lingered faintly upon Volf’s cold skin. Pushing the thought aside, Volf looked up, only to feel his whole body stiffen.

“Um, Dahlia, you...should probably go change. You don’t want to catch a cold.”

Neither Dahlia’s short-sleeved white shirt nor her long light-beige skirt had escaped her frantic splashing. The fabric was clinging to the contours of her body and had turned see-through in places. The young knight didn’t know where to look.

“Oh, yes, you’re quite right. I’ll do that right now. In the meantime, I think you should take a shower to warm yourself up. We can’t have you coming down with a cold either. I’ll bring you some work clothes from downstairs to wear while we get that shirt dry.”

“Thanks, Dahlia. I’m really sorry about all this.”

“Don’t be. I’m the one who should apologize. I should have thought more carefully about how I oriented that crystal.”

Dahlia looked utterly miserable as she bowed her head to him.

After watching her leave, Volf began to unbutton his damp shirt. The chill lingering in his fingers made them somewhat slow and fumbling. Once he’d fully undressed, he turned the shower on full.

“Pathetic,” he murmured to himself through a heavy sigh.

Dahlia had been completely unfazed by her damp clothes. Why had his reaction been so pathetically childish? There she was, doing everything she could to make sure he was safe and well, and he’d behaved like a schoolboy. It was the height of disrespect.

He hadn’t been himself lately. Perhaps he hadn’t been training hard enough. Perhaps he had too much pent-up energy. He decided to go on a long run or join someone on the training field for sparring once he returned to the barracks.



It was either that or go drinking with a friend and head for the red-light district. Volf chased that thought away with a vigorous shake of his head. This wasn't the time or the place. He didn't want to think about such things in Dahlia's vicinity. Volf turned the water to cold and let it pour over his head, staying there until he thoroughly cooled off.

"Well, you really screwed that up." Dahlia sighed dejectedly.

Having quickly changed clothes in her room, she was now back downstairs in the workshop. Her carelessness had nearly gotten Volf hurt. How arrogant she'd been to think that creating a weapon like that would be child's play—just a bit of fun for a quiet evening. She'd allowed herself to forget the ever-present danger of her craft and she was thoroughly ashamed of herself.

The chill of Volf's hand had horrified her as she'd melted the ice away from it in the bath. That earlier conversation about the knights' expeditions and their final meals must still have been preying on her mind. An unspeakable thought had occurred to her—the thought that one day, Volf might be brought back from a mission, his body as ice-cold as his hand had felt in hers. She'd almost cried. Only when he'd assured her that he was okay had she finally been able to think straight again. She'd babbled out whatever came to mind and apologized before practically running from the room.

Volf had chosen this path. One didn't become a Scarlet Armor of the Order of Beast Hunters by accident. It was simply disrespectful for her to doubt his strength, fretting and letting herself get so upset. It wasn't her place; she wasn't his family nor his partner. Her role was to support and encourage him, not to worry like this. If she wanted to call herself his friend, she should make him some useful magical tool or the magical sword he longed for.

Still, every time she recalled his freezing cold fingers, Dahlia felt a terrible pang in her chest. She hoped Volf would never discover what a timid, faithless person she really was. She tried to push those gloomy thoughts aside, only for them to be replaced with the image of Volf sitting in the bathroom with water dripping from his jet-black hair and shirt.

"It's almost enough to make one thirsty," Dahlia muttered to herself, the scene triggering a distant memory from her past life. About five seconds later,

her cheeks flushed cherry red.

# The Purple Bicorn

“What’s this, Volf? Been out all night and just had your bath? Your hair’s still wet.”

“No, I just had a wash after morning training. It’s so warm out there, you get sweaty in no time. Couldn’t be bothered to dry my hair.”

“What do you mean, morning training? Training’s just about to start now.”

Dorino stared aghast at Volf as they sat in the Beast Hunters’ duty room, where they frequently awaited orders or a call to arms. This morning’s training regimen would focus on stamina-building exercises such as running, while the afternoon’s would be competitive team exercises. Dorino couldn’t comprehend why anyone, on a day as hot as this, would want to add anything to this already packed schedule.

“I could only keep up with Sir Volf for half of it,” someone said wearily.

Dorino hadn’t noticed him hidden in Volf’s shadow, but Kirk was here too. His hair was damp like Volf’s. He’d been spending a lot of time in Volf’s company lately, but for him to join Volf even for extra morning drills was beyond what Dorino would have expected.

“What kind of training was it, anyway?”

“Ten laps around the training ground and then five hundred practice swings.”

“Seriously? Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little?”

Just one lap around the perimeter of the training ground made for a fairly long run. Ten laps was the distance they tackled during morning training, not as a pre-breakfast warm-up.

“Oh, no, Volf did twice as much as me.”

“Volf, are you trying to jump higher by dieting or something?” Dorino asked teasingly.

Volf didn’t rise to it, however, his tone calm and serious. “I haven’t been

sleeping well these past few nights. I thought I'd try wearing myself out so I get a good night's sleep."

"Just get some sleeping meds from the sick bay if that's your issue."

"Those don't do anything for Volf or me, Dorino," came a low voice. It was Randolph.

Both Volf and Randolph were the sons of earls. Sleeping drugs were one of the first substances they were made to develop a resistance to, although Volf had started rather late, shortly after entering high school.

"Oh, right. Now you mention it, I think you told me that before. Sorry."

"Couldn't you maybe ask a mage to cast sleeping magic on you?" Kirk suggested.

"That only lasts for a short while."

"So it does... About three hours, if I remember correctly."

Upon closer inspection, Dorino saw that dark circles had formed beneath Volf's eyes. It was rare to see him looking like this; the young knight usually took good care of himself. Dorino patted him on the shoulder and leaned in close.

"If you want a good night's sleep, there's nothing better than a pretty young lady to—"

"We have an urgent mission! Summon all the available men!"

Dorino was interrupted as the Beast Hunters' captain, Grato, strode into the duty room barking orders. His grim expression instantly filled the knights with apprehension. The room quickly grew crowded as men were gathered in from other rooms and from outside.

"Purple bicorns have been sighted at a watering place on the southern highway. We leave to dispatch them without delay!"

For a moment, it felt as though the air had been sucked from the room. Some men clapped a hand to their forehead, others grimaced, and even the most adept and coolheaded looked deeply perturbed.

“Eyewitnesses have confirmed at least four targets, though there may be more,” Grato added.

Murmurs rippled through the ranks from men who never usually spoke among themselves in front of the captain.

“Don’t make me go...”

“Gods, anything but those.”

“I can’t do this. I’m telling you, I can’t...”

One of the newer recruits looked around at the others with bemusement.

“Are purple bicornes really that powerful?”

“Haven’t met one yet, huh? Yeah, purple bicornes are mutants, and more to the point, they’re evil bastards. It’s not that they’re all *that* strong, but the illusions they create are wicked.”

“Illusions?” the new recruit whispered. “What makes them so bad?”

The older knight’s gaze grew terribly distant as he replied. “They use them to make you think you’re looking at someone you love—usually someone like your wife, your child, your lover, or a parent. It stops some guys in their tracks. They’ve also got high magic resistance; you need to hit them dead-on with a long-range spell to take them down. If you get close to them, they start kicking, and believe me, you’ll know all about it if they land a kick on you. If you let their illusions stay your hand for even a second, they’ll break every bone in your body or even kill you. And they’re omnivorous, by the way, if you see what I mean.”

“Gods... It just keeps getting worse.”

The young knight blanched, finally understanding what had his seniors so distressed. He couldn’t imagine fighting beasts that spun such villainous illusions. They sounded deadly enough without them.

Grato sternly addressed the whispering men. “Our targets being what they are, we’ll travel with all possible haste and vanquish them today.”

“Captain, is it really necessary to act so quickly? Could we not wait for a contingent of bow knights to accompany us?”

“When I was young, there was once a rumor that went around that said you could meet the dead at the place where a purple bicorn had appeared. People believed it and, in just a few days, there were dozens of casualties. We killed the beast soon after, but it was cold comfort to all those who’d lost friends and family.”

“Understood, sir.”

It was understandable that some people longed to see departed loved ones, even if only in the form of an illusion. However, as knights of the kingdom, they had to do everything in their power to prevent those beasts from harming any citizens. Anything less would be a dereliction of duty. None of them wished to face the bereaved relatives of people they could have saved.

“I can offer a little compensation to anyone who wants to volunteer. In the event that not enough of you step forward, we’ll flip a coin to make up the numbers.”

Volf was the first to raise his hand. “I’d like to volunteer, sir. I don’t require any compensation, but if possible, I’d like to be given priority access to purchase the materials from the bicorn.”

“Very well. One beast’s worth of materials will be yours.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

Bicorns possessed a high degree of magic resistance. Volf reasoned that this property might be very useful for Dahlia’s magical toolmaking—and magical *sword* making—efforts.

Another knight spoke up. “I’ll volunteer as well, sir. If I may, I’d like something good to drink when my wife’s not home.”

“Certainly. You’ll have a bottle from my private collection.”

Some quiet laughter rippled around the room, but few others were emboldened enough to step up. In the end, the volunteers numbered only ten, including Volf. Five of them were Scarlet Armors. As the Beast Hunters’ tradition dictated, the remainder of the team would be decided by the flip of a coin. The crowd parted down the middle, the men betting on heads on one side, those hoping for tails on the other.

“C’mon, luck, I need you on my side!”

“I’m begging you here, don’t make me go!”

Heedless of the men’s prayers and lamentations, the coin spun skyward again and again until another twenty knights had trudged forward to join the roster.



Vice-Captain Griswald, thirty knights, and four mages galloped on horseback from the capital, bound for the southern highway. It was just after midday when they reached the watering place mentioned in the report. They stopped their horses a fair distance away and proceeded from there on foot.

Griswald and one of the mages spoke to each other in hushed tones.

“We know what these illusions are, but it’s still not going to be easy maintaining focus.”

“It isn’t. I have an anti-illusory device that reveals the beasts’ true form, but they’re still overlaid by the illusions.” The mage used a magical lens to observe the bicornes from afar. “Those two on the right look especially dangerous.”

The beasts had deep purple, almost blackish fur and looked very similar to unicorns, only larger. Their eyes were red and somewhat long and narrow in shape. The clearest difference between them and their close cousin the unicorn was the two horns spiraling from their foreheads, as black and glossy as obsidian.

“And it’s tricky to fight them with long-range magic?”

“Yes. These purple bicornes are highly resistant to magic; if you don’t get a perfect shot the first time, they’ll escape. There are four of them, so perhaps we can use air and ice magic to prevent them from escaping and buy time.”

“Right. We’ll let you slow them down and then we’ll strike. Still...ugh. It won’t be easy putting my weapon through them.” There was a rare note of unease in Griswald’s voice as he stood watching the bicornes.

“If I may ask, Vice-Captain, who is it that they make you see?”

“My wife, carrying our daughter in her arms.”

“Ah... I understand.”

It was hard to imagine a man with such grit as to be able to drive a sword through his beloved wife and child, even if they were only a bicorn in disguise.

“How about you?” Griswald asked.

“I see my wife. It takes a good degree of resolve to cast long-range magic, but those beasts don’t make it easy.” The mage turned to the bow knights standing nearby. “And you? Who do you see?”

“My fiancée. Nothing surprising about that, but...I don’t know how I’m supposed to shoot her without so much as turning a hair.”

“It feels so wrong to fire at my wife and child...”

The men’s voices were quiet and full of woe. Even if they had used magical devices to prevent the others from overhearing, their worry would have been clear to anyone watching.

“I can’t believe this. It looks like the maid from our quarters.”

“Hold on, you’re gonna need to explain that later on. Not that I can talk... I see Fabiola. You know, the top girl at the House of Twilight in the pleasure quarter.”

“Wait, Dorino, you’re serious about her? I knew you’d been spending a lot of money on her lately, but...”

“Sure looks that way. Gods, I’m sweating like a pig.”

The bicorn’s wiles were exposing hitherto unknown desires, further compounding the general misery.

“What do you see, Randolph?”

“There’s not a slyer, more loathsome creature in all the kingdom, I’ll tell you that much.” Randolph wasn’t at all his useful self, staring fixedly at the bicorn with a taut smile.

“Are there any Scarlet Armors willing to form a vanguard? I won’t force anyone,” Vice-Captain Griswald called out.

“I’ll go.”

Volf stepped forward. The knight’s eyes were downcast and obscured by his



bangs, his expression unreadable.

“Ever reliable, Volfred. Thank you.”

“That figures,” said a man a little distance away. “Remember last time we fought these things? He said they just looked like bicornes to him; he didn’t see anything else.”

“That’s just sad. That means there’s not a single person he really loves.”

“Well, yeah, when you put it that way...”

If Volf noticed their pitying gazes, he gave no sign. On Griswald’s order, he began to prepare for the attack.

Passing him, a knight with blue-gray hair stepped forward. “I, too, would like to volunteer, Vice-Captain.”

He was Nicola Astorga, a man about ten years Volf’s senior. Unlike Volf, he was not a Scarlet Armor but one of the regular knights of the order.

“That’s very obliging, Nicola, but are you sure you’re prepared?”

“Yes, sir. I feel this is something I must conquer, or I’ll not be at ease with myself.”

Griswald hesitated for a moment after hearing the man’s pained reply, but he soon nodded. “Very well. You and Volfred shall lead the charge together.”

Volf armed himself with a second longsword the same size as his usual. He laid both scabbards on the ground and flexed his arms, familiarizing himself with the weight and feel of the blades.

“Dual wielding today, Volf?” Dorino asked.

“The quicker we kill them, the quicker we can all go home.”

“Look, are you *sure* you’re all right with this?”

“Fine.” He avoided making eye contact. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to ask who he saw when he looked at those monsters. “We’ll take the two on the right first. These things are really rubbing me the wrong way, so I want to make the first strike. Will you have my back, Dorino?”

“Yeah, all right, then. I’ll follow two seconds behind. I’ll get ’em if you don’t, I

promise. Even if I have to shut my eyes or something. We'll need your shield if they start kicking, Randolph. With our strengthening magic, we'll survive one kick, but no more."

"I'll be there," the other knight replied.

Having thoroughly inspected their weapons and armor, the men leading the attack discussed their formation. A mage and another of the senior knights joined them. In the event that their assault failed to dispatch the bicorn, a second wave would follow, but many of the men remained deeply troubled by the thought of striking at the illusions they saw. They could ill afford these misgivings. Even a moment's hesitation could be punished by a swift but painful death beneath the bicorn's hooves.

The older knight, Nicola, stood on the left, and Volf on the right. Several knights lined up at their backs, Dorino included. After a final check of the terrain through his field glasses, Griswald gave the signal, and the vanguard rushed forth. Volf cast his strengthening magic at full power and used the sköll bracelet to accelerate.

This was the second time he had encountered purple bicorn. The first time, they had looked like nothing more or less than what they were. He'd been perplexed by the reactions of all the men around him. This time, he understood. This time, he also saw the monster's illusion, and what he saw filled him with white-hot rage. Before Volf's eyes was a young woman with red hair and green eyes. But this woman, draped in sheer silk and softly smiling at him, was not Dahlia. Dahlia's hair was softer, her eyes a brilliant emerald.

"Don't you *dare*...!" Volf's roar was thunderous and charged with fury.

For mere monsters, these things had some nerve. Although he knew that the woman before him was nothing but a conjured disguise, as she spread her arms and smiled as though to welcome him in, his steps almost faltered for a moment.

*You're not Dahlia. Not even close. Dahlia smells like sunshine in a summer garden, not like you. You smell like a beast!*

In an instant, Volf's vision cleared, and the bicorn's true form was laid bare. He raised his swords in a cross before the approaching monster, slashing them

down to rend its body into four. The other made to flee, but Volf bounded off the trunk of a tree, leaping after it and decapitating it from behind while his other blade cleaved the barrel of its body. The red of Volf's armor was soon drowned beneath an even bloodier shade.

Meanwhile, Nicola was advancing on the other pair of bicornes with a white-knuckle grip on his greatsword. His blue eyes narrowed as he drew closer, but he never stopped running nor slowed his feet.

"Let her go, damn it!"

His yell was drowned out by the roar of a gale; it must have been a mage casting air magic to stop the bicornes in their tracks. One of the bewildered beasts reared onto its hind legs to try to lash out at the knight, but there was no strength in its attack, and all it took was one great swing of Nicola's sword to chop the monster apart.



A sidelong slash caught the other as it tried to escape, a veritable fountain of blood spraying into the air. By the time the knight lowered his sword, nothing remained of the bicorn but corpses.

“Men, search the area! There may still be others!” Griswald ordered.

The knights responded at once, scattering to comb the surroundings for any beasts that had escaped their notice, but they found none. With the coast clear, it was safe to begin harvesting materials and disposing of the bodies. The tension among the men finally dissolved, and conversation soon broke out again.

“Ugh, those illusions are the worst.”

“Tell me about it. Wish they’d invent some magical tool that could get rid of them.”

“Say, did you see Sir Volfred? He looked furious. I wonder who he saw.”

“Must’ve been that duchess. If he saw her acting like a temptress in the middle of these woods, it’s no wonder he flew off the handle.”

“Ah, you think he’s finally fallen for her? He couldn’t have made a worse choice, though.”

“It’s a shame. I know this is Volfred we’re talking about, but it’s hard to imagine the feeling’s mutual.”

“Right. You might as well fall in love with a star.”

The subject of the men’s gossip was Altea Gastoni. Women claimed that she used her influence and wealth to keep Volf under her thumb, while most men insisted that Volf was in thrall to her beauty and lofty status. Altea was not just a duchess but also sister-in-law to the queen consort. Her husband had gone to an early grave, and now she kept a young Adonis at her side. Was it any surprise that rumors abounded?

“Those monsters sure know how to give a guy a rude awakening.”

“First thing I want when we get back to the city is a stiff drink.”

“You said it. Tonight, we drink, forget our troubles, make some noise, and get

a damn good night's sleep."

The men's voices were low and dour. Some of them were loath to reveal who the bicorns had shown them; others sighed deeply.

"As for you, I think you ought to start by finding out the name of that maid from the castle."

"You've seen how cute she is. She's sure to have a boyfriend."

"Hey, don't give up so easily. Won't know unless you ask. It's true what they say—you miss every shot you don't take."

"I don't wanna take any shots... Anyway, what about you, Dorino?"

The man who'd been egging on his friend looked away with a distant gaze and a hollow bark of laughter. "Me and Fabiola? Do you know how many noblemen she's got doting on her already? She'd have to be out of her mind to get involved with a guy like me. Nope, it's a bottle of liquor who'll be my partner for this evening."

"If that's meant to be a joke, Dorino, nobody's laughing."

"Aw, give me a break, Randolph. Why don't you tell us who *you* saw?"

"It's none of your business."

"Oh, no you don't; I asked you a question, so answer it!"

It seemed that no drink was needed to ease the men into talk of romance today. The noisy chatter one usually heard in the bars had already begun, though they were all still stone sober. Keeping his back to the hubbub, Volf removed his armor. Clutching a water crystal in one hand, he drenched himself from head to toe, rinsing away the rank blood that caked him. As he was washing his hair a second time, a knight with blue-gray hair approached him—the man who'd joined him at the vanguard.

"None the worse for wear, Volf?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you. And you, Sir Astorga?"

"Managed to chip my sword. Must have been a tad overenthusiastic."

With a chuckle, the other man began to wash his own hair and face with a

water crystal. Volf couldn't help but notice how the water running down his cheeks looked almost like tears.

"I'm sure there was nothing wrong with your swordsmanship, Sir Astorga, but...if I'm not prying, might I ask who the bicorns looked like to you?"

"Curious? That's not like you. I saw my wife—my ex-wife. We separated the year before last. I was away on expeditions so often, she said, that she might as well not have a husband," the hitherto taciturn knight quietly replied.

"Forgive me. I should not have asked."

"Don't trouble yourself. I managed to cut through her, so that must mean I've gotten over it. I think I'll give it a little while and then see about those marriage interviews my friends keep nudging at me. What about you, Volfred? Who did you see?"

Volf hesitated briefly, unsure whether he ought to tell the truth. "I saw a dear friend. Those bicorns make me sick. I make *myself* sick."

"You mustn't think too much about it. Bicorns don't only show you people you're in love with. It can be anyone you hold dear. Before I met my ex-wife, I used to see my younger brother, who died when we were young. It got under my skin too."

"Your brother?"

"Yes. Some of the others see their children or family members who've passed on. I think it might be more accurate to say that purple bicorns show you those you want—or wanted—to protect."

*Those you want to protect...* Suddenly, everything made sense again. But then he considered the phrase, "those you *wanted* to protect." It brought his mother, Vanessa, to mind—or rather, the image of her lying still and lifeless in the dirt. In his mind's eye, he saw the color of her muddied jet-black hair suddenly shift, turning bright red, and he felt as though his heart froze solid. Volf was determined never to lose anyone else like that, never again to be left consumed with regret at his own weakness.

"Puts a fire under you, doesn't it? Makes you want to get stronger so those monsters won't be able to mess with you anymore."

“Yes, I feel the same way,” Volf replied, finally smiling his usual smile.



## Interlude: The Veteran's Pride

Fermo Gandolfi was the head of the Gandolfi Workshop and a specialist craftsman of small goods. He fulfilled a wide range of orders, shaping metals and monster materials to his clients' needs—making bottles, pumps, atomizers, vaporizers, tubing, boxes, and so on. His father had also been a small goods craftsman, but in order to broaden his range of skills, Fermo had chosen to train at a different workshop from age fifteen to twenty-one. It had now been more than twenty years since he had returned to the family workshop and had taken over the business from his father, and he'd grown quite proud of his craft.

It had always been said that Fermo was as stubborn as a mule, and he was well aware of this fault. He'd had a short fuse as a youngster, reacting violently if he suspected anyone of duplicity.

"I don't mind what they look like, just make 'em cheap," a customer had once said, inviting Fermo's ire.

"Don't waste your time polishing things up; rough and ready's what I want," a broker had told him. Fermo had objected in the strongest of terms.

He'd always been quick to cut ties with any company that tried to take advantage by short-changing him or overcharging customers.

Nonetheless, work had never dried up until recently. He'd had a respectable pool of loyal customers who valued his skills, his wife had run the business like clockwork, and their business contacts had often supplied them with clients and profitable jobs. Eventually, however, those loyal customers had begun to age, and Fermo's wife had fallen ill. The once-busy workshop had been steadily growing quieter as work dwindled. It wasn't as though Fermo had no friends or fellows to reach out to, but their businesses didn't appear to be flourishing either, and he couldn't bring himself to ask for help.

Craftspeople needed products to make, customers to buy them, and the means to deliver those products. Without these, they couldn't put food on the table. Fermo understood that he had a duty to take care of his wife and

apprentices. When he answered Gabriella's summons and made his way to the Merchants' Guild last month, he made up his mind to quit his stubborn ways, swallow his pride, and bow to whoever he had to.

"I'm Dahlia of the Rossetti Trading Company. Delighted to make your acquaintance."

It was a young woman with vivid red hair and clear, bright green eyes who greeted him in the meeting room. This polite young woman, little more than a girl, was far from Fermo's image of a company chairwoman. If this weren't surprising enough, she was a bona fide craftswoman as well. Gabriella's letter about an "outstanding magical toolmaker" had been no exaggeration.

She placed upon the table a soap bottle that produced thick, creamy foam at the press of a pump. To say that its workings had piqued Fermo's curiosity would be an understatement. He took it to another room and tested it with a shave before challenging himself to guess its mechanism without disassembling it. He could not.

Afterward, when he had the opportunity to take the bottle apart, the craftsman was completely won over. From his professional perspective, there were, of course, a few points that could be improved upon. The edges could do with rounding off, and for stability's sake, its center of gravity could be lowered. As he thought through the bottle's functionality and mechanisms, he found himself charmed by it.

However, when he learned that Dahlia was seeking a joint development contract with him, Fermo bristled. He was convinced that Gabriella had put her up to this, knowing business was slow for his workshop. He couldn't stand to accept that kind of charity. But he had it all wrong; all the young woman wanted was to improve her product with his cooperation. When he realized his mistake, he was so embarrassed that he wanted to disappear into a hole in the ground and fill it with water.

While he was busy fretting over trivial things, Dahlia looked him squarely in the eye and insisted, "But Mr. Gandolfi, you *could* make improvements to this design or come up with different versions, couldn't you? I'm sure of it."

The Gandolfi Workshop had never enjoyed the patronage of noble clientele,

nor did it have connections with any large, influential companies. All he did was disassemble, reassemble, and inspect the workings of her invention, but that was enough for her. Watching the way his hands moved had told her everything she wanted to know. That alone left her in no doubt as to his skill and gave her enough confidence to entrust him with improving and modifying her product. Fermo would dare any self-respecting craftsman not to be fired up and raring to go after such a compliment.

“I could, yes,” he said.

She looked pleased—over the moon, in fact—to hear his reply. As he began to explain his ideas, he could see her excitement in the shine of her green eyes and the way she’d lean in close, and he could hear it in the sound of her voice. Their conversation was lively, and Fermo soon forgot all about the formality that was expected of him at this first meeting.

However, the fact remained that the foaming soap bottle was Dahlia’s invention. It didn’t sit right with Fermo to split the profits with her in a joint development contract, and so he tried once again to refuse. However, this time it was Dahlia who got the wrong end of the stick, her face falling.

“I understand. It would be terribly embarrassing to put your name beside that of a novice like me.”

*Now, hold on a second, I didn’t say that. I didn’t even think it! And what’s a craftswoman of your caliber calling herself a novice for? You’re more than a match for me!*

Somehow or other, Fermo kept these thoughts from bursting forth and instead simply waved the white flag, agreeing to officially collaborate on the soap bottles. He knew that this young woman outmatched him on a number of fronts, but as the veteran in this partnership, he still had his pride.

That was why he made her this promise: “Just you wait—I’ll come up with great ideas, make ’em well, and one day, I’ll be raking in even more than you!”



“What was Chairwoman Rossetti like?” Fermo’s wife asked when he arrived home from the Merchants’ Guild later that day.

“A craftswoman after my own heart.”

“Oh dear. Hard work, then? Still, I’m glad she’s a kindred spirit,” Barbara replied with a chuckle.

Nothing more needed to be said, so close were this husband and wife.

“So, this Madam Rossetti, she’s a company chair *and* a craftswoman?” one of the apprentices asked as they looked at each other in puzzlement.

In a couple of brief words, Fermo told them that, yes, she was, before he left to change into his work clothes. He was itching to get crafting.

*Yeah, Dahlia Rossetti’s a craftswoman all right. No mistaking it.*

She’d explained the inner workings of her invention freely and openly, and it wasn’t profit that drove her, but the possibilities of what they could create together. She wanted to see her product become easier to use, more durable, and diversified into a range of forms. She was prepared to put in as much hard work as it took to make a better product and even to share the profits and credit with another artisan. That was the mark of a magical toolmaker. Fermo could tell how deeply in love she was with her craft. It was the kind of love—some might say obsession—that drove every other thought from one’s mind and made one pour one’s heart and soul into every creation. Sometimes, that came at the expense of other things.

Overjoyed to have met someone cut from the same cloth, Fermo happily threw himself into the new project. Before long, he was invited to visit Dahlia’s home, the Green Tower. There, Dahlia’s first employee, Ivano, apprised him of the circumstances surrounding the young toolmaker. It was a tangled web and she’d been through the wringer, by the sounds of it, but Fermo knew that she didn’t need his pity.

He was far too polite to say it to her face, but as far as Fermo could see, losing her fiancé had been no bad thing for her. She was free now to make what she wanted, how she wanted, and to expand her horizons in whichever direction she chose. Nothing made an artisan happier than that kind of creative freedom. In her personal life, too, happiness appeared to be close at hand. Fermo felt sure those two would find some way or other of working out their circumstances, though he had no intention of poking his nose into it himself. He

valued his life more than that.

The Rossetti Trading Company, it appeared, was a safe haven for Dahlia. She had Volf, the knight, to protect her, and she had support in all matters of business from Ivano, the merchant. Fermo was more than happy to stand alongside them and offer the expertise and knowledge he'd accumulated over his long years of experience. He had a feeling he might end up asking *her* for advice more often than the other way around; nonetheless, he was keen to do whatever he could to aid her.

"That the time already?"

Fermo glanced out of the workshop window to see the bright moon rising. He'd shaped and reshaped the piece of metal in his hands a dozen times, and his work gloves were drenched with sweat. The workbench was scattered with sketches and plans for prototypes and piles of materials. He'd given himself plenty of clearing up to do.

It had been mere days since he'd made the acquaintance of Dahlia Rossetti, yet his workshop was not only back on its feet, but even short-staffed. Lacking storage space, he'd rented out an empty building in the neighborhood. He already had a large order of foaming soap bottles from the Merchants' Guild to fulfill. It would take all of the workshop's resources just to manufacture and deliver the items on time. The apprentices had been rushed off their feet these last few days; at night, they slept like logs. Even so, in his spare moments, Fermo had still found time to draw up plans for new types of soap bottles and think up possible improvements for Dahlia's camp stove.

"Fermo, why don't you get up early in the morning to finish that? Those magic lanterns don't run for free."

It was Barbara, expressing her concern in a roundabout way, as she often did. Fermo smiled and pulled off his gloves at long last. Blisters had burst on the hand he used to grip his small hammer.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. There's no charge for the morning sun."

He knew that his wife wouldn't stop work for the day until he did. For the sake of her health, he ought not to overdo it. Being the sometimes-pigheaded and brash man he was, he was deeply grateful for a woman who would keep

him in check—not that he could ever tell her that.

“Here’s the ledger, all up to date. We’re on solid ground again. I’ll have to get started on the glasswork soon.”

Barbara beamed as she placed the open ledger down on the desk, the pages showing the workshop finally back in the black. At her bosom, the unicorn pendant sparkled merrily in spite of the dim light. Fermo found himself transfixed by its glimmer. He wasn’t used to having such magical accessories close at hand, much less beautiful pieces of jewelry made with rare materials. That this little thing had brought Barbara relief from the debilitating pain of redneedle was miraculous.

“What *are* you staring at?” Barbara asked.

“Oh, you know how I’ve always loved a nice rack.”

A sound like a cracking whip split the workshop’s silence as Fermo got a sharp smack to the forehead.

*Boy, that stings. That really stings.*

Fermo feared his forehead would be glowing red for a while.

“Honestly, the things that come out of your mouth sometimes!”

Her hand had moved even quicker than her mouth. Along with restoring her energy, it seemed the pendant had given her back her strength and speed as well. In fact, it might’ve even given them a boost. Her tolerance for his jokes appeared to be unchanged, however. Fermo made a mental note to tread a tad more carefully. While these silly thoughts ran through his mind, he saw Barbara cast down her violet eyes.

“We owe Miss Dahlia a great debt. We must repay her as soon as we can.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Fermo replied with a firm nod.

Thanks to Dahlia, their workshop was now so busy that they weren’t just surviving; they were thriving. She’d twisted his arm into signing a joint development contract and even freed Barbara from her interminable pain. It was an awful lot to repay, but Fermo was up for the challenge. The craftsman smiled to himself. *He* was the veteran here, and once he set his mind to

something, he was like a dog with a bone. As sure as his name was Fermo, he'd pay his young partner back for everything she'd done, and he'd do it with interest too.

# Grilled Butterfish and the Seven Wonders of the Royal Capital

“What kind of fish is this?”

“It’s called butterfish. It’s related to sea bream.”

In the Green Tower’s kitchen, Dahlia was preparing a gleaming silver fish. It seemed that Volf was unfamiliar with it, staring at it curiously with his head cocked.

Dahlia had written to Volf only that morning, saying: *When you have time, please come and take a look at my new camp stove prototype.*

She hadn’t expected him to arrive quite so promptly. A distinct air of fatigue hung over the knight; unsurprising, considering that the previous day, he’d rushed from the capital on an urgent mission to put down a group of deadly monsters. As soon as Dahlia saw him, she encouraged him to go home and take it easy, but Volf insisted that he was fine. Perhaps he’d suffered another unpleasant experience, she thought, remembering how Volf had been singled out by that gang of knights the other day. Whatever the case, she thought it best not to pry.

Since he’d come all this way, Dahlia decided to kill two birds with one stone and make them dinner while testing out her new prototype camp stove. The main ingredient she’d chosen for the meal was butterfish.

“I’ll just be seasoning it with salt and grilling it today, but butterfish is great deep-fried or dried too.”

The almost thirty-centimeter-long fish bore a clear resemblance to a sea bream. Its shiny silver skin was flecked with black dots. It was an extremely tasty species, but for some reason, it had never enjoyed much popularity in Ordine. Perhaps those black spots put people off.

“So, why’s it called a butterfish? There’s no yellow on it at all.”



“It’s because of its high fat content. Some people say it has a buttery flavor.”

The butterfish in this world was exactly like that Dahlia had known in her previous life. It was a little larger, but that only made it a more satisfying meal. As she turned on the tap and washed the fish, a clear, slimy substance began to run off its surface.

“It looks sort of sticky, Dahlia. Are you sure it’s all right?”

Volf looked concerned about its freshness. Dahlia herself had gotten quite a shock the first time she’d prepared this fish.

“Butterfish are always covered in this sticky stuff. The fact that it’s so clear means it’s fresh—the fishmonger told me so.”

She used a spoon to scrape off the scales before rinsing the fish again. Next, she cut open the belly and gutted it. All that was left was to generously season it with salt and cook it.

“There, that’s the prep all done.”

“I’m always impressed by how you handle these things. You’re a great cook.”

“All I’ve done is cut it up a bit. The rest is up to my little camp stove.”

Volf’s frequent praise was difficult for Dahlia to accept. The success of her meals had little to do with her skills and more to do with the quality of the ingredients and the fact that she had all the right utensils. The dishes she’d made him had involved little more complicated than a bit of pan-frying or stewing. Her mother in her previous life had been a good cook and had taught her a lot, but Dahlia had died before reaching her mother’s level of skill.

In this world, she’d learned from Sofia, her childhood maid, and from reading cookbooks, but her distinctive style was largely self-taught. When she was young and just starting out, she’d made all sorts of terrible blunders. However, her father would clean his plate no matter what she concocted. This filled her with determination to improve. As she thought back to some of her early dishes, she prayed that no burnt meat or fish had played a part in her father’s untimely death.

“Now, the shape isn’t final yet, but here’s the latest version of the camp

stove. And here's the pot. Mr. Fermo treated the surface so it's safe to use for cooking."

"Ah, the fold-down pot. You really managed to make it. I can see the stove's thinner than before too."

They went through to the living room, where Dahlia placed three of her prototype stoves on the table and switched them on. She would use two of them for cooking the fish and the other for warming some vegetable soup.

"It'll take a little while to cook, so let's have a toast," she said.

As the butterfish began to sizzle, Dahlia poured some finely crushed ice into a bowl. On top of this, she placed the small cups she'd bought with Volf the other day. The glass cups were simply decorated with colored lines—one in red, the other in blue. Their fresh, cool appearance was further accentuated by the bed of ice. Dahlia filled the cups with a faintly cloudy estervino, pouring it from a glass serving bowl. Today's estervino was medium dry and came courtesy of Volf. Apparently, it had been highly recommended by the store's manager.

They toasted each other's good health and fortune and took a sip. Then they returned the cups to the ice to allow the liquor to chill a little more. The pair cheerfully discussed the camp stoves while they waited for the food to cook.

"That's a fantastic smell," Volf commented.

As the butterfish crisped up, a mouthwatering, subtly sweet aroma began to waft from the stoves. Volf seemed to have a very keen sense of smell; perhaps that was why he was growing so restless.

"Shall I turn them over now?" he asked.

"Not quite yet. It's best to turn them only once so that they don't fall apart."

In Dahlia's past life, her mother had taught her that a fish should spend sixty percent of the cooking time on the first side and the remaining forty percent on the other. In this life, Sofia had taught her that it should be forty percent, then sixty percent. When she asked Irma and *her* mother, however, they'd both insisted that fish should be cooked equally on both sides. Dahlia was still in the dark as to which theory was correct. She decided to go with her mother's advice for today. The salted skin of the fish was beginning to crackle and spit from the

heat.

“Just a little longer,” Dahlia said.

“Right.”

Volf’s eagerness was inconcealable. With chopsticks in hand, the two of them sat watching the fish intently as it sizzled on the metal grilles. It was quite the bizarre scene. As Dahlia was picturing how the knights might cook a dish like this out in the field, she suddenly realized something.

“Volf, it must be rather difficult for you to get hold of fresh fish during your missions, right?”

“It depends. If we’re near the sea or a river, we sometimes catch a few.”

Even if that were the case, fresh fish clearly wasn’t the easiest ingredient to obtain during the knights’ missions. It might be wise to use less perishable ingredients in future test runs.

“Hmm, dried or salted fish would last a bit longer. Fish preserved in oil might work too.”

Many options came to mind, but each ingredient had different requirements in terms of transport and cooking techniques, and some lasted longer than others. Dahlia sat there, absorbed in thought, until Volf called her name.

“Dahlia, it’s smoking!”

Even a few seconds’ inattention ran the risk of burning the fish. The pair hurriedly flipped it over, and once it was finally cooked, they wasted no time digging in with their chopsticks. The pale white flesh flaked easily from the bones. Dahlia brought a piece to her lips, but she quickly realized it was too hot. She gently blew on the steaming piece of fish to cool it before popping it inside her mouth.

Beneath the thin, crispy skin, the flesh was surprisingly soft and moist. The salty seasoning mingled with the natural savoriness and sweetness of the fish, resulting in a beautifully balanced flavor. It was also very easy to eat, containing only a few small bones. The distinctly salty flavor of grilled fish soon had Dahlia longing for the white rice she remembered from her past life.

“This is heavenly,” Volf murmured, reverently piecing the fish apart flake by flake.

Judging by his intense gaze, it was very much to his liking. Dahlia gently placed another piece of butterfish on the grill and turned the stove back on.

“Now, is this chilled yet?” she wondered aloud.

Once her palate was finally clear of the fish’s flavor, Dahlia picked up one of the cups of estervino. The glass was chilly against her fingertips, the ice-cold estervino glimmering within it. In spite of it being medium dry, Dahlia detected no harshness in the liquor’s flavor when she took a sip. It felt fresh and clean on her tongue and slipped down smoothly. It reminded Dahlia of fresh, pure spring water with the unmistakable flavor of estervino.

This was a dangerous one. If she wasn’t careful, the bottle would be gone in the blink of an eye. She set her cup down and relaxed into her chair. The warmth gradually returned to her mouth, and the aroma of the butterfish invited her back for more. The flavors of the soft, fragrant flesh and salty skin seemed even more intense and delightful than before. It was clear that chilled estervino was the perfect accompaniment to the rich fish. Dahlia sighed softly in contentment, looking over at Volf to see him do just the same thing.

“How is it?” she asked, as she turned her attention back to the stoves.

Although lighter than her previous prototypes, they were no less powerful. The pots Fermo had made for them warmed up nicely, without the heat concentrating in the folds as they’d feared might happen. It seemed to Dahlia that success would soon be within their grasp.

Volf looked almost tearful as he gazed back at her with his shimmering golden eyes.

“You know, I think maybe butterfish are born to be eaten with medium-dry estervino.”

“Volf, imagine how those poor fish would feel if they could understand you.”

The sentiment fell on deaf ears. At that moment, Volf’s head was empty but for thoughts of fish and liquor.

After the long, leisurely dinner, Dahlia sat down to write notes on the camp stove while Volf washed up. She'd offered to do the dishes herself since Volf was surely tired from yesterday's expedition, but he refused, insisting her work was more important. Oddly, splitting the chores now felt completely natural.

"Here's to the success of the new and improved camp stove."

"May it produce many a tasty and hearty meal on our expeditions. Cheers!"

Having relocated from the table to the sofa, the pair raised a second toast with cups of chilled estervino. Dahlia had prepared a fresh bed of crushed ice for the cups to rest on. Finally out of work mode, she gave her muscles a good stretch, and Volf struck up conversation.

"Do you remember any of the other Seven Wonders of the Royal Capital, Dahlia? Aside from the healing white slime in the temple, I mean."

Those "Seven Wonders" had come up the other day. Hoping the conversation wouldn't take a turn for the macabre, Dahlia searched her memory.

"Well, I seem to remember the Guardian of the Sewers being one."

Along with abundant water crystals, Ordine also had an extensive sewer system. Its construction had been possible largely thanks to elite earth mages who could carve out water channels with ease.

"I've heard that strange creatures sometimes turn up inside the septic tanks," Volf said. "They're connected to the sea and rivers, so the general consensus is that it's just groups of fish-type monsters swimming up the channels."

"I see. That makes sense."

Some monsters resembled small fish. It was easy to see why a shoal of them might be mistaken for some kind of magical guardian.

"I was talking about the Wonders with the older knights recently, and it seems like they've changed a little over the years. According to one of the much older men, people used to say, 'A vein of adamantite sleeps 'neath the city walls.'"

"Adamantite?"

Adamantite was a magical metal famed for its hardness. Some believed it

could be used to create powerful enchantments. In the words of an old fairy tale, “Even steel is like butter before an adamantite sword.” However, Dahlia had never seen nor heard of these legendary weapons truly existing. Could there really be one somewhere in this city?

“Have you ever seen an adamantite weapon?” she asked.

“No, never. I’ve never even heard of raw adamantite being discovered in Ordine. There are deposits of it in other kingdoms, I’m told, but they’re very secretive about it, so it’s hard to know what’s true and what’s just rumors.”

“In that story about it being underneath the city walls, does it say which part? Like in the north or south?”

“Well, I suppose that’s the ‘wonder’ part. Nobody knows exactly where it’s supposed to be. It’s just...down there somewhere. Just imagine, though, a magical sword forged from adamantite... Wouldn’t that be incredible? Doesn’t it make you want to go digging, just a little bit?”

Upon seeing Volf’s eager smile, Dahlia was suddenly reminded of the time her dog from her past life had dug up nearly half the yard. All the dog had unearthed was the cap from a juice bottle, but he’d dropped it in her hand with such pride that she’d simply had to praise him.

“I think it’s against the law to deliberately damage the walls. That probably applies to digging under them too. Besides, who knows how long those walls go on for? Even a lifetime wouldn’t be long enough to search beneath it all,” Dahlia replied with a wry smile.

Then again, she thought, Volf’s instincts were sharp, and his nose never lied. *He could always cast his strengthening magic and sniff out the adamantite like a —*

Dahlia pulled the brakes on that train of thought and quickly decided to forget it.

“I never heard anything about adamantite when I was in school, but there was a rumor about the walls. ‘The walls protect the city with a magical barrier,’ people said. Apparently, the magic keeps monsters and such away.”

“That’s what I always heard too,” Volf agreed. “I mean, there *is* magic in the

walls, but it's just a hardening enchantment so they last longer and stand up to storms."

The city walls were not only tall, but very thick and very long. It was no wonder powerful hardening enchantments were needed to keep them in good condition.

"I just remembered another of the wonders: 'Late at night, at the Royal Opera House, you can hear fairies sing.' People thought music-loving fairies came out to sing once the opera house was empty."

"I don't want to shatter your dreams, but I've been told those 'fairies' are just up-and-coming singers who aren't good enough for the stage yet. They practice in the wings at night. Sometimes, retired singers come and sing from the opposite side of the stage to coach them. One of the older knights is a regular at the opera, you see. He's the one who told me all this."

"I think that's lovely."

True, it was nice to imagine fairies filling the empty opera house with mystical melodies by night, but the truth of the singers, young and old, coming together to support each other was perhaps nicer still. One day, those novices might stand on the other side of the stage to mentor the next generation. Dahlia took another sip of estervino, letting the chilled liquor wash over her tongue.

"What else?" Volf mused to himself. "Oh, yeah. 'In the castle grounds, there's a building with no way in or out.' Actually, there are quite a few buildings near the royal residence with hidden entrances. I imagine they're emergency shelters for the royal family."

It was a logical explanation. If those buildings really were for ensuring the royal family's safety, it was no surprise that the entryways and exits were kept top secret.

"At school, someone once asked me, 'Have you heard about the ghost in the historical archives?' That turned out to be another of the wonders," Dahlia recalled.

"Historical archives" was perhaps a more dignified name than the building deserved. It was more like a three-story warehouse stuffed with decades and

decades' worth of dusty documents, disused magical tools, arms and armor—all manner of old things were squirreled away there in a less-than-orderly manner. It was a dingy place hidden in the shadow of the main school building. Dahlia had never gone inside.

"We had to do nighttime awareness training for my chivalric studies course. They made us walk around that place in the dead of night. I never ran into any ghosts, though."

"I'm so glad I never took chivalric studies."

Dahlia had had no idea that tests of courage like that were part of the coursework. She thanked her lucky stars that no such thing was required of the magical toolmaking students.

"And then there's the seventh wonder," Volf began, his expression solemn.

"The king can come back from the dead!" the pair said in unison.

The supposedly unkillable king was probably the best known of the Seven Wonders.

"I think that story's been around since the kingdom's founding. It's said that the first king survived being stabbed with a sword."

"Yes, they say only old age can claim the life of the monarch. I can't help wondering whether this wonder isn't just people's wishful thinking, though."

It occurred to Dahlia that coming back from the dead surely made one *undead*, but she kept the thought to herself. It felt perilously close to *lèse-majesté*.

"It might be wishful thinking to some degree, but it's really not far from the truth. The royal family's healing magic is extremely powerful."

"Goodness. So they have fire *and* healing?"

The current king boasted the most potent magical power of any monarch in recent memory. His fire magic was so terrifically powerful that he was sometimes nicknamed "the Sun Wielder." It was news to Dahlia that the king's restorative powers were just as impressive.

"Most of the royals can command all five schools. As far as I know, fire magic



is the king's specialty, but he also has powerful water, air, earth, and restorative magic. He can use every type with the skill of an elite mage."

The gods had obviously seen fit to shower the ruling family with their bounty. Dahlia couldn't help feeling a tad envious.

"Still, to come back from the dead would mean that the king can use healing magic to revive himself. Is it even possible to heal your own wounds like that?"

Obviously, one couldn't use magic once already dead, but perhaps there was some kind of revival spell one could cast in advance, just in case the worst should happen. *Wouldn't that qualify as necromancy, though?* Dahlia thought to herself. Whatever the case, the idea that such magic existed was undeniably exciting. She'd love for the Beast Hunters to be able to make use of it on their missions.

"Well, this is only what I've heard, but with the right kind of magic, it seems that some priests and mages can heal themselves, yeah. They can treat their own wounds and even hangovers."

"No need for them to buy potions, then."

Being able to heal one's own wounds would be a useful skill indeed. Personally, she'd start with doing something about the lingering prickle those fish scales had left on her fingertips.

"The only trouble is that you need to concentrate hard. A mage I heard about tried to cure his hangover but ended up making it twice as bad."

"Ouch. That sounds awful."

Few people would be able to muster proper concentration through nausea and a pounding headache, so it was hardly surprising.

"But about that revival magic," Volf continued. "My guess would be that it's just powerful healing magic cast on someone who's on the brink of death, rather than actually dead."

"I see. That *is* more plausible."

"On a mission a while back, a high priest who was accompanying us said, 'As long as you've still got your head and your heart, we can manage something or

other.”

“Something or...other?”

Dahlia’s imagination whirled into action and she felt her blood run cold. She prayed sincerely that none of the Beast Hunters ever ended up in such a state.

While she sat there fretting, Volf smiled cheerfully and said, “We usually have a priest with us these days, so even if some huge monster gobbles us up, we’ll probably come out of it all right.”

“Volf, do you have to *always* say such terrifying things?!” Dahlia demanded, glaring at him reproachfully.

She’d been afraid that this conversation would end up somewhere gruesome, and her instincts had been proven correct. Hoping to change the subject and dispel these distressing thoughts, Dahlia produced a long oil-paper bag.

“This is lamb jerky from the next kingdom.”

“Lamb jerky?”

“Mm-hmm. Irma gave it to me. One of her clients went traveling and brought this jerky back as a souvenir. She said the flavor’s good; not too overpowering, considering it’s sheep meat. Would you like a piece?”

“I’d love one. I’ve never tried jerky made from sheep before.”

Volf took one of the long, thin pieces of jerky and peered at it with interest. Dahlia took one for herself too, biting down without hesitation. It turned out to be much more tender than it looked. Most jerky was fairly tough, but this was obviously a soft type. Chewing it gradually released the flavor—savory and meaty without tasting too strongly of sheep.

“Nice and tender, huh?” Volf commented. “It’s not as salty as the stuff we take on expeditions either.”

“Is the type you usually eat very tough?”

“Yeah. It needs to last, you see. The guys around my age don’t mind it, but some of the older knights struggle to chew it. They usually soak it in water to soften it.”

Chewing tough, dry jerky would be a struggle for anyone without strong teeth and jaws. It was no wonder the older knights had trouble. For her part, Dahlia was also concerned about its high salt content. There was no such term as “hypertension” in this world. However, in her conversations with friends and acquaintances, Dahlia had often heard of people suffering what sounded like strokes and other symptoms that were typical consequences of high blood pressure. She couldn’t say conclusively that there was a link to these people’s salt intake, but it was hard to believe that there was no connection.

The meals the Beast Hunters ate during their expeditions sounded quite poorly balanced. While there was nothing wrong with the rye bread, all they had aside from that was salted dried meat, salty cheese, dried fruit, and soup with a few dried vegetables. Such a salty diet could easily give rise to high blood pressure, and it was lacking in protein and vitamins too. Aside from all that, it must have been somewhat demoralizing eating the same dull meals day after day. The knights’ work was dangerous and difficult. If only Dahlia could perfect her camp stoves, they would be able to cook some more nutritious and enjoyable meals to sustain them on their missions.

“I’m going to give these stoves everything I’ve got—whatever it takes to get the order to adopt them,” Dahlia declared, her expression resolute.

Volf grinned. “I can’t wait!”

“Oh, that reminds me. What was that urgent mission you had to leave for yesterday?”

“We had to exterminate some purple bicorn. They’re a kind of mutant bicorn.”

“Purple? Are they poisonous, then? Or do they maybe have some kind of paralyzing magic?”

According to Dahlia’s bestiary, purple often indicated monsters with poison, venom, or magic that caused symptoms like paralysis.

“They have illusory magic. They use it to disguise themselves as people. Everyone hates fighting them.”

This was news to Dahlia; she’d never heard of bicorn using illusions. She

could imagine how confusing that might become in close combat.

“Do they try to confuse you so you attack each other?” she asked.

“No, it’s not that. They, er...turn themselves into people you’re close to. Or people who are important to you, I guess.”

Volf dropped his gaze, his voice low. Dahlia was reminded of how exhausted he’d looked when he’d turned up on her doorstep earlier. From his expression, one would think he was chewing on a cockroach as he sat there eating his jerky. Volf must have seen his mother, Vanessa, yesterday, Dahlia reasoned. She couldn’t imagine how awful he must have felt raising his sword against her; the fact that she’d long since passed away would have been no comfort.

“It must have been very hard.”

“Huh?” Volf stared at her for a moment, motionless. “I didn’t... I mean, it didn’t last all that long. I saw through them and managed to take them out.”

“Right. I know mutants can be especially dangerous, so it can’t have been easy,” Dahlia said quickly, making it clear she was referring to the monsters’ genetics and not whatever illusions Volf may have seen.

It was their use of magic that many people believed separated monsters from ordinary animals. Many were highly resistant to magical attacks. Depending on their magical affinity, some could even survive long-range spells from elite mages. Fire magic would be ineffective on a monster that used fire magic. Earth magic would be moderately effective, while water magic would do the most damage. That was more or less how affinity worked. Even ordinary bicornes were quite powerful, magically speaking. Battling their mutant forms would be no mean feat.

“Oh, your cup’s almost empty.”

Volf suddenly reached out and refilled her cup from the serving bowl. Just for a moment, as he placed it back on the table, Dahlia glimpsed a thin red mark running across the palm of his hand.

“Volf, is your hand okay? It looks like you’ve hurt it.”

“It’s nothing. I hardly noticed it.”

She could tell from his calm smile that he was telling the truth. Still, she was sure that if she'd gotten a cut like that, Volf would be fussing over her like a mother hen.

"I realized something yesterday," Volf continued. "I want to be so strong that I can one day defeat any monster with ease, but...I've still got a long way to go. As a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, I'm sworn to defend the kingdom against any threat, but I don't have the strength to do that yet. I need to work harder. I need to temper my mind and body so that I'm ready for anything."

There was a darkness in Volf's golden eyes that Dahlia had rarely seen. He held his injured hand clenched as though to hide the mark, tightening it until his knuckles turned white. It was both unease and resolve that kept his fist clenched so hard. Dahlia couldn't guess at the thoughts playing out behind his pools of liquid gold—whether they were of his mother's death, his conduct in yesterday's battle, or the savage beasts he might fight in the future. All she was sure of was his burning desire to become a man of unquestionable, unstoppable might.

"Volf...?" She whispered his name so softly that even he didn't hear.

"You're more than strong enough already," she wanted to tell him. "Don't rush into danger. I want you to be safe and come home unhurt." But she couldn't bring herself to speak these thoughts aloud. She knew it would only upset him further. Instead, she put on her best smile and said cheerfully, "Volf, I need you back here in one piece, okay? I'll be waiting with a nice meal for you."

"You've got yourself a deal."

Though his expression was serious, his playful words made Dahlia grin, and she refilled his glass with estervino.

Alongside magic crystals and monster materials, the danger of monsters and the inevitable damage they wreaked were facts of life for the people of this world. Here, these fearsome creatures were simply another kind of natural disaster. Thanks to the work of the Order of Beast Hunters, as well as many mages and adventurers, the kingdom of Ordine was relatively safe in comparison to its neighbors. Dahlia's recollections from her past life, however, had left her with a rather different understanding of safety from most people

around her.

Powerful monsters could be as destructive as any force of nature. Even well-armed caravans could be laid to waste if they encountered a forest serpent on the highway. Desert worms could descend without warning on travelers and oases and leave nothing but sand in their wake. Many a ship had been lost at sea to the wrath of sea serpents. In the neighboring kingdoms, wind dragons sometimes ruined vast swathes of wheat fields, while fire dragons had been known to reduce whole towns to ash, residents and all. There were records of goblin hordes pouring from the hills and razing villages in Ordine, long ago. In her history class at school, Dahlia had heard of a hydra appearing near the border some twenty or so years ago. Many men from the Order of Beast Hunters and other knights' divisions had lost their lives battling it.

While a few monsters sprang up in much the same areas at around the same times each year, for the most part, it was impossible to predict where or when monsters would appear or what damage they might do. The appearance of mutants only added new layers of uncertainty.

Like every other living thing in this world, monsters were just trying desperately to survive. Given time, they were sure to become stronger and cleverer, leading to ever bloodier battles with humankind. To continue fighting and vanquishing these creatures year after year would be a Herculean task.

Dahlia could not fight monsters. Despite using many monster-derived materials, such as powdered slime, she would be helpless if one attacked her. And so she was resolved to fight in the only way she knew how—through her craft. Just as Volf sought strength as a knight, so she would seek strength as a magical toolmaker. She would complete her camp stove and then set her sights on more new magical tools that would improve the knights' lives. She wanted to make magical tools that would help people live in comfort and happiness in this magical, monster-riddled land.

If she could invent something to brighten the daily life of just *someone* in this world, be it Volf, the Beast Hunters, the citizens of Ordine, or anyone else, then all of her efforts would be worth it. She would be proud to call herself Dahlia Rossetti, the magical toolmaker.

“We’ve got our work cut out for us, but let’s give it everything we’ve got,” Dahlia said.

“Yeah, no holding back.”

The glow of the magical lantern gently wavered as they brought their cups together with a clink.





## **Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—The Fairy Glass Lantern**

It was March, that time of year when spring is said to be just around the corner, but the mornings and evenings were still nippy. The Green Tower was built from stone, and at this late hour, no matter how warm and toasty one's toes had felt in bed, the tower's stairs soon chilled them. Dahlia may have already lived half a lifetime in another world, but she was only an elementary student in this one. She couldn't help a slight sense of trepidation in the dark stairway, creeping as quietly as a mouse as she descended to the workshop on the first floor.

Earlier that day, she'd found a small cluster of fairy glass, scintillating in all its rainbow colors, on the workbench.

"I've got an urgent order for a fairy glass lantern, so I'll be working tonight," her father had said at dinner.

He hadn't seemed very pleased about it, and Dahlia couldn't help wondering if he was a little under the weather. She'd hoped to watch him while he worked, but he'd said no, since it could take him most of the night. When she'd tried to argue, he'd simply smiled at her and said, "I'll show you next time."

There had been something different about that gentle smile—something that quelled any further protests she might have made.

A fairy glass lantern was simply a magical lantern enchanted with powdered fairy glass. It produced not only light, but illusions as well. Dahlia didn't yet know exactly how they were made. It was widely thought that fairy glass was a crystallized form of the magic that fairies used to camouflage themselves. It had the power to conceal things and trick the eye.

Its rarity made it expensive, and, according to a magical toolmaking book Dahlia had read, it took very fine control of one's magical power in order to craft with it. Dahlia was enchanted by those shimmering crystals that were like

rainbows trapped with the purest quartz. She longed to enchant with them herself one day.

Peering down into the workshop from halfway up the stairs, Dahlia saw her father slumped over the workbench, fast asleep. The object in front of him, throwing out soft, multicolored light, had to be his finished lantern. The small lantern was gold in color, and the handle was delicately engraved with butterflies and scrolling vines. It looked very refined, certainly of a different class from the lanterns she was used to seeing.

She gingerly approached, coming to stand beside her father. It was from this angle that the illusion came into view, floating in midair. Within a circle about fifty centimeters across, Dahlia saw a boundless blue sky and a meadow of flowers that stretched all the way to the horizon. Flocks of small birds flew across the dazzling blue while snow-white clouds drifted lazily by. In the meadow below, large dahlia flowers bloomed in a dozen colors, visited by white butterflies. Now and then, the flowers and foliage nodded and swayed in a gentle breeze.

Was this a real place, Dahlia wondered? Or did it exist only in her father's imagination? Regardless, the translucent spectacle was utterly captivating. She'd never imagined that the lantern's illusions would float in midair like this, rather than appearing in or on the object itself. Only a master craftsman like her father could produce such lovely work as this; of that, she was sure. Dahlia lost track of time as she stood admiring the dreamlike scene projected by the lantern. Eventually, however, a loud snore from her father shattered her reverie. Dahlia scanned the worktop and sighed as her suspicions were confirmed.

"Tsk, Father... You've overdone it *again*?"

Three red wine bottles stood at one end of the workbench. They were all empty. By the looks of it, he hadn't even been using a glass, drinking straight from the bottle instead. For an honorary baron, he was inexcusably ill-mannered sometimes. Not to mention the fact that he'd fallen asleep wearing no more than his work clothes. The nights were still chilly; what if he caught a cold? He'd done just that after drinking too much and falling asleep like this last month.

Dahlia fetched a warm blanket from one corner of the workshop, bundling it up in her arms and tottering over to her sleeping father to lay it over his back. She was still a little too short to manage it, however, leaving her with no choice but to throw it instead.

“Upsy-daisy! Oh!”

The sudden waft of air caused by the blanket sent a piece of white paper fluttering to the floor. Dahlia hastily snatched it up. Her father’s blueprints and specification documents were important; she couldn’t allow them to get dirty.

“What’s this?”

What she’d picked up was an envelope and a neatly folded letter. The envelope was edged with black embroidery. As she recalled, nobles used this style when sending someone notice of a funeral. Perhaps this was the reason her father had been drinking. Perhaps a fellow toolmaker who’d been honored with a title or one of his noble friends had passed away. She glanced at her father, now noticing the tear stains on his cheeks that had not quite dried. Might this person who’d died be someone *she* knew? Maybe someone who’d visited the tower? Suddenly growing anxious, Dahlia unfolded the letter.

“I regret to inform you that Teresa has departed from this world...”

The lady whose passing the letter conveyed was Teresa Lamberti. This name was all Dahlia had ever known of her mother. The letter was brief and dispassionate. It went on to explain that her mother had died of an illness and the funeral had already taken place. Below was noted the location of her grave within the nobles’ cemetery, and that was all.

The sender was the current Earl Lamberti. He’d been adopted into the Lamberti family and had subsequently become Teresa’s second husband.

“Who does he think he is?”

Dahlia felt anger rising up in her chest. What was this letter supposed to achieve? It had been years since her father and mother had separated, and not a word had passed between them. Why would Lamberti go out of his way to notify Dahlia’s father of her mother’s death—even to direct him to her grave? It was hard to see the letter as anything other than vindictive. “You still love her,

don't you?" it seemed to jeer. It wasn't as though the earl had bothered to write when Teresa had become very ill or just after her death. The funeral was over already; she was naught but ash.

"Ugh!"

About to rip the letter into shreds, Dahlia stopped herself just in time. Her father had not destroyed it; what gave her the right to?

"Father..."

She looked once again at her father's cheek and bit her lip hard. He'd been crying here in secret, all alone. Could it be that he still loved her mother after all? Could that be the real reason he'd never considered remarrying? Even after she'd left him, married another man, and been gone all these long years, did he still keep a place for her in his heart? Although now he would never see her again, much less have a chance to mend their broken bond, it seemed that he still loved her enough to cry for her.

Dahlia felt her own eyes welling up. In spite of the years she'd lived in her other world, in this one, she was still a child. She wasn't sure of the feelings tumbling around inside her; was it sympathy for her father or anguish that he'd felt unable to confide in her? She swallowed back her tears and refolded the letter. Resisting the urge to hurl it into the trash, she slipped it back inside its envelope and gently slid it beneath her father's arms.

Dahlia had never seen her father cry before. She'd seen tears of happiness when he'd laughed himself silly and playful crocodile tears, but he'd never cried with sadness in her presence. Not long ago, following the death of a veteran toolmaker he'd known, Dahlia's father had been despondent. However, at least while he was in the tower, he'd never shed a tear.

Be that as it may, even grown-ups weren't immune to pain. There must have been times her father had wanted to cry just like tonight. She found herself thinking back to her past life. Perhaps the man who'd been her father then had also wanted to weep at times. Even after arriving home past midnight following an exhausting day at work, the very next day, he would go out with Dahlia and her mother on a family trip. Dahlia remembered him changing careers and joining a new company when she was in middle school. There was little change

at home, and she didn't think much of it at the time, but looking back now, changing careers during a recession must have been a very difficult decision for him. Even so, he never complained to her, never let slip any sign of the hardship he must have been going through. He simply kept quiet and soldiered on, carrying his burden apparently alone.

Her mother had been the same. She'd never confided in Dahlia about any troubles she was going through or concerns she had for the future. Dahlia had been under her parents' wings until the very end; she'd still been their little girl, and she'd forever lost her chance to repay them for all they'd done. She was determined not to let that happen again. In this life, she wanted to grow up and stand on her own two feet. She wanted to be the kind of daughter her father could grumble to and confide in when he needed someone to talk to.

They only had each other, after all. She didn't want either of them to have to cry alone. However, she understood that she was still just a child here, too young to support her father the way she wanted to.

She suddenly remembered a line from a book on magical toolmaking she'd read: *Mastering the technique of enchanting lanterns and lamps with fairy glass marks a milestone in a magical toolmaker's career. It is at this moment that they may consider themselves a full-fledged artisan.* Clearly, processing and enchanting with this mystical material demanded considerable skill.

"A full-fledged artisan, hm?"

If she could prove her worth as a magical toolmaker, she was sure her father would finally see her as a grown woman. She wanted to finish elementary school as soon as she could, study magical toolmaking in high school, and one day become a craftswoman of her father's caliber. She would take every opportunity to help him with his work, watching and learning as much as she could. In her own time, she would work hard to better her skills and the potency of her magic. One day, she would make a beautiful fairy glass lantern of her own. Her father would say, "You're your own toolmaker now, Dahlia," and she'd finally become someone he could rely on in times of need.

Dahlia's little hands curled tightly into fists and she swore to her sleeping father, "I'll be a great toolmaker, just like you. You wait and see!"



“Ow, ow, ow...” The moment Carlo tried to move, he let out a pitiful groan.

He must have slept in an odd position; his arm and shoulder tingled and ached dully. The wine had also left its customary parting gift—a throbbing headache. Massaging his temples, the man finally lifted his head up off the workbench. He couldn’t yet scrape together the will to stand up, however. On the bench in front of him, the fairy glass lantern was still glowing faintly. A brilliant blue sky and a field of blooming dahlias hovered before Carlo’s eyes, and he felt a sensation like a knife sliding into his heart as he was reminded that his former wife was dead.

Last night, he’d poured every drop of his magic into the fairy glass, illusions swimming before him as he reduced the crystals to glittering powder. Fairy glass was a notoriously tricky and idiosyncratic material. When touched by a toolmaker’s magic, it often created illusions and what appeared to human eyes like nightmares. A moment of inattention or irregularity in one’s flow of magic could send the stuff scattering everywhere.

When used to enchant magical tools, fairy glass demanded exactly half of the artisan’s reserves of magic, regardless of quantity. Attempting to enchant with it twice in a row was guaranteed to end in magic exhaustion.

Carlo was well aware of this. Clutching the fairy glass with both hands, he’d begun to let his magic flood in. Reacting to the powerful flow of magic, the fairy glass had gradually disintegrated, and as it did so, it showed Carlo a vision of those he loved most in all the world. He saw the woman who’d once been his wife, looking just as she had when they’d first met, and his elementary-school-age daughter who lived with him in this tower. This pair, separated by time, stood side by side, smiling joyfully back at Carlo. It was a scene that could never have existed, but it warmed Carlo’s heart nonetheless.

On the heels of this vision, as Carlo had expected, came a nightmare. The two figures disappeared, and he was plunged into the blackest darkness, yet even in this cold and soundless gloom, Carlo didn’t despair. In his mind’s eye, he was still looking at his wife and child’s beautiful faces, radiant with joy. The toolmaker smiled and then cried through a vision of pure bliss.

Once the vision faded, he had downed a potion to restore his magic and used the now-powdered fairy glass to enchant the lantern. The scene the lantern projected was of a dahlia garden Carlo had visited with Teresa one day in late summer. It had been their first outing together, but sadly, it had rained, and they'd vowed to come again the next year. Come again they did, man and wife by then, and once more, they vowed to return. But next summer came and went, and their vow went unfulfilled. Carlo had never set foot in that garden again.

As lovely as that field of dahlias had been, Carlo had only had eyes for Teresa. It was *her* beauty he remembered far more than the blooms'. Teresa was ravishing, gentle, strong yet fragile—with her ruby eyes and scarlet hair, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. Nursing a bottle of red wine, Carlo had lost himself in reminiscence.

Carlo turned his heavy head, catching his reflection in a sheet of enchanted silver on the shelf. He looked rough, but at least there was no telltale redness or swelling around his eyes.

"A man never lets a woman know he's been weeping. When you need to hide red or puffy eyes, wrap ice crystals in a handkerchief and hold it to your face while you cry."

Carlo's father had given him this advice when he was a child. At the time, he'd just laughed. Men don't need to cry, he'd thought; no one was going to catch *him* blubbing. However, as he'd entered his teenage years and then adulthood, he'd found himself fighting the urge to cry far more often than expected. There had been times when he couldn't hold back the tears—when he parted ways with lovers or grew frustrated by his poor skills.

In his pants pocket was an ice crystal tucked inside a white handkerchief. The handkerchief had been a gift from Dahlia two years ago. She'd painstakingly embroidered it, pricking her little fingers every few stitches. Only a child would have come up with such an idea. Yes, he'd told her that he wanted one, but he'd never imagined that she would really take all that time and trouble to embroider him a handkerchief. The needlework, loosely resembling a flower, was not exactly expertly done. Nonetheless, Carlo found something beautiful in those red threads, the same color as Dahlia's hair.

He'd accepted the handkerchief gladly, but then, out of surprise and a little bashfulness, he'd reached out and briskly ruffled his daughter's hair, inadvertently ruining her winter festival coiffure—the one her friend Irma had spent at least an hour perfecting that morning.

"After I made her all pretty and everything! Don't you know *anything* about girls, Mr. Carlo?!"

Irma had been incandescent when she'd returned at lunchtime with refreshments. He remembered hanging his head low in apology. Her reprimands hit a little too close to home, and he'd spent a long time reflecting on his behavior. Thankfully, after fixing Dahlia's hair, she'd eventually forgiven him. A gift of his latest model of hairdryer had proven quite effective in placating her.

Carlo had been truly elated when Dahlia had presented him with that handkerchief. Somewhat embarrassingly, it was the first he'd ever received. What's more, it was from his own darling daughter. He'd never admitted it to Dahlia, but he'd been so happy he'd had to rush to another floor and shout his joy to the heavens.

"Dahlia's embroidered handkerchief! A one-of-a-kind treasure, and it's mine! Take *that*, future son-in-law!"

What he'd failed to notice was that Sofia had just appeared in the hallway, carrying a laundry basket.

"You are the most *peculiar* man, Mr. Carlo."

She'd fixed him with a look of utter disdain and shot him frosty glances for the rest of that day.

"Ugh, it's freezing..."

As Carlo finally managed to sit up, he felt the blanket slide off his back onto the floor, and for the first time, he became aware of the morning chill in the air. He didn't remember wrapping himself in a blanket last night. He'd completed the fairy glass lantern and then sat here gazing into its illusion while he drank—that was the extent of his recollection. In other words, the one who'd put this blanket over him might well have been Dahlia.



“Ah, not good... Did she see it?”

He anxiously searched for the letter. He was relieved at first to find it beneath his arms, but his unease quickly returned. As far as he remembered, he'd left the letter sitting out on the workbench when he'd fallen asleep; he didn't remember putting it back inside the envelope. He opened the envelope to find the letter facing the opposite way it had been when it had arrived. There was also a tiny tear and a diagonal crease running across the paper. He pictured his daughter almost tearing the letter in half, hesitating, then thinking the better of it and carefully slipping it back inside the envelope. His expression darkened. She was the last person in the world he wanted to hear this news, yet he knew he couldn't hide it from her forever. His troubled thoughts were interrupted by the patter of familiar footsteps descending the stairs.

“Morning, Father. It's time for breakfast.”

“G'morning, Dahlia... So this is where I went to sleep, is it?”

Carlo pretended to have just woken up that moment, stretching his arms up above his head. Dahlia neither scolded him for falling asleep at the bench nor asked him anything about the lantern. Normally, a magical device like this would draw her like a bee to honey.

“It's still chilly, huh? I must've got up and grabbed this blanket in the night,” he said, testing the waters.

“Don't catch cold,” Dahlia mumbled.

Her slightly sleepy green eyes glanced over at him timidly before quickly darting away. There was a slight tremor in her voice. The girl was honest to a fault; deception didn't come naturally to her. She wouldn't have had to try if it weren't for his carelessness. What sort of father was he to make his daughter act this way?

Still, although he knew it was unfair to her, Carlo wasn't ready for this conversation. Just for now, he needed to pretend that all was well with the world—to put on a brave face, like a father was supposed to. *Forgive me, Dahlia.*

In truth, Teresa's death had come as a profound shock to him. His heart still

felt like a tiny boat being battered by a tumult of pain and grief. Right now, he wanted to slam his fist into the wall. He wanted to scream. He wanted to drink himself senseless and sob his heart out. But Carlo couldn't allow himself to cry in front of Dahlia; deep down, he felt that he'd be failing as a father if he did. He couldn't bear to show her more weakness than he already had.

"Boy, those late nights take it out of you," he said, feigning a wide yawn, giving himself an excuse to rub the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Father!" Dahlia suddenly shouted.

"What is it?"

"I want to become a magical toolmaker as soon as I can, so I'm going to hurry up and finish elementary school and take magical toolmaking classes in high school. Then I'll be able to help you out in the workshop and learn by watching you. If I do all that, I'll be a full-fledged toolmaker in no time!"

His daughter's sudden declaration both took him aback and confirmed his suspicions. She *had* read the letter. Yet she didn't say a word about her mother, instead trying her best to offer him peace of mind. It made him feel wretched to see his own young daughter trying to look after him. Carlo gritted his teeth and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets, clenching his fists until his nails bit painfully into his palms. He did his very best to smile at her.

"That's music to my ears. I expect great things of you, my little darling!"

"I'm being serious, Father..." she muttered sulkily.

"And so am I. I'm sure you can do it if you set your mind to it. Do me proud, huh?"

Dahlia's slightly pouted lips blossomed into an elated smile. Carlo could see Teresa in that smile, and he gazed back at her fondly.

Dahlia's enthusiasm for learning boded well for her future. There was no downside to getting a good education, no matter what path one took later in life. Carlo was delighted by her ambition to follow in his footsteps and become a magical toolmaker, and he was confident that he could teach her everything she needed to achieve it. If she could develop a solid skill set, then she'd never be without the means to support herself, which would certainly give him some

peace of mind.

However...his willingness to teach her came with a caveat. He knew it was selfish of him, but no matter how quickly she finished elementary school, how outstandingly she performed in her toolmaking classes, how much she deepened her knowledge, how inspired her inventions, how skillful her crafting, or how masterful her enchanting became, Carlo would not stand for her to surpass him.

He couldn't care less about anyone else, but as long as he still breathed, he couldn't allow himself to fall behind his daughter. For one thing, as her mentor in their craft, his pride simply couldn't take such an injury. But more than that, as her father, he never wanted to find himself walking in his own daughter's shadow. *As long as I live, it's Carlo Rossetti, not Dahlia, who'll be the greater toolmaker.* This wasn't merely a goal, but his solemn promise as Dahlia's father.

Someday soon, he would visit Teresa's grave in secret. He'd go under cover of darkness with a bouquet of red dahlias and the fairy glass lantern. Teresa had always loved the enchanting glow of those lanterns. He'd open a bottle of wine and, for as long as it lasted, proudly regale her with stories of their daughter. Once Dahlia was all grown up and he could tell her everything, they could visit the grave together.

Carlo's smile faded slightly. By that time, there might be a more important man in Dahlia's life. Of course, it would be a long, long, *long* time before he'd have to face up to that, but the thought troubled him nonetheless. Whoever that man might be, there was something Carlo wanted him to swear: *Please, protect my daughter.* He hoped this man would be gentle, quiet, intelligent, and above all, healthy, so that he might outlive Dahlia. He should have a steady job with a good income and no possibility of being sent abroad, and he had to be from a respectable family. He could think of a dozen other criteria for this future groom—standards he would never think of holding himself to, but that was what it meant to be a parent.

People often said that Dahlia took after Carlo, but there were some aspects of his life that he sincerely hoped wouldn't be mirrored in his daughter's—his luck in love and marriage, for one. Above all else, he wanted Dahlia to live a long and happy life with a loving partner. If said partner even *thought* about having an

affair or dying young, he'd have Carlo to answer to.

"Anything but a love like mine." He whispered the words like a prayer.

"Did you say something, Father?" Dahlia asked, her emerald eyes round and concerned.

It was far, far too soon for him to be worrying about this. Besides, knowing his Dahlia, he'd have nothing to worry about anyway.

"Nah, nothing. C'mon, let's get our breakfast."

Carlo stood at last and turned out the fairy glass lantern. Dahlia looked just a touch disappointed.

"Now, my esteemed magical toolmaker with your shining future...will you take my hand?"

He put on a highfalutin voice and drew himself up in the exaggerated pose of a nobleman as he offered his hand to his little daughter, who couldn't control her giggles. She happily took his hand. Hers was so small, it fit snugly in his palm. For how many more years could he hold her hand this way? Precious few, he guessed, but now wasn't the time for such thoughts. Slowing his steps to match Dahlia's, he climbed with her up the stone stairs.

Seeing the sunlight streaming through the window, he was reminded of the dreamy vision of Dahlia and Teresa that he'd seen last night. He almost looked back, but he stopped himself. No good would come of torturing himself with visions of happiness that could never be. Besides, he had all the happiness he needed right here in his hand. The lantern would sleep, awaiting the day its rainbow glow would be ignited once again.











"THESE  
SPRINGS  
MUST BE TOO  
STRONG... I  
DIDN'T MEAN  
TO MAKE IT  
JUMP QUITE  
THAT FAR."



Prototype  
Pop-Up  
Toaster



"NOW IT  
MAKES SENSE.  
SETTING THE TABLE  
WOULD DEFINITELY  
BE FASTER IF THE  
TOAST JUMPED  
RIGHT ONTO THE  
PLATES!"



"ER,  
THAT'S..."



## Bonus Translator's Notes

Hello and thank you for reading to the end of Volume 3! Once again, I'm Niki, your translator. Without further ado, let's jump straight into my notes for this volume.

### The Black-Bellied Fiend

During the chapter in which Dahlia, Volf, Ivano, and Fermo all gather at the Green Tower to test Dahlia's new camp stoves, Ivano makes a quip that caught a few readers' attention:

"You're a fiend, you know that?"

"A *friend*, Mr. Fermo. The R is important."

This spelling-based joke clearly wouldn't make sense back-translated into Japanese, so how did it come to this? Let's begin with the original lines.

"...Anta, hontou ni haraguroi na."

(...You've really got a black belly, haven't you?)

"Ore no hara wa futoi dake de, kuroku wa nai desu."

(My belly is just fat, not black.)

In Japanese, "haraguroi" (black-bellied) refers to someone with a wicked nature. It's similar to black-hearted in English. Why not use that? Well, then Ivano's line would become nonsensical—I couldn't very well have him say he has a "fat heart." No, I had to come up with something more creative. The key in these situations is to strip the lines back to their essential meaning—what are they trying to communicate? Fermo tells Ivano that he's a wicked man. Ivano refutes this claim with a twist on Fermo's words. I went through synonyms for a wicked person that I could make some kind of pun on and soon happened upon the oft-mistyped fiend/friend pair.

While this solution works well in isolation (in my opinion!), I also had to think



about how it would fit into the wider context because this exchange isn't the only reference to Ivano's weight in this chapter. Soon afterward, Fermo raises a toast to Dahlia's "fat assistant," referring to Ivano. Now, if the only reference to Ivano's weight had been in the black belly/fat belly exchange, this would have seemed completely out of left field in the English translation. Thankfully, earlier in the chapter, Fermo brings up Ivano's intention to diet. This means that there's still some context for his later comment, despite the change in wording I had to make in the translation.

This is why it's important to be wary of altering wording. There's always the danger of breaking a connection elsewhere in the text—it's like fixing a bug only to cause another one.

## **I Can't Believe It's Not Butterfish!**

In this volume's penultimate chapter, Dahlia cooks up a new fish dish for Volf. The fish's appearance intrigues him.

"So, why's it called a butterfish? There's no yellow on it at all."

"It's because of its high fat content. Some people say it has a buttery flavor."

In fact, this fish's Japanese name has nothing to do with butter. It's known as "ibodai," which roughly translates to "wart bream." The original lines read as follows:

"Ibo wa nai no ni ibodai nan da."

(It's called a wart bream even though it doesn't have any warts?)

"Sono kuroi hanten ga ibo mitai ni mieru kara, ibodai da sou desu."

(It seems it's called wart bream because these black dots look like warts.)

In my mind, there were two possible solutions to this problem. Option one was to translate the fish's name to wart bream, which would allow me to translate Volf and Dahlia's exchange more or less as is. However, I'd essentially be inventing a new species of fish that would only exist in Dahlia's world. Option two was to use the fish's proper English name, butterfish, and adapt the conversation accordingly. If the ibodai had indeed been fictional, then I'd have

had no issue giving it a more literally translated name, but since Dahlia explicitly mentions that she knows this fish from her previous world—our world—I judged it best to give it the name we know it by.

Incidentally, the butterfish in this scene is a very different creature from the one I knew growing up in the UK. They were little spotted, eely things no longer than my hand that I used to search for beneath rocks and seaweed on the beach. For once, I'm glad I'm writing in American English, or else I would've had another layer of complication to contend with!

## **We No Speak Italiano**

I'm sure it won't have escaped your notice that there's a distinctly Italian theme running through the kingdom of Ordine, particularly in the food and drink. During one al fresco lunch, Volf and Dahlia enjoy such delights as crespelles and porchetta. Despite not speaking Italian myself, I decided to lean into this theme early on when I named Dahlia's favorite tippie "estervino." In Japanese, it's written simply with the kanji characters for "east" and "liquor." Rather than settling for something dry like "eastern wine," I decided to invent something Italianesque to better fit with the rest of the Mediterranean cuisine.

Now, no good deed goes unpunished. In this volume, Volf and Dahlia visit a drinking vessel shop where they are served a new variety of estervino, crystal clear instead of cloudy like the regular kind. This one is written with the characters for "pure" and "liquor" in Japanese. I spent quite some time brainstorming possibilities and finally settled on "vetrovino"—"vetro" meaning "glass" in Italian.

The store owner also uses a special term for hot estervino, "kan." The option to simply translate this term to "hot" was precluded by Volf's reaction upon hearing it—he questions it, and Dahlia jumps in with a quick explanation. This immediately told me that the term's meaning shouldn't be readily apparent, so this too was given the Italian treatment and rendered as "caldo." I was very careful to make sure that "caldo" denotes the right kind of "hot," i.e., not the spicy or sexy kind! Studying Japanese left me well aware of those sorts of pitfalls.

Well, that's everything I have for you this time. I hope you've enjoyed the discussion. Sadly, this volume will be my last adventure with Dahlia as her translator, but I'll be sure to keep following her story and I hope you will too! I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to each and every reader who's come this far; your support means so much to everyone working on this magical series.

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 3

by Hisaya Amagishi

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