

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with **Magical Tools**

Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Kei

8



Dahlia in Bloom

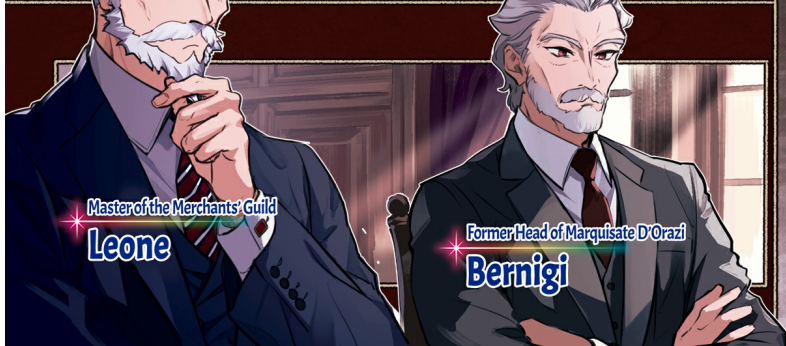
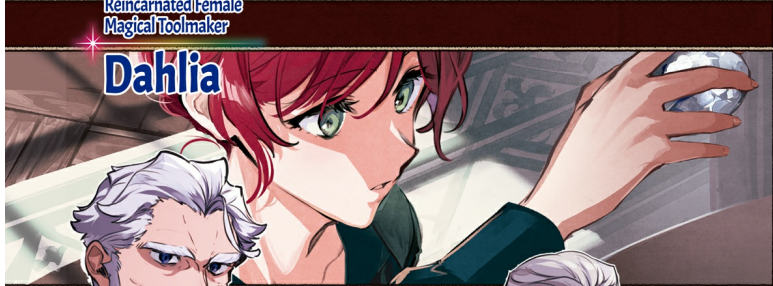
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"HOW
BEAUTIFUL
THE SHADE
IS..."

Knight-Guard of the
Rossetti Trading Company

Marcella

Magical
prosthesis



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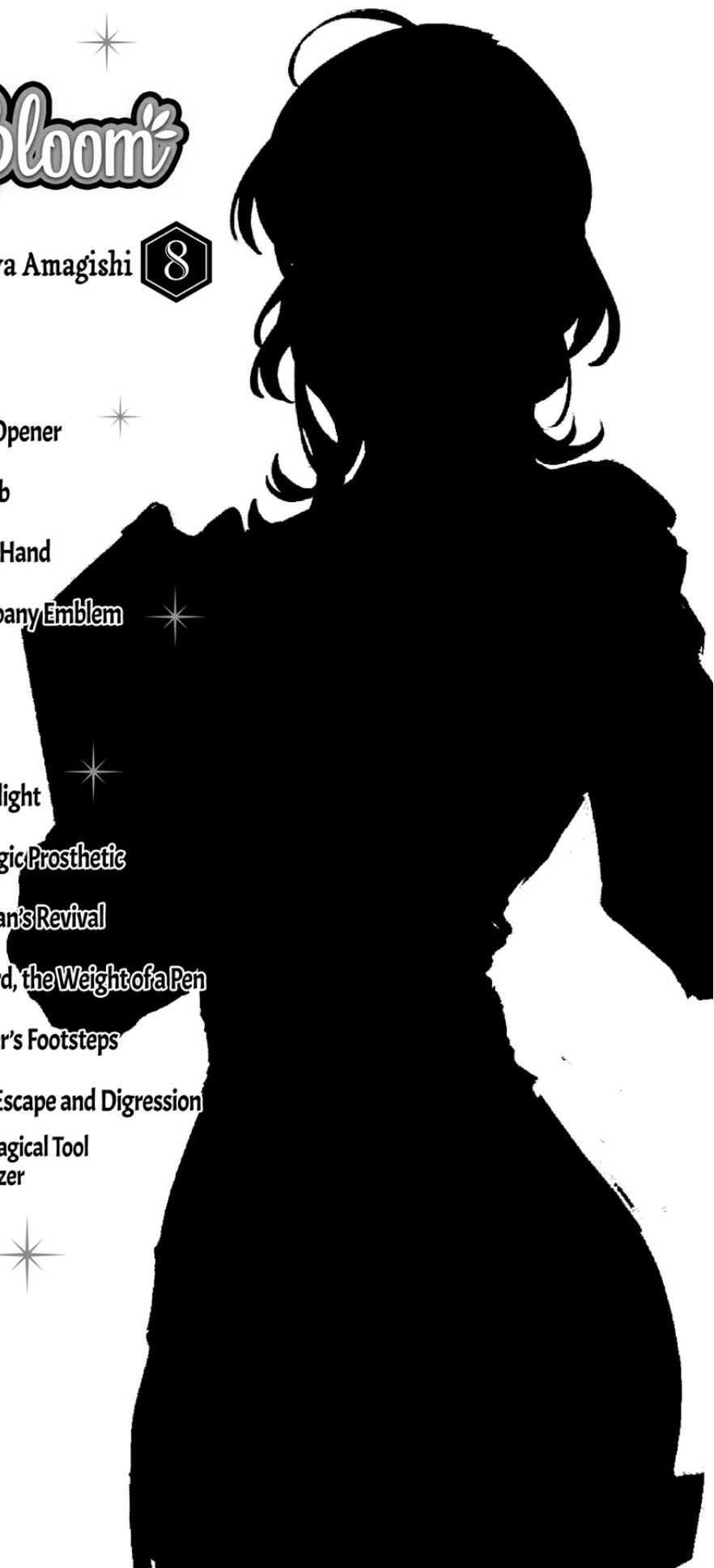


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Argent Fireflies and the Letter Opener

“This is argent firefly dust.” Shaking the little glass bottle kicked up the silvery powder inside, causing it to sparkle like glitter. Though the midday sun did well to obscure it, the powder—or more accurately, the beautiful scales—luminesced dimly in the shades of night. The argent firefly, despite what its name suggested, was an insectile monster rather than a true insect.

In her previous life, fireflies hadn’t shed powder like this, monsters had been figments of the imagination, and the only magic had come in the form of technology—Dahlia Rossetti, who’d been reincarnated in Ordine, found herself comparing her present to her past. Here, she was a craftswoman who created magical tools for everyday living and had unremarkable looks, save for her bright red hair and vivid green eyes.

“Whoa, I didn’t know argent firefly scales were so fine...” Entranced by the bottle was her friend Volfred Scalfarotto—or Volf, as she called him. He was a royal knight of the Order of Beast Hunters and the fourth son of an earl; someone of his status ought to have little to do with a commoner like Dahlia, yet theirs was a fast friendship born out of pure coincidence. The duo had since shared many meals and even discussed business together. His hair was the color of a doused raven, his skin like fine porcelain, and his eyes a deep gold. He had the brow of an intellectual, from which a sharp nose extended downward, and delightfully shaped lips. Every part of him was a brushstroke that completed a masterpiece, yet his looks caused misunderstandings due to the way women flocked to him, and those past experiences had instilled in him a wariness of others—beauty was truly a double-edged sword.

“As is, the dust scatters at the lightest breeze, so I’ll add it to some water in a dish and mix it with a paintbrush. Enchanting with this will enhance an item’s radiance. They use this stuff on guardslamps too, you know?”

Guardslamps were magical lanterns used by city guards on night watch. As they were powered by fire crystals, they were much brighter than any regular

lantern. Their globes were painted with alternating stripes of red and yellow to dye the light they cast. Guards wielded these lanterns when rushing to the scenes of robberies, fights, carriage collisions, and other injuries, and, with their body strengthening magic, they moved at tremendous speed—it brought to mind the police cars or ambulances of her past life, not that she would have expected anyone here to understand what she meant.

“I’ll begin mixing it now.” Dahlia added a quarter spoon of the scales to one spoonful of water in a small white dish, then began stirring, turning the liquid into what looked like a snippet of lamé.

“That’s really pretty. Oh, I’ve actually seen real argent fireflies at a large pond during my expeditions, and they’re just as pretty in person. The slightly greenish-white light they produce reflects from their silver wings, making it quite a bit brighter than a regular firefly’s.”

“I’d like to see them for myself.” It sounded as though argent fireflies were even more gorgeous than normal lightning bugs dancing in the air; with their wings glittering above a mirror of water, the sight was sure to be fantastical. Her life in Japan had been confined to a dense concrete jungle, and she had never seen a firefly in the flesh before.

“The locals there had a whale of a time trying to catch them with long nets, but argent fireflies have body strengthening magic, so it was supposedly quite difficult but very profitable to do so.”

That world, this world—what was the difference? Humans would destroy their fantastical environs for a pretty penny all the same. Dahlia stared into the distance as if she’d find hope somewhere out there.

But Volf turned to her with a smile on his face. “Dahlia, wanna go see them next summer? There’s a few of them out in our territory.”

She saw their powder quite frequently, but if it was safe, she’d like to see the real thing. She’d especially like to take a close look at how their wings worked and see if different specimens had different levels of magic in their scales. “I’d love to!”

“I’ll get the people there to contact me as soon as they appear, then.”

Going to see argent fireflies with Volf next summer—there was yet another thing to look forward to. “Okay, I’m going to enchant your letter opener with this paste now.”

“Thank you!”

The object of today’s enchantment was a letter opener that Volf had brought with him. The grip had a decorative design, and—perhaps due to its age—the silvery parts had lost their luster. When they’d spoken about bringing it back to a brilliant shine, Dahlia, on top of providing him with polish and a cloth, had gone a step further and offered to enchant it. As he buffed it with some elbow grease, she had prepared the argent firefly scales, bringing the two of them to the present moment. The enchantment would make the silvery parts shine only a little brighter, but even so, Volf had snapped at the opportunity and was staring at her hands; his golden eyes sparkled brighter than any metal.

“Here I go.” Dahlia took the buffed letter opener into her left hand and pointed her right index and middle fingers at it. A rainbow strip of energy flowed out from her fingertips, turning silver when it came in contact with the paste in the bowl beside her, and enveloped the letter opener in a glimmer. As the silver serpent reached the tip of the blade, Dahlia diminished her output and, so that no part of the knife would be left uncovered, concentrated to apply an even flow, then tightened the spigot completely. She gently set the letter opener down on the cloth on the workbench, then double-checked her handiwork—it had a uniquely fine silver shimmer that was unlike any polished metal.

“It’s so pretty...” Volf sighed his words out; it was evident he liked the result.

“It should be just as sharp as before, but why don’t you give it a quick test to make sure?” What good would it be if it couldn’t open letters?

He took a folded sheet of paper from her, then carefully cut it at the crease. “It feels good. Heck, it might even be a little sharper than before.” That was most definitely just his imagination—argent firefly dust had no such effect. “You know I bought this thing in college because I thought it looked like a magical sword?” How very like him to have done so.

This was a world of magic and swords and magical swords. As for the latter,

some were born out of the protection of spirits, fairies, and the like, while others were artifices. Naturally, it was very useful to have weapons and blades—kitchen knives and scissors, for example—enchanted with hardening so that they didn't break or self-sharpening for a persistently keen edge. Volf, however, wanted neither of those—what he wanted was a powerful magic sword, one imbued with romance. He and Dahlia had been developing their own but had found little success so far.

“Since college? Well, it's no wonder that it's lost a little of its luster.”

“To tell you the truth, it was around then that I pretty much stopped opening letters myself.”

“Uh, what did you do with your mail, then?” She knew he must've received piles and piles of love letters from girls at school.

“I had others open them for me at home, and I only took important documents. One time, I cut my hand open because someone had stuck a razor blade inside; apparently, it was from some guy who really resented me.”

“Gosh, you've had it rough...” Not only had he not wanted those letters, one had been genuinely dangerous to open—no wonder he'd had people handle his mail for him.

“That's why this letter opener hasn't seen much action at all; all I ever use it for is when my family sends me news. Oh! I do open your letters, though.” His bright smile warmed her heart.

Dahlia's letters contained neither threats nor confessions of love, and she hoped he wouldn't need to fear them. However, she wasn't much of a writer, and their content wasn't much to behold; they resembled nothing so much as business correspondence, asking him when they could meet next.

“With this enchantment, this, too, has now become a magical blade.”

“Uh, no? That's still just a letter opener—a particularly shiny one, perhaps, but it's not like it can kill any monsters.”

“Oh...”

Why was he so disappointed? Now she felt bad for him. Perhaps she ought to

call it a *false* magical sword, she thought to herself, as Volf gripped it in his right hand. Maybe it was his natural good looks, or maybe it was because he was a Beast Hunter, but he did indeed appear very gallant wielding it.

“You’re right, I don’t think I’d have an easy time slaying a monster with this thing.”

“Don’t go proving my point, okay?”

He agreed not to. “Anyway, it might be kinda nice if our next magical sword were this shiny...”

Dahlia failed to see the point in fighting monsters with a shiny sword. If anything, the way it gleamed would scare them off. But perhaps that wasn’t such a bad idea either, as it could ward off monsters; he’d come home safe and sound without a battle—though that was definitely not what a Beast Hunter would want.

“We’ll be going to tomorrow’s field training together, won’t we, Dahlia?”

“Yes, though I’m afraid I’ll hinder everyone.” But she knew that was twisting his words, and she dismissed those negative thoughts.

The training session tomorrow involved inspecting a reservoir along the western highway, securing materials, and field testing her own invention, the portable warm air circulator. According to the other knights, though, the real objective of the journey was an armored crab—a large cancroid monster that lived in rocky ridges. They would take its shell back as material; everything else, they would use up on location—in other words, they would have happy bellies. She had been invited along, as it should be fairly safe, but the prospect of the trip nonetheless made her quite nervous.

“Don’t worry, Dahlia. It’s safe out there, and besides, we’ll be there to take care of any monsters that show up.” He must’ve seen through her concerns.

Volf began preparing to return to the barracks. The black coat he put on reminded her of when they had first met—his armor had been covered in blood, his clothes in rents, and his body in wounds as he collapsed in front of her carriage.

If I hadn’t been there at that exact moment—the thought chilled her to the

bone. His departures were always sudden, and he never knew how long he'd be out on an expedition or when he'd return. There was always the chance that more monsters had appeared than the reports detailed or that other monsters would appear. He had to suffer the heat and the cold of the wilderness and any unforeseen storms of thunder, rain, or wind.

Despite her title of the Order of Beast Hunters' Advisory Magical Toolmaker, Dahlia could not fight; she did not belong on their expeditions. But tomorrow, she would not be seeing Volf off or waiting for his return—she had the opportunity to join him and the rest of the Beast Hunters on their field training. She couldn't have been happier about it.

"I'm so excited! See you tomorrow!" Volf did not bid farewell to her with "Good night and pleasant dreams" or "See you next time"—his dazzling smile linked this day to the next.

And so Dahlia responded in kind. "I can't wait!"

Field Training and Armored Crab

Clear skies awaited them the following day.

“Why, if it isn’t Dali!” Volf’s voice was filled with a certain joy as he rushed over to Dahlia.

It was still early in the morning, so the only other people in the castle’s carriage station were Beast Hunters finishing up preparations for the expedition, but it was still a little embarrassing. “Um, I suppose you’re right—I am dressed like Dali.”

She was dressed exactly the same way she had been when they had first met. She had on a black hat into which she’d stuffed her hair; her father’s shirt and trousers, the latter of which were a little baggy on her; a tall pair of boots; and black-rimmed glasses. Although the lenses weren’t corrective, neither were they just for show—she figured the glasses could be protective if she had to push her way through tall grass.

“Is there a particular reason why?”

“I know some of you are worried about a woman tagging along on the expedition, so I thought it might be prudent to dress like this today.”

“You even sound like Dali too...” It was as though he were reuniting with an old friend he hadn’t seen in ages.

Around Dahlia’s neck was a voice caster, something her father had invented to alter one’s voice; this particular unit deepened her voice to give it a masculine flavor, and she had been wearing it when she’d first encountered Volf.

A few days ago, Vice-Captain Griswald had told her that a few knights had expressed concern about having a female guest joining their expedition, and he had recommended that she wear comfortable clothes she didn’t mind getting a little dirty—he had even specified that there would be a bit of a hike and that it would be better to wear boots and trousers than a skirt. However, Dahlia had

taken that to mean “Don’t look like a dainty girl, wear something that blends in with the others, and make sure you can move around easily.” Volf had once said that monsters tended to target the easiest prey, and she didn’t want to cause trouble for the others if any showed up. Hence, cross-dressing, which Volf was oddly taken with.

“Your voice also suits you very well, Dahlia—er, pardon—Chairwoman.” Marcella scrambled to correct himself, his shoulders silently trembling as he suppressed a laugh. It felt like just days ago, he had been with the Couriers’ Guild, but by some convoluted turn of events, he was now Dahlia’s bodyguard. They had come to the castle by carriage together, but she hadn’t activated the voice caster until now; he likely found it quite jarring to hear a different voice coming out of her mouth. Marcella was the only other employee of the Rossetti Trading Company who was present today, as Ivano, the vice-chairman, had a meeting he could not reschedule.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, your outfit today—I can tell you put a great deal of thought into it.” Arriving on the scene just now was Jonas, and his rust-colored eyes smiled from behind Volf. Jonas was the bodyguard and attendant of Volf’s elder brother, and, by yet another convoluted turn of events, he was now also the head manager of the Scalfarotto Weapons Works.

Dahlia was sorry that a nobleman like him was obligated to give her a compliment. “I thought I should blend in as much as possible to not get in the way during the expedition.”

“Indeed, your outfit looks very easy to move around in.”

Just then, someone called for Volf; it appeared that it was time to depart on their journey. “All right, *Dali*, I’ll see you later in the woods!” He ran back to the rest of the Scarlet Armors.

The Beast Hunters’ carriage was slightly longer and more spacious than the ones Dahlia usually rode in, and traveling together with her were Marcella and Jonas. Its little windows gave her a fresh view of the streets of the capital.

“Master Jonas, if I may—I am wondering about Lord Guido’s security detail today.” Marcella really had become a knight of the Scalfarottos.

“As he will remain on castle grounds until my return, we have requested that two knights from the family and two of the mages under his authority serve in my place during my absence.” Were there four people guarding him at the same time, or were they taking shifts? In either case, it was evident that Guido was heavily guarded. “Lord Guido expressed regret for being unable to attend today’s excursion.”

“Truly, how unfortunate...” It shouldn’t be very dangerous today, the weather was so nice, and Guido surely would’ve loved to go on an outing with his brother too.

“Lord Guido very much enjoys armored crab, you see.”

“I’m sorry?”

“His favorite preparation is grilled whole.”

Ah. Guido’s regrets centered on missing out on the eating part. It was surprising, though, that he enjoyed them that way; it was difficult for Dahlia to imagine him getting his hands dirty with the shell and all. Like everyone else, nobles probably wanted to take it easy—if they didn’t need to mind their manners in front of company, then maybe they were prone to bouts of barbarism too.

“Erm, if there will be extra and if I can get permission to have a portion of it, shall we freeze some and bring it back for him?”

“I am sure he would be delighted.”

Jonas’s smile reminded her of a question the vice-chairman had entrusted to her. “Master Jonas, Ivano had a question—he was wondering if it would be possible for him to pay his respects to your family’s business.”

Jonas—now head manager of the Scalfarotto Weapons Works—came from Viscounty Goodwin, and their family operated the Goodwin Combine. The Rossetti Company owed much to him, so Ivano hoped to go say hi and establish a relationship with them.

“No, thank you. Rather, I ask that you not do so. I am estranged—erm, our relationship is not so mendable.” His right wrist—his illusory bracelet—clinked. Jonas had a fire dragon blight, and if he were to remove that bracelet, the red

scales on his right arm would become visible. “Viscountcy Goodwin no longer considers me part of the family—my mother was a foreign dancer, and I possess no external magic.”

The atmosphere in the cabin changed in a matter of seconds. Even Marcella, sitting beside Dahlia, tensed up. She had heard that being unable to express magic impeded a noble from succeeding their family’s rank and from many professions as well. Furthermore, Jonas’s mother was a commoner from abroad; Volf had no external magic either, but Jonas likely had it worse. Dahlia couldn’t find a good reply.

But his iron-oxide eyes saw through her hesitation, and Jonas continued in a calm voice. “You needn’t worry. I have had aid from my father and the honor of being employed as Lord Guido’s attendant since our elementary school years, so I am not in want. My blight has even granted me the ability to use magic now.”

He was so casual explaining his background, but as Dahlia nodded along, she nevertheless decided to avoid bringing this subject up again.

“I hope I’m not prying, Master Jonas,” Marcella began to pry, “but, erm, what about your mother?”

It was surprising that Marcella had pursued the topic, but Jonas was unhesitating in his answer. “She returned to her homeland and remarried an outstanding businessman, and I am pleased to know that she is in good health.” Having said as much, he then proceeded to thoughtfully change the topic. “The portable warm air circulator and the heated low table are simply fantastic magical tools. The former is very helpful during the day, and the latter does wonders to warm the colder parts of my body. I have not had good sleep in the colder months until their existence.”

“Might it be that your right side tends to get cold, Master Jonas?” Dahlia remembered the conversation they had had before.

“Yes, indeed it does, but it isn’t very sensitive, and I only feel the chill where scales do not grow.” He touched his shoulder with his right hand, then opened up his left. “The chill does spread to my left side too. When it gets even colder, I lose a lot of my agility, and I even become quite sleepy at times. You have my

utmost gratitude for your portable warm air circulator.”

“I’m very happy to hear that it has been helping you.” It was miserable to be cold all the time, even if it was only a certain part of the body. To hear that Jonas had regained some mobility was music to her ears. She had to wonder—were fire dragons not very good with winter either? Her illustrated monster guide said only that they were weak against ice magic. “Do fire dragons also tend to get cold in the winter?”

“Perhaps so. The mental image of them shivering isn’t very majestic, though.”

“They might even worry about their tails getting frostbitten.”

Dahlia giggled. That really would be unbecoming.

“Have you heard from Lord Guido about how I became a turtle under my heated low table?”

“Um, no. Not at all.” She had been told to keep it a secret, so what could she do but lie through her teeth?

It must’ve been less than convincing; the corners of Jonas’s mouth curled upward. “You are a poor liar, Madam Rossetti. For the sake of your role as a chairwoman, perhaps you would do well to practice it some more.”

“Yes, maybe...” A good poker face would definitely be advantageous. She wondered if she should ask Ivano or Oswald for help. And just how did you practice something like that anyway? Dahlia began giving those questions some serious thought.

“Master Jonas, I believe you ask too much from our chairwoman...” Marcella had a troubled expression already, which did not help him when he caught Dahlia’s glare; he zipped right up.

“I jest. You should—well, I ask that you stay the same way and stay by Lord Volfred’s side.” Jonas smiled gently.

By the time she realized she was being teased, the city gate came into view.

The carriage progressed along the western highway, faintly lit by the morning sun, before finally parking at a carriage stop. The squad had split up to conduct

their inspection, and they were on time for the rendezvous here, as everything had appeared to be okay at the reservoir. By this point, they would likely have already begun ascending the rocky mountainside by horse and on foot, but today, Dahlia had a job to do first.

“Can everyone hear me?” Her father’s voice caster was very handy in this situation—she could turn up the volume on the tool and use it like a bullhorn. It was not as loud as a loudspeaker powered by multiple air crystals, but it was perfect for a small group of people. Furthermore, her deeper masculine voice carried better to everyone. Even with the voice caster and her menswear, the Beast Hunters recognized who she was. But because they did, quite a few of them seemed somewhat confused.

“Knights, take your portable warm air circulators!” The whole group tensed when Grato, the captain, bellowed. Even without a voice caster, his voice was loud and carried well. The Beast Hunters did as instructed, and they each took a circulator from a wooden crate.

“Begin by strapping this part to your back. However, not only can you use it on your back, you can also tie it to your waist and the back of your neck, so tighten the belt and affix it wherever you prefer. The temperature and the airflow each have three settings—use these two cords to adjust them, then be sure to wear something on top so they do not catch and become tangled on anything.”

Dahlia had help from Volf, who stood next to her and demonstrated how to put on the circulator.

“If the heating is insufficient, you can also wear another one on your front. However, be sure to adjust it to an appropriate setting to avoid low-temperature burns. Then—”

After going through it once, the other Beast Hunters began putting the portable warm air circulators on various parts of their bodies. With miniaturized mini-kotatsu now tied around themselves, the once-stalwart knights, too, had become “kotatsnails”—it pained Dahlia to restrain herself from bursting out laughing. Once they had their jackets on and tools activated, most of the Beast Hunters were riveted in place; their bodies thawed and their expressions

melted.

“Oh, it’s so cozy...”

“It’s perfect how warm the air is...”

The knights’ oozing smiles were infectious.

A few of the knights must’ve set the fan speed too high, as the tickling had sent them to the ground laughing. Dahlia decided to let them figure things out on their own—she had instructed them twice to start at the lowest setting.

“This is very nice. Much better than the fire crystal—powered warmers that only get one spot hot.”

“The temperature’s perfect. I haven’t been this moved since the zephyricloth.”

“The cords could be a little thicker; these feel like they’d snap.”

“If they get caught on anything, it might actually be safer if they did snap.”

“We’ll have to be sure that nothing’s poking out of our clothes during combat.”

Dahlia perked her ears up. She had planned to survey them for their opinions and to see what needed improving, but nothing could be more genuine than the feedback they didn’t mean for her to hear. And they made very good points—it would not do if the cords were to snap or if they got in the way during combat. Not only should they keep the ventilators under their jackets, Dahlia also needed to figure out a way to make sure her invention was as safe as can be.

“Sir Jonas, are you not keen on trying the portable warm air circulator?”

Jonas opened his jacket for the grizzled veteran to see. “I am already wearing two of them—both settings on medium for the one on my back, and both settings on low for the one on my front. It is extremely comfortable.”

After tying the units to their backs, the other Beast Hunters had begun putting the ventilators on other parts, searching for their favorite spots.

“Eugh, it shoots my armor stink back up at me!”

Dahlia whipped around to see who was suffering—a youth with navy hair, now sniffing himself.

“Did you not properly air it out last time you used it, Dorino?”

“You cannot blame the magical tool for your own lack of maintenance.”

“Hey, it ain’t my fault for sweating easily either!” Dorino snapped back at Volf and Randolph, despite the fact that both were being quite calm and reasonable.

“Maybe you need to spend more time in the bath.”

“Since body odor is a concern, I recommend you wash thoroughly with deodorizing soap.”

“You jerks are just saying I stink in a roundabout way.”

Dahlia recalled that horrifying memory of Volf saying he had found her by her scent; she’d be running away if she had to listen to people talk about how she stank. “Um, it’s only natural that your armor smells like sweat, since you’re so active! Let me bring you a deodorizer for leather and fabrics next time I go to the castle. Using zephyricloth in the fall and winter should also help combat this problem.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Ms. Dahlia!” Dorino beamed like he’d finally seen a light at the end of the tunnel, giving her relief too.

“Oh, here comes the cauldron!” Volf had his gaze on a large object shrouded in gray cloth, now being set down on a sheet of waterproof cloth.

“What is it for?”

“The big catch.” The gray cloth was pulled off to reveal a great silver cauldron that looked more like a bathtub; it was actually larger than the bathtub in the Green Tower.

“The plan is to roast the armored crab legs and boil the body for soup. I hope the one we get will be too big to fit in there, though!” The green-haired youth, Kirk, was bouncing with excitement; Dahlia could but smile too.

The group moved up the craggy hill. Some knights were behind the pack guarding the carriage, though Dahlia was traveling on horseback. She hadn’t yet

mastered riding on her own, so an older knight was leading her horse while she sat on a beginner's saddle, which had a handle. Dahlia had planned to walk alongside everyone else, but she was very grateful for what she got instead—this way, she wouldn't slow down the squad, who were all hustling up the hillside. As Marcella could not join the knights' march, he was to help out by the riverside. Filling in as bodyguard was Jonas, who followed Dahlia on his own horse. The ascent was sandy and muddy—it was impressive how the knights and the horses seemed impervious to the rough terrain.

Finally, they reached a shallow valley with little greenery but lots of sand. It was flanked by boulders of all sizes, but there wasn't even a trace of an armored crab around here.

"Now we wait. Griswald, Randolph, you two are up."

"At once, sir."

"Aye, sir."

Griswald and Randolph donned scarlet armor and equipped themselves with a pair of spears. Each then headed toward a rocky tract. Rushing to intercept monsters was the role of the Scarlet Armors—was the vice-captain a Scarlet Armor for the day? Or was he an armored crab specialist?

Grato, who was beside Dahlia, must've seen the puzzlement on her face. "I should have explained, Rossetti—armored crabs turn red when they are in combat or emergencies, and so they will recognize the approaching Scarlet Armors as enemies. Furthermore, the crabs only fight when they have a size advantage; otherwise, they hide. Hence, with those two out there, we are sure to find a very large specimen."

"Huh?" The captain's explanation elicited a squeak from her. Griswald and Randolph were both just over two meters tall, and they had the bulk to go with their height too. If Dahlia were to encounter a crab her size, it would be a wise bet that she'd hightail it out of there immediately. She couldn't imagine what an armored crab larger than those two would be like.

"The cast's leader will likely be the one to respond when those two encroach upon its territory. It is critical that we not reduce the crabs' numbers, so we take only males above a certain size." Armored crabs might have been

monsters, but they were treasured for their meat and materials, so it was Grato's responsibility to ensure they were not overhunted. No matter the world, being a leader was a lot of responsibility.

Griswald and Randolph clashed the tips of their spears, and in response to the cacophony, there came the clacking of claws.

"Ah, there it comes."

"*That* is an armored crab?" How a creature of that size and color could have remained hidden for so long was a mystery. It towered over the two knights, giving Dahlia a novel but very confusing perspective. The shape was like a hybrid of the snow crab and the red king crab of Terra. The sharp spines on its carapace were like pillars, and its legs were thick and very long.

"It looks like a fine specimen. One that big should feed all of us with leftovers."

Hearing Grato sounding so pleased, she fought to keep her composure. The monster hardly looked delicious; hell, if anything, she was afraid she would end up as food for *it*. The crab's peculiar eyes goggled this way as it snipped its claws menacingly, sending a shiver down Dahlia's spine.

"This is— Ah, Volf, how about you?"

"Right away, sir!" He lifted the broadsword at his side and, for a split second, glanced at her.

"Be careful" was what she would have loved to say if she could speak. On instinct, she extended her right arm, dropping the notepad she was holding. She scrambled to pick it up, but by the time she raised her head, Volf's back was receding into the distance. *Right. This is work for Volf the Beast Hunter.* His steps were sure-footed as he dashed toward a monster that made her knees weak. *He might get hurt, he might die*—as she saw him off, Dahlia bit the inside of her lip so as to keep her anxiety to herself alone. She could not stop him; the little she could do was to give him her support and pray that he returned unharmed.

"There you are, Volf!"

Griswald deflected the giant claw hurtling toward him, and when the crab

opened its mouth to spit acid, Randolph stuffed it full with both his spears.

“On it!”

“Aye!”

The two other knights backed away as Volf slid underneath the crab. When he was diagonally below the monster, he pierced its belly with a potent thrust of his broadsword. The cracking of the shell sounded like a boulder being split, and the colossus squirmed. The next moment, the point of the broadsword poked out between the monster’s eyes. It silently screamed as it toppled over, lifeless. The armored crab had been swiftly extinguished.

“A tremendous warrior.” Grato seemed impressed by Volf’s skills.

Though she understood that Volf had slain the beast, it had happened so quickly that Dahlia was still processing what she’d seen.

“A critical blow, Volf? That’s our Dark Lord.”

“You could have put on more of a show, you know?”

In any case, Dahlia understood only that Volf was very strong and that he was nicknamed “Dark Lord.” But against something that size, wouldn’t it have been better to use the Galeforce Bow—a powerful enchanted bow—to strike from a distance? She turned to Kirk, who was nearby. “Do I understand correctly that the Galeforce Bow will not be used against the armored crab?”

“That’s correct; we are planning to test both the Galeforce Bow and Blades later this afternoon, after we deal with the crabs—it would be a waste to shred their meat!”

“Yes, that makes sense.” Dahlia met his tender smile with a stiff one. All the Beast Hunters saw was an appetizing meal on legs.

Then, the snipping noise returned. As she checked in a panic to see if that armored crab was still alive, a second one—slightly smaller, but still gigantic—came crawling toward them from a different direction.

“Lucky us!”

“The boys who stayed home today are going to get more than their fill!”

There was zero sense of tension among the knights, but at least that alleviated some of Dahlia's fear.

"Captain Grato, perhaps you could demonstrate Ash-Hand for Chairwoman Rossetti?"

"Sorry?" Much to her confusion, her name had suddenly come up. Was Grato going to use his magical sword to roast the armored crab?

The voices of the knights answered her question. "Please, Captain!"

"This is a perfect stage for Ash-Hand!"

Grato's red eyes smiled softly. "Now, tell me—and I will not be angry—what is it that you truly mean?"

"I love steamed crab!"

"Roast the brown meat, and we will be able to eat it as soon as you return!"

"All right, all right. My knights sure have become immoderate in driving their captain." With a troubled smile on his face, Grato drew the red longsword hanging at his left hip, and a powerful wave of magical energy blasted outward, wreathed in wisps of white smoke.

Ash-Hand was the powerful magical sword bonded to Bartolone blood. It was said to be capable of turning its target to ash with a single thrust. It chose only those who had both Bartolone blood and fire magic; not even the royal family could wield it. Its fame was known throughout the Kingdom of Ordine.

"I will return shortly." Grato sauntered over to the armored crab with no sense of urgency, the trail of white smoke clinging to the blade like an animate being.

The crab raised its claw and swiped down to crush its prey, but the magic sword was quicker; the monster was flung off its legs, and it slid across the ground. Ignoring its yelping, Grato launched himself upward without a run-up, and he stood atop the struggling armored crab. He plunged the magic sword down into the center of the carapace.

"Ash-Hand!"

The magic sword reacted to its name and shrilled as the monster extended all

legs straight and smoke poured out of its mouth and joints. Then, the unique scents of both grilled and steamed crab wafted through the air. Grato delicately extracted his blade from the beast, which now lay flat on the ground.

“Hooray for our captain!”

“The strongest man I know!”

Big smiles stretched across the knights’ faces as they cheered—was it for their leader’s prowess in slaying the monster in one blow? Was it for the perfectly steam-roasted feast? Dahlia could not figure it out.

“Ash-Hand sure is nice...” Before she knew it, Volf had returned to her side and was pining for his true love in heartrending tones. It was fair—that was a bona fide magic sword.

It was also a wonderful magical tool. Dahlia was intensely curious about what materials had been used and how it had come to be. It was so mystical, and she, too, was very interested in it. The blade seemed to have immense magical energy and could emit burning temperatures on demand, yet it was stable in its sheath. Nothing she had ever made in the Green Tower came close to Ash-Hand. Even if her goal was too lofty, she wished to perfect an artificial magical sword that could gratify her friend. “I’m very glad you made it back safely. Hopefully, you’ll get a nice magic sword one day too, Volf.”

He returned her soft-spoken words with a delightful smile. “I’m looking forward to it—I know we’ll come up with a super magic sword.”

Dahlia balled up her fists as the knights surrounding them continued celebrating.

“Hm, this one turned out to be blue—must be a mutant. Hopefully it isn’t poisonous or anything.” The armored crab that fell into Volf’s hands had been flushed red during the battle, but now, it had a new coat of paint—the mutant was blue by nature.

“I’ll get my antidotal ring and try a bite. If I’m not hallucinating afterward, I’ll take it off and try again. If that turns out to be fine too, then we can all dig in!” The smile on Dorino’s face suggested he was quite excited to be the squad’s

taster. “If I throw a fit or start spouting nonsense, then please step in, Father Aroldo!”

Popping out from the back of the crowd was the priest Aroldo in his white robes, black cloak, and silver stole—a deacon’s badges of office. On an expedition such as this, his presence was a given. “Place your trust in me—I shall dispel your affliction, be it poison or paralysis!”

The people of this world were quite the gluttons; their passion for gastronomy could not be understated. They enjoyed poisonous delicacies, like certain fungi and fish, with great relish, and a bit of antidote was simply the price of admission—that much was commonplace. However, a ring or a bangle could only do so much to counteract toxins. Anything particularly powerful or unusual called for a more effective magical tool or healing magic from a priest or mage.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, you needn’t worry at all.” Aroldo smiled to soothe her concern before showing his true colors. “Should anyone find themselves needing deliverance from any ailment, I am here for them. Such is my excuse for partaking in today’s feast of armored crabs, you see, and I really should put in some work.”

“Sustenance is crucial during an expedition, Father Aroldo. If the knights ever run out of supplies, it isn’t unlikely that they will find themselves needing to eat a mutant form, and it would be very troublesome if the antidotes they have on hand couldn’t handle the toxins.”

“You make a fine point, though I have heard that one encounters mutants only rarely.”

“In either case, it is good to be prepared for the unexpected, and your role today is critical. Besides, what if the mutant armored crab turns out to be delicious and makes for fine foodstuff? Erm, I mean...” Since when had Dahlia been brainwashed by the knights? Were these cancroid monsters just walking meals to her now too?

“Delicious mutant crab, you say?” The priest quietly chuckled to himself. “Thank you for the kind words, Chairwoman Rossetti. Indeed, dispelling ailments is a very important role, one I am grateful to assume. I shall therefore

be on hand and enjoy the armored crab. Perhaps the blue specimen will be tasty. If it proves not to be wholesome, then I shall counteract the poison as everyone savors their meal.”

They would seldom encounter blue armored crabs in the future, but because of the mutants’ rarity and distinctive flavor, they would be elevated to the status of “Apex of Armored Crabs” among epicures. Later still they would be known as “King Armored Crabs,” despite not being the leaders of their casts. To blue armored crabs, however, having humans take a liking to them would be a nuisance.

“Oh, it’s amazing—I think it’s even sweeter! It’s definitely good to eat!” With food taster Dorino’s approval, the Beast Hunters began preparations to butcher the crabs.

The sheer size of the armored crabs made them too challenging to move whole, so the knights removed their legs and bundled them up in waterproof cloth to bring them back to the riverbank. There were opportunities to use large pieces of the red carapaces as material; thus, they were wrapped with a sheet of waterproof cloth and transported by four people working together. Though the cold weather prevented the crabs from spoiling, the smell might attract other monsters, so work had to be done quickly.

“Chairwoman Rossetti sure looks sharp in her menswear.” The knight stole glances at Dahlia, who was tidying the sheets of waterproof cloth some distance from the group of men.

“Not only is she cross-dressing today, but she even altered her voice to be deeper so as not to attract monsters, you know?”

“She’s always so passionate about her work too...”

“It looks so natural on her, I could be convinced that she normally cross-dresses the other way.” The knights spoke in hushed tones as they unfurled waterproof cloth.

One of them stopped in his tracks. “Wait, come on. Don’t tell me you actually think she looks like a guy.”

“She’s put so much effort into it, sir—don’t you think she deserves more credit?”

“I don’t mean it like that. Look at her nape.”

“Huh, you might be onto something.” A few of them nodded in agreement; gaps in her thin scarf afforded glimpses of her fine skin and delicate neck. Just then, Dahlia extended her left hand to flatten a corner lifted by the breeze, giving the men a look at her profile.

“Her wrists are so thin too...”

“How could you say she is anything but womanly?”

A mage, hitherto silent, cleared his throat twice. “Gentlemen, is it not dishonorable to speak of Chairwoman Rossetti—someone who is giving her all for us—in this manner?”

The veteran who had led Dahlia’s horse earlier looked at the mage who had so gently admonished the others. “Forgive us. Correct me if I’m wrong, but is it not true that you have spied upon her just the same?”

A few seconds of silence passed before the maroon-haired mage quietly spoke up again. “Personally, I think Chairwoman Rossetti would be stunning with eyeglasses!”

“Well said. Hopefully we will have the chance to see her with glasses in her usual dress.”

“That would be a treat.”

“No, no. She would look best dressed as she is but with a pair of glasses.”

“You two are awfully fixated on eyewear...”

Despite the fine weather today, a shadow suddenly fell over the whispering men—unforeseen clouds in the horizon? The knights looked up to find a blue armored crab towering above them.

“My friends, I hate to interrupt your lively conversation, but I have come to dissect.” At the sight of the soft-spoken man carrying an armored crab aloft, the color drained from the faces of the knights and mages.

“V-Volf...”

“Lord Scalfarotto...”

“Sir Volf, we were just, uh...”

Volf did not reprimand the group, nor did he unleash his intimidation. For what reason, then, did the knight—who likely spoke for everyone in the group—seem to feel the need to prostrate himself and beg for forgiveness?

“I’m thinking I ought to stuff their mouths full of salt, bind all their limbs, and roast them over an open fire.” Volf’s mouth was in the shape of a smile, but his golden eyes, pointing this way, chilled them to the bone.

“Volf, you—you’re talking about the crabs. Right, Volf? Right?”

The Dark Lord did not respond to the knight’s cracking voice.

Back at the bank, sheets of waterproof cloth lined the ground around the two bonfires, whose heat triumphed over the chilly late autumn river breeze.

“Some crabmeat over here, please!”

The great cauldron was hoisted onto a platform assembled out of metal rods, and once the blue shell went in, a mage magically filled it with water. Next to arrive were lidded pails containing seasonings and chopped vegetables, which were then dumped in as well. Glorious was this cooking scene.

Just as Dahlia was wondering how the cauldron would be hung over the bonfire, two mages lined up before the vessel. “Shall we turn up the heat so as not to keep everyone waiting too long?”

“Yes, let’s speed things up—Fire Wall!”

A split second later, the bottom and sides of the cauldron were bathed in flames. The level of heat spewing from the wall of fire was far greater than what Dahlia had expected; she reflexively recoiled, and a small stone under her step threw off her balance.

Volf caught her in the nick of time. “Are you all right, Dahlia?”

“I-I’m fine, thank you. I just tripped over a rock.”

“I’m sorry, I should have explained ahead of time—the mages lend us any magic they have to spare and directly heat the cauldron. It’s not always that the terrain is favorable, but this is certainly the quickest way.” Its efficiency and efficacy couldn’t be questioned, but what a luxury it was to spend the royal mages’ magic this way.

“Fire mages must have their work cut out for them, then.”

When the spectacled mage made eye contact with Dahlia, he walked over to her, then shook his head. “On the contrary, actually. There are only so many situations in which fire mages come into action—with fire magic, there is too great a risk of starting wildfires in forests and grasslands, and it destroys monster parts that could be used.”

“Each expedition location has its difficulties, I see.”

“Indeed. Furthermore, sandy deserts are perfectly safe places for fire, though the monsters there tend to be resistant to heat. Only one environment comes to mind in which fire mages can freely use their powers—the swamplands where we cull titan frogs. As offensive magic, however, fire spells are hard to beat.” The mage was wistful as he explained his craft. “I believe my work has caught up to me.” As the knights lined up a few large metallic buckets on the other side of the cauldron, the mage returned to his station.

“What are those for, Volf?”

“Oh, those are ice buckets. For the crab and alcohol.” It had seemed logical to use ice crystals instead, but today’s expedition was only a day trip, and the mages probably had plenty of magic to spare.

“Ice Crash.” If it weren’t for the mage’s quiet chanting, the way the ice came forth would have seemed like sleight of hand. The shower of ice rattled into the bucket. Not only was this less frightening than the earlier Fire Wall, it was also quite a handy spell.

“I heard it takes a lot of control to do that. Because almost all of the ice mages have a lot of magic, ‘making large chunks is simple, but equal-sized little pieces take a lot of practice,’ so my brother said.”

Randolph joined the conversation too. “Ice magic requires a fair amount of

time to activate, yet he does it instantly—the result of diligent training.” It was clear that this was no easy task, and those who traveled with the Order of Beast Hunters probably had very fine control of their magic.

“I wonder how they become so proficient,” Marcella pondered aloud.

“There is some relation with the type of magic; however, I believe the most important factors are how much one has practiced and how good one’s instructor is,” Randolph answered.

Marcella had recently begun practicing earth magic, and his attempts at making bricks were still at the level of mass-producing pickling weights. In fact, he had a painful recollection from just the other day of trying to dial down his output, but that had merely produced large pumiceous stones. He had only taken a few steps on this journey, and the path ahead was sure to be rocky.

“Everyone, come get some crab!” The knights who had been cutting up the crab by the riverside came to announce it was time for lunch.

Dorino returned with two large pailfuls of crabmeat. “This one’s for eating raw, and this one’s steamed by the captain, and someone else will be swinging by with the grilled stuff.” The pail on the left was full of ice water and large chunks of raw meat, and the other had the crab steam-roasted by Grato’s Ash-Hand. According to the bestiary, armored crabs were “difficult to defeat with fire magic,” likely because their shells were heat resistant. But no crab was built to resist a magic sword cooking it from the inside out.

“Let us raise a toast, then proceed with the ‘on-site taste test.’”

Griswald proceeded under his captain’s direction. “Let us not forget that today is a field training day. And though Father Aroldo has graced us with his presence, anyone in a drunken stupor will not be receiving any recovery magic, so exercise moderation!” The knights only got more excited after the captains’ words. They all received their wineskins, which they clashed together.

For the inexperienced Dahlia, though, drinking straight from the wineskin proved to be difficult. Its contents couldn’t be sucked out, and inclining it caused the wine to rush out and drown her. The wine itself was quite delicious—a white with citrus notes—but her concern was being able to taste any of it. When she looked to her side, she found that the problem lay in her lack of

suction force—Marcella, Jonas, and the others had their vessels in one hand, and they were drinking just fine. Dahlia ended up folding and squishing hers to get the contents out.

Volf handed her a plate of the blue—the one he'd slain. "Some raw crab, Dahlia?"

The legs were as thick as her fist, and the meat inside blossomed like a white chrysanthemum. There was much more meat to be had here than the crab sashimi she'd had in Japan, and it felt very grand.

"It's as fresh as it gets, so no problem with it being raw. It's not poisonous either, and the acid sac and gland have already been removed. To be safe, though, here's some medicine—with it, you'll be fine even if you eat too much or start seeing weird bugs crawling in your vision."

Dahlia received a powder that was purplish-red, a color that looked to be poisonous rather than curative. "Has no one else taken it?"

"Before the trip, we all took a liquid medicine that's compounded of that powder, an anti-infective, and a slew of other stuff, but it's... Eugh."

His furrowed brow told her all that she needed to know. Still, the powder was an antiparasitic and would prevent her from suffering the consequences of overeating—she did as she was told. As for its flavor? Well, she would have much, much preferred it in capsule form. Dahlia cleansed her palate with a swig of wine.

She took her plate of salted raw crab, dug it apart with her fork, and took a bite. "Oh, it's so sweet." The crabmeat had a delectable sweetness and toothsome texture, not unlike the raw prawns found in Japanese cuisine. Due to its size, it was slightly fibrous but far from sinewy. The more she savored her bite, the happier she was to have this opportunity.

Volf's golden eyes grew large. "This is definitely less tender than ordinary armored crab, but it's also sweeter, like you said."

"The flavor is fine, but raw? I'm afraid the texture is not for me." Randolph had stopped eating already, so Dorino traded him for some steamed crab and finished Randolph's leftovers with an additional sprinkling of salt.

Marcella also looked hesitant as he chewed his food. It seemed like raw crab wasn't for everyone, maybe because Ordine didn't have much of a sashimi culture. It was then that Dahlia realized something, and she looked across to Jonas, who had just cleaned off his plate.

"Master Jonas, how do you like raw crab?"

"Very. Delicious." The way he punctuated the two words, Jonas must have been telling the truth. His right oxide-colored pupil turned vertical for a split second. He took an extra large serving from Volf—who must've noticed Jonas's delight—and he thanked the knight.

"Here you are, Chairwoman Rossetti."

Next was the steamed crab. Both the shell's exterior and the membrane were red, while the interior was white. The sword-steamed crab was still warm to the touch, with a wisp of vapor rising from it. She began breaking off the meat with her fork, but she met with resistance from Volf.

"Try not to tear it apart but instead sink your teeth into it, Dahlia. That way, you won't lose any of its savory juices."

"Good to know; thank you." It wasn't the most elegant way to dine, but she took his advice to heart; everyone else was doing the same anyway. "Oh, that's good..."

The gentle cooking method helped the meat retain all its juices. It lacked the brininess of saltwater crabs, but that wasn't anything that couldn't be fixed with a generous application of salt. The flavor was very much armored crab, but perhaps due to its freshness, it was richer than the norm. How extravagant was it to have a mouthful of crabmeat? She reminisced about ponzu, which would go so well with it, but that was why the drink of choice today was a citrusy white wine.

"The captain sure cooked it perfectly."

"Indeed. It could not be better."

"Ash-Hand sure is nice..."

Dahlia had compliments to pay as well, but her mouth was filled with crab. It

truly was delicious. She looked around her—many were silently feasting on the steamed too. Although shelling the meat required some effort, the deliciousness was enough to keep the chatter down.

Volf saw the empty pail and went to fetch more food. “I’ll go get some more of the steamed crab.”

As he watched Volf walk away, Jonas looked terribly emotionless. He took two bites of the steamed crab, then washed them down with a gulp of wine.

Dahlia hurried to bring him a big plate of the raw. “Here, Master Jonas!”

“Thank you very much...”

She took his unfinished plate of steamed crab and swapped it with the plate of the raw. “Have you eaten much crab before?”

“Not much since my sense of taste changed.” A change in his sense of taste—that was to say when he had received his blight.

“Do you find all cooked foods unpleasant, Master Jonas?”

“Yes, unfortunately, cooked meat tastes very burnt to me. If it is sautéed, then the texture is like biting into cotton or cloth. I quite enjoyed steamed crab before, but the texture is rather difficult for me now.”

“And vegetables are a matter of texture too?”

“That is part of it, but the grassiness and sourness are also overwhelming.” He paused to sigh. “Please forgive me for uttering such unappetizing words during a meal.”

For Jonas, meat could only be raw or rare, and it sounded like anything else was difficult for him to force down. Since he seemed to be enjoying his raw crab, Dahlia wondered if he’d enjoy similar foods. “Master Jonas, have you ever tried sashimi?”

“Sashimi? What Esterland calls the dish of raw fish with its head attached?”

“Huh?”

“I saw it once when I was a child. The fish’s head was still moving about—trust that I can’t forget about it, though I have yet to try it again.” His rust-

colored eyes wandered into the distance. Jonas's first experience with raw fish must've been something prepared live—what Japanese people called ikizukuri. But how could anyone possibly have served that to a kid? It was no wonder the experience had left him permanently scarred.

“Oh! Um! Most sashimi is served without the fish's head. Since you enjoy raw crab, I'm confident that you would very much enjoy it if you tried it again. It may be rather pricey, however.” In Ordine, places that offered Esterland cuisine tended to be expensive. Serving seafood as sashimi necessitated the freshest product possible, so given the price point, it could be had only at Esterland restaurants in nobles' quarters.

“Then I shall try my hardest to talk Lord Guido into it.” The way Jonas had said it so nonchalantly made Dahlia snicker.

At that point, a mage approached the group to replenish their pails with ice. “Forgive me if I am overstepping boundaries, Chairwoman Rossetti, but may I ask why you address Lord Jonas as ‘Master’?”

“Umm...”

“I had the opportunity to explain a few things, as Chairwoman Rossetti knew nothing about weapons, and I have had the privilege of her gratuitous respect ever since.”

Lying came as easily as breathing for Jonas; Dahlia shrank a little. Of course, it wasn't like they could tell people the truth: that “Master Jonas” had stuck in her mind because Volf had started calling him that. There was also the fact she used his first name, though she only realized now—a little late—that it might have been rude on her part.

“Hence ‘Master Jonas’?”

“Yes—although, considering that she is an advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters and an outstanding magical toolmaker, I ought to be the one calling her Master Dahlia.”

“Ah, indeed, Master Dahlia!” He seemed to have really taken a liking to that title, though Dahlia herself had begun squirming at the conversation. As others needed refills of ice too, the mage dipped his head and then took his leave.

“Erm, might addressing you as Master Jonas be disrespectful?”

“There is no problem at all with that. If anything, it’s a great honor for someone like me to be addressed that way.”

He was quite casual about it, but that somehow made her feel even less at ease with the prospect. “Um, Master Jonas, please feel free to use my first name as well.”

“What an honor. Would you prefer Master Dahlia? Or perhaps Miss Dahlia would better befit a lady as comely as yourself?” Nobles sure were good at flattery. She was actually envious of how collected he was, sitting there enjoying his crab.

“Master Jonas, I think I ought to learn how to lie from you.”

He nearly choked on his food—a very novel reaction.

“It should be almost finished simmering.”

The cauldron that the mages were so gently bubbling had begun to let off a delicious aroma, drawing longing gazes from Volf and the others. Just then, knights came by with buckets, and everyone knew to swiftly retrieve the shallow pots for their camp stoves, into which went pieces of crab. With armored crabs being the size that they were, a single segment of the legs was plenty. One side of the shell had been removed, so maybe the plan was to grill them on the lid-skillet—so thought Dahlia, but then a mage came with a silver case, from which he spooned a mound of rich yellow butter onto each piece of crab.

“Will we be frying it?”

“No, the butter will just be on top. The shell is so thick that frying it tends to dry out the meat. We are also fed a lot of butter and cheese on our expeditions so that we stay full for longer.”

“Not that we ever really get the chance to feast on crab, mind you—it’s mostly rye bread with a thick spread of butter that does the trick.”

“Yeah. If it’s a particularly long expedition, we’ll even soak the bread with

olive oil. It's hard to sleep on an empty stomach."

"Oh, yeah! We used to do that a lot! Jerky and olive oil wasn't very good, if I recall correctly."

"Your journeys must have been very difficult..." The Beast Hunters seemed to painstakingly pad their meals with extra calories while out in the field. Imagining how everything would taste made Dahlia wince.

"What an expedition calls for is honey."

"Haven't you been having a whole lot of honey lately, Randolph? You're gonna turn into a bear, you know?"

"Fret not. It is a restorative."

As talk of expeditions turned to the topic of Randolph's sweet tooth, the mage began flinging flame at the line of pots on the ground. Dahlia had never seen—or even heard of, for that matter—crab cooked by little fireballs. The fragrance of crab, butter, and then char filled the air, making her mouth water.

"Bon appétit!"

"Thank you so much."

The mage turned over an empty stockpot on the sheet of waterproof cloth in front of Dahlia, making a perfect platform for the shallow pots. Judging by how smoothly he set them down, this was likely a common occurrence.

Everyone proceeded to stuff their faces with the grilled buttered crab, and Dahlia did the same. It was hotter than she had expected, likely from the added fat; she huffed and puffed as the crab scorched her mouth. It was noticeably sweeter than the crab she had yearly, and each bite had also been saturated with just enough salted butter. She spent as long as she could savoring the heavenly harmony of the grilled crab's smokiness and golden melted butter before swallowing.

"Name me something better than grilled armored crab with butter!"

"Without a doubt, this is tastier than any crab I've ever had..."

As Dorino and Marcella lavished praise on the meat, Jonas shifted his rusty eyes. "I believe we have a guest."

Everyone's gazes went to the dark green coach that had just arrived at the riverbank; the coat of arms, painted in gold, signified a very high-ranking noble.

"Ah, he's finally here—my vice-captain when I was a rookie. I extended an invitation to him, as he has a taste for armored crab. I shall receive him; you may all continue." A beaming Grato and a veteran knight approached the coach together as the rest of the Beast Hunters returned to their meal.

"Grilled tomalley and crab soup are ready!" Each person had their camp stove pot filled with soup. Those who wanted the simmered and grilled crab fat had dishes of them.

"How about some estervino courtesy of Lord Guido Scalfarotto?" Next to the barrel lay dozens of large wooden scoops, insisting everyone imbibe. According to Volf, Guido was hooked on estervino—this was demonstrated by the experienced way that Jonas offered the full ladle to Dahlia.

"Ms. Dahlia, we're to season the soup however we want. Would you like to try it with some meeso—er, miso? Anyway, that Esterland seasoning made from beans."

"Miso?! Yes, please!" Of course she said yes to Dorino—she had been yearning for that very bean paste! And if there was miso, there just had to be soy sauce out there too! "Do you happen to know where the Order got this miso from?"

"From our quartermaster. He said it was a sample product for long-lasting provisions. Where he gets it from, I won't learn until we get back to the castle."

"Please let me know once you find out!" It wasn't a request—Dahlia *demand*ed he track down the supplier.

Dorino then cranked up the heat and tossed in a spoon of the miso.

"No, Dorino! You mustn't turn the heat all the way up!" She was shocked by how loud she'd said that.

"Huh? Miso doesn't dissolve without a bit of heat, you know?"

"It's better to turn off the heat first, and you should mix it in instead of throwing it in all at once." Her impromptu demonstration of miso soup

preparation drew the attention of Dorino as well as the mages in charge of the cooking.

“Having tried her wonderful barbecue sauce and spice mix, I am not surprised that Chairwoman Rossetti is so knowledgeable about miso.”

“Where did Madam Rossetti learn so much about Esterland cuisine?”

“Dahlia bought a book on the topic from the bookstore, and she must have studied how to cook with miso.”

“Ah, her passion lies not only in magical tools but also in the culinary arts, I see.”

The others were quietly chatting about her behind her back, but there was something more important on her mind: she drilled into them the risk of destroying miso’s flavor when bringing the seasoning to a rolling boil.

“How does it taste, Randolph?”

“Good, but it tastes purely of crab. It lacks...depth.” Randolph took the spoon out of his mouth and then looked toward the river—perhaps the late autumn sun was reflecting into his eyes. “They should still be in season, and the stream is strong. Vice-Captain Griswald, permission to enter the water?”

“By all means.”

“No nets, Volf, so lend me a hand.”

“Sure thing. Dorino, you kill the incoming fish.”

“Got it!”

Net income, huh? The mention of those words inadvertently brought to Dahlia’s mind the paychecks of her previous life.

As the three knights walked toward the water, they made it look like catching fish with bare hands was something normal people did all the time. Randolph removed his scarlet armor, portable warm air circulator, and then his shirt.

“Um, what are they doing?”

“You needn’t worry, Chairwoman—Sir Randolph’s trousers are still on,” Marcella reassured Dahlia, who hurried to avert her eyes.

“Sir Randolph is quite the expert at catching fish with his bare hands, you see.”

She had little to say in response to the knight. Before long, the half naked Randolph hopped in and waded his way to the center of the river. It couldn't have been warm in there, and the current was terribly strong. Dahlia worried that he might be washed away, but he looked to be unfazed, unmoving with his face and one arm plunged in the water. Then, Randolph's hand emerged from the river with a splash—and within his grip was a thick golden object that dazzled everyone on the bank. Volf caught the lump of gold dancing in the air and passed it along to Dorino, who took no time to set it on a cutting board and pierce it with a shortsword. A fourth knight then took the killed fish.



This was a treasurefish. To Dahlia, it looked like a chum salmon but golden. In the warmer months, it was nearly black in color, but it turned gold as the weather got colder. Hence, it was called “riverblack” from spring to autumn but “treasurefish” from autumn to winter. Its gleaming shade indicated that it was packed with lots of fat; according to conventional wisdom, the fish was most delicious when it was at its fattiest. “Treasurefish are only found upstream, so they’re hard to catch”—so she had heard before when she and her father had visited a diner one time.

Randolph moved to another part of the river, tossing treasurefish out of the water from time to time, whereupon Volf would catch what rained down upon him and Dorino would kill the fish on the cutting board—a well-oiled machine. Yet Dahlia couldn’t suppress the thought that came into her mind.

“A bear...?” asked Marcella, as though speaking for her.

“Indeed,” said Jonas.

“Marcella, Master Jonas...” She was fighting the urge to agree with every fiber of her being.

“Yes, that is exactly what we call Randolph: the Bronze Bear.”

“I apologize! I mean no offense.” At the sudden appearance of the vice-captain, Marcella panicked, Jonas dipped his head in apology, and Dahlia shrank. She felt bad for even thinking it, but there was no more accurate nickname for Randolph.

“In Ehrlichia, it is a great compliment to describe a fisher at a river as a bear, and that is according to Randolph himself.”

The vice-captain’s words jogged Dahlia’s memory—Randolph had said that he’d studied abroad for a long time. Ordine’s neighbor was famed for their livestock and livestock breeding, and perhaps their schooling included lessons in fishing.

“Randolph is also very proficient in finding fruit and honey in the woods, thus Forest Bruin is another one of his nicknames. This is just within our circle, so I pray that you all will keep this matter a secret?” Griswald mischievously put a finger to his lips, and the rest of the group chuckled in unison.

The Bronze Bear had flung seven treasurefish to the shore before he finally exited the water. Afterward, it was simply a matter of continuing the feast, with some putting miso and tomalley into their crab soup, some cooking the treasurefish in the soup, and some still gorging on crab both raw and grilled, all with drinks in hand.

Volf brought back thinly sliced treasurefish, likely as sashimi for Jonas, as he was completely avoiding the grilled crab and crab soup. Just like the raw crab, sashimi was not the sort of thing everyone appreciated, though it was fortunate that Jonas absolutely loved the raw stuff. However, he was swallowing the sliced fish without chewing it at all, like some sort of lizard. Dahlia wanted to say something about it, but he was simply doing what a lizard or snake (dragon?) would. Wait, no. Whatever monster was possessing him, Jonas was still a human being. He must've read her mind, or at least the trouble on her face—they made eye contact, and Jonas began to politely chew his food.

As an aside, apart from looking like salmon, treasurefish also tasted like it. It was fatty, but being a freshwater fish, it was also quite light. Some soy sauce and wasabi would have been delightful right about now.

The river breeze was getting chillier, but the portable circulator was spreading warm air across Dahlia's back. Nothing was quite as special as dining alfresco under the clear blue sky. Grato, Aroldo, and the guest with a full head of white looked to be having a jovial time too.

The slices of treasurefish were simmered in miso soup made with the rich armored crab stock, their flavors pairing perfectly. The veteran knight who always stayed with Dahlia's group had a great smile as he brought more estervino, and everyone there ate with relish and chatted with glee.

"Six or seven years ago, no one in Ordine would eat the innards of a crab. Ever since cooks came from Esterland and taught us their ways, half of us love the stuff, while the other half have given up on trying to learn to love it." The veteran mixed some crab meat into grilled tomalley.

"People in different parts of the world have different tastes, after all."

"On the other hand, others abroad find us bizarre for eating things they wouldn't because Ordine welcomes any and all foreign cuisine. I see it as a

blessing that I am able to sample all manner of delicious foods.”

“I wholly agree.” The opportunity for variety in food was pure joy for Dahlia, though it didn’t seem to be the same for people in other nations. She sipped on her miso soup as gratitude for having been reborn in Ordine welled up in her heart.

“Some tomalley for you, Kirk?”

“No, thank you. I’ve given it many attempts, but the bitterness does not agree with me.”

“That’s the good part.”

“Tomalley is food reserved for the natural enemies of crabs.”

“Well, that’s us, isn’t it?” If Volf was joking, it didn’t sound like it. It wouldn’t have sounded like a joke if anyone consuming crab today had said it either.

“I guess tomalley is a flavor that only a mature adult would enjoy.”

“In that case, I’ll stay a kid forever!”

The veteran chuckled at Kirk’s pout. “You’ll grow into it, I’m sure. But I have to wonder if there isn’t a more approachable way to have it.” He began working together a simple dough of wheat flour and water, kneaded it into little balls, then fried them up in a shallow pot over his camp stove. When they crackled, he flipped them over and lightly brushed them with a mixture of tomalley, miso, and estervino. They remained on the heat until they were slightly toasted. “It’s not much more than flour, but it should taste pretty good. Give it a taste, Kirk.”

“Um, thank you.” Kirk gave the crab fat cracker a glare filled with suspicion.

“Chairwoman Rossetti and bodyguard, would you like to try some as well? It is something akin to the rice crackers found in Esterland.”

“I would love to, thank you.” The lightly charred cracker was dyed a deep green from the miso glaze, which contrasted against the delicate sprinkling of chili flakes, giving it quite the unique look. But Dahlia enjoyed both tomalley and miso, so she unhesitatingly crunched down into the freshly prepared cracker, as did Marcella beside her.

Both grilled tomalley and miso erupted in her mouth, very salty but also very

savory. Chewing it some more brought out the simple flavor of wheat, delightfully accented by the chili. Miso remained on her palate after the bite had gone down. She followed it with a sip of medium-dry estervino, and its flavor was fantastically refreshing. It was a perfect combination.

“You look to be enjoying it very much, Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“It is delicious; it truly is.”

Her words must’ve finally given Kirk the courage to try it too. He took a tiny nibble and chased it with a little swig of the estervino. “Oh? That *is* good...” He took a bigger bite this time and then downed the rest of the ladle. “If it’s this way, then I *can* do it!”

At that exclamation, Volf burst out laughing. “I guess you’re on our side now, eh?”

“Seems like little Kirk’s finally become an adult.”

“Sir Dorino, surely you mean I’ve finally learned to drink!”

Dorino clapped Kirk on the shoulder a few times before turning to the veteran. “Hit me with one, sir!”

“If I may have one as well, please.”

“All right, all right. I’ll make you the dough, but you’ve got to grill it yourselves—I have some drinking to catch up on!” The veteran began whipping up a new batch of the crackers, and, despite his supposed unwillingness to toil for his juniors, he showed everyone how to form the dough. It was very versatile too—it could be turned into crackers or gyoza wrappers or even filled with jam—and making it could be an important skill out on the field. After all, food was at the center of life. Or perhaps humans, by nature, were gluttonous.

The knights’ chatter and laughter drowned out the rushing of the river. Grato had been chowing down on grilled crab dripping with butter and quenching his thirst with the citrusy white wine. The one he had steamed himself was great and all, but crab was best grilled to go with wine—that was what he had thought, at least, until one of the knights brought him the crab soup flavored with the Esterland seasoning known as miso. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

“Captain! More estervino? It goes wonderfully with the tomalley you made!”

“A cup then, please.” After answering the navy-haired knight, he turned back to the old man in the simple chair beside him. His hair and beard had turned completely gray, and he was just as tall as he had been, but his muscles were no more, leaving him thin and bony. The tree might have withered, yet its roots were strong—no part of the man seemed weak; it would have been no surprise to anyone to learn that he had once been the vice-captain of the Beast Hunters. Grato recalled how, when he had just entered the Order, this man would yell at him all the time with such vigor. “Lord Bernigi, some estervino for you?”

“I’ve had enough.” The old man cast his tea-brown eyes to the ground and shook his head. He was very fond of crab, yet he’d had but the single piece of the steamed and none of the grilled. This sea serpent used to drink wine past the carryover, yet he only emptied the glass he’d initially been served. Perhaps this was him showing his age or his poor health.

Grato couldn’t help but worry. “Is the armored crab not to your liking today, sir?”

“Such is not the case; it tastes fine.” He spooned some of the soup from his bowl, went through the motions and chewed it a few times, then gulped it down seemingly without really tasting it. The crab should have been tender, but the single bite he had taken was probably not to his taste.

Last week, Volf’s brother Guido had sent a quick note saying that “former Vice-Captain Lord Bernigi has been having less appetite and more need for rest,” and that might explain the old man’s behavior. It was curious that Guido had known about his condition, but Grato had no interest in finding out why. Of course he had worried; after all, Bernigi had been such a big part of his life. The day after he had received the letter, Grato had penned another inviting the ex-Beast Hunter to the armored crab feast that would be held under the guise of field training, only half expecting him to accept. Bernigi must’ve had days when he felt better or worse too. Grato hadn’t wanted to force the old man into coming, so he had added that he was free to decide on the day of.

“You needn’t worry for me. My health is fine.” The silence was brief, but it must’ve been enough time for Bernigi to see through Grato. The old man

looked away and toward the knights pouring each other drinks and enjoying the crab.

“So, what do you think about our new squad, Vice-Captain?” Perhaps the estervino was especially smooth or the char on the crab was especially tasty; Grato unintentionally reverted to addressing him like the superior he had once been.

“Grato.” His red almond eyes were just as sharp as they had been back when his glare and his scolding had caused the onetime rookie to shrink in fear. “From what I see, your men are too soft. They sit on tarpaulins, cooking their own food with their own luxury stoves. They stuff their bellies and drink till they are drunk—they look like children on a field trip.”

“We are celebrating the newcomers today. This is not how we usually are.” Griswald, the current vice-captain, protested before Grato could speak, but the captain had nothing more to say once he caught Bernigi’s scowling red eyes.

“Irrelevant. They are defenseless—as far as I can tell, at least. Their state makes me question whether they can slay powerful monsters and fend off any sudden—” Bernigi’s voice caught the attention of the knights around them, and he quickly stopped to clear his throat. “It is uncouth for seniors like me to drink too much and then grumble about everything. I shall retire.”

“Allow me to join you.”

But the old man shook his head. “Drink with your men, Grato. You needn’t bear with me.”

“I would be happy to catch up with you, sir. It *has* been a while since we—”

“The time when I bore the title of ‘vice-captain’ was ages ago, *Captain*. You ought to revel with your subordinates rather than worrying for a decrepit man.” He turned to the two bodyguards who had accompanied him. “It has been a long time since you have seen the knights, and you do not have liquor or crab often, so go enjoy yourselves.”

“Lord Bernigi, one of us should—”

“I will be just a few paces away from everyone. And I don’t need anyone to watch over me while I nap inside—the carriage is far too small for that.” He

grabbed his cane and limped toward the coach.

After Bernigi went inside, one of his bodyguards lowered his gaze. “I beg your forgiveness, everyone. Lord Bernigi’s mood sours when his body does not behave as he expects it to...”

“The squad is much livelier than usual as well. We naturally seem like we’re not serious enough.”

“The men have been taking shifts on watch; it is not fair to say that we have been negligent...” Griswald could not contain his exasperation.

The knights exchanged glances. “With age comes worrying, I suppose.”

“To moan about ‘young’uns these days’ is a job reserved for the elderly, after all.”

One of the knights turned to Grato. “Is Lord Bernigi’s knee bothering him? I hear that the Adventurers’ Guild has released a new monster-based medicine that is effective for people at an advanced age. Perhaps we could bring some back for him?”

“That leg is prosthetic.”

“Huh?” His surprise wasn’t unwarranted. In the capital, a priest could completely mend almost any physical injury, big or small, within a week. It did cost quite the sum, but it was nothing that a high-ranking nobleman like Bernigi couldn’t afford.

“Lord Bernigi defended a cave for seven days to protect a wounded comrade.”

“With an injury like that? Alone?”

“Mm. By the time we found him, his leg was beyond healing, and he retired from his position shortly after that.”

“It’s no wonder he is so adamant we shore up defenses.”

“Well, that would be because—” The veteran cut himself off, hesitating to continue, and looked to Grato.

The other bodyguard finally spoke up. “Please forgive Lord Bernigi, everyone.

His son, who was also a Beast Hunter, fell in the line of duty, so I am certain he can't help himself worrying for your safety..." His voice trailed off into nothingness; whatever discontent the knights might have felt had disappeared. The Beast Hunters, past and present, saw the most killed in action out of any of the orders of knights.

"We ought to do as Lord Bernigi says—let us enjoy our time today." At the captain's urging, the knights finally began drinking again; Aroldo even passed an estervino scoop to Grato.

The shimmering surface of the drink evoked memories of a certain Beast Hunter—Bernigi's son. Unlike his father's almond eyes, his had been kite-brown and gentle. But like his father, he'd had a penchant for a glass of dry red and steamed armored crab. Grato was drowning in his memories—for a moment, he even heard the fallen knight's laughter, but he was nowhere to be found. Of course he wasn't here. He couldn't have been here. Yet even now that he was captain, Grato's eyes would dart around in search of his comrades who no longer roamed the earth.

The bright red flames of the bonfire stung his eyes.



Dahlia gingerly locked the door of the carriage, one that had been deployed for her sake today. It appeared like any other carriage on the outside, but it featured a toilet, a place to change, and somewhere to sit and rest. Naturally, there was a lock in the interior as well. It was a vehicle the Scalfarotto family reserved for when they made excursions, and Dahlia was ever grateful she had been granted this peace of mind.

Though the carriage was parked by the riverbank, Marcella had wanted to accompany her, an offer she had adamantly refused. Yes, it was his job as her guard to be by her side—she knew that—but the carriage was within sight of the bonfires, and there were lookouts close by. As close as she and Marcella were, having him beside her as she did her business was too tall a hurdle for her. She had had to explain that to him forcefully before she could come alone.

She'd finished and was heading back toward Volf and the rest of the group when her attention was drawn to the deep green coach nearby. Grato's guest,

the elderly man, had one foot up on the running board as he tried to open the door. But his cane slipped on a wet leaf, and he lost his balance.

“Careful!” Dahlia rushed to the elderly man, propping him up as well as she could; his reactions were quicker, though, and his other hand had already grasped hold of the door. This pirouette left the elderly man with his back pressed helplessly to the side of the coach, like an insect pinned to a display.

“I am fine—forgive me for worrying you.”

She replied in a panic to the husky voice. “My apologies!”

“The springs in the door are a little strong; could I ask you to hold the door for me?”

“My pleasure.” Dahlia did as requested until the elderly man entered.

He struck the doorsill with a metallic *clank*. He must’ve had a steel toe in his boot and a brace for his right knee—he was at an advanced age, so maybe it was to support a bum knee. After he had found his seat inside, she dipped her head, signaling that she meant to take her leave.

Then he spoke again. “You do not seem like a knight. Are you here as an attendant?”

“Not as an attendant, but I was graciously invited to join today as the Rossetti Trading Company’s—” Dahlia now realized she had completely forgotten to introduce herself to the aristocrat; she panicked and turned to him.

“Ah, no need for formalities. The Rossetti Trading Company, is it? The name is Bernigi—a former Beast Hunter and now just an old man escaping to his coach to recover from all the drinking today.” The man with the hoary head did not introduce himself with his surname; Dahlia took it as an indication that he was traveling incognito and did not inquire further. “It must be hard for a businessman like you to join these knights on their field training.”

“Not at all. It has been a great learning experience. I had never seen a living armored crab until today.”

“You certainly wouldn’t see a living one in the city—I would sure hope not, at least. Did you try the crab raw today?”

“Oh, yes, it was wonderful.” Even with a sunbeam shining through the open window, the air inside the cabin was cold, and it gave the elderly man a few mild coughs; Dahlia saw a folded lap blanket lying on the seat near her, and she handed it to Bernigi. “Do you carry a hand warmer?”

“I think my attendant has stowed it away somewhere, but this blanket will be plenty, thank you. Back in my day, when I went out on expeditions, my pillow would sometimes frost over.”

“It was that cold?” When the elderly man had been young, the waterproof cloth had yet to be invented, but he should’ve at least had a sleeping bag or something.

“Mm. The mountains to the north get very cold, you see. Night watch was done in three shifts, and whoever wasn’t on duty would sleep in their armor. Even with some bedding to lay on the ground, we’d freeze, as our armor was mostly metal back in the day, and when we rolled over, the frost on the ground would crinkle.”

“My, the conditions truly were dreadful. Everyone must have caught colds?”

“We all did in the beginning, but once you start training, your body gets used to the hardship.” Bernigi coughed again in the chilly cabin.

Dahlia took out a spare portable warm air circulator she had in her jacket pocket. “Here, I think this may help. Try putting it under your lap blanket.”

After a quick explanation, he placed the magical tool on his knees and then covered it up. “This is perfectly warm. I never knew there was something like this. Life sure is easier these days.”

“Erm, this has only just been invented for the Beast Hunters, actually.” Dahlia couldn’t bring herself to tell him that pretty much every single knight out there was equipped with one. She answered his question about whether the ventilator was for sale and told him how much it sold for. She then agreed to let him have someone from the family send payment to the Rossetti Trading Company at a later time.

Bernigi enjoyed the warmth for a while before lightly rapping his right knee twice and grimacing. “More and more magical tools appear every day. On the

one hand, they are very helpful...”

“But on the other hand?” She was surprised at his hesitance and ended up staring him dead in the eyes.

His almond eyes, the color of black tea, silently apologized. “I know you are with the Rossetti Trading Company and I mean no offense, but this old man cannot help but feel uncomfortable that the Order of Beast Hunters employs so many magical tools.”

“Is the object of your concern perhaps the order’s budget?”

“No, I have heard they have extra money to spend now. Rather, I...” Bernigi sighed. “I feel that they are spoiled. They are too lax. They are unaware. I almost want to ask them what they would or could do if a wyvern appeared right now.”

“You worry for the knights, then.”

“I suppose I do. Every single man out there is a nephew or a grandson to me.” He coughed again, then he looked out the window—his gaze was undoubtedly full of love for his kin.

“Um, I hope you can forgive me for being so bold as to say this, but although the proliferation of magical tools has indeed made the Beast Hunters’ lives a little more comfortable, I doubt they are negligent—it isn’t as though these magical tools make the monsters any weaker.”

Bernigi gave her a puzzled look. “I would understand if you were saying that because it is good business for you, but I have heard that your company barely turns a profit on the camp stoves for the Order.”

“We are fortunate to be in the black. Besides, these Beast Hunters protect our kingdom. I truly believe that our company ought to do whatever little we can to make their grueling expeditions easier.”

“And what if the comfort they are now afforded leads to carelessness? When I was their age, the sort of behavior they are currently demonstrating would have been no laughing matter. Whether it was day or night, we were always vigilant during our expeditions. No matter if our comrades fell in combat, no matter how terrible the fight, we powered through it all with grit and

determination. I want those knights to live...” Bernigi’s final sentence was nothing but a whisper—not to Dahlia, but to whatever gods he was addressing his prayers.

And she understood him well. But expeditions didn’t have to be about grit and determination; neglecting to improve the situation would be inefficient. “I understand what you are saying. But, um—say, do you use magical lanterns or hot water dispensers at home?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Is that not the same, sir? I feel that magical tools help improve the knights’ efficiency and thereby ensure they survive. That is, erm, that is to say that when we make their journeys more comfortable, they have more energy to do battle against monsters. Furthermore, I would venture to presume that you wish for your own children and grandchildren to grow up in a better environment than you have, so, um, is it really so bad to support the Beast Hunters and wish that they become stronger every day?” She was rambling from the heart, and she knew her question was hardly coherent.

Bernigi sat in silence. It was only then that Dahlia remembered he was a nobleman, and one whom she had only met today at that. Getting worked up about what he had said about the knights using magical tools was one thing, but being irritable and disrespectful toward him was another.

As she turned pale and made the decision to apologize, Bernigi spoke first. “Hm. I suppose I am still clinging to the past. It would be hypocritical of me to enjoy my modern conveniences, like the hot water dispenser and the cooling fan, while forbidding my son or grandson to do so. To say others must suffer because I have is terribly selfish.” The elderly man directed his words unto himself. Dahlia was left speechless. The corners of his eyes curved upward as he looked at her. “I thank you for this lesson in humility.”

“N-No! I have done nothing to deserve your thanks!” She flapped both hands in a fluster at his declaration.

“The Rossetti Trading Company teaches their employees well. I should like to meet the chairwoman they call the Red-Haired Witch someday.”

“Oh, um—”

Though she tried to introduce herself, the elderly man wasn't finished. "You haven't heard of that name? I hear they also call her the Red Cat. The fact that Chairwoman Rossetti will be made a baroness next year for her continued inventions of novel and helpful magical tools—it's something very unusual, you know? People at the castle and the nobility give her such amusing nicknames—some are less amusing, however..."

Now he had her curiosity. "And what might those be?"

"They call her the Sandalbearer and the Culinary Revolutionary for the tools that the Order has adopted." Those names were too heavy on the shoulders for her to accept, but at least they weren't unsavory. Then, Bernigi slapped his knee. "Ah, yes, I remember now. There is another one related to the toe socks: the Goddess-Savior of Athlete's Foot, or, for short, the Goddess of Athlete's Foot."

"The Goddess of Athlete's Foot?!" Dahlia felt as though she had been punched in the gut. Dread and despair made her shoulders slump. Just the mention of the disease was enough to make her flinch, but to be named after it? Who had been so bold as to utter the name first? She had many choice words for them. *At the very least, use the original name—anything but the shortened version.* In any case, she felt she had the right to complain Volf's ears off afterward and perhaps even to bury her face in a corner and yowl like a cat.

"The first few times I heard people say that, I would berate them for being so rude, but kids these days shorten anything they can. Ah, be sure to keep this a secret from your boss—" Her hat had shifted—apparently a less-pressing concern to her than her dejection—and a tuft of her long hair spilled out from the side; as soon as his red eyes spied it, the elderly man shut his mouth. He opened it again, but this time with much more hesitation. "Are you perhaps, erm, Chairwoman Rossetti herself?"

Now that she had taken her voice caster off, her voice returned to normal. "I apologize for my delayed introduction. My name is Dahlia Rossetti. I have put on these clothes and altered my voice so that I can blend in for today's training."

Bernigi looked shaken by the transformation. "I should be the one to

apologize for assuming you were an employee of Rossetti, and especially for my thoughtless words unto a lady. I beg that you keep what I said about the knights a secret between the two of us.”

“I’ll do that, and thank you for your forgiveness.” *Oh, boy, is this awkward or what?*

The dead silence in the coach was finally broken by loud voices outside. Bernigi and Dahlia both immediately turned their heads toward the window, and the reason for the commotion became obvious—there was a colossal bat, its dark blue body camouflaged against the sky. The scent from the cauldron had attracted the monster, and it was currently circling the knights just above head height.

Bernigi hung halfway out of the coach window. “A skybat?! That nimble beast goes for the easiest prey, like smaller individuals and food out in the open. I knew those boys were unprepared!”

And he was right in a sense—the people outside sounded oddly calm. “Perfect timing! Let’s give it a go!”

“All right, I’m loosing!” The test scheduled for this afternoon seemed to be going according to plan. The bow knight flexed every muscle to draw the Galeforce Bow as Kirk tickled the air in front of him with his fingers. The pair of arrows went shrieking into the sky, disappearing before their very eyes.

“Too soon, junior! The skybat can use its magic to sharply veer and—what?!” The elderly man’s concern turned to shock.

“Come on!” Kirk was so confident, he could shout and cheer as he controlled the arrows; his control had improved so much in such a short time. He pushed the pair of arrows along, tracking the acrobatics the monster was performing. But the skybat had nowhere to go, and the glinting mythrill thread split its body in twain.

“Ah...” Dahlia could’ve sworn the monster made eye contact with her as it crashed to the earth, but all she could do was mentally clasp her hands and pray for its peace.

“What was that bow?!” Bernigi’s neck seemed like it should’ve creaked as he

turned toward Dahlia, and his eyes were terrifying.

“Um, a titanbow?”

“That kind of power from a titanbow?! Ridiculous!”

“Erm, it is called the Galeforce Bow...”

“I have never heard of such a thing. From whom did the knights get it? It isn’t likely any family would give away such a magical weapon, so was it borrowed?”

“No, it is, uh, an invention of the Scalfarotto family’s Weapons Development Team.”

“Invented? What is it made with?”

“It’s, um...” The barrage of questions made Dahlia’s head spin; if only she could call Master Jonas over. But someone else came to her rescue.

“Allow me to explain.” Grato’s voice came from outside the window, then he walked around to the other side to open the door. In his hands were a bottle of red wine and a pair of glasses—for him and Bernigi, no doubt. “Rossetti, why don’t you go take a look at the skybat? I doubt you have had a chance to do so before. We will have it parted, and you may take any part of it you wish.”

“Thank you very much for your generosity. Um, excuse me, then.” Dahlia felt bad for running away from Bernigi, but she wasn’t quite sure how much she should or could say about the bow, so, without making a fuss, she grabbed onto the lifeline the captain had thrown her.

“Thank you again for propping me up earlier, Chairwoman Rossetti. Much appreciated.”

Dahlia spun around, surprised that Bernigi had called out to her. What she saw was a look of tenderness in the elderly man’s almond eyes—more tenderness than she would ever have expected. She bowed once, then alighted from the dark green coach.

“Are skybats edible?”

“I dunno. I don’t remember ever eating one before—hell, I don’t remember ever being able to kill one.”

When Dahlia rejoined the larger group, the monster's wings had already been cut off. The knights sounded like they were still hungry, though that dark blue flesh hardly made her mouth water. A ways away from them was Randolph, who gently closed the eyelids on the skybat's head; being stared at by the dead monster was probably a little uncomfortable.

"Dahlia, is there any part of the skybat you would like?" Before she could tell him what the captain had said, Volf offered the monster to her with a big smile.

"Yeah, Ms. Dahlia, no need to be shy. If you want, take the whole thing!"

"No, I couldn't!"

Volf was presenting her with a rare opportunity, but it wouldn't have been right to take the whole monster without having any purpose for it. It was said that the skybat's bones aided flight, but her illustrated bestiary also said the bones weren't very sturdy or magically potent, making them unsuitable even for longbows.

That said, she *was* interested in the material. "If it wouldn't trouble everyone, may I have a few bones?"

"Certainly. We will send them to the Adventurers' Guild once the skybat is frozen, then it should be another two, three days until they completely break down the monster and have it delivered to Masters Dahlia and Jonas."

"Huh?"

"Sorry?" Jonas and Dahlia questioned the sudden use of the title.

Griswald must've expected their reactions—he had a smirk on his face. "The squad has discussed this. Not only is there a member of our squad with the surname Goodwin, we shall continue to ask both of you to lend us your technical prowess, so please allow us to address you as Master Dahlia and Master Jonas."

"I thank you all for this honor."

"Oh, um..." Dahlia had a hard time saying otherwise after Jonas's immediate response. She was neither experienced, a knight, nor a noble; just as she wanted to say that she didn't deserve that much respect, the rest of the Beast

Hunters beamed.

“Master Dahlia! Master Jonas! Thank you both for always making our lives better!”

“Uh, thank you too.” Now she had nowhere to run. She turned to Volf for support, but he was staring a hole into the ground.

“Master, huh? Makes sense, you being our advisor and all. Maybe I should call you Master Dahlia instead of just your first name when we’re at the castle too...”

Dahlia couldn’t come up with an answer to his mumbling. She decided that once they were alone, she’d tell him she would much prefer it if he kept addressing her the same way he always had.

One of the younger knights raised his hand. “Vice-Captain! Is the skybat edible?”

“It is edible, but I’m not so sure about its flavor...”

The veteran chimed in. “Edible? Yes. Tasty? No.”

“Have you had it before, sir?”

“One time when I was young, we ran out of supplies during an expedition. We caught a skybat in a trap and ate it, but...” The veteran laid a hand over his mouth and then rubbed his cheek. “It’s tender, but it’s terribly astringent. You know how some fruits have to be soaked in alcohol to get rid of their astringency? Well, that same taste permeates skybat meat.”

“Ew. I don’t think I need to try it, then.”

“Regardless, this might be helpful to know, so listen up. It smells fine until you put it in your mouth, but once you take the first bite, it’s nothing but bitterness. Water won’t wash that taste off your tongue. It’ll stay with you the whole day, and so long as it’s still in the stomach, you’ll still be tasting it. It’s so astringent, it’ll make your head hurt.” His pained description was far too vivid; others around him were scowling along with him.

“It isn’t bad for your health, though?”

“No. Aside from the flavor, it’s fine. I’ve heard that it’s even very good for the

stomach and the gut.”

“You mean it doesn’t upset and even helps your stomach?”

“As long as you can stomach the stuff, yeah. After you eat skybat, your skin and hair will get all shiny the next day. Noblewomen who prize beauty will grill the meat, finely shred it, and swallow it with water. Even then, it’s said to be very bitter.”

“Is that right? My wife tried it once and said never again.”

“But she did try it?”

“Anything for beauty...”

With that conversation at an end, Volf, with a piece of the monster in his hand, gave Dahlia an inexplicable expression. “Hey, Dahlia—”

“No, thank you! Just the bones are fine!” She didn’t need to be pretty *that* badly.

“My skin and hair be damned—I have no appetite for the stuff after hearing about it.”

“You know, when I first joined the squad, there was a certain individual who tried it for his hair.”

“Did it work?”

“It got shinier, sure, but even after he had it for seven days straight, he didn’t seem to have any *more* hair.” The veteran looked just as displeased as he had before. The effects of skybat meat were interesting, but to take the stuff for a whole week? That was asking a lot.

“Erm, who might that be?”

“Kirk, the vice said ‘a certain individual’—take a hint.”

“Ah...”

There was a certain knight, the wielder of a smoking sword, who sometimes fixed the hair at his temples—Dahlia had a clue who it was, but she wasn’t going to say it out loud.

A few seconds of awkward silence plagued the group until Griswald cleared

his throat. “Masters Dahlia and Jonas, would you like some of the meat after it is processed? There are many skybats over in Ehrlichia, and they treat traveling cloaks with their meat. If a monster bites the wearer, it instinctively lets go, as it mistakes them for unsavory prey.”

“That would make it quite effective on armor.”

“How about applying it on the scarlet ones?” Jonas’s suggestion met with Dahlia’s instant approval. The Scarlet Armors would be a little safer.

“Why don’t you try it first, Volf?”

“No, I think it should be applied to everyone’s armor.”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s so popular with wyverns. You should apply it to your whole body so you’ll be fine even if you become takeout again.”

“As they say, hope for the best but prepare for the worst, Volf.”

“I don’t think people get carried off by wyverns as often as you all think!”

Nobody within earshot could keep themselves from laughing at the exchange.



The scene displayed in the couch window was serene—almost too much so. Sitting amid the laughing and cheering was Rossetti, who still had her red hair tucked inside her hat. She was small only in comparison to the muscular knights around her, but she didn’t look out of place—it would be plausible to claim that she was a knight without her armor.

“So, Grato? What’s with that bow from earlier? It must have been expensive.”

Sitting across from Bernigi was his former subordinate and the current captain of the Order of the Beast Hunters. “The Galeforce Bow is an artificial magic bow with a medium-strength air enchantment, and it cost about as much as three greatswords.”

“And the materials?”

“Green wyvern bone for the bow and bicorn tail for the bowstring.”

“Nothing unusual there. What about the arrows?”

“Those are made from green horse bone and enchanted with wind dragon

scale. The pair of arrows are joined together with mythrill thread.”

“Hm. Interesting. I would never have thought to connect arrows with mythrill thread.” The skybat had been cut apart, and the knights were loading its parts onto the wagon; Bernigi found himself feeling sorry for a monster that harmed humans. He dismissed the thought and recalled an old memory. “Back in the day, when we had no choice but to eat skybat, we would try to get its flavor out of our mouths by chewing whatever grass there was at hand.”

“I remember I couldn’t bear how bitter the meat was, but the grass only made things worse.” Grato grimaced as he painted the wine glasses red and then handed Bernigi one. With a “Cheers,” the two men wet their beaks; the dryness paired perfectly with further reminiscing.

“When I saw the knight hand-catching fish earlier, it reminded me of that time a lookout got attacked by two red bears.”

“Ah, yes, that was when I had just entered the Beast Hunters. We used a potion on that knight, then had him carted back to the capital. It is fortunate that he turned out fine.”

“But he never returned to the squad.”

“Likely because he was soon to marry into his wife’s family. His son is now quite the competent Beast Hunter too.”

The calmness in Grato’s tone was night and day compared to the young, cocky knight Bernigi had once known. He had become a fine, levelheaded captain. Bernigi should have been happy about that, but instead, he felt so old. “We had a knight who got carried off by a wyvern, and the only thing that we could bring back was his armor. He had fussed over naming his newborn son for half a year only to never have seen him once.”

“That did happen.”

“There was another knight who was suffocated by a marsh spider shooting silk into his mouth. We could only defeat it by burning them both.”

“I remember everything I have burned with my own hands.” The memories were too painful to have faded—his calm demeanor was belied by the way his fingernails dug into his palms.

“When I was young, we lacked even water crystals, and a man died falling into the stream trying to get a drink. I believe I have told you this before?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“When our vice-captain went to file the paperwork, one of the men from the treasury department made a comment about how the knight ‘hadn’t even been engaged in combat with a monster,’ and the vice-cap flew into a fit of rage and sent the bureaucrat flying. I regret not being the one who punched him.”

“I, too, wish I could have done so. Thankfully, no one in the treasury would say anything like that today.”

Bernigi had heard that the Beast Hunters’ funds were now somewhat more ample than they had been in Grato’s day. The current captain had been tenacious in the budget meetings and wielded his connections well, and he paid from his own pocket for whatever the Order lacked. Bernigi was a marquis too, yet he had failed to do the same for the squad in his time. “Grato, you have done well. I was not a good vice-captain—I could not fix the squad’s problems or protect my own men while I was a Beast Hunter, and then I had to resign after injuring my leg. Ever since, I have been but a nobleman living in extravagance.”

“I would not describe your heavy burdens that way, sir. You put your life on the line for seven straight days to protect your wounded subordinate—”

“It was meaningless. It was my fault that there was no one beside him when he passed on in that freezing cave.” Bernigi had stood at the mouth to protect him, but for what? The next time he saw that young knight, he had already become cold and stiff.

“His body was intact, we buried his ashes, and his family thanked you, sir.”

“They should have reproached me for my failure to protect their son as his vice-captain—they had every right to!” His voice had grown louder than he had meant it to. Grato used to freeze whenever Bernigi raised his voice, but now the captain was unperturbed as he looked straight at him. The old man remembered how those deep red eyes of his had cried. “Their youngest son had joined the Beast Hunters because he looked up to me, and what do we have of him now? Just ashes. I remember the tears in your eyes when you stood before

his empty casket.”

“I no longer remember it, but I do not doubt your memory, Sir Bernigi.” The faintest crease formed between his eyebrows; once a poor liar, always a poor liar.

“This drunk old man has grumbled on long enough. Have you anything to say?”

“Hm, let me see. Shall I boast about how much the Order has changed?” Grato likely wanted to put an end to the whining and changed the topic.

Bernigi swirled his second glass of wine and smiled. “Do boast all you want.”

“With an increased budget, we now have acquired good horses and more sleipnirs.”

“Oh, yes, I have seen. You have quite the fine steeds in your stable.” That not a single one was underweight had been shocking. And just like the animals, the men at the riverbank had healthy physiques.

“With the raincoats made of waterproof cloth, we have been able to travel farther in inclement weather. Even the tents and wagon bonnets use this material, and our knights have been able to maintain their good health even in the rain. Furthermore, with the camp stoves, our meals have greatly improved; almost no one has to go hungry any longer.”

“You have many more wonderful magical tools now, like those toe socks.”

Grato nodded politely, then the two men shared a sly smile—noblemen did not have the luxury of removing their leather dress shoes, and so those toe socks were indispensable for a multitude of reasons. “This spring, one of our knights was snatched up by a wyvern, but he made it drop him and then safely returned. There he is—the one drinking beside Rossetti.”

“I have heard about that. Guido’s youngest brother, the Black Reaper and the Dark Lord. He seems like a very capable fellow.”

“He is. He does a lot for our squad. It was he and a few others who slew four purple bicornes without suffering a scratch earlier this year.”

“He must possess an unyielding spirit. Something to appreciate, that.” Purple

bicorns could induce hallucinations of those one cherished—they were fearsome creatures that caused many a life-threatening injury. That multiple knights could slay them without incident was a sign of the Beast Hunters' great mental and physical fortitude.

“We managed to slay marsh spiders without a single casualty this year. We sold the useful materials to the Adventurers' Guild for a tidy sum.”

“That would explain the big pat of butter on the grilled crab today.”

“Indeed. A while ago, we slew the second forest serpent of the season. It was quite delicious roasted over a fire and brushed with sweet barbecue sauce. I even dried the leftover meat with this sword here.”

“To treat the Green King like that—it's almost inhumane...” Bernigi was flabbergasted, yet he couldn't help grinning. In his time, fighting a forest serpent had been a matter of life and death—that it had become a trifle was something to celebrate. Still, one had constricted him and broken his hip bone, yet here was Grato saying the knights had enjoyed the Green King with barbecue sauce, as if it were not a living terror but food. What had become of the Order of the Beast Hunters? “I realize how much I have aged. You have raised your squad well, Grato.”

“Not I alone—it began with you, Sir Bernigi, training my seniors so well.”

“Hm. You are a commendable captain. The young'uns of the Order even draw little harpies on the back of paperwork, I hear—you have spent time well training your men.”

Grato almost drowned in his wine. After his coughing fit stopped, he glared at the old man. It was an expression Bernigi had seen many times in the past. “In all seriousness, the squad has grown so fine. You ought to be happy.”

“Yes, sir. There is still room for growth—but we have Rossetti protecting our backs now.”

“Oh? Is she a member of the squad too?”

“In my eyes, yes. It would be too much for her to bear, so I have not told her so explicitly, though.”

Thinking of the earnest manner in which she had approached him, and thinking, too, of those green eyes of hers, Bernigi understood completely. “You have been quite charmed by her, I see.”

“Yes, indeed—she is truly a great magical toolmaker.”

“‘A fine redhead,’ as you would have said in your youth, eh?”

Grato chuckled but otherwise said nothing to address that point.

Bernigi continued, “The Order of Beast Hunters’ advisory magical toolmaker, was it? She was the one who made that magic bow, then?”

Grato maintained his silence, but his smile disappeared; those red eyes of his looked dead into the old man’s, and that was answer enough. The captain approved of this magical toolmaker who had so charmed him—it was obvious she had become an integral part of the squad.

There she was outside the window, accepting a scoop of estervino from the man with sand-colored hair—by his dress, he must have been her bodyguard. He was too far to make out clearly, but he seemed to be a strong knight with a great physique. On her other side was the Scarlet Armor with a unique set of golden eyes, Scalfarotto’s Volfred. Diagonally across from her, Jonas, with oxide-colored hair and Guido’s usual bodyguard. Despite that impregnable defense surrounding her, everyone seemed to be enjoying their time in her company. Indeed, every single knight was laughing and making merry with the others. It was a scene Bernigi had never seen in his time, and, if he were afforded the opportunity to show his true feelings, it was a scene he wished he could have seen. *If only my youngest son could be there with them now*—for a split second, he saw the boy’s smile.

“Well, I know not who made it, but I understand it is a weapon the squad needs and treasures. You ought to get blood bonding and temple contracts to all those who come in contact with it.”

“Yes, we are in the process of doing so.” Grato said the silver stole there was handling it, reassuring Bernigi.

The old man finished his last sip of red wine and once again looked out the window at Rossetti; dressing like a male attendant suited her well, but there

were surely other outfits that would have looked better on her. “Grato, offer the goddess a set of robes.”

“For Rossetti, you mean?”

“Mm. Make it a set of fine robes at that. Just surrounding your advisor doesn’t guarantee that no one will steal her away from you; you have to make others understand that she is one of ours.” It was only at the end of his declaration that Bernigi said “ours”—even now, he still wanted to consider himself a member of the Order of Beast Hunters. He had doffed his armor many moons ago, yet he was still so attached. How pathetic. Trying to look as collected as he could, Bernigi glanced up at the other man.

Grato was wearing the same smile he had all those years ago. “Understood, Vice-Captain.”



The feast had concluded on schedule, and everyone had helped restore the riverside to the way they had found it. By the time the carriage arrived back at the castle, the orange of the setting sun had all but disappeared. They headed toward the Beast Hunters’ wing to get a simple medical checkup—a necessary procedure after an expedition in case there were any unnoticed injuries or illnesses. Unlike the others, Dahlia had a priestess look after her, and it was over in a flash. Marcella and Jonas had had a cup of tea in the drawing room while they waited for her.

Volf stepped inside soon after he knocked. “Hey Dahlia, got any plans tonight?” He was followed by Randolph, who reproved him that he should have waited for approval before entering.

“No, nothing in particular. I was just thinking of heading home.”

Another knock came at the door; this time, it was Marcella and Jonas. “I apologize, Master Dahlia, but would it be possible to borrow Marcella? The Beast Hunters so graciously offered some frozen armored crab to Lord Guido, and I was hoping to have Marcella’s help with the heavy lifting.” On the journey home, the wagon had been stacked up to belly height with frozen crab; it seemed immovable without body strengthening magic. But now, even Jonas was calling her “Master Dahlia.” She knew it was far too late to say no, but who

knew if she would ever get used to it?

“Could you be so kind as to lend a hand, Marcella?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We have also received many smaller pieces, so as thanks, I shall send some home with Marcella.”

“Thank you very much, Master Jonas. My wife will be overjoyed.” Marcella was delighted, and Irma would surely be too; she loved crab as well, and she ought to have a few extra portions for the twins’ sake.

“Lord Volfred, may I please task you with sending Master Dahlia home?”

“Sure, Master Jonas.”

Jonas gave his farewell and left with Marcella in tow.

“A few of us were thinking of going out to celebrate a successful expedition—would you be interested as well, Dahlia? Of course, if you’re tired, I’ll take you home straightaway.”

“I wouldn’t mind going, but hasn’t everyone had enough to drink already today?” Almost all of the knights could hold their liquor, so what was a few more to them, she supposed. No one had been really drunk, so maybe they could go for another round or five. As for Dahlia, she had consumed more crab than drink; she worried that she would stink of the creature tomorrow.

“Think of it less as going out to drink and more as going out for a light dinner. The apple pie where we’re going is rustic and delicious, by the way.” Randolph sure had a way with inviting someone; she beamed.

And so, Dahlia and the Beast Hunters made their way to a diner-tavern in the Central District.

A horde of forty or so Beast Hunters invaded the third floor of the slightly timeworn establishment. Everyone must’ve had their usual seats—they split themselves up between the different tables. The warm glow of the magical lantern bathed a fresh sight: knights out of their uniforms.

“How about sharing some juice, sparkling water, and a few bites—is that

okay? You can order your own booze, but let's not drink *too* too much tonight."

"Shall we raise a toast?"

Unfortunately, Grato had been obliged to stay behind at the castle to finish up a bit of work; in his place was the man sitting across from Dahlia, Griswald. "To a successful day of field training! Cheers!"

Everyone raised their drinks of juice or sparkling water. "To everyone's safe return! Cheers!" Dahlia washed down the sting of those words with a sip of her juice.

"Whoa!" After Dorino clinked his drink against his squadmates', his grasp slipped on the wet glass. His reflexes were good enough that he caught it with his other hand, but a splash struck him in the face. "Gah! My eyes! Someone—a handkerchief!"

"You have one in your breast pocket."

"That's a first love-handkerchief, a keepsake; I won't—I *can't* use it."

"Then you ought to carry another one." Despite the banter, Randolph lent his friend the handkerchief in his pocket; Dorino gave his thanks and then dabbed around his eyes.

"You're finally a big boy now, eh, Dorino?"

"Sir Dorino, did you receive your handkerchief from your girlfriend?"

"It's from the love in my heart, Fabiola from the House of Twilight." Dorino got all quiet, and so did everybody else.

"Oh, a mass-produced handkerchief of first love, I see."

"Poor guy..."

Dahlia couldn't understand why everyone was expressing pity for Dorino, and she looked to Volf beside her. His brow was all scrunched up, and when he noticed her looking his way, he seemed even more uncomfortable. "Ladies of the night, um, hand out those handkerchiefs to all their clients."

One of the knights at another table leaned over. "First loves are fleeting moments, so the ladies give embroidered hankies to their male clients; to their

female clients, they hand out cheap hair accessories and stationery in their color. All it means is ‘Please come again.’” Dahlia had learned a few things: that the House of Twilight was almost certainly the name of a brothel and that clients of different genders got different gifts.

“I never knew women received stationery.”

“When I was in primary school, kids who were dating would trade pens and pencil cases and the like. Was that a thing for you, Master Dahlia?”

She shook her head at the green-haired youth’s question. “I don’t think so. But I did trade hair ties and ribbons with other girls.”

“With Ms. Lucia, I assume?”

“We would go to Irma’s place, and the three of us would give each other matching braids.”

“Hmm...” Volf smiled at what must’ve been his mental image of the three of them with their hair tied up.

“Dorino, maybe you should consider finding someone to give a bejeweled bracelet to.”

“Thank you for your concern, sir, but I’m plenty happy as I am currently.” Dorino reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his white silk handkerchief by a bit.

Dahlia caught only a glimpse of it, but the embroidery seemed to be finely done in beautiful gold thread. “It looks like it’s the real deal to me...”

Like as not, only the people at the same table had heard her mumbling, Griswald being one of them. He looked at her as though he were interacting with a young child. “I understand that you wish the best for him, Master Dahlia. However, know that for Fabiola, Dorino is not the only ‘only one for me.’” That was most likely the truth, wasn’t it?

“Dorino, as someone who’s had more experience in life, listen to me when I tell you not to get too deep into this kind of thing.”

“Will do, sir.” His navy eyes did not waver; he knew better than to object.

“Speaking of which, I bet you’ve received a whole wagonload of embroidered

handkerchiefs, Volfred.”

“Hey, cut it out—Master Dahlia’s here.”

“It’s no problem, as I have never received one.” Everything delivered to Volf was processed by his family’s people and then promptly returned, regardless of whom it was from. It couldn’t have felt good for the sender, but he had no choice.

“As if we would believe that, Volfred.”

“False humility’s a nasty thing, Volf.”

“Honestly, I have never accepted a single one. I mean, it wouldn’t make sense to accept a handkerchief from someone you don’t recognize or whose name you don’t remember, right? Even if I did recognize the name on the parcel, I had my family reseal it and send it back.”

“Oh? How resolute of you.” The senior knight seemed rather surprised by his actions.

Volf seemed less than comfortable with the attention everyone was giving him, and he, in turn, looked toward Dahlia. *He really had it rough*, she thought, as he sighed to himself.

“Okay, maybe not the handkerchiefs, but there had to be other things people gave you during your college days, right? If not bracelets, maybe stuff like decorative cords and ties, then?”

Exchanging engagement bracelets wasn’t a particularly common practice among people in college; a thin cord tied into a knot was plenty between people who were dating at that age. Dahlia had also heard people would inscribe their partners’ names on the insides of their neckties. She was sure that Volf, unlike her, had received many decorative cords.

“Come on, Volf, tell us the truth.”

“If they were ordinary cords, they went into an old shoebox, but I never personally accepted or put on any of those things.”

“Hm? What do you mean by ‘ordinary’? That implies the existence of extraordinary ones.”

“I’ve been handed cords with jewels or ones made of monster leather, but I rejected those.”

“Musta been expensive.”

“Those girls probably dreamed of engagement bracelets...” Kirk’s words only became clear after Dahlia had ruminated on them for a bit. She would have been worried about putting a gemstone on a cord—one little tug or a little snip, and the pretty rock was gone.

“Well, uh, rather than count or value, what’s the most memorable present you’ve gotten?”

“Something memorable? Hmm...” Volf’s eyes looked dead. “There were worn hair ties and scarves, braided cords made of hair, a necktie with the sender’s name written in blood on the back...”

“Godsdamn. Yeah, that’s memorable in a way, all right.”

“There were also hair or fingernail clippings in glass bottle pendants. Oh, and how can I forget about the times when they tried to put cords on me that had anesthetic effects, or paralytic scarves made of monster silk?”

“What the—! This was serious shit!”

“Those are crimes, my man!” The Beast Hunters shrieked in unison—something that didn’t even happen when there were incoming monsters.

“You’ve got me quaking...”

Those gifts were indeed terrifying; Dahlia, too, was chilled to learn all that had happened to Volf.

“I thought you’d be buried in riches with all the presents you got, but... Damn, Volfred...”

“I mean, now I can see why you were so cold toward women...”

“It ain’t just hard being so popular, it’s dangerous...” There was no envy anymore, just sympathy.

A veteran asked, “This stuff persisted after you joined the squad, didn’t it, Volf?”

“It, uh, became less frequent, sir.”

“You should’ve told us! If shit happens to you, you gotta come to us for help; don’t act brave and try to shoulder it all yourself.”

“He’s right, Volf. We all look out for each other here, so please come to us for help next time.”

The shower of support seemed to make Volf feel a little self-conscious. “Thank you, I’ll remember to do so. I’m sure age will do its thing and make this face of mine a little more forgettable and inconspicuous.”

That was wishful thinking as far as Dahlia was concerned. With the fairy glass glasses, daily life went a lot smoother for Volf, and she would modify or make him another pair should he need it.

“All of a sudden, I’m not jealous of Volf whatsoever anymore.”

“To think that I’d been making fun of you all this time...”

They whispered among themselves; it was good that they finally understood more of Volf, though it had become somewhat of a literal pity party. Dahlia also wasn’t sure if they expected her to say something, but she wished that they would stop glancing over from Volf to her.

“Say, Master Dahlia, did you ever embroider a handkerchief in your college days?”

“Actually, I did one before entering college.”

“You were an early bloomer! Did you give it to your childhood sweetheart?” The fact that Kirk asked that so innocently made it hurt even more. Her answer would undoubtedly disappoint him, though.

“It was for my father...” Raucous chuckling ensued—was what Dahlia had braced herself for, anyway, but in reality, not a single laugh was heard; rather, her audience vented their exasperation with sighs. She fought every urge to dash out of the room as she stared a hole into the glass in her hand.

“Did your father wish for an embroidered handkerchief, Master Dahlia?”

“He mentioned that he had never received one, and I asked him if he would like one from me. I doubt any father could possibly reject his little girl, so I made

it for him while I was still in primary school.”

“I had a feeling that was the case. Was he happy to receive it?”

“He seemed to like it, at least.”

“I’m sure he was genuinely delighted.” Griswald nodded repeatedly, like he really meant what he said. For what it was worth, he supposedly had a daughter of his own; maybe he would have liked to get an embroidered handkerchief from her as well.

“Four daughters and I still have never received one...”

“Oh, Sir Alfio...”

“Well, each gave hers to her own fiancé, so no problem there, but still—I’ve never gotten one. Who did my wife give it to...?” Alfio filled his glass up with liquor, neat. *Wait. What happened to going easy on the booze today?*

No one could answer his question, but the others *could* join him in the wallowing. “Tonight’s drink burns, all right...”

“Wish I had a daughter too...”

“You’ve got three sons, don’t you? Well, my two girls have gotten to that age where they respond to anything I have to say with merely a yes or a no...”

“Well, once they get married, you won’t even get that anymore...” The older knights at the other table joined not only in the grumbling but in ordering what seemed to be too much alcohol.

“You have it better than me, sir—you’re married! We don’t even have plans to get wedded.”

“Yeah, and what about me, pal? I haven’t even got a partner at all.”

“What more is there to say about someone for whom spring has never sprung?”

Over at the other table, the younger knights couldn’t look each other in the eyes. When someone brought over a case of dark ale, they each popped a top.

Wait. I know I’m repeating myself, but what happened to going easy on the booze today? The situation around Dahlia seemed to be spiraling, and she was

at a loss for words. Randolph softly nudged a plate of roasted chestnut toward her. She began ripping bits out of the flat side of the peel.

Dorino looked at her for some time. “Oh, I’ve got a good idea! Ms. Dahlia, why don’t you back-embroider Volf’s undershirt? He’s the only Scarlet Armor without one.”

“*K-hmpf!*” As for the knight in question, his drink must’ve gone down the wrong pipe when he heard the word “undershirt.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. In the early years of the Kingdom of Ordine, they fought against a lot of monsters and stuff. In hopes that they would come back safely, men preparing to go into combat would get the back of their undershirts embroidered, and those who did tended to survive—so the story goes.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s an old-timey practice. Knights nowadays don’t really go out to fight much anyway.”

As far as Dahlia knew, people in Ordine mainly stitched designs on gifts for loved ones. She’d read that nobles gravitated toward handkerchiefs and other accessories, but according to different books, the embroidery could also have many different meanings.

“It’s become more popular lately among our squad, actually, and Volf is the only Scarlet Armor without a stitched shirt.”

“Volf never goes home, and even if he does, he doesn’t have sisters either.”

“And with his face and whatnot, it’s not like there’s anyone else he could ask for help. That’s why I was wondering if maybe you could do it, Ms. Dahlia.”

As his friends began to object, Volf cleared his throat. “I dunno about that...”

“Um, may I ask who did the embroidering on your shirts?”

The first to answer her question was Griswald. “My wife stitched on our family crest.”

“I’ve got four undershirts with Fabiola’s name!”

“The product of the seamstresses at her work, then.”

“Hey.”

It seemed that women sewed on their names too, though it probably wouldn't have been wise to find out who'd actually done it for Dorino.

“My mother and little sister put our family name on mine. When they came to visit, they handed me two dozen shirts.” Randolph's family must've really cared for him.

“Two whole dozen...”

Dahlia learned that back-embroidery could feature a family crest or name, the wearer's name, a small needlework design—there didn't seem to be any hard-and-fast rules. It could also be done by the knight's family, fiancée, lover, relatives, and so on. One of the knights mumbled that his maid had done it for him, which earned him a couple of pats of condolence on the back.

“If back-embroidery doesn't have any particular rules, then maybe I can do it too.”

“You're so busy, Dahlia—you don't need to force yourself to do it. It's just a good luck charm anyway,” Volf softly said.

But even if it was just a good luck charm to grant him a little safety, she had to do it for him. “I'd like to stitch the backs of your shirts if you'd be happy with me doing it, Volf. If you give me all of your undershirts, I'll embroider all of them for you.”

“Um.” His golden eyes grew wide, and they blinked once. “Thank you for offering me your time, Dahlia.” With how uneasy he looked, he must've had a whole load of undershirts, but she could just do one at a time.

“I'm so happy for you, Sir Volf!”

“There ya go, Volf! Now you're gonna live forever!” Dorino and Kirk clapped Volf on the back, then walked out of the room.

Then, Volf had two large hands on his shoulders. “Volf, drink as much as you like tonight. I shall escort Miss Dahlia home should you be unable to move.”

“That's a good idea, Randolph. Why don't you and I see who can drink more

tonight? I'll even do sweet honey wine with you." There went his last bastion of inhibition.

Dorino returned with a case of booze, followed by Kirk with all the glasses he could carry in both hands. Bottles, glasses, and a second round of food filled the tables, and the knights began making merry. They shared their thoughts about the portable warm air circulator and chatted about their private lives—it was touching to see them even more relaxed than they had been at the riverside. With a smile, Dahlia accepted a glass of an amber liquor.

Enjoying the scene of their rowdy squadmates and their advisor were two veterans. They each had a silvery goblet in hand, filled not with alcohol but warm chicken soup—they had reached that age at which a strong drink after a long day was too rough on the body.

"So, the kid's getting his undershirts all back-embroidered, eh? I'd expected Volf to be celebrating, but it doesn't seem like Master Dahlia realizes what she's said."

The eyes of the other vet, who was leaning against the wall, curved. "Unfortunately, her face does not say 'I don't want anyone else embroidering your shirts' either."

It was true that back-embroidery was an age-old tradition, but that had only become a trend within the squad because of the camp stoves. On the underside of each one was the name Rossetti—just as, in the early years of the kingdom, women had embroidered the backs of the shirts of men going into battle. The hopes and wishes of now and of yore were the same: for their loved ones to return home safely; that much hadn't changed. The handiwork was usually done by someone intimate—family and close relatives, but naturally, fiancées and lovers as well.

"You who fight for me, I shall support from behind" was its meaning, and to embroider all of a man's undershirts could be taken as extending the meaning to "I want you all for myself." It was unlikely—rather, it was certain that Dahlia had no intention of saying so. The redheaded magical toolmaker, with roasted chestnuts between her fingers, was devoting all of her attention to the vice-

captain, who was explaining the skybat's finer points.

"Can't help but feel for him, our Scarlet Armor, the Black Reaper..."

Volf avoided looking at Dahlia as he downed a glass of whatever his friend had poured him, and his friend returned the favor. The Black Reaper or Dark Lord was ever calm on the battlefield, dauntless in the face of danger. Alcohol never shook his composure either, that heavyweight of a sea serpent. Yet his youthful cheeks were dyed a beautiful red tonight, and not by monster blood.

"Indeed. Volf is finally able to remove his armor."

Interlude: The Delivery and the Hand

“Servant to the Scalfarotto household Lord Jonas Goodwin has arrived to offer some armored crab, Lord Bernigi. He has requested, erm, that you personally select the parts you would like from his carriage.” Already a while after suppertime, Bernigi’s attendant came to his master’s chambers with apparent hesitation.

Bernigi’s white eyebrows furrowed. Indeed, he had a taste for armored crab—that was no secret. He had used that excuse to accompany the Order of Beast Hunters on their field training and converse with Grato today, and he had returned home satisfied. It would have been understandable if the captain were visiting, but it was shocking that it was the Scalfarottos. Not only was a servant of an earldom visiting unannounced, but he was also calling the former head of Marquisate D’Orazi—a house belonging to a different faction, no less—to his carriage. Jonas’s intentions were anyone’s guess. This situation might even have contained an element of danger were Bernigi still marquis, but he was just a retired senior now; even if anything happened to him, his family would not be impacted.

Jonas Goodwin—he had been introduced to Bernigi as the one in charge of the Scalfarottos’ Weapons Development Team. In that case, perhaps he was involved with the Galeforce Bow Bernigi had seen today. Was he looking for a letter of recommendation? Financial support? Or was he perhaps here simply because Grato had put him up to delivering the crab?

Accompanied by his guard knights, Bernigi made his way outside of the manor. Stopped in the guest lot was a carriage with a small Scalfarotto family crest, one for transporting not noblemen but goods. By all appearances, it might indeed have been carrying a delivery of armored crab.

The man with rust-colored eyes introduced himself briefly as an attendant of the Scalfarotto family. “I hope you can forgive us for visiting so late, Lord D’Orazi.”

“No matter. I hear you bring armored crab?”

“Yes, indeed. We have received a large number today, and we wondered if you would be interested in taking some off our hands. Our knight Marcella can bring it in for you once you are sure the parts are to your liking, though I am afraid that it may be a little cramped inside our carriage.”

Bernigi squinted at the message between the lines—*climb aboard alone*. He deliberated on the name mentioned, and he clenched his cane. “Wait out here,” he ordered his retinue.

“Lord Bernigi!”

“Your insistence will not make it any more spacious inside. Like the man said, I need to ensure the crab is to my liking.”

“Very good, sir.” The knights relented, though not out of a lack of concern for his well-being.

Bernigi accepted Jonas’s invitation to board the carriage, whereupon the well-built sandy-haired man inside greeted him—the man who had sat beside Chairwoman Rossetti during the field training this afternoon. His features were easy to see under the illumination of the magical lantern, but Bernigi, wary of becoming too fixated on the young man, turned to the pair of large pails.

“The cloth, Marcella.”

“Right away.” Even having been cut in half, the armored crab legs packed in ice were still impressively large and thick.

“This here is the second leg of the regular, and this is the third leg of the mutant; please take as much time as you need to choose. We have also brought a half dozen bottles of wine that would pair well with the crab. May I offer you a taste of it right now?” The little table inside the cabin had been prepared with a bottle of red wine and a couple of glasses, almost as if they were receiving Bernigi as a guest. “I would offer to taste the wine for poison, though I have had too much to drink today—Marcella?”

“Yes, of course!” Marcella pulled the cork out of the bottle and then poured himself two sips. He appraised the wine’s aroma and brought it to his mouth; it must’ve been to his liking, as his eyes lit up.

“It looks to be rather delightful.”

“I think it’s superb.”

“Do have some more. Lately, I have been unable to finish a bottle by my lonesome.” Bernigi filled the glass in the knight’s hands.

“Oh! Thank you.” Marcella seemed terribly guilty, looking to Jonas as if asking whether it was okay for him to partake.

“Graciously accept your drink, Marcella, and then pour for Lord D’Orazi.”

It was only then as Marcella did as instructed that Bernigi got a good look at him. Marcella’s kite-brown eyes glowed with positivity. His cheekbones were prominent but not too much so. His hair was coarse. His knuckles were pronounced, despite his youth. His large frame looked sturdy. There were so many little things, like the way he had cast his gaze downward as he tasted his wine and then opened his eyes wide when he enjoyed its flavor—rather, one needed not to spot these little things to see Marcella’s resemblance to Bernardi, Bergini’s son.

The old man willed himself not to let his emotions surge out, and he kept as collected as possible. “To what shall we raise a toast on this occasion?” Until the Scalfarottos revealed their motives, celebrating and saying “To meeting my grandson” was not an option.

“For the two of you, how about to family?”

“Oh.” With that one line, whatever stiffness was on Marcella’s face had now turned to surprise and bewilderment; it must’ve been only now that he learned they were related.

“Cheers to the health and fortune of our families.”

“To...to our families’ health and fortune. Cheers.” Marcella managed to force out his words. That nervousness was just like Bernardi’s when he’d donned his knight uniform for the first time.

“Is your family well?”

“Yes.”

“Marcella will become a father next year.”

“Oh, how joyous. Have you decided on a name yet?”

His brown eyes pointed down to the floor before looking directly into Bernigi’s. “*Names*, actually—we are still scratching our heads for our twins, but I am thinking of naming them Bernholt and Dino if they are boys, Bertina and Diana if girls.”

“I see...” The words Bernigi wanted to say tore his heart apart. His son had never returned, not even a body. But now the bloodline continues—*Bernardi!* “’Tis a good name. I pray for your and your wife’s health.” He could keep his voice from trembling, but not his fingers; Bernigi folded his hands with as much strength as he could muster.

Though he refrained from involving himself in the moment, Jonas gave him a perfunctory smile. “Lord D’Orazi, I understand it would be too much to ask you to do so for our titleless knight, but with your similar name, may I ask on Marcella’s behalf that you please offer your hand as congratulations to him and his children? You are the most hale and venerable knight I know of.”

“Erm, forgive me for my ignorance, but I suppose you don’t mean his literal appendage?” Marcella asked.

“Upon the birth of a child,” Bernigi explained, “the oldest member of one’s family would print their signature—their hand—on paper and have the child touch it. It is a tradition that conveys the wish for the newborn to live longer than the signer. But I am afraid you have misplaced your trust in someone with dreadful handwriting.”

“No! Uh, a commoner like me does not deserve such an honor...”

“I hope you will not mind if I address you as Marcella?”

“No, sir.”

“Call me Bernigi. The way I see it, this is fate. I may have the worst print you will ever see, but I am old and healthy enough for this role. I ask that you allow me to offer your children my hand.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Ah, yes. My wife is the same age as me—may I ask that she be allowed to do

so as well?" He had overstated his wife's age by one year, but surely she would not be angry.

"Yes. I am most grateful for this grace." Marcella bowed deeply.

"We are most obliged for your generosity. Our knight here has been troubled over his magical practice lately, and I am sure this will spur him on in his training. There are very few teachers who can help him with his grade-fifteen earth magic, see."

"Fifteen, you say?"

"Indeed. He climbed another grade the day before yesterday." Though this was the knight's business, Jonas was speaking for him.

However, Bernigi directed his words toward Marcella. "With that much magic, you can easily be adopted into a noble house. I am sure whoever is fortunate enough to adopt you will welcome your family as well."

"Naw, me and my—no, my family and I wish to live the rest of our lives as commoners."

Bernigi recalled the day that he had fallen out with his youngest son. His eyes, brown as a kite, had been the same color. His voice had been just as firm and resolute too. To witness his grandson respond with such utter lack of apprehension was bittersweet. "Very well. You must have a wonderfully loving family."

His grandson had grown up to be a fine man; they had raised him well. For him to be alive and healthy, to be able to share a drink with him—what more could Bernigi ask for? He could not unfold his hands yet.

A while after, Marcella exited the carriage to move one of the pails of armored crab. That Bernigi was able to reunite with his grandson seemed to be the work of the only other man in the cabin.

"As a commoner, Marcella had not studied much or practiced magic, but he is determined to become a proper knight, Lord—"

"'Bernigi' is fine, Jonas."

“Thank you very much for the honor, Lord Bernigi.” After his circuitous explanation, so like a nobleman, the attendant donned a smile—not one with warmth but a smile like a serpent imitating a human’s; there was a reason they called him Scalfarotto’s Blighted.

It was almost embarrassing to be so easily manipulated by young’uns at his age. It was not all bad, however. “I suppose I cannot die yet—not until I give out my hand.” He could not help but grin.

However, Jonas’s smile faded. “Speaking of which, the woman named Marcella for whom you are looking is no longer of this world. I hope you can stop searching for her out of consideration for our knight.” It was not a request—it was a warning. The anti-eavesdropping device by his sleeve lit up red.

Marcella, the woman, had been a prostitute, and for her, Bernardi had cast away his social status, knighthood, money, and all else. Bernigi had admonished him, telling him to calm down and think things over. They had fallen out that day, and the next, Bernardi had gone off to the frontier to battle the hydra. After lopping off one of its nine heads, he was no more. His order had suffered enormous casualties, and even Ehrlichia had become quite nervous about the situation. But with the proverbial fire to put out, Bernigi had had no time to mourn his son’s death.

His youngest son had so loved this Marcella; after a month, Bernigi had felt he had a responsibility to inform her of his death and give her a sum of money. However, there had been no signs of that woman in the red-light district. There had been rumors that she had long left her profession, gotten together with someone else, or even gone abroad for work. Bernigi had never gotten hold of her, and after a season had passed, he had given up.

Twenty years had passed since then. Bernigi and his wife had lived long enough. Their other children and grandchildren had grown up in good health, and there was no need to worry on that front. This autumn marked a decline in his health, and he had figured he ought to put his affairs in order and clean out the drawers in his study. Then he had spotted a sheet of parchment—the report he’d received on the search for Marcella. It had long since been time to let go, yet he once again dispatched people to look into the woman. But the results had turned out to be inconclusive, and the people who had been interviewed all

those years ago had all forgotten about her. There were no traces of this woman, as though she had never existed. It had seemed too odd to be a coincidence, and so Bernigi had asked the Intelligence Office to find Marcella. Not long after, he had received an invitation to today's expedition.

"Fine. I shall call off the investigation." It was now clear as day why she had been erased from the earth. Perhaps if Bernigi had employed the Intelligence Office earlier, he would have found Marcella the night before the Scalfarottos had taken him in, but it had all worked out in the end. It was obvious that Guido Scalfarotto had more sway with the Intelligence Office than Bernigi, but he was not about to give up.

"Marcella has only recently begun learning magic. I'm sure he would appreciate some advice if you have the chance to visit us next time."

"Very well. I shall do so when the opportunity arises." It mattered not what the excuse would be; Bernigi would go to the Scalfarottos. Grade-fourteen, fifteen magic just sitting dormant and untrained for so many years was an irritating waste of good talent. If he had met Marcella much earlier, he could have taught him magic control, advanced earth magic, whatever kind of weapon training, even chivalric combat—he could have *personally* taught him all that.

"While we are on the topic, Marcella's children are thought to be over grade eleven. In the future, finding an instructor will surely prove very troublesome."

Jonas's tone was terribly dramatic, but it was the substance of his message that was so alarming. To carry a child with a great magical imbalance was very risky to the mother, and despite Jonas glossing over it, Bernigi was seized by worry. "Over grade-eleven earth magic? Marcella's wife is a commoner, is she not? Is she in good health?"

"Thanks to a special magical tool, both mother and children are now very healthy. With their talent, however, they are sure to attract unwanted attention. Marcella himself said that he was not interested in being adopted, and our family is providing his family protection, so this search... It may cause him to become the subject of rumors."

Because of Marcella's wish to remain a commoner, the Scalfarottos had

erased all information on him. “What with your poking around within the Intelligence Office, there is the risk of information being leaked to other noble families. So, for your own grandson’s and great-grandchildren’s sakes, help us help them.” Despite the carefully chosen and polite words, it was closer to an order than a request; the Scalfarottos required his obedience, not his assent. Furthermore, their protection of Marcella and their permission for his grandfather from a different faction to meet him could not be had without a price; the Scalfarottos did not operate on benevolence.

There was no point beating around the bush. “So? What do you want from me?”

“We would like to ask you, as former vice-captain of the Beast Hunters, to become a member of the Scalfarotto family’s Weapons Development Team. This team is based out of our villa, where you may find the Rossetti Trading Company as well.”

“Very well. It is important that the squad get good weapons, and I would love to be able to help.” That was the perfect excuse for Bernigi, a noble from a different faction, to lend a hand, and for him to visit the Scalfarottos as well—this had been well planned.

“Still, what a shame...” Bernigi continued. His grandson has as much raw talent as his late son, and his great-grandchildren had hidden talent too. If it were possible, Bernigi would much rather they take up the D’Orazi family name so he could protect them instead. There was a great deal he wanted to teach them in the very little time that remained to him. Perhaps that was why he was so driven by his desires. “Will you not entertain the idea of letting my family take in your knight? I would make the trade fair.”

“We will not—he himself does not wish for it.”

Jonas’s lack of hesitation was somewhat irritating. *I would lose the chance to protect my grandson, just as I did with my son.* “And if I said I will take him by force?”

“We shall oppose you. Marcella is one of ours.”

Both men’s voices were equally icy, and it felt as though snow would fall inside the cabin. Bernigi had already reached for the shortsword on his left hip,

but Jonas—the red-brown pupil of his right eye split into a vertical gash—pressed three fingers to the back of the old man’s hand.

“Forgive my rudeness.” In the midst of their intimidation battle, Bernigi’s reflexes had made his body move involuntarily—his subconscious had identified Scalfarotto’s Blighted as a monster to slay. He very likely would have drawn his sword if not for Jonas.

“I ought to apologize for subjecting you to something so unsightly.” His pupil returned to its original roundness. Although he had almost been attacked, Jonas seemed neither angry nor surprised.

Not only had Bernigi lost this battle, he truly felt he had done wrong. “Is there anything I can give to you as an apology, Jonas?”

“I shall ask Lord Guido—”

“I am asking what *you* want, Jonas Goodwin.”

When he heard his full name, his gaze went diagonally downward. Five seconds elapsed before he looked back up with an all-too-perfect U-shaped smile. “In that case, on the day Lord Guido receives his marquisate, may I have you take the initiative to speak to him first at the castle? As we shall be cooperating in the near future, I hope you can also address him as Guido.”

When a title was bequeathed to someone, they were to go around paying respect to families of the same rank. To have Bernigi greet him first and call him Guido, sans honorifics, was an immense display to others—it was a big ask of someone from a different faction, despite the old man being retired. But Jonas—or rather, the man behind him, Guido Scalfarotto—was undoubtedly giving Bernigi much more.

“Very well, Jonas. I shall speak to Guido first, and I shall heartily congratulate him on his marquisate.”

“Thank you very much, Lord Bernigi.” His rust-brown eyes were surprisingly emotive—this was perhaps the first time Bernigi had seen Jonas smiling from the heart.

After Bernigi was promised he would be invited to the Scalfarotto villa, he

alighted from the carriage. Marcella, who had been waiting outside, bowed deeply again, and he responded with a firm nod of the head. As Bernigi walked back to his manor under the night sky, a heavy sigh escaped his lips. If he'd had the choice, he would have taken Marcella along and introduced him to his wife and sons. He still wished to gather all of his family together. But knowing that his grandson was alive and present was plenty. Until yesterday, Bernigi had thought to straighten out everything, for he would not remain in this world for long. Now, he begged to live for as long as he could. How easily a man could change, how greedy a man could be—he could but laugh.

But the man named Guido Scalfarotto was beyond his title in every respect, whether it came to his capable subordinate, the matter with the Intelligence Office, the expedition, his connection with the Rossetti Trading Company, or Marcella. Guido had long been on the same level as a marquis, namely Bernigi. If anything, Bernigi ought to spur on his son so as not to be surpassed. Or perhaps it would be more favorable for the D'Orazis to make interfactional ties with the Scalfarottos.

There was so much for Bernigi to discuss with his wife tonight; he hurried his steps, only to totter because of his prosthetic leg. His guards rushed to support him, but Bernigi was still sharp, and he managed to remain upright with his cane. If he was going to the Scalfarotto villa, he would need to get his act together. That included figuring out what to bring for gifts, what to wear, and how to explain the situation to his faction. Though Bernigi did not know how far he could or should meddle with their business, he ought to also devise a plan for his grandson and great-grandchildren's educations. There was so much to think about, to worry about.

Another thing for Bernigi to worry about was writing his hand for his great-grandchildren, who now had bright futures to grasp. Two great-grandchildren, so two hands—it would be embarrassing if one of them featured terrible penmanship. But it would not do to have his wife write both; he *yearned* to do one himself. Swords and bows were no trouble to him, but the pen?

“Time to devote myself to practice!”

From tomorrow on, his study would be his battlefield.

Back-Embroidery and the Company Emblem

Last night had been rowdy at the Beast Hunters' party. Volf had outdrank Randolph, an impressive showing by the sea serpent. He had even managed to take Dahlia back to the Green Tower with not a single stumbled step. On the other hand, Randolph had been laid out on a bench to sleep off his drunkenness, and Dorino and some of the more senior knights had promised they'd carry him to the barracks. It would have made sense to take a carriage back—so Dahlia had suggested—but apparently, “that was what body strengthening is for”; their smiles had implied they were both willing and used to it.

So Volf had escorted her back home, and at the door, they had bidden each other “good night and pleasant dreams.” Then, in the quietest voice, he had said, “I’m looking forward to the back-embroidery.” That moonlit face belonged to the man they called the capital’s prettiest boy, and Dahlia had figured they were onto something.

She had tried to take off her coat, only for a sleeve to get caught on her golden bracelet. It was for protection, and perhaps because she had been wearing it, she had been spared from total intoxication. She had realized her cheeks were hot, and to sober up a little, she had begun to think about what to do about the back-embroidery.

Dahlia retrieved her stationery set and began peeling the paper around the charcoal core, her fingers brushing against the coarse notepaper. “The Scalfarotto name itself? Their family crest? Since I’m making it, maybe ‘Rossetti’ or ‘Dahlia’? Hmm, what else...”

Volf—that would kinda feel like putting a child’s name on their shirt. Denied.

Scalfarotto—Guido’s face came to mind, and that didn’t feel right. Denied.

The Scalfarotto crest—the ice crystal was too intricate and, well, too chilly. Denied.

Dahlia—way too embarrassing. It wasn't as though Volf was part of her family or anything. Denied.

Rossetti—Carlo's smile came to mind, and that didn't feel right either. Denied.

Was she doomed to never hold a needle here? Was she just going to groan on and on without ever coming up with a pattern? Dahlia took off her glasses and did a big stretch, and when her arms came down, her pendant—the one to prevent stiff shoulders—danced on her chest. The obverse was cragsnake fang, the reverse, unicorn horn. The latter had a depiction of a small flower, while the former had a nightdog. Nightdogs were a breed prized for their ability as guards. Traveling from town to town called for bodyguards or sleipnir-drawn carriages, but many also brought those hounds as companions. Dahlia got the brilliant idea to embroider that very nightdog on Volf's shirt—a prayer for his safety during his expeditions and to ward off any dangerous monsters.

She didn't have any of his undershirts with her at the moment, but she did have a supply of black men's tees that she kept for sleepwear; Dahlia brought out the one that Volf had used before to try her hand at it. The tools for this project were monster silk thread and a hardened mythrill needle, a combination that made for very smooth handling, perfect for needlework. As one might've expected, these top-of-the-line items were courtesy of Lucia, who had lent them to Dahlia after they'd chatted about how a lot of sewing was done with magical tools. If the embroidery was to wish for Volf's safety, then she had to do her best with the best, after all.

Hmm, a black dog on a black shirt? Dahlia encountered another roadblock; she hadn't thought of asking Volf what color his undershirts were. She remembered Dorino saying that back-embroidery was often done in red, and if black on black was too subtle, she could add a red flower behind the dog to make it pop. Under the magical lantern's glow, she stitched single-mindedly until her vision became bleary.

"Ah..." Back-embroideries were supposed to be these little needlepoint designs—who the heck stitched this fist-sized patch on here? This had got to tickle the back. As she went to take out the thread, she paused. *Wait, this is a prototype. Yeah, just a test run.* She convinced herself that everything was fine; when she did his shirts, she would make sure to make the embroidery a lot

smaller.

Dahlia put the black T-shirt on the torso she had received from Lucia for test-fitting raincoats and came up with more excuses. The back-embroidery did in fact stand out due to its size, but it wasn't a bad look at all. It wouldn't be visible with a layer on top, and this was just a test product. Then, she got another bright idea: as a magical toolmaker, she ought to give the shirt an enchantment. The Beast Hunters' expeditions were rigorous, so it might be good to make it more durable. Hardening would make it too, well, hard to wear, but what if she tried to strengthen the fibers instead? With that in mind, Dahlia checked the shelf to see what she had on hand.

The first material she grabbed was powdered kingsnake shed. The kingsnake was a fearsome monster that slithered through the desert, gobbling up any travelers who stepped foot into its territory. Capturing one was surprisingly easy, however—fill a large pot with alcohol, and it'd drink until it fell, making it a breeze to capture dead or alive. Really, that should be a cautionary tale. Humans generally avoided slaying it, though; the kingsnake ate the eggs and larvae of the desert worm, keeping their population in control—Dahlia had learned this, and the fact that maintaining ecological balance was a delicate thing, in college biology. As an aside, shed kingsnake skin was used to strengthen lantern wicks. Guards in the capital also used portable lanterns with these enhanced wicks for resistance against both heat and water.

The next material was yellow slime powder. This was not the usual yellow floury substance that she used, but a much more translucent form, like ground-up citrine—a gift from the slime farm's chief researcher, Idaea. When Dahlia had visited the nursery, the two women had bonded over their shared passion for slimes. Afterward, she had consulted with Ivano to determine whether the company could support the slime research. Ivano had been slick with Forto, and the Tailors' Guild ended up shouldering the financial burden, with the result that Idaea now regularly sent powdered slime to the Green Tower. Recently, Dahlia had gotten grade-A yellow slime, the top grade in the system of A to E. The document inside the package had explained that it was from specimens with "healthy color and luster, high magic, and high translucency." Yellow slimes possessed earth magic, and they were good for hardening and

strengthening. They weren't as potent as other monster materials and thus saw less use, but they had just the right balance to make cloth a little more resistant to ripping.

The mixture for the shirt was similar to the one used for raincoats—Dahlia decided to use pennyroyal extract and armored crab acid. Using powdered desert worm would have made it a lot more durable, but it would also have made the enchanted cloth too hard. On paper, her calculations said the mixture should provide the fabric with hardening and strengthening, but she was unsure—and extremely curious—how this top-grade yellow slime would perform in practice.

After carefully stirring this liquid mixture in a glass, Dahlia poured in her magic, then added the kingsnake powder and stirred it again. It was time to add the yellow slime powder, but *uh-oh*, to her nose came a tingle. It was the wee hours already and she wasn't wearing a jacket.

"Achoo!" There went triple the amount she had meant to put in. Her panicking was juxtaposed with the beautiful powdered yellow slime sparkling in the liquid. She'd already added the kingsnake powder, so it would not keep, and throwing it out would have been such a waste. With a sense of *waste not, want not* and more excuses, she stirred the mixture a third time. If it was to fail, then she'd just hide the shirt before Volf arrived. Dahlia shrugged. "Guess I'll call this magic practice."

She turned the back of the dress form toward her and brought the mixture close to the embroidery. Whereas she would have spread it on a flat surface in making waterproof cloth, Dahlia would use magic to lift the content in the glass out. This was an enchantment that needed grade-ten magic, so it would be a difficult one. She mentally prepared herself for failure, then secreted magic from her finger.

"May Volf be safe and sound..." The mixture responded to Dahlia's prayer and magic, and it floated up as a pretty sphere, pale yellow like the moon herself. It spun around twice and then was fully absorbed into the embroidery. However, it rippled out and coated the entire shirt. "Huh?"

In making waterproof cloth, shooting a weak but steady stream of magic was

quite difficult; Dahlia was able to do it, but she could hardly call herself good at it. But this? This enchantment had her flabbergasted. Not a single drop dripped from the shirt, and the coating was even and thorough. She *should* have been happy, if anything.

“Let’s see, let’s see...” She touched the shirt, and gosh, was it weird. It was softer than waterproof cloth yet squishy enough that her finger was enveloped when she poked it. The texture was similar to the rubberized fabric of her previous life, but different in that the shirt was not elastic. Dahlia assumed this was what a thin layer of kraken skin would feel like. She poured water over the shirt, and it absorbed about a third while repelling the rest. In essence, this fabric was neither water-repellent nor very sweat-absorbant—good as neither a raincoat nor an undershirt.

“Welp, I must be drunk.” Maybe her intoxication had made her fingers a little less sensitive than they should have been. Maybe the shirt would harden over time, or at least she clung onto the unlikely hopes that it would.

She was sleepy, she was tired, and her eyes ached; nothing else to do but to sleep on it now. The morning sun illuminated Dahlia’s steps as she headed toward the bathroom.

Sleep came after the shower, and when Dahlia awakened, it was close to midday. Volf had today off, and it wouldn’t be long before he came by, so she hurried to dress herself, then headed down to the workshop. Dahlia felt the black tee again—it would still be uncomfortable as an undershirt. She intended to clean everything up before Volf got here, so she stripped the torso and placed the garment on the workbench.

“What is going on with you...?” Dahlia was stunned by the shirt she was talking to—it stood up straight on its hem atop the workbench, as though an invisible person were modeling for her. She slowly backed away, then the doorbell rang. Amid her shock and fear, she ran to the door, hoping to find the knight she was expecting.

“Hi, Dahlia.”

“Vooolf!”

“What’s wrong?!”

“There’s...”—she hesitated before continuing—“*something* inside. Maybe.” Volf would later describe her as having looked like she was on the verge of tears.

He threw his bag to the floor and, in one motion, put Dahlia behind him and drew a shortsword. His blade pointed at the freestanding black shirt. “What is that thing, Dahlia?”

“That shirt, uh, for some reason, has become like that...” To explain would be difficult, if not nigh impossible.



With his guard still up, Volf cocked his head slightly. “Is that an attempt at creating a dullahan?”

“Now, why would you go and assume that about me?” Her nervousness dissolved in a snap. She realized she had let her imagination get the better of her; after her enchanting, the shirt had merely taken the shape of the torso overnight. “Last night, I was thinking of a design for your back-embroidery. This is the result of my test.”

“Test? Of *embroidery*?” Volf squinted his golden eyes at her.

Dahlia proceeded to describe what she had done after she got home, after which Volf gave the shirt a light slap. Since it was just an empty shirt, it collapsed, folding in half. He smiled as he looked at the stitching on the back. “It’s stunning.”

“I know I made it too big...”

“Yeah, but this shirt, though—I think it’ll be very durable.”

“You wouldn’t be able to move around in it...”

“It should make for a nice, soft raincoat.”

“I’m sorry to say that it absorbs water...” Despite Volf’s every endeavor to make her feel better, she had to burst every one of his bubbles. The shirt was supposed to be tough and robust, but why had it turned out like this? *I should’ve cleaned up quicker.*

“Still, this is very interesting.” Volf must’ve enjoyed feeling the incomprehensible texture of the fabric.

But she wished he would stop kneading it with such glee. “That’s one way to put it. It’s practically useless, though.”

“No, I genuinely think this has potential. If you make it a little thicker, it could be used as armor lining or as knee and elbow pads to dampen shock.”

“Huh?” *He means impact absorption?* Dahlia reached out and felt the shirt once again. It was squishy when she squeezed it, and when she let go, it slowly relaxed. She reckoned that with a few more layers, it would become quite similar to the memory foam she once knew.

“Our armor is currently lined with materials like monster leather or kraken, but both of those are much stiffer than this stuff—doubly so when it’s cold out. I think this is perfect as is.”

“How thick should it be?”

“I believe I’d like it about three times thicker, though I can’t say for sure until I actually put it on my elbows or under my armor.”

“If it’s for protective equipment, then I’ll have to make sure it’s durable enough. It wouldn’t do if it crumbled and fell apart after a day’s use.” This called for field testing, but that wasn’t something she would be able to do.

“Why don’t you talk to my brother about this? Oh, and Master Jonas too—he should be familiar with armor.”

“Unlike a magical sword, this shouldn’t give them cause for concern. I’ll tell Ivano as well. He mentioned that he would like to meet with Lord Guido to discuss the Weapons Development Team.”

“Good idea. I think my brother likes him—last time I went home, I was so surprised to see them enjoying a cup of tea together.” Though Ivano would definitely have vehemently shaken his head with a stiff smile if asked about it, that he had gotten chummy with Guido *was* indeed surprising. “Anyway, I brought six undershirts with me. Sorry about bringing so many.” As he apologized, Volf opened the cloth-wrapped bundle of his light gray tank tops.

“Well, you need a few before you get your laundry done, so please don’t hesitate.” She laid one of them on the workbench. “What do you think of the design and its placement? If you like it, I’ll make it smaller.”

“That’ll be great. Your design is wonderful.”

“Thank you. It’s a nightdog and a flower; I hope it isn’t too feminine.”

“Not at all. It’s very you, Dahlia. Or rather, it’s very Rossetti—you could even use it as your company emblem.”

“Hm. That’s a great idea.” A company emblem—or as she knew it from her previous life, a company logo—wasn’t something she needed, but having something she could print or stamp onto products would be quite convenient.

Wishing safety for Volf and the Beast Hunters, Dahlia and the Rossetti Trading Company shall support them from behind—not a bad sentiment at all.

“If we use this emblem on our products, it will be immediately obvious who’s made them. A small logo would be easy to place if space is limited, and foreigners could recognize it too even if they can’t read our alphabet.” Ordine exported many magical tools abroad, and travelers also brought home magical lanterns as souvenirs; a pictogram would be easily identifiable for those unfamiliar with the Ordinato script.

However, for Dahlia, the more pressing matter was getting the back-embroidery done before Volf’s next expedition. “May I stitch one of your shirts?”

“I would be delighted if you could. Have you had lunch yet, by the way?”

“No, not yet.”

“How about I make you some crepes?” Apparently, the ingredients were in the bag that Volf had thrown to the ground earlier—that included the eggs, of which around half had not survived the drop.

“I couldn’t have you cook for me on top of buying all the ingredients...”

“It’s only fair, since I’m always over enjoying your cooking.” Volf had had a difficult time trying to fry crepes on his camp stove before; deft as he was, it was shocking he hadn’t been able to avoid tearing them. To Dahlia’s slight envy, the next time he had made them, his dexterity had been evident in crepes as perfect and pretty as the ones you’d find in a café. He bustled in the kitchen as she worked the needle in the living room on the second floor.

“I was just about to ask you if you were ready for me to bring the crepes over, but it seems you’re quicker than me.”

Accompanying Volf’s voice was a sweet, mouthwatering aroma from the kitchen, something Dahlia hadn’t noticed until now; in fact, she had been so absorbed in the embroidery, she didn’t know how long it had been since she’d started working. “It’s a small piece, and I had the design completed already.”

Looking at the stitching, he grinned from ear to ear. “That really says ‘made

by Dahlia.’ It feels like I could become one of your magical tools when I wear that undershirt.”

“I can’t say I like the idea of you turning yourself into a magical tool, though you do have a point—with just the emblem on your back, it does make you look a bit like a product of the company...” Though he was great as a salesman and a face of the Rossetti Company, it wouldn’t do if he seemed like merchandise. “Let me put my name underneath as well.”

Her surname wouldn’t help, but perhaps her given name might. Among her threads, she found the one closest to the color of the shirt and then stitched “Dahlia” below the logo. The first character was a little too big and the rest were a little too small; striking the right balance was harder than she had thought.

“Why did you choose the same color as the fabric?”

“I don’t have experience stitching letters, so I figured it would be better if they weren’t too noticeable. Once I get better, I’ll use something different. And, um, besides, I thought it’d be fine as long as you knew my name was there.” Her rushed excuses hardly explained much but brought a big smile to his face.

“Yeah, you’re right. I can still read it just fine, and I’ll still know your name is on the shirt.” It seemed like it was more than just his ears that were sharp.

His attentive gaze didn’t help Dahlia relax much, but she acted as collected as she could and finished up the work. She took the shirt off of the embroidery hoop, made sure there were no stray needles hanging inside, then handed it to Volf. “Here you are. If this is to your liking, then I’ll do the same to the other five undershirts. You’ll know I got better at doing the letters if you see my name in a different color. I’ll make sure you get them before the season changes too.”

“This is perfect! Thank you—I really mean it, Dahlia. Is there anything—anything at all—I can get you to show my gratitude?” Volf clutched the single shirt to his chest as he looked intently at her.

Her wish was not for any physical good but for his well-being. Putting that into words was a little beyond her, however. “Then could I have some extra cream on my crepes today?”

“You got it. I’ll pile on all the cream and fruit you could want!”

As long as he returned to her so that the two of them could share a laugh like this, that was all she desired. Likely, that would be what Dahlia wished for as she back-embroidered the next shirt. Her crepes today would tear from being overfilled.



“Did you give your shirts to Dahlia so she can stitch your back-embroidery, Volf?” As the Beast Hunters got dressed in their large changing room before training, Dorino struck a question. The other knights who had also been present when they went out drinking the day before yesterday flashed Volf tender gazes from time to time.

“Yeah, I did, and she even did one up for me already.”

“That quick?! Well, go on and show us.”

“Here. A flower with a nightdog.” There was something adolescent about his smile as he took off his top to reveal his undershirt.

Slightly above center on the back was a little needlepoint design of a red flower behind a black hound, something that screamed *them*; Dorino couldn’t help but break into a smile. “Oh, that’s fantastic!”

Randolph nodded. “A fine back-embroidery.”

Both the swiftness of the toolmaker’s hands and the design made all the knights glow, but the boast that Volf was about to utter would stun everyone into silence. “Dahlia put in the Rossetti company emblem for me!”

“Ah. Right. The company emblem.”

“I see...”

Those who had been at the party the other day all cleared their throats, rubbed their temples, softly sighed, or enjoyed the autumn sky outside the window. Not a single one dared to ask what was collectively on their minds: did Dahlia really consider Volf to be nothing more than her company’s guarantor or just a friend to support as thanks for helping out with her business? Did Chairwoman Rossetti really not have anything else in mind? But the black-

haired youth was a happy boy, so what *could* the rest of them really say?

“Yep. That’s Ms. Dahlia, all right.”

“Be happy she did that for you.” Dorino patted Volf on his right shoulder, Randolph on his left.

“I really am.”

Amid the chorus of sighs behind his back, the black-haired youth—and only him—beamed.



“The Rossetti Trading Company has come up with our company emblem.” In Ivano’s right hand was a parchment emblazoned with the logo of a black hound over a red flower, and in his right was another parchment stamped with a small monochromatic version of the same design—both equally striking and stylish.

Guido took both pages, and his smile narrowed his eyes. “Oh, that is indeed a wonderful emblem.”

The location was a parlor in the Scalfarottos’ villa, where the two men sat across from each other on sofas separated by a coffee table. Ivano realized that he had gotten used to the intricate engravings and unbelievably thick carpeting; what he still hadn’t yet gotten used to was speaking with the man before him.

“I believe Volf has already seen this?”

“Sir Volf and our chairwoman collaborated on the design, and it was supposedly conjured up for his back-embroidery.”

“I’ve often heard that term during my chivalric studies...”

The slight tilt of Guido’s head summoned his attendant with oxide-brown hair. “Back-embroidery is an old tradition dating back to the founding of this kingdom. When a knight would depart for battle, women who were close with him would wish for his safety by stitching a simple embroidery design on the back of his shirt. It is said the practice carries meanings such as ‘I wish to protect your back’ and ‘I will protect the home in your absence.’”

“Ah. No wonder that my schoolmates in chivalric studies admired the custom so.”

“I have learned something new as well. I thought it was simply to wish Sir Volf safety on his expeditions.” Ivano was a little surprised by the lore behind it, but not as surprised as he’d been when Dahlia had handed him the design.

“This emblem—is it perhaps a sign that my brother is considering whether to retire as a Beast Hunter?”

“I think not. Surely he would speak to you about it before making that decision, Lord Guido.”

“Well, I’m not so sure about that. Sometimes things happen on a whim.”

“Unlikely,” said Jonas softly but audibly—he was standing beside Guido, and a coffee table’s distance wasn’t enough to dampen his voice. It seemed they didn’t really mind Ivano hearing, though; there wasn’t an anti-eavesdropping tool active.

Ivano continued, “Forgive me for suddenly shifting topics, but I brought with me a letter from our chairwoman. I believe it bears a request from Sir Volf.”

“Oh, then allow me to read it at once.”

That Guido sounded very pleased as he received the letter made Ivano feel a little sorry for him—the contents of the letter were going to disappoint him. And, as expected, Guido’s face stiffened into a mask soon after he began reading. When he finished, he handed the letter to Jonas, who proceeded to silently digest the words.

Surprisingly, Guido’s dejection was noticeable. “The material on which Madam Rossetti completed her back-embroidery is groundbreaking, and Volf wishes to use it to line his armor, so it seems...”

“Yellow slime this time? How curious.” The rust-eyed man showed no expression, yet Ivano understood his feelings all too well. When Dahlia had first explained it, Ivano could only don a hollow smile. First blue slime with the waterproof cloth, then green with the insoles and zephyricloth, and now yellow. If slimes could speak, they would surely have cursed Dahlia as an enemy to their kind.

“A question, if I may, Ivano—is magical toolmaking in the civilian sector a profession that requires experimenting and enchanting with every single thing

available?”

“I believe that is not so much something with all magical toolmakers but rather *this* magical toolmaker. In part, it is due to our chairwoman’s creative mind and due to this being, erm, a hobby of sorts for her.”

How could Ivano explain this? He thought of Carlo—once, when they had gone to the tavern, Carlo had put an ice crystal to a metal tankard hoping to chill his drink, only to completely freeze it solid, and he had bellowed in laughter. It wasn’t necessarily that they *had* to try enchanting with every material they got their hands on, but Ivano recognized the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. He thought of Oswald next. Ivano had never witnessed him in action, but he knew he was incredibly thorough with his calculations before properly crafting something in his workshop. There were no comparisons to be made.

Jonas managed to wrap it up very nicely. “Master Dahlia is very passionate in her magical toolmaking research.”

Guido pointed his blues at him, then slumped and sighed. “I suppose I expected too much when I saw the company emblem...”

For once, Ivano completely agreed with him. “Likewise, sir. I asked our chairwoman about it as well.”

“Oh? And what did you say?”

“Pardon the impoliteness toward Sir Volf, but I asked, ‘Oh, won’t you make Sir Volf exclusively yours already, Ms. Dahlia?’”

“And Madam Rossetti?”

“‘Once he retires from the Order of Beast Hunters, I would love for him to work for us.’ She, of course, had on her usual innocent smile.” Both when she had handed Ivano the dog-and-flower design and when he had asked her that question, Dahlia hadn’t the slightest blush on her face—in essence, she was not even cognizant of the possibility of becoming anything more than just friends with Volf. Ivano badly wanted to pour Volf a tall one the next time they had a chance to drink together.

“It appears that sort of thing is still a long way away...”

“They have only known each other for half a year, after all.”

“Half a year? Huh, I suppose you’re right. I mustn’t be too hasty, then.”

Again, likewise. Dahlia and Volf gave off the false impression that they had been together for a long time. Ivano himself hadn’t been with the Rossetti Company for even a half year yet; he was still a fledgling vice-chairman. But there was so much time to grow.

“Anyway, let us gather at this villa so we can announce the company emblem, discuss new materials with potential to use for arms and armor, and introduce the Weapons Development Team all at once. I trust that you will not object to me inviting Augusto of the Adventurers’ Guild and Lord Jedda?”

“Not at all. Could you also please send an invitation to Lord Forto?”

“Of course. In that case, it would do well to have those knowledgeable about slimes and armor lining too.” With so many people involved, this had already gotten so much more serious than the toe socks, but it would be better with more heads; Ivano would just have to deal with his stomach pain later. “Ah, yes. For the Weapons Development Team, I have also enlisted the help of Lord Bernigi, former vice-captain of the Beast Hunters and former Marquis D’Orazi. I ought to invite him as well.”

“Lord D’Orazi, you say?” Ivano was late in putting up an unruffled front. The D’Orazis were Marcella’s biological family—so Gildo had told Ivano. This was no coincidence—Guido wasn’t so much inviting the former Beast Hunter but rather Marcella’s grandfather. Even so, it wasn’t Ivano’s place to seek confirmation. He feigned calmness and sipped on his tea, and when he looked up, Ivano saw deep blue eyes examining him.

“Very commendable, Ivano. I am shocked you know of the D’Orazi family already.”

“And I cannot accept the compliment—I *have* failed to keep my reaction from showing.”

“I thought you did well to regain composure. Anyway, from whom did you hear of Lord Bernigi?”

“I ask for your leniency.” There was probably no point in sweeping the

question under the rug, though. He likely already knew Ivano got his information from Gildo.

Guido curled up one corner of his lips. “Of course. I hope you will not take offense if I say that it was a leading question.”

Oh, you little—names unfit for polite company welled up in his throat. If anything, Guido should have been commending him *now* for not showing or voicing any anger. In hindsight, the correct answer to the question “Do you know of the D’Orazis?” was “Only by name.” Ivano had fallen for the leading question nonetheless, and he directed his anger toward himself. “No offense taken at all. I thank you for your instruction, Lord Guido.”

“Please don’t take it to heart, Ivano; I thought that it would be prudent to teach you this sort of exchange. Even if you can maintain composure, you will face many traps like this in the future. Particularly the ones you may not trust—they, too, may suddenly revive a dead topic, pressing some point they want to pry out of you.”

“I shall keep that in mind. And how should I act toward those whom I do trust?”

“You spill your secrets right away. If the other party is someone with power, then they can help you in your times of need.” Was this soft-spoken man someone who could be trusted? “Returning to the topic at hand—Lord Bernigi knows about Marcella, and I have also told Marcella the name of his biological father. When they speak to each other, both men engage in this song and dance in which they pretend like they know nothing, never explicitly acknowledging their kinship. I wonder whose sake that is for. Have you told Madam Rossetti about this matter?”

“No. I have no plans to.” Dahlia wouldn’t be able to hide the knowledge, and in any event, she ought to learn it not from her coworker but from her friend, namely Marcella himself.

Guido nodded. “Anyway, Madam Rossetti is brilliant, but I must say so are you. I was surprised to hear that despite your lack of rank, you are now on a first-name basis with Viscount Forto.”

Through some twists and turns, Ivano had indeed become friends with Forto,

the master of the Tailors' Guild. It wasn't something that either of them hid. Guido finding that out wasn't unexpected. Their friendship had really only begun because of their shared experience of being on the receiving end of Guido's icy intimidation—something Ivano could not be thankful for. "We have found friendship at the bottom of a bottle of swill."

"Oh, I am so envious. I hope we can do the same."

Yeah, right—Ivano bit his tongue and smiled. Something told him it wouldn't be possible to become friends with this man; even if it were, Ivano had no desire to do so. He recalled the time when Guido, with a glass in one hand, had intimidated him, and Ivano slipped a bit of spite into his response. "A chilled bottle of expensive wine pales in comparison to a shot of cheap liquor—only if, of course, it is to one's taste." A tippie tasted better when it was not strategic and tense but when all parties could freely be querulous; these two could never share such a drink. It wasn't as though Guido truly wished to imbibe with him anyway.

Guido remained unfazed. "Now, it seems that you have your work cut out for you, Ivano, and Madam Rossetti is likewise going to have trouble supporting my little brother all on her own. I don't mean to make it an exchange, but is there anything I can afford you?"

"Hm, let me see. Oh, I would appreciate something good to ease the stomach." Ever since he joined the Rossetti Trading Company, business had never been more interesting. On the other hand, Ivano's stomach had begun aching sometimes—regularly, in fact. Forto and the Jeddas were in the same boat, so Ivano hoped it wasn't because of his timidity. Guido, in contrast, always seemed so stoic. He might react whenever Volf was brought up, but even then, he immediately collected himself again. His suave voice and opaque smile, trademarks of the soon-to-be Marquis of Ice, shrouded his true feelings. He was a nobleman through and through, his words shrewd and graceful. Guido would be the last person to need and know of good stomach medicine.

"Jonas, do we have any in stock?"

"Yes, we received a new shipment today."

"Ivano, this compound is from across the border and made with bovine liver. I

shall have it prepared for when you leave.”

“Thank you very much. I have great expectations of its efficacy.”

Although Ivano wanted to clutch his belly, Guido maintained his usual smile.

“Oh, it works wonders. I cannot do without it on hand at all times.”

Unveiling and Developing

“Thank you all very much for gathering here today. I hope we can use this roundtable for discussion in a relaxed manner.” Out of respect for today’s guests, Guido kicked off the meeting in a rather polite manner—not to say that he was ordinarily quite rude.

Despite his best wishes, it was nigh impossible for Dahlia to relax. This was the Scalfarottos’ villa, or Volf’s estate. Unfortunately, he himself was absent—yesterday, giant boars had attacked a caravan carrying fruit along the highway, so the Beast Hunters had been dispatched to tackle the problem. He had sent a note saying that he was “going to make some delicious bacon.” Dahlia wasn’t worried, and she had tried some herself—it truly was delicious. Maybe she ought to pray for the boars’ souls, just as she had done for the armored crabs days earlier.

Sitting together at this round table for this roundtable were Guido, Jonas, Ivano, and Dahlia; that much was natural, as this was partly for the Rossetti Trading Company to meet with the Scalfarotto Family Weapons Development Team. However, it was perplexing that the other members were here.

Beside Guido was Bernigi, the gray-haired elderly man from the field training, who had introduced himself as a former vice-captain of the Beast Hunters’ and as former Marquis D’Orazi—that last part had made Dahlia turn pale. He had pleasantly greeted her and thanked her again for the other day. The others were shocked that the two were already acquainted, but it wasn’t the right time and place to go into details. She couldn’t help but wince at how rude she had been, as well as at the Goddess of Athlete’s Foot and Galeforce Bow bits.

Continuing on, there was Leone Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild; Augusto Scarlatti, vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers’; Idaealina Nicoletti, chief researcher at the slime farm; Viscount Fortunato Luini, guildmaster of the Tailors’; and Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. This was *supposed* to be an internal meeting with the Weapons Development Team

to discuss the viscoelastic material made with yellow slime, yet inexplicably assembled here were the former head of a marquise and the top brass of various guilds. Dahlia was so tense that a frog seemed to be hopping in her throat, and the fragrant black tea that the maid had served her seemed to be too much for her stomach right now.

After a round of simple introductions, a smiling Ivano distributed sheets of parchment. “This here is the Rossetti Trading Company’s emblem.” One was in color, the other a monochromatic stamp; Dahlia was uneasy having her design displayed, though the others smiled and nodded in approval.

“Is this your own design, Dahlia?” Leaning over and whispering was Lucia, who smiled from ear to ear when Dahlia replied in the affirmative. “It’s very you two.”

“It’s who now?”

“Oh, the red flower is you, and the black dog is Sir Volf, are they not? Since when did he join the company anyway?”

Petrification in three, two, one. Once Dahlia understood the situation, she tried her damndest to quietly explain herself. “No, no. The flower is the company, and the black dog is to ward off monsters, and he never mentioned anything about joining the company!” Midway through, Dahlia was not so quiet anymore, though she was the only one who failed to notice that. Lucia simply said, “Oh, I see,” while Guido looked on with a doll-like smile, Ivano pressed a finger to his brow, and the others stared at their parchment—an awkward silence, for some reason.

Surprisingly, it was Bernigi who threw her a lifeline. “’Tis a fine company emblem. The watchdog protecting the flower, the flower covering the watchdog’s back—a beautiful thing.”

“Thank you very much...” *What a nice person*, thought Dahlia, perhaps naively. He had been the vice-captain of the Beast Hunters at one point in time and had probably led a lot of knights; perhaps that was why he was so considerate. She could learn something from him.

“Here you are, Chairwoman.” Ivano must’ve deliberately changed the topic for her too. He handed her a case of the prototypes, the cue for Dahlia to step

into the limelight.

“This is the product I would like everyone’s opinion on: a soft fabric enchanted with yellow slime.” She was too ashamed to show everyone the embroidered shirt, so she had instead enchanted a two-centimeter-thick section of cloth. However, perhaps because she hadn’t been in the zone—or because she hadn’t been drunk enough—the slime mixture hadn’t formed into a sphere this time, and she’d had to enchant it on the workbench. The outcome seemed to be just about the same, but she figured she needed to work out what had happened. “This is the thicker version made of a cotton fabric, enchanted with a mixture of powdered kingsnake shed, pennyroyal extract, armored crab acid, and high-quality yellow slime.”

“Kingsnake and armored crab? This fabric makes great use of monsters.” Guido sounded quite impressed.

“The materials are quite similar to those in the waterproof cloth and the raincoat; those require powdered sandworm instead of powdered kingsnake shed and blue slime instead of yellow.”

“You have employed a great variety of monster materials, I see.”

“I thought slimes were nothing but irksome little creatures. Never did I know they could be put to use to such a great extent.”

Guido and Bernigi overturned the sample to compare its front and back sides, while Lucia examined the fabric. That left Forto waiting as he chatted with the table, but the demonstration part would come soon, and hopefully he wouldn’t get impatient before then.

“It is quite the unique texture. If durable enough, it would do well for more than lining armor.”

Augusto agreed with Leone. “I like how it can be bent and stretched to a high degree. It might work well to make surfaces nonslip.”

Dahlia’s audience was having fun, marveling at the squishiness of the sample, but Idaea was particularly excited—the head researcher’s periwinkle eyes gleamed as she squished and let go, squished and let go. “The tactility is simply wonderful. I love how slimelike it is!”

“If you would like, please take a sample home with you, Ms. Idaea. I have a thicker version as well.”

“Thank you so much, Ms. Dahlia!” Her delightful smile brought joy to the rest of the room.

“This here is the thick version. I have more studying to do regarding its physical appearance.” The color and roundness of the next prototype that Dahlia brought out was evocative of the yolk of a gigantic boiled egg. It was somewhat stiffer than a slime, though that comparison might not have been too helpful, as opportunities to feel a slime were hardly common. “It compresses when slowly pressed down, yet a raw egg will not crack when dropped on it.”

When this cushion-like version was slowly squeezed, it contoured around the hand, molding itself into the gaps between one’s fingers. When released, it slowly reverted to its original shape. An egg drop test like the ones that had been conducted in her previous life would have been perfect here, but Dahlia made do with a glass paperweight. *Puff*—the air was pressed out, and the paperweight stayed in position. It had been dropped from quite a height, but it had not bounced off, nor had the glass or the material suffered any damage. When the paperweight was removed, the prototype reverted to its original shape.

“Egads...”

“Unbelievable!” Her audience leaned over the edges of their seats, their eyes shocked wide open.

“Sir Volfred of the Order of Beast Hunters proposed that this material might be viable for impact absorption. Other potential uses include carriage seat cushions, for example. However, a potential problem is that this can only be made with grade-A and B yellow slime, which drives the costs up—”

Dahlia proceeded with a thorough explanation of this new product, while Ivano distributed information packets regarding yellow slime, the market price of its powder, and details about the other components. The company provided estimated prices per square meter of the fabric and for the cushion-sized version, though they were higher than Dahlia would have liked; it would never

become affordable to the masses if not mass-produced. She had experimented with lesser quality yellow slime, though her tests made with grade-C and below had turned out to crumble too easily.

“You needn’t worry—the longicollis feather-stuffed cushions that nobles enjoy are easily double this price.” Forto gave a shocking revelation; Dahlia hadn’t expected it based on her experience with longicollis stew.

“Knights will not adopt it at this price.” The former vice-captain had a good point. They were likely to spend big money on shields and armor, but this would be a different story.

“May I, Madam Rossetti?” With permission, Guido took the sample, then Dahlia placed another two on the table for him to compare. “I would like to test out what Volf had said about it being good for shock absorption, Madam Rossetti. Would it be fine if I potentially damage these?”

“Not a problem; I have more.”

Guido took the cushion-like model and squeezed it a bit before handing it to his attendant. “Jonas, strike it hard.”

From the corner of the room, Jonas brought a simple table he had already prepared, onto which he placed the yellow slime cushion. “Excuse me.” *Thwump!* He sunk his right fist into it. He did not pull his punch, yet the material came out unchanged. The only thing that changed was his brow, which furrowed.

“Excuse me,” he said again, bringing the table back. Jonas removed the glove on his right hand, then slammed his fist down again. *Thunk!* Dahlia tensed up at the sound, but the cushion rebounded to its form. Jonas grimaced again. “It is rather durable.”

“Very interesting. Allow me to try it out as well.” Something must’ve struck a chord with Guido, and he, along with all the other men aside from Ivano, lined up to smack the material. With how springy it is, it shouldn’t have hurt their hands. It left everyone with furrowed brows, but maybe it was etiquette or something that noblemen all had to suffer the same way; Dahlia could but watch in silence.

Thwomp, thud! Amid the thunderous punching, Lucia tugged at Dahlia's sleeve. "Hey, Dahlia, this might be good as a seat cushion, but it would also be comfy as a pillow."

"Wouldn't it be too stuffy?"

"I think it'll be okay if you make the surface bumpy and throw a zephyricloth cover on it. It might work if you mix in regular pillow material too." A brilliant idea—Lucia had come up with the memory foam pillow and a way to make it work with the materials of this world.

Jonas and Bernigi returned to the round table. "I agree that this material will do wonders combined with armor."

"Might you mean to line the inside of armor?"

"Yes, correct. It would work as padding for the elbows, knees, and buttocks as well. If made replaceable, then a less-durable version would be viable as well."

"Mm, good thinking. It could line the backs of broad shields too."

"Oh! It'd be really good for padding the chest and buttocks for women, as well as shoulders for men—people can enhance their features this way!" They were apparently speaking Lucia's language too. "As is, it would be fine for the buttocks and shoulders, but it might be better if it's stiffer for menswear. Make it softer for the chest and it'd feel just right. Then again, I might have to sew it on some garments, put it on, and feel it for myself..."

Lucia was having fun—perhaps too much so—talking to herself; it was Dahlia's time to tug on the couturier's sleeve. "L-Lucia, maybe you could save this talk for later..." It wasn't as though she was wrong per se, but talking about this kind of thing out loud here might make her too conspicuous; Dahlia would rather Lucia save it for when they conducted the practical experiments later.

"Heh heh, it feels like a slime, but I could squish this all day and it wouldn't burn my hand. It's so wonderful, I would want to cover my room with this." Idaea, diagonally across from Dahlia, had been enraptured too. Maybe she'd like a mattress made of this material.

"The texture of this material would be good for supporting parts of the body that were lost to injuries or sickness," Bernigi noted.

“I see. That would certainly be feasible,” Guido agreed.

“This should keep the body warmer than stuffing it with cotton. Old injuries ache in the cold, you see...”

“Oh, yes, the cold of winter is indeed quite troubling. I would enjoy it as well,” Jonas added.

Healing magic indeed didn’t work on injuries that were too old or on illnesses. However, the thought of using this material for medical purposes had never crossed Dahlia’s mind; a little upset at herself for being shallow, she quietly listened to their conversation.

Bernigi leaned over to Guido. “Times sure have changed. Back then, we used to say that one would know during a dance.”

“Erm, is it that obvious?”

“By the way they move, it is easy to tell whether they are the genuine article, and it is even more apparent up close. But with this material, no one would be the wiser.”

Hold on. What are they talking about? The two men were trying their best to whisper, but their timbres meant their voices carried far too well. This topic had Lucia engrossed, however. Meanwhile, Ideaa had a deathly smile as she kept squeezing the cushion—one might have gotten the wrong idea.

“It seems the age of knowing by feel is over.”

Sitting next to Dahlia, Ivano coughed into his empty teacup.

Guido had the right idea changing topics after that summary. “Now then, I believe we have gained a good understanding of what we are dealing with. From here, we shall split into two groups—the production side and the business side of the matter. The production party will be heading to the workshop, and it consists of Madam Rossetti, Head Manager Fano, and Chief Nicoletti. We will need someone to show them the workshop as well as demonstrate some weapons, so please attend them, Jonas.”

“Understood, my lord.”

“Would you mind if I joined them, Guido? I have no head for business, and I

should like to see the weapons as soon as possible.”

“By all means, Lord Bernigi.”

With the departure of Dahlia’s group, half of the seats at the round table were vacant; Ivano felt as though the conference room had grown even larger.

“Let us coordinate our next steps. Ivano, come sit with us.”

Here, the commoner Ivano sat at a table with Viscount Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants’; Viscount Augusto, vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers’; Viscount Forto, guildmaster of the Tailors’; and soon-to-be-marquis Guido. Up until half a year ago, this situation would have been nothing but a daydream. *How dare someone like me join these people here*, he thought to himself as he corrected his posture on the luxurious leather chair.

“Now, then, I would like to have everyone’s candor regarding the new product.”

Augusto was the first to answer Guido’s request. “Frankly, this is unfathomably terrific. I see it sharply enhancing the performance of protective gear. The Adventurers’ Guild would love to get their hands on it, assuming that the price and timing are right.”

“After seeing how it absorbs impacts, I can say this is a versatile material, although we still lack empirical data. It can undoubtedly be used for armor and furniture at the minimum. The Merchants’ Guild wishes to have rights to it.”

“I must say I was quite surprised by it at first, but the Tailors’ Guild would like this as well—not only would it be great as padding, but I believe it also has potential for use as bedding.” Each of the men, on behalf of his guild, spoke so positively about the new product. The fabric and cushions made with yellow slime were sure to become a big hit; Ivano was feeling very pleased when he heard Guido call his name.

“Ivano, does the Rossetti Trading Company have a preference about whom to prioritize?”

“The chairwoman would like to deliver to the Order of Beast Hunters first.”

“I have no objections to that. Everyone?”

“Not at all, though—if I may be frank again—we would like to have this as soon and as affordable as possible for our adventurers’ sake.” It was natural that Augusto wanted to protect his guild members.

Ivano would like to hasten production and delivery too, and he would like for the people present here to assist in that process. “In that case, may we task Lord Augusto with increasing yellow slime breeding and securing other monster materials, Lord Forto with securing the supply of fabric and warehousing, and Lord Leone with securing various other necessary materials and outsourcing to magical toolmakers?”

They all agreed and took responsibility for their respective domains, save for one person—Guido fixed his gaze upon Ivano. “Do I not have a role to play, Ivano?”

“Lord Guido, we would very much appreciate it if you could liaise with the castle and the nobility, who may be too eager to get their own share.”

“Certainly, there is a possibility that some may fight for the new product. Even if it is just the carriage seat cushions, they may assist in greasing palms. If I could have the prototypes, I shall focus on quieting anxious voices.”

“Very good. I will see to it appropriately.” Ivano’s response elicited a smile from the man with blue eyes. It appeared that the Cushion Mark I would become an accomplice to bribery.

“Sir Guido, know that those are sure to cause a ruckus among the civil servants.”

“Yes, indeed. They are at their desks all night filling and filing papers—they would definitely appreciate something comfortable for their seats. That material would do well for cushions too...” Augusto stared blankly into the distance, perhaps bracing himself for another round of exhausting himself around the clock—in the past, the staff of the Adventurers’ had gone pale from dealing with blue slimes, and even now, with Idaea and the nursery’s backing, the forecast looked like more of the same.

“The Merchants’ shall recruit woodworkers as well.”

“Erm, Lord Leone, I believe the woodworkers are up to their necks in heated low tables...” Dahlia had preoccupied yet another occupation with one of her inventions; the tables were being sold the second they were made, and the warehouses that had been prepared for them were sitting empty—an extravagance that many couldn’t entertain the thought of.

“Why, there are always more people looking for work. Those who were in a slump now sell ten times their previous output—they even revere her as ‘Dame Chairwoman Rossetti.’”

In fact, they had called her that the other day, and Dahlia had panicked; now that the capital-D Dame was set in stone, she’d likely be on the verge of tears. Then Ivano heard his name again.

“Going forward, Ivano will preside over this matter, and we shall execute his orders.”

“I couldn’t, Lord Guido! Someone like me—” The suggestion was so matter of fact, but *oh, no...*

“What’s the matter, Ivano?”

“I would be overstepping my rank. I could serve in an advisory role, sure, but I would cause trouble in a directory role.” This business was entangled with the aristocracy, and for a commoner like himself to be in charge of it all would be less than ideal. At most, he ought to only suggest, not command the people in this room; surely it wouldn’t do for them to be bossed around by someone of his status.

For whatever reason, however, Forto frowned. “What do you mean, Ivano? The director of business within the Rossetti Trading Company is none other than you. I would be delighted to follow your directions.”

Augusto followed up on that remark. “Certainly, we would not be here if not for you bringing this product to us. You have proved to be a skilled planner, and if anything, I would like to request that you take charge of this project.”

But the other day, Ivano had fallen for Guido’s trick question—in spite of the high praise he’d received, was this yet another trap he was about to step into? Never mind his own skin, he did not want for the company to incur any

damages as a result of a lapse on his part. That said, could one really learn to deal with tricky nobles without first failing? Ivano wanted to become capable of dealing with *them* as he served at Dahlia's side. Should he ask to be an advisor? Should he refrain from taking formal responsibilities so he could work out the details, letting the Merchants' Guild's Leone preside? He was racking his brains when he heard his name again.

"Ivano." Leone's black eyes were waiting for him; the guildmaster nodded, and his usual stiff expression softened to a tender smile—a smile in which Ivano saw that of his own father, although the two men looked nothing alike. "You needn't be reserved—you are already one of *us*."



Following Jonas's guidance, the production team came to a room in the back of the manor with a splendid view of the blossoms in the garden. "This is the Scalfarottos' magical toolmaking workshop, used for making both weapons and magical tools."

Dahlia's heart raced every time she came here. Along one wall were shelves of crafting materials from the ordinary to the extraordinary. A large, sturdy workbench—a perfect place to run experiments—was surrounded by comfortable chairs. The aqua-blue marble flooring had been chiseled for grip. The windows had been crafted out of blue crystal to reduce glare, with two sets of curtains—one white, one black—to adjust for whatever light level the work called for. Messy or smelly experiments could be conducted in a smaller room adjoining the workshop, and the wall between the two had a glass window for observation. This workshop was nothing short of perfection; the one in the Green Tower couldn't even compare.

Behind Jonas were Bernigi, Dahlia, Lucia, and Idaea. Marcella had also been summoned to help with heavy lifting; it was very much appreciated, as the large bottles of slime powders and various liquids were hefty, and he also replaced Ivano as Dahlia's assistant and bodyguard. Marcella wanted to learn more about magic and magical tools too, and what better opportunity was there?

"Here we have the specification document and experiment results for the yellow slime fabric." After the six of them sat around the oval desk, Dahlia took a stack of documents out of her bag. Powdered kingsnake shed, pennyroyal

extract, and armored crab acid were the basis of the mixture, then yellow slime was added before enchanting. Only the top two grades could be used, and those made up only ten percent of total yellow slime powder production, meaning that it was rather precious. As a result of her experimentation, there was more room to improve on both the durability of the fabric format and the shock absorption of the cushion format. However, in this world, there was no real way to get concrete numbers on shock; all she had been able to write was that eggs didn't crack after being dropped on it from a certain height, and that it was hard to penetrate with a blade.

"It says 'hard to penetrate with a blade,' meaning it is not impenetrable?"

"Lord Bernigi, the more of the material's surface a blade comes in contact with, the more elastic and resistant to stabbing and slashing the material is. Something sharp like a pin should have no problem piercing through, however."

"Can it be cut with scissors during production, then?"

Being a couturier, Lucia had the subject matter expertise to both answer the question and explain the facts to everyone. "It should be no problem when cutting it slowly; too fast, and it will stop the scissors. Incidentally, a blade can penetrate the material when inserted slowly."

"Then it truly should be usable as protective equipment—it can guard against damage from monsters." Being a former vice-captain of the Beast Hunters, Bernigi had the subject matter expertise to give his approval; Dahlia would have liked to test out some armor coated with the material right now.

"It says that yellow slime grade-C and below is not durable enough, but how does it actually differ?"

"Here, Master Jonas—it splits and cracks, then crumbles." She laid a thick cloth down on the desk and poked at it, demonstrating exactly what she had found. "As you can tell by feeling it, it does not have much elasticity."

"Yeah, this isn't gonna last—oh, sorry! I mean, this isn't going to last." Lucia hurried to apologize to Bernigi and Jonas.

"Never you mind—talk how you normally do. Here in the workshop, shall we speak freely and candidly exchange our opinions?"

“It’s very kind of you to offer, but I wouldn’t want to be disrespectful to you, Lord D’Orazi.”

“Call me Bernigi, everyone. I am but a retired old man, and I am here not on behalf of the D’Orazi family but rather as a fresh hire of the Weapons Development Team. We all ought to address each other by our first names. If that is a concern, shall we have a scrivener draft us an agreement that we may speak freely without fear of censure afterward?”

“I am sure we can take your word for it, Lord Bernigi, and we gratefully accept the kind offer.” Jonas was the first to respond; he was likely the person most intimately familiar with noble affairs.

Dahlia and the others all exchanged glances before nodding. “Thank you very much, Lord Bernigi.”

“Please continue, Master Dahlia.”

His title for her came like a punch to the solar plexus, and she barely managed to keep herself from gasping out loud. She just needed to convince herself that she had improved as a chairwoman. “V-Very well. This fabric is the one I demonstrated earlier, the one with some elasticity. This version here is produced by applying a thick layer of the mixture, then blasting it with magic; enchanting it slowly will cause the liquid mixture to run off.” She brought out the yolk-yellow fabric and cushion onto the table, letting everyone have a feel for the texture, which was like that of a stiffened slime. One looked impressed, one looked befuddled, one looked suspicious, one looked grave, and one had a great smile.

“This one seems to have multiple layers.”

“Yes, the enchantment was done in three bouts.” When viewed from the side, it was obviously composed of thin layers; one could potentially jam one’s thumb in and try to split them apart.

“And it comes out as one layer if you enchant it in one go?”

“I believe so, yes. Unfortunately, this is the most I can do with my own magic.” This was the outcome even with grade-ten magic. To have it in one chunky layer, they would likely need to outsource it to mages with much more

magic than her.

“We have the talent and the materials here, so let us give it a try. I know my way around enchantments too.”

“Have you made magical tools before, Lord Bernigi?”

“Nay, I know nothing about magical tools, but there have been times when I’ve had to do my own enchanting. See, when I was a young man, the squad did not even have the budget to harden our swords and spears, let alone a magical toolmaking advisor such as yourself, Master Dahlia.” Life had had even less grace to spare for the Beast Hunters of yore.

“Pardon me if my ignorance is showing, but would slime powder grade-C and below solidify into the right texture if a large and sudden flow of magic was applied to it? In metallurgy, softer metals can be alloyed with harder ones by applying a strong magical enchantment.”

“Oh, really? In that case, we should try it with lower-quality slime powder as well. If that doesn’t work, we can also try mixing it with high-quality powder.” Dahlia took out her notepad and quickly jotted down Jonas’s advice. Every lead should be tested if that was the price of getting closer to a better product.

With Marcella accompanying her as her assistant, Dahlia moved to the smaller testing chamber, where the two of them donned masks. She had forgotten to wear one the other day on account of intoxication, but yellow slime powder was extremely fine, and it irritated the throat without proper protection. Dahlia concocted a big batch of the base mixture, split it into five, then added to each a different grade of yellow slime powder. Spectators plastered themselves to the window, intently watching her work—it was a little disconcerting, but Dahlia powered through it, and when her preparations were complete, she and Marcella carried the mixtures back to the workshop.

“Who among us has experience with enchantments?” At Bernigi’s question, Dahlia, Idaea, and Lucia raised their hands; Lucia expressed her disappointment about lacking magic. “And you, Jonas? You seem to be more than powerful enough.”

“Embarrassingly, I am not versed in the craft. I was unable to use magic until my blight, and I did not study it during college either. I am capable only of

offensive fire magic.”

“You have an opportunity to try now if you wish to take it. With just a hardening spell, you can split firewood with a training sword—even break bones with a chair or table leg.”

“I would be delighted to learn from you, sir.”

Dahlia was touched by the first half of the exchange, but then it got a little too dangerous for her liking. Judging by Jonas’s smile, they might simply be joking—though you could never really tell what noblemen were thinking.

“And you, Marcella? Are you familiar with enchanting?”

“No, I’m afraid all I have done is repair stone flooring, stairs, and the like.”

“I shall teach you, then.”

“Would that be all right, Lord Bernigi? I, erm, am but a commoner.”

“All who sit around this table in the workshop are equals, are we not? Besides, many with earth magic are also skilled at enchanting. When it is used to make stonelike products such as clay bricks, the results are always easy to identify.”

Thus began Bernigi’s crash course on magical enchanting. Placed atop a large plate was a smaller one, then in went the mixture before being enchanted. The small volume of the liquid limited any risks that might occur from failure. “First, gather the magic in the palm of your dominant hand, then spread it out flat. This is not offensive spellcasting, so draw only from the very surface of your internal magic, channel it into your fingertips, then *bam!* Drive it in!”

Skill in enchanting did not a good teacher make. The elderly man instructed based on whims, and his two pupils scrunched up their eyebrows. Still, something seemed to have clicked in Jonas as he let his magic flow out of his right arm.

“Something like this, perhaps?” Jonas held his hand over the little plate, and the mixture began sizzling. There was a brief flash, which disappeared in a shimmering red haze and left behind a mound of coarse red granules on the large plate. “Forgive me, for I have failed. It appears that I have burned it.”

“Nay, the liquid has fully transformed, not burned. I am sure you have given it your magic, and this is a great result for your first try. With repeated practice, you are sure to master it!”

Jonas squeezed his right hand shut. “Thank you very much!”

Correction: perhaps Bernigi had what it took to become a magical toolmaking instructor.

“Next is Marcella. Try to strike it hard—*wham!*”

“Wham. Okay!” With a shriek, a splattering of tan sprayed everywhere. Opposite Marcella was his boss, who was struck by a few grains; the pea-sized spheres rolled across the floor. “Dahlia! You okay?! Gods, I’m so sorry, I must’ve put in too much magic! Er, forgive me, Chairwoman...”

“I’m all right, don’t worry.” Obviously, she took no offense to him speaking like an old friend—that was what they were.

Bernigi was less than impressed, however. “Master Dahlia, are you familiar with Marcella on a personal level?” The nobleman must’ve been bothered by the vulgarity.

“I was friends with him long before I became chairwoman. His wife and I grew up together, and Marcella was even one of my guarantors when I founded the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“Ah, I understand now.” He looked pleased with that explanation.

As Lucia flew to fetch a broom and swept the floor, the light brown beads rolling around in the dustpan caught Dahlia’s attention. “I’m wondering if a more concentrated blast of earth magic could make finer granules...”

“Oh, are you conducting an experiment on the slime powder? I would love to get new data!”

“Madam Idaeia, allow me to use my earth magic. I shall also test the grade-C powder.”

“If you could, please, Lord Bernigi!” Her periwinkle eyes shone like the midday sun—not for the former marquis but for slimes. Dahlia decided to keep that observation to herself, though.

Speaking of Dahlia, she placed a large plate before Bernigi, filled a small one with more of the mixture, and placed that one on top of the first. Then, Bernigi pointed his palm toward the stack of plates and ever so slightly cocked it to one side. *Prang*—it was even sharper than when Marcella had tried his hand at it earlier, and the large plate was buried under a heap of tan beads. Bernigi moved on to the grade-C slime powder. The color was a little different on his second go, ranging from tan to tawny, but the most noticeable change was the fine grain size.

“Perhaps yellow slime reacts according to the type of magic used? Or maybe it’s how much magic?” Ideaea spoke to herself as she scribbled down some notes.

“Dahlia, can I touch it?”

“Yes, but as a precaution, put these gloves on first, Lucia.”

“It’s really smooth, but the bits aren’t soft at all, so I don’t think a cushion filled with this stuff would have any give to it. Don’t even get me started on what would happen if it were to rip.”

“Oh!” Smooth, fine, and hard pellets—Dahlia had owned something like that in her bedroom in Japan. “I’m sorry to pester you, Lord Bernigi, but could you use your magic the same way but double the amount?”

“’Tis but a trifle. I could make a hundred times that, should you ask me to.” Of course, a former marquis would be on a totally other level. After Dahlia refilled the plate with liquid, Bernigi enchanted it as easily as he had promised.

Dahlia thanked him, then wrapped all of the pellets in a large handkerchief and tied it off at the top. She gave the sides a squeeze, confirming her hypothesis that it would be yielding yet supportive. The toolmaker had to keep herself from giggling.

“Master Dahlia, it is not as elastic, and I fail to see how a powder would be effective for lining armor.”

“Without a very strong fabric, that pack will undoubtedly burst.” Both Jonas and Bernigi doubted its efficacy.

“I think this would be better for the Tailors’ Guild—Lucia, feel this.”

“Okay! Ooh, this is fun...” She did as instructed, and she squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed as her lips curled upward. Despite the smile and gleaming dayflower eyes, the couturier’s expression was a little unsettling. Lucia stood up and approached Bernigi—all the while squeezing that pellet-filled handkerchief, of course. “Lord Bernigi, you said you could make a hundred times more, right? Could you please do that? Right now, if possible!”

“Erm, yes, of course.”

The elderly man seemed overwhelmed by Lucia’s fervor, and Dahlia empathized. Marcella smiled awkwardly, and Jonas had no words as he tried to remove himself from the situation. Idaea was still jotting down notes, yet to return from her own world.

“Dahliaaa, a hundred times more of the mixture, please!”

“I’m on it.” She headed to the test chamber again, and where she went, Marcella went too. This time, when she finished her task, Lucia and Bernigi were the ones who rendezvoused with them.

Lucia had in her hands a large cut of white cloth, a needle, and thread—she had begun sewing up a large bag and, as a professional couturier, was nearing completion already.

“Perhaps different types of magic will yield different results. I actually have a little water magic, so if you wouldn’t mind, I would like to try enchanting it as well.” Idaea produced somewhat soft, faintly green pebbles.

“What do we have?”

“Yellow slime reacts to water magic differently than it reacts to your earth magic, Lord Bernigi. Master Jonas did not fail—in fact, he did the opposite. I believe that different magic creates different results, and the greater the magic output, the smaller the grain size will be.”

“Does blue slime react differently to one’s element as well?”

“Ah! I would like to try that too, Ms. Dahlia!”

Afterward, Dahlia hurried to mix a batch of the blue slime concoction she used for making waterproof cloth, then she had Jonas, Marcella, and Idaea use

their respective elemental magic on it. Sadly, all the samples remained liquid, and their only reaction was to turn slightly cloudy.

“I wonder why it’s only yellow slime that behaves that way.”

Marcella offered his disappointed chairwoman a plausible theory. “Maybe it’s because water is absorbed by earth but evaporates in air? Water can’t absorb water, and if it’s evaporated, it’s gone.”

Despite the setbacks, Dahlia was very grateful for everything today. This was definitely not anything she could have learned, tested, or even come up with on her own, yet here they were, blazing through one experiment after another and understanding so much more than they had before.

“Shall I retrieve some red slime and green slime powder as well?”

“Yes, please, Master Jonas.”

“I have black slime powder as well, if you wish to experiment with that too.”

“No, I should probably refrain from that...” The image of Volf’s concerned face popped up in her head. It wouldn’t do to expose everyone in the room to the dangers of black slime either. If the day came that she really did want to run some tests on it, she would fully prepare the necessary personnel and potions.

Meanwhile, Lucia flew out of the testing chamber, followed by Jonas and a pallid Bernigi with his cane. When she returned, she exclaimed to the world, “I have made the ultimate cushion!”

“The what now?”

“Here!” Hugging the large rectangular cushion, she plopped on the ground, and it silently conformed to her body and propped her up. Unfortunately, it was hard to tell by just observing. Lucia wildly flapped her arms about. “Dahlia! Try it out, try it out!”

Dahlia did as told and sat on it; the grains inside crunched as it supported her, molding around the contours of her body no matter how she shifted her weight. She would have loved to embrace it as it lulled her to sleep. In the bedroom of her previous life, she’d had a large beanbag cushion that had been a very popular item for how relaxing it was; some had even dubbed it “the

cushion that introduced indolence to humanity.” What they had come up with was just as sublime—no, it was even more dynamic and form fitting. Lucia was right—this was the ultimate cushion. Dahlia suppressed her urge to wrap her arms around it and instead finally stood up. “Please take turns, everyone.”

Bernigi’s turn. The elderly man sat down and sighed in astonishment. He shifted his body around, closed his eyes, and remained still; it was likely too difficult for him to get back up, and that was not a comment on his cane or knee. When he was finished, he asked Lucia to make another one as he went off to produce more of the beads.

Jonas’s turn. He lifted it up, slowly reclined into it, and sat in all sorts of positions. Afterward, he stood up, lifted it again, and cradled it in his arms. Jonas was never one to show too much emotion, but it was obvious enough that he had taken a liking to the cushion by the way he was cuddling with it; Dahlia thought maybe she could make him another one as thanks for everything he did for her.

Idaea’s turn. It took but a moment after sitting down before she beamed and exclaimed how wonderful it was. She then lay on her back and hugged the cushion, giggling and refusing to get back up. Seeing Idaea in bliss, Marcella slowly backed away from her and whispered to Dahlia that he could wait. The researcher could take this prototype home later.

“The feel of it was quite shocking, I must say. The way it invites you to loosen up and relax, it certainly deserves the moniker of the ultimate cushion.”

“It truly makes one feel quite secure...” Bernigi and Jonas would both undoubtedly be happy to have one in their respective rooms.

“Dahlia! This stuff is amazing! It might take a bit of fitting, but I’m sure it could be used to pad the chest—”

“L-Lucia, why don’t we talk about this afterward?”

“Yeah, you’re right! Gotta compare it to the real deal, right?”

Marcella suddenly found the floor very interesting to look at. He used one hand to cover his face as his shoulders softly trembled. Bernigi and Jonas had enough noble training to keep straight faces. Dahlia knew she didn’t have it in

her to hide her reaction, so she went to clean up the plates.

“About those pale green grains—were they produced by enchanting green slime?”

“That was yellow slime with water magic, Lord Bernigi. I tried enchanting the blue slime mixture, but it did not react to water magic.”

“It may be because I don’t have much water magic. It would be a good idea to conduct the experiments again with the help of people who are more powerful with the four basic elements.” Finally returning to her seat, Idaea was back in business mode—apart from the cushion, which was still in her arms. As a result, she was sitting a bit away from the desk, and something about her words was not very convincing.

“I would like to add ice to that list as well. Perhaps I’ll hire some mages for this task.”

“Master Dahlia, I shall endeavor to assist you with my fire magic today. Shall I ask Lord Guido for his help with water and ice afterward?”

“I would very much appreciate that, Master Jonas!”

“Sir Scarlatti should be proficient in both water and fire—I hear he can even boil large monsters alive. For wind, you can turn to Sir Jedda, though I am not sure whether he still uses his magic much as the guildmaster of the Merchants’.”

Fire, earth, water, wind, and ice—users of all of these elements had already been assembled here, and they were noblemen too. They should be quite powerful, meaning the yield they would produce should likewise be great. This was a rare opportunity—there might not even be a second chance.

“However, it might not be wise to—” Idaea began to speak, but Dahlia could not hear her words.

“I’ll go ask them right away!”

“D-Dahlia!” Marcella chased after the fleeing chairwoman.

Bernigi was left wide-eyed and flabbergasted, Jonas rubbed his brow, and

Lucia simply nodded.

Idaea looked toward the opened door with reverence. “To be able to run to them for a favor like that—that is very brave of her. Ms. Dahlia is a very admirable chairwoman.”

Admirable? Was that really the appropriate adjective for her foolhardiness? It was only that Dahlia currently had an extremely narrow ken. As her close friend, Lucia was certain about one thing. “That’s not her as a chairwoman—that’s Dahlia the hopeless magical toolmaker.”



As soon as the servant answered the door, Dahlia burst into the parlor. “I have a favor to ask of everyone here. I hope you can lend me your strength!”

The men had just finished their discussions and were about to disband, but they all leaped to their feet at the appearance of the out-of-breath, overwhelmingly urgent chairwoman. “Of course, Madam Rossetti. In Volf’s absence, I am at your service.”

“I shall do whatever I can as the master of the Merchants’ Guild.”

“The Adventurers’ Guild is also at your disposal.”

“Miss Dahlia, the Tailors’ Guild may have little power, but I shall wield it to its full extent for you.” Continuing after Guido, each of the men agreed on behalf of his guild. She was already very accomplished and had helped everyone here. Perhaps it could be said that Chairwoman Rossetti brought great profit to everyone. None of them could possibly refuse her imploration.

“Did something happen, Chairwoman?!”

“What is it that you wish to ask of us?” Ivano and Guido asked at the same time.

“Please enchant the slime for me!”

“Enchant the slime...?” Muttering voices overlapped.

Other than Ivano, the men here were all viscounts or even greater in rank. Those with great magical ability received mandatory education in controlling it during primary school. There were lectures in magical arts in college too, where

students got practical training on how to enchant things like metals and small items. Depending on the person, they might wield magic for combat or self-defense. However, not once had the lesson plans included enchanting slimes—powdered or otherwise. The thought had never even come to mind, to be honest. Everyone had confused looks on their faces—everyone except for Ivano, who pressed his palm against his forehead.

“I am practiced in offensive magic, but enchanting slimes? What would that entail?”

“Would that be possible for someone like me who has no experience crafting magical tools?” The hesitant questions came from Augusto and Forto.

“It is—we will begin by teaching you how to do it. Does that sound about correct, Master Dahlia?”

“Yes...” Seeing all the bewildered faces in the room and Guido’s curious smile, Dahlia felt sweat bead up on her brow. She had finally realized the consequences of her actions—all too late, however.

“I do not go back on my word; I shall lend a hand.” Leone decisively volunteered his help, perhaps in consideration for the company as the Merchants’ guildmaster. Whatever the reason, it was very much appreciated.

“Thank you very much. In the workshop, we have discovered that the differing magic changes the output of the material. I understand the impudence of my request, but I hope to borrow everyone’s elemental magic to get to the bottom of this matter. Also, um, we have produced another material as well.” Dahlia had completely changed her tone from when she’d entered the room.

But Forto heard her out and was very interested in this development. “Yet another one?! What kind of material is it?”

“Erm, it’s a smooth pellet. It does not have elasticity, but it makes for a unique-feeling material in cushions. I have a hard time coming up with an equivalent, but it is very relaxing. Lucia is very happy with it as well. I believe you will understand if you try it for yourself.”

“If Lucia is happy with it, then it must be something suitable for us clothiers to use. Very well. Allow me to help too.”

“A new, relaxing material, you say? How very interesting. I should like to sample it too; it may be applicable for use in furniture.”

“If we assume that applying magic of differing elements to it may create even more impactful materials, then perhaps we may even need to construct more slime farms...” Smiles spread throughout the room.

“Shall we go with Master Dahlia, then?” Guido’s prompting put everyone on their feet. Despite doubts regarding the prospect of enchanting slime powder, they all seemed to be very passionate about magical tools and new materials.

It was only afterward that Ivano informed Dahlia of the truth: “Those were merely their expressions as they worked their mental abaci.”

Heeding Dahlia’s clarion call, all parties headed to the magical toolmaking workshop. The nobles eyed the bead cushion with skepticism, but only a portion quickly changed their minds when they sat on it; some were left with smiles and others with frowns—it wasn’t for everyone.

Next came preparing for the experiment. As some of those present were unfamiliar with or ignorant about magical enchantments, Bernigi reprised his role. However, there was now another instructor: Leone. Shockingly, he had been a member of the Magical Tool Research Group in college; he must’ve seen the surprise on Dahlia’s face, and he nonchalantly dropped the fact that he had been Carlo’s senior in the research circle, shocking her even further.

“I know little about magical toolmaking, but I know my way around the basics of enchanting. Firstly, *whoosh* your magic into the palm of your hand, and then —” Bernigi was apparently a big fan of onomatopoeia for his intuition-based teaching.

On the other hand, Leone was a much more logical lecturer, writing down notes on the fundamentals of magic and enchantments on paper. “Enchanting with materials is generally executed with nonelemental magic, though those who have the power of fire, water, and the like are still able to—” Students went and learned under the teacher whose style they preferred.

Meanwhile, Ivano assigned himself the duty of recordkeeping, and Dahlia focused on combining the mixtures. Though her magic was classified as

nonelemental, it would have been more accurate to say that her magic had trace amounts of elements that the instrument hadn't been able to measure; she simply couldn't enchant with or cast elemental magic. Her hair was red and her eyes green—hearing their busy voices, she couldn't help wishing she was capable of fire or air.

Bernigi demonstrated the enchantment with the yellow slime mixture as Leone explained his process. Bernigi had developed his own style for hardening equipment, and that had likely involved earth magic; he beamed when Leone explained it was the perfect element for weapons and armor.

Then it was time to begin hands-on practice. The mixtures to be used were the one for yellow slime-impregnated cloth and the one for waterproof cloth. Once the respective slime powders were added, then fire, earth, water, wind, and ice magic would be applied. The enthusiastic students took their turns enchanting, but as expected from first-timers, there was a bit of hullabaloo—failing to apply enough magic to cause a reaction; evaporating the liquid with offensive magic; washing the mixture away with water; and freezing over the whole plate, to name a few problems.

When they finally became used to it, the wielders of powerful magic conducted the desired experiments on yellow, blue, red, and green slime. Beside them, Lucia and Idaea tried the same with their lesser magic. Before long, the bench was piled high with heaps of grains, from fine to pebble sized. In this workshop where aristocrats and commoners alike intermingled, there was a fervor in the air. There were those who were tense but endeavored to succeed, those who anticipated delving into the unknown, and proud noblemen with personal stakes in the outcome.

By the time things settled back down, the darkness of night was already descending. The executives of the various guilds called their servants to handle affairs and cancel dinner plans; their schedules had gone right out the window already. However, out of an abundance of consideration, they did so in the hallway, and the others did not notice. Never panicking, never making a fuss, and always graceful—such was the nobleman.

Eventually, the experiments had been completed and the results were in:

Yellow slime: Regular enchantment on high-grade powder resulted in a cloth that was somewhat resistant to blades and the shock-absorbing material—what Dahlia had made before in the Green Tower. Strong earth enchantment on any grade of powder resulted in fine beads suitable for cushions and furniture—the first new material that had been made in this workshop today. Strong fire magic enchantment resulted in fine beads that, for whatever reason, felt nearly identical to the ones created by earth magic, except that they were red-brown in color. They caused no burns or other negative effects when exposed to bare skin. Strong and weak water enchantment resulted in pale green grains that became finer in proportion to the strength of the magic. They were strangely tender and easily crushed, making them likely unsuitable to supporting the body. Closer examination into their characteristics was required. Air enchantment produced no reaction, unfortunately.

Blue slime: Regular enchantment on any grade of powder resulted in waterproof cloth. Elemental enchantments other than ice turned the liquid cloudy but otherwise produced no reaction. Ice enchantment froze the mixture but produced no reaction otherwise. Further monitoring and reexamination after thawing were required.

Red slime: As it was the least commonly encountered among the four types of slime, the powder was available in only a single grade. The samples used today had been denatured of their corrosive properties as well as completely detoxified of their irritancy to skin.

Strong water enchantment resulted in grains that were warm to the touch. They were coral-red and semitranslucent. Each was the size of a bird egg and had the texture of one too; combined with their slight warmth, Dahlia couldn't help but see them as little hard-boiled red slimes, as bad as that sounded. "What is this material good for?" Fire crystals were much more efficient for heating things up. She rubbed her cheek as her light bulb remained dim. Bernigi then touched everyone's hearts by suggesting that it could be used not to raise temperature but to maintain it, for cribs in the winter or for transporting the infirm outdoors. This material also required further research.

Green slime: Fire enchantment on any grade of powder did not produce grains but rather a single ball of green fibers. Said fibers could then be

smoothed out and flattened, but they produced no breeze, unlike the zephyricloth. Their low tensile strength made them obviously unsuitable for fabric, much to the chagrin of Forto and Lucia. They seemed to have no real purpose and were set aside, and by the end of the experimentation, when they had dried out, Ivano had a terrible time trying to scrape them off the workbench. The fine fibers formed a paperlike sheet; alas, it was green, and the cost of the mixture was prohibitive.

But that was true of the other materials they had produced too—they needed to be affordable for them to see widespread adoption. Could less mixture be used? Could some of the ingredients be omitted? There was more testing to be done. The biggest problem of all, though, was the magic required. Powerful mages could be hired to create these materials, but that would make them very expensive. Mass production would also call for numbers and time.

Lucia poked at the edge of the cushion. “More of these beads would be nice, but making lots of them takes lots of magic too...”

The fine cushion beads were the most promising of the materials so far. They didn’t seem to require delicate enchantment; rather, they seemed to fairly explode out of a burst of strong magic. Dahlia did some poking as well. “I wonder if we could get everyone to blast it at once and make a whole bunch of them.”

“Dahlia!”

“Chairwoman Rossetti...”

“Chairwoman...” They all turned to her with terrifying looks on their faces.

Oops. Shoulda kept that to myself.

“As they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Jonas?”

“Yes, sir.”

Bernigi and Jonas approached the workbench, and without so much as a count-in, they synchronously struck the little plate of mixture with their powerful magic, instantly turning it into fine beads. They somehow even nodded at the same time. “Jonas, could you lend me a mana potion? I should

like to give it my all.”

“It is yours for the taking.” He began distributing bottles to the others as well. Bernigi drank his without any hesitation, and Augusto took his, seemingly understanding the implications: everyone was to have a full tank of gas for this next challenge. Dahlia took hers too. Marcella grimaced as he knocked it back—partially because of surprise and panic, but also, of course, because of the astringency. All of these potions were icky, frankly; surely the alchemists could make some improvements.

“Master Dahlia, would you be so kind as to concoct more of the liquid mixture?”

“Of course. I’ll get on it right away.” She did as Bernigi asked, making as much of the stuff as there was powdered kingsnake shed available. Leone lent a hand too; he was as quick as any active magical toolmaker, shocking her a third time today.

Then, all parties made their way to the rear of the manor. They covered the ground with waterproof cloth, placed the excessively large basin—almost a bathtub, really—on top, and dumped buckets of the mixture in. Directing was Guido, around whom were a few mages standing by. He explained that they were there in case healing magic was required, contrary to Dahlia’s assumption that they would be providing the necessary fire or earth magic; she felt terribly sorry.

“If we are all ready, then let us begin!”

Augusto, Marcella, Bernigi, and Jonas—all wielders of much magic in their respective elements—took astonishingly little time to coordinate themselves. Perhaps the pair of earth magic wielders were particularly affinitive, but even so, it seemed like even their expressions were awfully similar—so thought Dahlia as she watched over the enchanting. The four men pointed their palms toward the basin, matched each other’s breathing, then called forth their power. The immense blast of magic enveloped its target in a hazy shimmer, and moments later, a screaming explosion of pellets erupted in the direction of the magic blast, naturally peppering the four enchanters and even the observers standing a distance away as well.



Rolling around on the tarps were beads of uniform size and color, and touching them confirmed that they felt just like the ones made in the workshop. The material went beyond filling the large basin; it formed a small hill of light oxide-brown beads—enough to fill plenty of cushions.

“Aha ha ha!” Though it wasn’t clear who was first to laugh, it was clear that—after the nerves of learning how to enchant, doing the experiments, fatigue, and this unspoken camaraderie that had emerged—whoever it was had infected everyone else, and soon all were guffawing here at the grounds of the villa.

Guido brought a pile of cloth and suggested that everyone help erode that mound of pale brown beads by taking some home. Their safety would be tested by the Scalfarottos’ mages and alchemists, who would even stabilize their state as a precaution. Multiple enchantments were difficult enough under ordinary circumstances, so the fact that these mages could conduct them freely must have meant they had tons of magic in their reserves; Dahlia was more than a little envious.

Just wrapping up the fine beads in a large cloth made for quite the comfortable seating surface. Once the cushion was made, the question became where to put it in the Green Tower—her bedroom or the living room? Furthermore, the enthusiastic letters requesting priority delivery would come to Dahlia and Forto the very next afternoon.

“I really can’t thank you all enough for your help!” Back at the workshop, Dahlia bowed deeply, followed by Ivano and Jonas.

“Everyone will receive a copy of the experimental results once I have them compiled.” Beside Idaea was a stack of papers containing the data.

She and Ivano had also collected notes during this session, which were now being passed around the group. “As we will also be testing the materials for durability and longevity, it should be a while before they can be put into production. I humbly ask that everyone continue to lend us their strength through this endeavor.”

“The Tailors’ Guild promises our full support.”

“You have the Adventurers’ support as well.”

Given how unreasonable she was being, Dahlia couldn’t have been more thankful for their cooperation. As mentioned, the work was yet to be completed. She would experiment and make similar products; test for durability, safety, and the effects of time on the materials; and check for degradation from sunlight and susceptibility to water, among other things. Literature could provide a frame of reference, though there was very little writing done on slimes. Still, this wasn’t something that only she could do—she had the help of the guilds with commercializing these materials; when it came to research, she had Idaea and the Scalfarottos’ mages, alchemists, and blacksmiths. Dahlia’s role would be to come up with new potential products and conduct quality assurance.

“These materials you’ve made today have all been so wonderful, and I’m excited to see what becomes of them. One way or another, I’m certain that they will bring prosperity to the Rossetti Trading Company.”

Leone agreed with Augusto. “Implementing these materials would indeed be quite profitable. They can be registered before they become commercial products; this cushion fill, for example, ought to be registered as soon as it is confirmed to be safe.”

A magical tool registered in a contract at the Merchants’ Guild guaranteed its inventor the profits they deserved, granting them royalties much like a patent had in her previous world. And though knockoffs or otherwise similar products could be made in secret, the Guild would be totally barred from dealing in them. Furthermore, the counterfeiter’s credit would plummet, and any business they conducted within the capital would be strained at best. This system was an inventor’s best friend. Naturally, there wasn’t much that could be done about counterfeits smuggled out of the country or wholesaled to a fence, and a product could not be registered at the Merchants’ if it and the processes involved in its manufacture required absolute secrecy.

“Thank you for the advice,” Dahlia said—to Leone, but also to everyone else at the table. “I understand this will be a bother, but I ask everyone to please add your signatures when the contracts for the magical tools are prepared.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

“What?”

It was a little surprising how all eyes pointed in unison toward her, but she reflected upon her words—she had essentially said, “Every one of you, get over to the Guild the minute the contracts are ready.” She scrambled to correct herself. “Oh, um, I understand that you all are very busy! I did not intend to trouble you to visit the Merchants’ Guild, but once I scrutinize the contracts, I will have them sent around for everyone to sign. I understand it might be very inconvenient, but I hope I can have everyone’s suggestions on how to split the profits.”

Augusto raised his right hand. “That isn’t the problem, Chairwoman Rossetti. Rather, you would like *my* signature on the contracts?”

“Yes.”

“Erm, you are saying that includes me as well?”

“Yes, Mr. Forto. Everybody here helped, so I would like everybody here to sign them.” *I mean, that much is obvious.* Each person’s share was based on their contribution, but they all had exchanged ideas and taken part in the experiments—they could not have achieved what they had today without this communal labor. But maybe this would be difficult for the Guild. “Um, is there perhaps a rule prohibiting individual names on the contracts?”

Leone returned a smile. “Not at all. I would be grateful to put down my signature.” Augusto and Forto were likely shocked because they had never collaborated on developing a magical tool before, then.

“Marcella and I are employees of the company, Chairwoman, so we shall exclude ourselves. As we shall continue prototyping and adjusting, we would be extremely delighted to split it sixty for the Rossetti Trading Company and forty divided equally among the rest of you. Once we come to an agreement, we ask everyone to sign their names. Furthermore, we hope to have the assistance of Mr. Jonas of the Scalfarotto Arms Works and Ms. Idaea on future research.” Ivano had already thought up a brilliant way to share the profits: Bernigi, Guido,

Leone, Forto, Augusto, Jonas, Lucia, and Idaea made eight, meaning that they would each get five of the remaining forty percent. It made the math easy, but Dahlia couldn't tell whether it was fair.

"That is better than I would ask for. I accept." The Merchants' guildmaster gave his response immediately; he always had and still did look out for them.

"I thank the Rossetti Trading Company. Please know that you always have my support should you ever need it."

"It's an honor. I will help to the extent of my capabilities. I'll have farms developed for kingsnakes and armored crabs should the need arise, and if it does not I'll send our guildmaster to hunt whatever monsters you need." Augusto's joke elicited a few laughs.

Guido and Jonas were speaking among themselves, too quietly to be heard. Lucia muttered to herself that maybe she would save up enough money quicker than she'd expected; this was likely in reference to her atelier, and Dahlia would be overjoyed if that were the case.

"With just half a day, you have made gold rain—is there perhaps anything the Rossetti Trading Company would like?"

Ivano answered Bernigi's flattery and question, summing up Dahlia's thoughts beautifully. "We hope that everyone will forever sail alongside the Rossetti Trading Company in this same boat." The room fell silent, maybe because his words were *that* beautiful; the men seemed to be touched. Now that he commanded everyone's attention, he continued, "The only question remaining is what to call them—the product names. 'Yellow Slime Cloth' and 'Yellow Slime Cushion' would hardly be appealing."

"The yellow slimes *did* give up their lives for this, so it makes sense to me..." Idaea was visibly disappointed, but even Dahlia wasn't too keen on the two names.

"Since the sturdy cloth is somewhat impervious to blades, perhaps 'light protective fabric'?"

"Good idea, Lord Bernigi," said Dahlia. "That would make its purpose unmistakable."

“In the same vein, how about ‘impact absorption material’ for the cushioning?”

“I agree with Lord Guido’s suggestion. As blacksmiths and arms craftspeople will likely interact with these two products frequently, I believe it would be prudent to give them straightforward names.”

The group had arrived at their decision readily. It might lack romance, but it was fine just as long as it was easy to understand. Out of nowhere, though, Dahlia was struck with the thought of what Volf would name them were he present. *Too much magic sword making.* “That leaves us with the pellets formed by earth and fire magic. They look like little bits of pumice, so how about ‘pumice bits’?”

“Perhaps we ought to give that a second thought, Master Dahlia. Hmm...”

“They are light as bubbles and the insides are sand, so perhaps ‘bubblesand’? Or does that sound too much like some sort of bodywash?”

“Ivano’s idea isn’t bad, but if we would like to prioritize aesthetics, then how about something like ‘dunasphera’?”

“Dunasphera? That rolls right off the tongue!”

“You are quite the poet, Lord Forto. What a wonderful mental image that name evokes.”

As the name zephyricloth proved, Forto really had a way with words. It wasn’t like Dahlia hadn’t known coming into this, but it really drove home how lacking her own nomenclature skills were.

“Lord Bernigi mentioned that the large red slime grains could potentially be used in beds for infants and the sick; would a plainer name be better for medical use?”

“What say you all about ‘body heat conservation material’? It does exactly what it suggests.”

“That is very accurate indeed.” With Bernigi’s help, another decision had quickly been made. It was good to have a name that was to the point.

“It’s rather unfortunate that the green slime material could not be used as

textile fibers.”

“It might just have some sort of use after exsiccation, though...” Ideaea responded to Forto’s disappointment with her own dissatisfaction. They were both very passionate about fabrics and slimes, respectively, but the product’s merits were not plain to see.

With all of the names decided, it was time to wrap up the day—not much of a day anymore, as stars were scattered across the sky already. Everyone made ready to depart, and as they finally approached the door, Augusto spoke again. “It is amazing how you came up with that name in an instant, Lord Fortunato.”

Guido apparently felt the same way. “You might be wasting your talents at the Tailors’ Guild, Lord Forto. How about trying your hand at writing an opera?”

“Your words flatter me, gentlemen,” he replied with a graceful smile.

“Lord Luini, would you come over sometime soon to help me proofread a love letter for my wife? I shall be more than happy to pay you for your services, of course.”

“Pff—it would be my pleasure. I shall sit beside you, and we can work on it together if you would like; uncork a nice bottle of wine for me?” Forto somehow managed to hold back from bursting out laughing at Leone’s deadpan delivery, but Dahlia and the others lacked the fortitude.

The only person who understood the gravitas and earnestness of that request was the grimacing Ivano.

Boar Hot Pot and Yuzu Liqueur

“So gently do you yield support, so tender your embrace. From me to never part again, beg I for you to grace.”

“Volf, how about you get away from my cushion right this moment?” Dahlia knew her brand-new bead cushion was comfortable, but there was something off about the way he’d phrased that.

The weather was a little chilly that evening after the group experiment, and knowing Volf would be traveling by horse, she’d preheated the heated low table in the living room and laid out her long cushion filled with dunasphera; he had marveled at how the fine beads clung to his touch. Dahlia had told him to warm up as she finished her preparations in the kitchen, and he had really taken her words to heart—Volf had really let his hair down, so to speak, as he snuggled shoulder-deep into the heated low table, cuddled the cushion, and squeezed his eyes shut. People joked that locking eyes with the capital’s handsomest man was enough to enthrall anyone, though tonight, the reality seemed to be the other way around—the boy splayed out across the floor was himself enthralled by the heated low table and dunasphera cushion. Dahlia had always found that Volf reminded her of her pet dog from her previous life, yet today, he was nothing but a little house cat.

Those golden eyes still hidden, he made an appeal. “Sorry, Dahlia. Just a bit more.”

“Okay. It’ll take a little bit longer before the hot pot is ready anyway. You must be exhausted, Volf.” She found herself worrying for the balled-up boy; he had only returned from his expedition this morning, so he must’ve pushed himself to come visit.

“Maybe just a little.”

“Next time you’re so worn out from an expedition, please don’t force yourself to come. You can always send someone to deliver the things and come another day yourself, you know?”

“Hey, I’m resting right now. Hope I’m not bothering you and getting in the way of your work, though.”

“You’re never a bother, Volf. And I’ve already finished today’s tasks anyway.” She’d had a feeling Volf might show up today, so she had woken up early to draft the documents and finish other work—that wasn’t something he needed to know, though.

“This cushion is, like, really, really nice. It goes perfectly with the Table of De—the heated low table.”

“The fill is a new material we’ve come up with called dunasphera; Mr. Forto came up with the wonderful name.”

“Dunasphera, eh? Did you have another name in mind, Dahlia?”

She paused. “Pumice bits.”

He paused. “Yeah, that’s pretty good too.”

There was something ever so slightly painful about the way Volf covered his face with the cushion to avoid eye contact. *I’d rather you laugh at me.* “What would you have named it, Volf?”

Another pause. “The Sands of Sloth.”

Yet another pause. “I can see the connection, yes.” That was more or less what she’d expected from him. Neither of them could really come up with marketable names.

“I’d heard from Master Jonas before coming, but it really is true you can relax with this thing.”

“You heard from Master Jonas?”

“Yeah, I dropped by before coming here. I’m presuming this is the same thing, but he said he really likes the new big, long cushion he’s put in his room.”

Dahlia had heard that Jonas had installed a large heated low table in his room to get through winter; he must’ve been basking in its warmth right now, just as Volf was doing. She stifled a giggle as she remembered that Guido had said Jonas looked like a colossal turtle. “I’m so glad he does. Lord Guido didn’t seem to enjoy it very much...” Guido had looked a little uncomfortable sitting on the

cushion yesterday; maybe it wasn't to his liking.

"It's the texture that my brother doesn't like. 'You know how your feet get stuck in the sand at the beach? I get this terribly uneasy feeling down my back,' he said. They had company, so Master Jonas had to hold back his laughter."

She had to do the same just now. Everyone had their own preferences, and she didn't want to be rude.

"This is from the squad, and this is from the giant hog farmer—all for you, Dahlia." Volf pointed to the giant boar and giant hog meat that he'd brought with him today.

The targets of this expedition had been giant boars, of which the Beast Hunters had slain the male leader of the sounder and two of the three females with him. They had then brought the carcasses to the farm to turn them into bacon. As the meat needed to be smoked and cured, the farmer had instead given away some fresh hog meat to everyone who was interested.

Dahlia had visited that farm some time ago, accompanying the Beast Hunters on their picnic under the guise of the "rookies' equestrian training," and giant boars had attacked during that time too. The boars knocked down the farm's fences every two years, and a few years back, one boar had even stolen fifteen female hogs. To prevent that from happening again, Dahlia and the Beast Hunters had devised a new device called the nebelfalle, an automated atomizer loaded with black chili concentrate. Any animal that approached the hog farm too closely would be pepper sprayed and disabled by pain and odor.

"Are you sure, Volf? This is quite a lot of meat."

"Definitely. The whole squad got theirs already, and the farm said the nebelfalle is helping them out lots—they haven't had a single giant boar or raider trespass since, they said."

Fermo was manufacturing an improved version of the nebelfalle, and more black chili concentrate had been produced so that any intruders would be completely covered. Dahlia was afraid that might affect other wildlife, but at least the farm was okay.

"Since I always have you cook for me, why don't you let me do the grilling

today?”

“Just stay put for me, Volf. I’m getting the wild boar hot pot ready, and all that’s left to do is to bring everything to a boil.” *Botan nabe* is what she would have liked to call it, but that was a name from a lifetime ago. She was in the middle of prepping Welsh onion, napa cabbage, thinly sliced carrot and burdock, and mushrooms, and she would also add miso for flavor. Under the pretext of developing menus for future expeditions, Grato had passed the miso along to Volf, who had brought it with him today. During the field training day, Dahlia had asked where she could buy some; however, as the miso wasn’t from a regular store but a trading company that imported from Esterland, the Beast Hunters’ captain had also written her a letter of introduction—a very exciting development indeed.

Only when she set the heated low table did Volf finally crawl out from underneath. It was not without grim resolve and second thinking, but he helped fetch the rest of the tableware and carried the pot to the compact magical stove. As the thinly sliced boar and the vegetables gently simmered, Dahlia mixed in the miso. Unfortunately, there was no kombu to be had, but on the upside, giant boar was fattier than regular nonmonster boar, and it made a great stock.

Dahlia filled the pair of glasses with a pale yellow alcohol, then cut them with a bit of branch; it was equally good neat, but she felt soda water was most appropriate with *botan nabe*.

“Oh, this has a wonderful aroma. Is it yuzu?”

“That’s right. It’s been steeping since the summer.” Quite a while back, she and Volf had talked about yuzu liqueur. He’d mentioned that he liked it, so she’d macerated some summer yuzu with neutral spirits and rock sugar. The latter was rather pricey here in Ordine, but she’d splurged on enough for three big bottles and produced a beautiful yellow drink.

“Does yuzu dissolve in alcohol?”

“No, I took them out after a bit more than a month.” They clinked glasses as she explained the process. The liqueur had the sweetness of the fruit, and just a touch of the bitterness too. Its initial notes were fragrant, it was supple in its

development in the mouth, and the finish had a refreshing quality that was characteristic of citrus. The ethanol and astringency lingered on the tongue, beckoning the drinker to take another sip of that sweet liqueur, so busy on the nose and palate.

“It’s odd how it tastes even more fragrant than it smells...”

“Summer yuzu readily imparts its flavors to the spirits. If you don’t find it mellow enough, I could make some more with winter yuzu.”

“I think I’d like it better as is. With this, you know you’re drinking something alcoholic, and this aroma—it’s really something else.” Volf examined his glass, then took another sip with great satisfaction on his face; Dahlia vowed to herself to make five bottles next year.

She took a big ladle of the steaming hot pot into her bowl, then tucked in. Her chopsticks homed in on the giant boar meat. The color was a little pinker than pork, the texture quite springy but far from tough, the flavor was closer to beef, and it worked very well with the miso. It wasn’t heavy at all, despite it being a little fatty. The broth, having extracted the flavors of the vegetables, meat, and miso, was beyond words. Both Dahlia and Volf interspersed silent bouts of eating with sips of the yuzu liqueur. Less-sweet steamed bread soaked in the broth rounded off the meal. She had chosen it because it was also a little bit better for digestion; ever since Volf had gotten bashed in the pit of the stomach by a shield during training, his appetite had never quite recovered. Her original intent had been to have it with chicken stew, but it was just right with the boar hot pot as well.

The duo had worked up a sweat after dinner, and they extracted themselves from the heated low table. Dahlia refilled their glasses with yuzu liqueur on the rocks. “How did your expedition go?”

“The giant boar was a little more giant than we’d expected, and it charged at us and sent five of the guys flying. The priest quickly took a look at them, and they were as good as new.”

It was dangerous enough to hurt you guys was what she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. She’d heard that being charged by a giant boar was like being flattened by a fully loaded wagon; slaying one unscathed was likely too

tall an order even for the Order of Beast Hunters.

“We shot its legs out with the Galeforce Bow, but it had too much momentum and didn’t come to a stop until Randolph smacked it with his broad shield.”

“A shield? Whoa...” It seemed that shields could be used as weapons too. Dahlia had thought armor would work better enchanted with weight-reduction magic, but that wouldn’t help Randolph in cases like these.

“A broad shield is like a thick slab of steel that has been hardened as much as possible, so you can imagine how well it works against a wild boar. Randolph’s fists and elbows were twinging afterward—he was one of the five guys who needed healing by the priest.”

“Is that maybe because the impact goes to his hands?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t matter how much you roll with the punches, crashing against a monster that heavy is going to hurt.”

Perhaps what they’d named the impact absorption material would help with that kind of attack. “Um, I’ve made a much thicker version of that yellow slime shirt, and it might be good for cushioning. It still needs a bit more testing, but —” She proceeded to explain the effects of the impact absorption material, and they discussed whether it should be applied to the back of shields or the grip to lessen recoil. Dahlia and Volf decided to get the opinions of Jonas and the shieldmen.

“Oh, speaking of slimes, Master Jonas has a message for you. ‘The frozen blue slime liquid has not completely thawed, and it remains cold,’ end quote.”

“Huh?” A question mark popped up over the blue slime inside Dahlia’s head.

“He asked you if you could go over tomorrow to check it out, as the blue slime mixture that Guido froze has turned into some kind of gel.”

“Oh, okay...” Perhaps this would be the birth of yet another new material; half of her was excited, while the other half was hoping it wouldn’t be ruined and completely thawed by tomorrow. She decided she would get in contact with Idaeia first thing in the morning. Dahlia was once again reminded that slimes had a lot of untapped potential. She explained how Guido had used his ice magic on the blue slime mixture, then told Volf all about the experiment

that had taken place yesterday.

Afterward, Volf looked deep into her eyes. “Was it fun doing magical experiments with everyone, Dahlia?”

“It was lots of fun! I don’t really have many chances to do so, you see...” The truth was that once she’d calmed down and reflected on what happened, she had broken into a cold sweat. Fortunately, everyone had been very sympathetic to her endeavors, but perhaps the noblemen had felt she was disrespectful. She promised herself she would apologize to Ivano the next time she went into the office, even though he hadn’t said anything.

“I wish I coulda been there...” She was surprised at how melancholic he sounded, but just as she was about to speak, Volf shook his head, flinging the negativity away. “Actually, I’m glad I wasn’t there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I would’ve been so jealous seeing everyone using magic and enchanting...” His inferiority complex came out in his soft voice. Though he was the son of an earl, Volf could not use any of the five major schools, nor could he express his magic. And perhaps because of his lack of capability, he had long admired magic swords.

Dahlia knew all of that, so she raised her voice. “What are you saying, Volf? Isn’t it obvious that I would’ve asked you for your help with my work if you had been there? I could have used your help making all the liquid mixture, you know?”

“I would’ve been your assistant, then?”

“Mm-hmm. I definitely would’ve asked you to be my assistant.”

“Aw man, I wish I could’ve been there...” As she racked her brain thinking of how to respond to his utter disappointment, he rattled the ice in his glass. “To be honest, I kinda wished I had a blight like Master Jonas so I could use magic and fight with it and stuff.”

“Volf,” she said sternly. “It’s not easy living with it.” Jonas had gotten his blight from a fire dragon. Slaying one was no easy feat, and to be blighted was said to be a curse. She’d heard that if the monster’s magic was incompatible

with that of the blighted, it could make them fall ill, affect their sense of taste and smell, and adversely affect them in other ways. Why must Volf go fight terrible monsters and embed their magical cores in his body anyway? It didn't matter how much he yearned for Jonas's power, his safety was more important.

"It's okay. I know it'd be impossible for me anyway."

"Well, slaying a powerful monster isn't exactly beyond your ken, but..."

"I— Thanks, Dahlia, but that's not what I mean." His eyes emitted a golden light. "If I couldn't taste the flavors of the Green Tower Diner anymore, the joy would go out of my life."

She couldn't help but laugh at how serious he was, but that was also a very low bar to set for happiness. He did have a point, though—appetite was a very important thing. The strongest desire when a person grew old was appetite. If Volf found her cooking so delicious, then maybe she could continue to share meals with him even when they grew old? The yuzu liqueur must've hit her quicker than she'd expected. Dahlia hurried to drive the thought out of her head. Save the future for the future; focus on the joy that could be had here today. "Let's add to your joy, then—I'll take some yuzu-flavored quick pickles out."

"Thanks!" But Volf's smile was already full of joy.

Interlude: The Fledgling Takes Flight

“The handover is now complete. I have also provided manuals on my previous responsibilities for reference.” A heavy thud resounded through the office of the Merchants’ guildmaster as Ivano laid a stack of parchment on the desk; only after compiling everything had he realized he’d once overseen so many tasks.

It had been a few months since Ivano filled out that resignation form in front of Gabriella, and on paper, he had long since left the Guild. However, his replacement’s stomach had churned—the unfamiliarity and number of duties, as well as the suddenness of it all, were too much. Despite the fact that they were in the same building, coming over to the Rossetti Trading Company’s office to ask Ivano questions was surely too difficult a task. After discussions with the vice-guildmaster, it had been decided three people would take Ivano’s place, and he would lend a guiding hand whenever he had the time.

And, as of a few days ago, everything had been settled. Ivano had assembled all the documents, and today, he had come to formally depart from the workplace—the final meeting between guild clerk and the guildmasters.

“I also have a recommendation regarding the organization of documents. Please take a look.” Ivano had come to say goodbye, but there was one more thing he could improve. His suggestion was to forgo the titles and numbers on documents in favor of inserting colorful little strips of sticky paper between each section so that it would be visually obvious where they began and ended even when the reference ledger was closed. This was also the way he and Dahlia did things in the company, and it made searching through files dramatically quicker.

“Seems rather convenient.” Leone, seated across the table, ran his eyes over the documents.

Beside him, Gabriella smiled. “It does indeed. Let’s implement this.”

This scene warmed Ivano’s heart. Come to think about it, this arrangement was how he’d first met those two as well.

Sixteen years ago, Ivano and Loretta, his girlfriend—now wife—had come to the royal capital. His father, the chairman of the family business, had been a guarantor to a friend's company, which had failed, saddling him with a large debt. Ivano's parents had committed suicide and taken his sickly younger sister along with them, leaving none in his family but himself. Their hometown had been a speck of dust on the map compared to the capital; Ivano could not bear the deafening whispers behind his back. He did not want to bring trouble to his relatives either. And so, he had separated with his girlfriend and decided to move to the capital alone.

However, his tragic resignation had borne no fruit—his girlfriend had been waiting at the stagecoach station for him. With a load of baggage packed (*Moving somewhere?*—he would've quipped had he not been overcome with surprise), she had declared, "*I'll be your family now!*" as she thrust an engagement bracelet onto his wrist. Silver and set with blue moonstones, it was the most beautiful one Ivano had ever seen.

The capital the two of them had entered hand in hand was a spirited, glorious, yet dizzyingly hectic place, not to mention expensive given the high cost of living; even the rent for a small room had been a daunting sum. Love alone could not fill the stomach, and he'd had little money on hand. Ivano would take the first job that would hire him to ensure his wife did not live a life of want—so he had sworn.

When they unpacked their belongings in that small room at a cheap inn they now called home, they were stunned. Her father had had Loretta bring her favorite cooking pot—and it was indeed a pot—but packed inside were gold and silver pieces bundled up with cloth. "After registering your marriage, go rent a home. No need to rush finding a job, and take care of yourselves," read the now unfolded, hastily written note, the ink feathered and smudged. Ivano and Loretta bowed to the little pot.

They soon registered their marriage at the city hall and rented a small apartment, and Ivano began the job hunt—just as the note had instructed. He had gone to the Merchants' Guild to look at their job listings, and only because he was there already, he figured he'd test his pluck and applied to take the

Guild's employment examination. He'd vowed that he wouldn't become a merchant here in the capital, and, other than involvement with trading companies, the pay and working conditions for a guild clerk were better. He was told that the examination would be tomorrow, and he rushed to a store to rent a navy suit.

Ivano felt so very out of place that day. Interviews were conducted individually, and there he sat in the conference room at a large table across from the silver-haired, black-eyed Viscount Leone Jedda—a nobleman and guildmaster, a man who led a godlike existence. Next to him was a stunning but somewhat formidable woman with ivory hair and navy blue eyes—Gabriella Jedda, the Guild's vice-guildmaster and spouse of Viscount Jedda.

As the guildmaster sternly perused Ivano's résumé, Gabriella asked the petrified prospect, "Could you please tell us what your strengths are and what you wish to do?" They didn't seem to care about why he wanted the job.

Ivano swallowed his nervousness and answered that calculation was his forte, and that he wished for work in which he could make use of his experience and knowledge from working at a trading company—an inoffensive answer. Those deep navy eyes staring back made Ivano acutely aware that his efforts to put on a brave face were futile.

Leone had finished reading the résumé. "1,145; 3,707; 1,511; 2,212; 1,424."

The sudden outburst of five four-digit numbers had Ivano flicking an invisible abacus on his knees.

"How much is that?"

"9,999 *coins*."

Leone's slight nod was accented with a smirk, while Gabriella put her fingers to her lips as she giggled. How devilish.

Then, two days later, Ivano became a guild clerk. The role offered favorable working conditions, so many of the applicants were children from noble families or college graduates, and supposedly many had been vying for Ivano's position. That was when he learned that a great deal of importance was placed on an applicant's guarantor. At the time, the one person he'd had was an uncle who

lived far away, and the only thing to show for it was a slip of paper; his uncle wasn't even a nobleman or a well-known businessman. Only after he had entered the Guild did Ivano learn how unlikely he was to succeed.

As he would be interacting with the nobility, Ivano needed to learn the requisite etiquette. Thankfully, on-the-job training was thorough, covering everything he needed and wanted to learn. He even got a referral to a short course and a teacher after asking for them, and the Guild went so far as to cover most of the fees. There were those who made snide remarks at his lack of knowledge, his lack of education, and his bumpkinly origins, and he freely admitted to them, as not one word said was incorrect. Ivano put his all into absorbing everything they taught and then immediately applied his newfound knowledge. The job was far from easy, but the more he learned, the more interesting and profound it was. As someone who had worked abaci from an early age and had been employed in his father's trading company, Ivano knew exactly what the businessmen wanted. As such, he gradually received more requests for his services. The more years he lived, the more work he received directly from Gabriella. Before long, they called him Gabriella's mentee, and the snide remarks were no more.

Incidentally, with the first paycheck he received after joining the Guild, Ivano bought a cooking pot one size larger than the one he'd received from his father-in-law. Completely filling it with gold pieces and sending it back required three years' time.

"You know, you look better in those clothes than you do in the Guild's uniform, Ivano." It was supposed to be a compliment, but trace amounts of wistfulness laced Gabriella's words.

He pretended not to notice a thing and smiled. "Thank you very much, Madam Gabriella. I'm still getting used to them." His current outfit had been put together by the Tailors' guildmaster Forto. The deep navy suit matched well his combed mustard hair, and the white silk shirt underneath his jacket featured a pair of gold cuff links, one of which was also a magical tool with an anti-eavesdropping capability. It was an outfit suitable for meeting with nobles and for visiting the castle—things he hadn't even imagined he would be doing just a

year ago.

“You’ll be just fine. No one would bat an eye if you told them you’d always been one of them.” She left Ivano at a loss for words.

It had been Gabriella who’d first realized that he could no longer remain a guild clerk. She had said that she would “raise him to be a man who can run his own business.” That much did not seem to be a joke.

Leone had known as well. “This will be beneficial to you in the future, so commit it to memory,” he had prefaced his lessons, and all those turned out to be useful to Ivano as both a guild clerk and a businessman. The way Ivano had appended the word “coins” to that arithmetic question during the interview had shown them that he was a businessman through and through. He had striven to become a good guild clerk. He had striven to become a clerk whom friends and clients alike trusted. In spite of that, every time he spoke with other merchants, he felt compelled to consider what he would do if he were in their shoes. It had been these two who’d prised open Ivano’s eyes when he’d pretended not to see.

Then there was the goddess robed in gold—the magical toolmaker Dahlia Rossetti. The magical tools she crafted caused gleaming gold coins to rain down from the heavens, yet she was oblivious to her miracles—a combination most dangerous. Before other merchants or guilds could gobble up her rights, she ought to have a trusted merchant placed by her side—just as those thoughts came to him, Ivano had yearned to be that person for her. So, he’d advertised his services to her, become an employee of the Rossetti Trading Company, and been promoted to vice-chairman, hence Ivano’s reason for having come here: to thank the guildmasters for their support all these years—and to leave them.

“The way you asked to ‘board this same boat’ the other day was quite brilliant.” Leone was referring to what Ivano had said at the Scalfarotto villa; it seemed like it had made quite the lasting mark.

“Thank you for the kind words.”

“At the carriage lot, they all remarked how touched they were. Those who have their names on the contracts cannot ever disembark.”

“And I truly wish for them never to do so.”

“Neither will you disembark, will you? It goes beyond ‘sailing on the same boat’—you share a common destiny. A portion of all profits and rights that the company sees from now on will be yours, and in exchange, a portion of all risks and liabilities will be yours to shoulder too. The others were also quite astonished to realize you were the golden nail holding everything together. Though Madam Magical Toolmaker seemed not to understand completely...”

“Our chairwoman surely believes that it was only natural because the experiment was done and the products were created jointly.” All Dahlia had meant was that she wanted everyone’s help. It had been clear by that all-too-honest color of her eyes. Nevertheless, she was a competent magical toolmaker, but that wasn’t the whole story either. “However, I reckon that she has— What would you call it? An ulterior motive? At the very least, something that could be conveniently solved.”

“My, Dahlia has an ulterior motive? Do tell, Ivano.”

“I believe what she wishes for are people who have magic and would gladly join her in her experiments—friends, if you will. Our chairwoman is a magical toolmaker by nature, and she likely doesn’t want people who seem willing to keep her company—people who are her good friends—to leave her.”

“Oh, how very like her. I am certain that not a single soul would leave her, though.”

Ivano grinned at her words. “Indeed, is there anyone who would disembark from the Goddess of the Black Line’s large ship? Put out the gangways, and more would surely climb aboard.”

The guildmasters before Ivano joined him in laughing. But that was no joke. The noblemen present that day belonged to their own clans, factions, guilds, and professions; they knew the weight that their personal names lent to those contracts. But even if the seas got a little rough, they would surely be happy to stay onboard. They would undoubtedly help her with her experiments, as well as provide materials and magic, doing as Dahlia wanted—hell, they would provide her with much more than she would ask for. And, above all else, the noblemen would treat the commoners—Ivano included—as subjects for their protection. They would keep other merchants and nobles in check, and they

would act as shields should anything happen. All this could be had for a few percentage points of the contracts; it was an exceedingly good deal.

“The goddess who keeps us in the black, eh?” Leone chewed the cud as the smile disappeared from his face. “I already regret it all. I ought to be celebrating your entry into the Rossetti Trading Company, yet my sincerest feeling is that of lamentation.”

“Thank you, sir.” Even if it was flattery, such high praise from the Merchants’ guildmaster was something to be cherished. Ivano had a feeling he could leave this room satisfied.

“Ivano, answer this one question for me. Never shall I ask it again.”

“Very good, sir.” Ivano straightened himself at the sudden severity and looked back into those black eyes, the very ones he had found so frightening in the past.

“Once the Rossetti Trading Company is on the right course, has the right people, and you can leave it behind, would you like to formally become our son and the vice-guildmaster? Won’t you aim to become the master of the Merchants’ Guild one day?”

Surely you jest, Ivano wanted to say, but it was clogged up in his throat. There was nothing to gain for those two if Viscountcy Jedda should adopt a commoner like himself. He might have had made a few connections through the Rossetti Company, but resigning from his vice-chairman position meant that he would lose them all; Leone and Gabriella had many more and much more powerful connections anyway. No abacus counting this exchange would show zero, no set of scales weighing it would equilibrate.

Deep blacks and deep navies—two different colors but with the same glimmer, earnestness, warmth, and steadfastness—looked deep into his own eyes. At long last did he understand that these two placed far too much esteem in this Ivano Mercadante. His family had no status, magic, economic power, or credit; there was nothing to him but this one man. Yet, in defiance of all those inadequacies, the Jeddas truly meant every word. What higher appraisal could one receive?

“Though I must decline, I will forever remember this kindness. I pray you can

forgive me.”

“No, no forgiveness is needed. I knew your answer before I asked. I shall not mourn this outcome, and I shall be able to treat you as an equal from now. Forget it.”

Forget it? Now that was a good joke. Filing guild documents, hosting meetings, appraising goods, scheduling and timekeeping, diplomacy—everything he knew, he’d learned from these two. He’d absorbed so much more business acumen from the Jeddas than his own father and grandfather. “I will not forget. I *cannot* forget. Working in the Merchants’ Guild—working under you two is something I will treasure forever.” As Ivano bowed deeply, he saw a glint in Gabriella’s eyes, but Leone spoke before Ivano could find something to say.

“Ivano, it is time you learn to dance.”

“Huh?” The sudden non sequitur had him making a boneheaded noise. Ivano had never had anything to do with dancing. Sure, he’d gone to the opera once or twice, but he’d never even watched a dance performance, let alone flittered on the floor; the closest he’d gotten to a ball was when he’d caught glimpses of one while he was making a delivery. It wasn’t as though a merchant needed to know how to dance, but perhaps, given that he was now socializing with the nobility more frequently, he’d have to do so. “Perhaps our chairwoman would need to, but me? I don’t see myself dancing.”

“Sooner or later, your daughters will enter college, where there will be musical education. The choices are either to learn an instrument or learn to dance, and girls tend to choose the latter. Rather than having them nestle up with people who have two left feet, they ought to learn from their father.”

“I see your point...”

“But more importantly, imagine your daughters all dressed up and ready for their first dance!”

“Sign me up for lessons!”

Gabriella chuckled at the fathers with daughters getting all riled up; the glint in the corner of her eyes this time was likely due to exasperation,

though. “All this talking has me quite parched. Let me go get someone to make us some tea.” She dabbed her eyes before exiting the office with a smile.

Leone watched her leave before continuing. “Does your wife dance?”

“No, she does not. She likely hasn’t seen a dance outside of the theater.”

“One ought to do so with one’s wife. Once you have learned well, partner with and teach her. That way, no other person will need to touch her.”

“Huh. All right.” Ivano avoided committing to the overly affectionate man’s suggestion.

“No other person will have the first dance of the night with her either.”

“I doubt you need to fret so much about that, Mr. Leone—it isn’t as though Madam Gabriella would go to a ball with anyone else but you.”

“Not necessarily...” Leone was rarely so cryptic. His black eyes turned to the window. “The person who took Gabriella to her first ball was Oz, and the person who took her first dance was also that guy—not that I would moan about it; this all happened before she and I were married.” His somber tone was entirely understandable.

During the slime experiments the other day, Leone had said that he had been the senior of Dahlia’s father, Carlo, and through transitive property, that made him Oswald’s senior as well—it stood to reason that Leone had been close with Oswald. However, Leone had always been strangely uncordial toward him, while he had always gracefully turned aside Leone’s attitude. Leone had never let his feelings affect business between the two of them—in fact, it had always gone well—so Ivano had reckoned that the two men simply did not get along. For his own relationships with Leone and Oswald, Ivano figured it might be worth learning more about the apparent history between them during their youth.

“There is another thing as well. You see, after my elder daughter went to the Goddess’s Right Eye, she embroidered a white handkerchief for that Oz. I did absolutely everything I could to prevent that from happening, and I paid the price for it—she refused to speak to me for two weeks and a day.”

“Ah...” So the history between them wasn’t limited to their youth. If one of

Ivano's daughters wanted to give Oswald her handkerchief of first love, he'd do everything to prevent it too. Just as a precaution, Ivano swore to himself that he would never bring his daughters to the Goddess's Right Eye, Oswald's magical tool shop in the nobles' quarter; if they needed any sort of magical tools, he'd bring them to see his boss instead.

"I shall introduce you to our dance instructor." And just like that, Ivano had lessons awaiting him. Regardless of whether it would come in handy when dealing with nobility, being able to dance with his wife was a very attractive proposition. It would even give him a bit of exercise that he sorely needed.

"Now, the time has come for me to drive you out of the nest. You have the capabilities to not only feed yourself but even feed mother and father bird; perhaps it is no longer appropriate to call you a fledgling. Allow me to celebrate you leaving the nest." From his suit jacket, Leone took out a pair of thin silver keys—hazy, tarnished, timeworn—though the little black and white stones embedded into each of them had quite the shine.

"Thank you very much." As Ivano took them into his hands, he felt soft waves of energy radiating out, indicating that these were magical tools.

"The one with white jadeite guards against poison and magical confusion, the one with the morion against soporifics and aphrodisiacs. Both are powerfully enchanted; I guarantee their effectiveness. Wear them around your ankle so that they are not visible to others. If they feel warm, that proves you have been drugged. Retreat as soon as possible, but do not let your guard down while on the move either."

A pair of twice-enchanted magical tools with a quality silver chain—it took no guessing that this was a very precious anklet. "I am deeply grateful, sir, but, erm, if I may ask its price?"

"I do not remember seeing the price tag." That was obviously rubbish coming from a man so observant of the value of goods; even the attendant behind him—who always extinguished his presence and never showed any emotion—placed a fist over his mouth as if to stifle a cough. It was most likely something for nobles and thus quite expensive, and it would have required a magical toolmaker with Oswald's skills to craft something like this, perhaps even a

noble's mage or alchemist—

It deserved thanks. Ivano would like to know approximately how much it cost or, at the very least, who had made it. "If I may, then, the name of its craftsperson?"

The expression that showed on Leone's face as he laughed was neither that of a nobleman nor that of a merchant but that of some young boy. "I did say I was Carlo's senior, did I not?"

Scientific Discourse and the Magic Prosthesis

“Oh, close—close enough!”

“I know, right? It might have to be a little softer for me, though.”

“What do you think, Dahlia?”

“How about you, Ms. Dahlia?”

“Um, I think this is just about right for me...?” In the workshop of the Scalfarottos’ villa, Dahlia was in a dilemma over how to respond. With her were Lucia and Idaea; her bodyguard Marcella was receiving equestrian training. Their current research was on bust pads, and they were on the topic of how the material felt in the hand. Lucia had taken off her jacket, Idaea had removed her jacket as well as a corset-like garment with metallic inserts, and all three women were in the middle of a serious discussion.

Atop the desk they were sitting around was a white ellipsoidal bag filled with both the light brown pellets created by powerful earth and fire magic enchantment—dunasphera—and the red slime enchanted with powerful water magic—body heat conservation material. A mixture of the two offered a sensation like soft and warm fat. Even like tender flesh, perhaps. However, Dahlia couldn’t help but wonder why this had to be used to pad the chest. A body was covered by both upper and lower body undergarments, not to mention clothes on top of them. It wasn’t like they were particularly prone to being touched. Besides, cotton was normally used to pad the chest. How curious it was that something so realistic was needed.

“Hmm. I guess individual differences really are quite big.”

“Rather than have something that is one-size-fits-all, perhaps they should be tailored to each person.” Now that they had the prototype breast pads in their hands, a conclusion had finally been reached—they ought to be made to order.

“Can I have this first, Dahlia? The Tailors’ Guild will apply a stabilization to make sure it’s safe, and I’ll go to the temple to make a contract to keep this

under wraps. Once you come up with a number, I'll pay you back." Lucia spoke not as a friend but as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory.

"Sure thing, but will just the one be okay?"

"Yep. See, there's someone in the Guild who had one breast removed because of an illness. She had a priest heal her, but her illness relapsed, and she didn't have the money to get another round of healing magic. She stuffs with cotton right now, but as someone who has always had breasts, her balance isn't so good anymore. Oh, and she recently even said that 'her organs get directly chilled'—it seems it's really cold, so I was hoping to get her to try out the pad before winter comes."

"Oh, that's why..." No wonder Lucia wanted it urgently.

"Cotton pads are less convenient than you'd expect—they flatten out too quickly, and they get ruined by sweat. They don't help much with the cold, and you have to be careful when walking in a crowd because they don't absorb impact well."

Rather than a couturier thing, it was a genuine, real-world medical problem, and it seemed like a big one at that. "It's a safety thing too, then?"

"Mm-hmm. You know how there are some problems that temples can't heal away, like illness and scars? Well, people who live outside the capital might not even make it to a temple within seven days, and there's the cost of traveling to keep in mind. Sure, nobles might have a mage with healing magic at home, but a priest's services are too expensive for commoners in the provinces. I've heard there are even people who make it to the capital too late and enter state-run institutions instead."

"I never knew that. I always assumed that there were itinerant priests who served the countryside."

"It isn't possible to simply get more priests, but since maybe clothes can at least help alleviate some of the problem, I really want to come out with more supportive garments like this at the Guild. I'm so overly eager to do this that I even blurted this stuff out in front of the big shots..." The other day, Lucia had talked about bust pads in the same room as the noblemen, and it seemed like it was still bothering her. But Bernigi and the others had made a few comments

too, so it probably hadn't done much damage. "I'm thinking of using this for fashion too, of course. It's realistic, and it's good to look how you want to look. It wouldn't be just for breasts either; I'm sure many people would like to augment their shoulders or butts or whatever too. On the other hand, stuff like corsets can help make someone minimize their features."

"Would the shoulder pads be for men, Ms. Lucia?"

"They could be for anyone, but they would be primarily for men since broader shoulders give a suit more impact; giving the collar a bit more oomph makes someone look smarter, though. Nobles, knights, and the retired tend to add padding."

"Wouldn't cotton pads do, Lucia?"

"Well, about that—I've heard that when a man meets another man, he might make fun of him by patting him on the shoulder and shouting, 'Stuffing?!' while acting all shocked."

"Oh, that's so dirty..." It must have been hard being a nobleman and having to deal with such cruelty.

"Nobles have things like 'This outfit must be worn for this function,' so there are times when it's obvious something doesn't suit them. It doesn't matter if it's clothing designed for men or women, people should just wear what they like and what looks good on them. But I guess that's too much to ask of our society."

"Keep in mind that in Ehrlichia, cross-dressing gets you more than just weird looks; things are better here."

"People there can't even get married to someone of the same sex. I kinda get why people move to Ordine."

Same-sex and polygamous marriages were recognized here in Ordine. Though they were comparatively less common, there was a married couple of the same sex in Dahlia's neighborhood, and they were not out of place. It was rare to get nasty comments from others when dressing up in a nonconforming way too. Hence, it wasn't uncommon for gay couples who couldn't legally get married in other countries or who were being persecuted to immigrate here.

Unfortunately, due to the perception that Ordine was stealing the citizens of another nation, there was some friction with Ehrlichia.

“By the way, I never noticed until now, but you have quite the full chest, Ms. Idaea. You’d look great if you showed your shoulders, so why do you wear that chest support like a knight?” Lucia had a good point—the sternum brace that Idaea usually wore completely hid her curvy figure.

“What good are breasts anyway? They make it hard to move around and make me look fat, so I normally cover them up with the supporter and a coat. Plus-size lingerie is awfully pricey, and the shoulder straps get stretched out too quickly. These supporters for female knights are far more durable.”

“I suppose that is true—the larger the size, the more expensive they get...”

“Indeed. And having a conspicuous chest attracts the weirdest people.”

“As in people hit on you because of your breasts?”

“No, they skip the flirting and go straight for the grabbing. They assume I’m just some wallflower because of my looks.” Idaea had long, sky blue hair, slightly downturned hyacinth eyes, a light complexion, and soft facial features—her navy, thin-framed glasses suited her well, but she certainly had a meek demeanor. “I’ve been to the guard station three times before, enough that they recognize me now.”

“To be harassed so often that the guards recognize you is simply sickening...”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. If the creeps don’t cut it out when I tell them to, I reach for some concentrated corrosives.”

“A slime’s digestive fluids, perhaps?”

“Precisely. Aim for the eyes, and they’ll be immobilized immediately. They’ll then get sent off to the temple, which costs them three, four gold for treatment. It’s not easy bringing them all the way to a guard station sometimes. I mean, slimes feel way better to touch.” The acid would definitely cause burns to the face, and if it got into their eyes and they didn’t have a potion on hand, they’d be writhing on the ground.

“You’re so strong, Ms. Idaea! I’m guessing there are a few knights in your

household?”

“I have four elder brothers, two of whom are knights. They are all very protective of me and taught me many ways to defend myself.” Her brothers had worked hard to teach her, but it was equally impressive that she’d learned so much.

“Is your father a knight as well?”

“No, he is an alchemist who runs his own business, but I don’t know if I can call him my father—I’ve been disowned, you see.”

“Wait, really?”

“My family cultivates medicinal herbs, but when I was in college, I did slime research instead of herbalism, and that caused a lot of bickering. One time, when I returned home during a break, I fed my pet slime medicinal herbs, and from then on, I was no longer part of the family.”

“Ahh, I kinda get it. If I’d lost the tools of my trade, I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same...” Lucia must’ve been imagining her beloved scissors and clothes gobbled up by a slime—if something like that happened to Dahlia, she would have a long, long talk with the culprit too.

“My father is a bit of a scaramouch. All I did was feed it a row of herbs for making high potions, and it’s not like the stuff doesn’t grow back.”

Dahlia couldn’t keep herself from snickering at how aloof Idaea was. Growing those herbs was far from easy, and a single plant was worth at least one gold, if not more—a whole row of them? Quite a few plants, to say the least. “I’m not surprised that your father was so angry...”

“I dunno, Ms. Idaea...”

“He started it. When my blue slime had finally grown large enough to split, my father crushed one of them up and used it to fertilize the fields while I was away. ‘It’s not like there aren’t more slimes in the world,’ he said to me when I went to protest.”

“Oh, no...” That crossed the line. The slime had not only been Idaea’s research project but also her *pet*—well, of course she’d done what she had to return the

favor. It was quite clear why there was such animosity between the two. “Then you entered the Adventurers’ Guild afterward, Ms. Idaea?”

“Immediately after college, yes. After a while, the Guild came into a lot of slime materials, and I was the single person in charge of it all. That’s how I got to where I am; I count my blessings every day.” That warmth in her smile was unmistakable: she had always truly loved slimes.

“But your family must be pretty worried?”

“They are fine. I write my mother once a month, and my brothers come to visit me in the capital every so often as well.”

“I’m sure your father worries about you too, Ms. Idaea.”

A beat. “If my mother leaves my letters out on the table, he turns away.”

Dahlia began feeling a little bad for her father, but the chances of them reconciling seemed slim.

“I guess there are all types of relationships between parents and their children out there. I don’t know about being a parent myself, but kids are great! There have been so many new baby clothes lately!”

“Ms. Lucia, are children great, or are the clothes great?”

“I bet you’ve been hooked on sewing outfits for Irma’s babies.” Both of them played along with Lucia’s quick shift back to her passion.

“Yeah, maybe. But I haven’t sewn *that* many, just twenty pairs of diapers and ten sets of unisex baby clothes—by that I mean for each of ‘em.”

Hold your horses, cowgirl. Just because they’re twins doesn’t mean you need to go wild. Rather than bursting Lucia’s bubble, Dahlia resolved to buy a wardrobe for the babies. “Lucia, I’m sure Irma and her family would like to choose some outfits on their own too.”

“Exactly! Me, Mr. Forto, and someone else from the Guild each filled out a sketchbook for Irma to choose designs and colors from. Going outside is probably really tough on her now, what with how big her belly’s getting.”

“That’s a good point...” Irma was about seven months in, and she was pregnant with twins, no less—work had gotten too difficult, so the salon had

been shuttered for the time being. Last time Dahlia saw her, Irma had grumbled that she couldn't see her steps anymore, and that walking was difficult. On the plus side, the twins were very, very healthy—you could see them moving around, even through Irma's clothes. There was a funny story about how Marcella had put his ear up against her belly and gotten kicked. "With a kick that strong, that one's definitely a boy!" he'd said. Dahlia couldn't wait to welcome them into the world.

"Irma said that because she's got two babies, she might be producing twice the milk."

"Huh? Is that a thing? I thought twins get half goat milk."

"She can't be sure until after she's given birth, but Irma's said that they've been speaking to a family who raise goats too; it wouldn't do to not have enough milk for two." In Ordine, it wasn't uncommon for people to keep goats to sell milk, as parents fed it to their babies if they weren't producing enough.

"Feeding two babies sure sounds difficult..."

"I'll say. Why can't parents just share everything, including morning sickness and breastfeeding?!"

The point was well-taken, but there were definitely some physical limitations involved. In any case, Dahlia promised herself she'd bring Irma more food from now on.

"Oh, look at the time! It won't be long before Lord Bernigi gets here."

"I'll pack the things into the crate!"

Thanks to Lucia, Dahlia had come to understand the importance of bust pads. However, discussing their tactility with Bernigi and the others was a hurdle too tall for her. The three women hurried to clean up.

Along with another knight of the household, Jonas was standing guard outside the workshop. Seeing as Bernigi would arrive soon, he decided to send refreshments in, and he dragged over a wagon with cakes and a tea set.

"Is something the matter, Lord Jonas?" The knight wondered why Jonas was

standing in the hallway with the wagon in tow but not entering the room.

“It appears that, erm, everyone inside is quite in the midst of effusing about magical tools, and I am afraid I would disturb them, you see.”

“Oh, is that right? But if it’s magical tools they are discussing, I’m sure they would not mind your presence, Lord Jonas.” All the knight heard was faint laughter reverberating inside.

But Jonas, a man with the blight of a fire dragon, could hear every word spoken by the women. He stood there unmovingly, his rust-brown eyes pointing at the ground. “No. The experts are engaging in a scientific discourse, some of it related to medicine—it is not a domain I should intrude upon.”



“This is the blue slime mixture that we enchanted with ice magic last time.” Jonas brought Bernigi into the workshop where Dahlia and the others were already waiting.

“Though not frozen, ’tis nevertheless quite cold...”

Now that they were recharged from teatime and sweets, Jonas brought in a pair of little plates, atop which were jiggling two translucent, blue-tinted gels. Dahlia made a connection with those cooling patches she’d slap on her forehead when she had had a fever back in her previous life; even their colors and textures were rather similar.

“This might be good for the summer, but are we sure it won’t cause burns with how slimes can dissolve stuff?”

“Like with the waterproof cloth, the processing nullifies the solvent power, Ms. Lucia.” Idaea demonstrated that the gel was safe by removing her gloves and touching it. She then gripped one edge and yanked, tearing a piece off. “It’s a bit brittler than slimes.”

“Wrap it in some waterproof cloth or what have you, and this may work to keep things cool. Though, as with the body heat conservation material, we know not how long this keeps its temperature, but the longer, the better.” Bernigi had hit the nail exactly on the head. The potential uses for the two products depended on how long they were effective. If the gel only cooled for a

short time, it would be enough to provide relief for those fighting fevers, but its longevity needed to be measured in weeks for it to be effective in keeping food cold.

“It will need to be monitored for at least a few months. Just because it had an application of stabilization magic, that does not mean it will not deteriorate at all.” Jonas then suggested having the Scalfarottos’ mages make more to observe, and Dahlia agreed.

“I’d like to compare the dunasphaerae before and after being stabilized! Granted they are still prototypes, it will be next spring before they can be brought onto market, according to Mr. Forto. Same with the blue slime material—it would be too unaffordable if they had to be stabilized, and the safety testing takes time.”

“Slime powder is easy to stabilize, but I’m afraid I am not well-versed in that matter. My apologies.”

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for, Ms. Idaea; unlike the zephyricloth, which had sat around for a while before being refined, the research on these materials has only just begun. It’s inevitable that they will take some time.”

“Products for babes and the infirm merit especial care—the solvent power and drive of slimes cannot be underestimated.”

“Sorry? Drive?” Lucia and Jonas were awfully confused. Dahlia, on the other hand, understood full well what Bernigi meant—a slime had once escaped from a glass bottle in the Green Tower.

“Indeed. At the nursery, our slimes have become more eager to break out of confinement or enter other holding tanks, and the black slime has even been trying to dissolve the glass at the seams. Certain specimens become more driven once they familiarize themselves with their environments.”

“Sounds like it’s going to get away sooner or later.” But Lucia’s off-the-cuff remark was anything but funny—if the black slime escaped containment, all hell would break loose.

“Black slimes sure are pesky. One time when I was a younger man, we bivouacked near some swampland during an expedition. It must have been a

slime's territory, and it swallowed up our supplies."

Jonas seemed quite surprised too. "How dreadful..." Thankfully, Volf wasn't present today, or else he definitely would've been on edge just hearing about this. For whatever reason, he held almost too much animosity toward this monster. That said, there was a chance he'd heard of this story already, given that he was a Beast Hunter.

"Was everyone okay?"

"None of us were harmed, though seeing it had silently dissolved our belongings overnight, it was quite the rude awakening to find the morning sun beaming directly through holes in our tents and the wheels on the wagon all chewed up. As you can imagine, the journey home was hardly pleasant..."

"Oh, no..." Everyone grimaced for Bernigi, who was staring off into the distance as he seemingly relived the pain. All in all, it could be considered fortunate—a step in the wrong direction and the knights could have been dissolved away as well.

"After a discussion among ourselves, we concluded that it had been a warning from the black slime. From then on, no knight set foot in that vicinity of the swamp—a rule that Grato still follows, I believe." It turned out that there were indeed monsters that terrified the current Order of Beast Hunters, but they really had good reason to be cautious against a foe that had such intelligence and dynamism.

Changing the topic, Jonas brought out some impact absorption material. "Now, then, Lord Volf has inquired whether this could be affixed to the backs of broad shields."

"Ah, to prevent the shieldmen's wristbreak, I see."

"Sorry, Lord Bernigi, could you explain to us what you mean by 'shieldmen's wristbreak'?"

"When defending against an attack or bashing the monster itself, it is easy to break the bones in the wrist. Many monsters are quite tough, see."

"Oh, broad shields could be used offensively as well?"

“Indeed. Padding might be better tailored to the individual. These gloves eliminate direct skin contact with bare metal, and if they wear, they can be changed out.”

Perhaps they might have a chance to visit Randolph soon to fit the material on his shield. It was worth it to minimize injuries to the Beast Hunters—so Dahlia thought during their discussions as the day came to an end.

Lucia returned to the Tailors’ Guild and Idaea to the Adventurers’ to report today’s meeting to their respective bosses, while Dahlia remained in the workshop going over the materials that Jonas had restocked.

“Master Dahlia, Jonas, could I trouble you two to make some cushion fill for me? My missus has been pestering me about it, and, of course, I shall pay for the cost and your labor.”

“A present for your wife?”

“No, it aids in stretching out her back, she said—she has already stolen mine.”

After a beat, Jonas said, “I hope you can make as much as he desires, Master Dahlia. Will it be possible for you to make more of the mixture?” There was definitely a smile with his eyes, emotionless though his tone might have been, and Dahlia agreed with pleasure. “I hope you can excuse me, as I need to return to Lord Guido’s side. Should there be anything you need, please ask Marcella in my stead.”

“Thank you very much for taking time out of your day for us, Master Jonas.”

After he walked out, Marcella entered the room. “Excuse my intrusion.” His brow was beaded with sweat, perhaps as a result of his riding lessons today.

“Ah, Marcella, we were just about to craft more of the bead fill; as lying sideways is difficult for a woman so close to childbirth, perhaps your wife would find comfort in a cushion as well?”

“Thank you very much for the concern. Would that be possible, Chairwoman?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then let us work together and make more!” As the elderly man shot to his feet, a deep *crack!* came from his leg. Bernigi was about to topple over when Marcella flew to support him.

“Lord Bernigi, are you okay?! Get a physician, Dahlia!”

“On it!”

“Marcella, Master Dahlia, I’m fine! Nothing has happened to me—the core of my prosthetic leg split is all.”

“Your prosthetic?”

“Your prosthetic leg?” Marcella and Dahlia wondered aloud at the same time. Certainly, Bernigi walked around with a cane, but it hinted nothing at him having a prosthesis.

With the aid of Marcella, the elderly man returned to his seat, and he removed the kneepad and leather boot from his right leg. Inside his footwear was a thin metallic plate wrapped around a wooden pylon, and there was now a diagonal fracture through the wood. Its construction looked simple enough. “Apologies—a lady ought not to be subjected to such an unsightly thing.” He had likely mistaken her gaze as one of shock instead of curiosity. Bernigi cast his eyes down and began to put on his boot over the cracked pylon.

“No! I was just interested in seeing how it is constructed. If you wouldn’t mind, could you please tell me about your prosthetic leg? Perhaps I could replace the broken part.”

“The wooden core has snapped, something that happens from time to time. It would be much sturdier if it were metal, but it would become quite cold in the winter.”

“Is there, um, any cushioning in between?”

“It is easy for cushioning to become dislodged, so I wrap thick cloth under the dressing. And you needn’t fret; I wear an anklet enchanted with unicorn horn, so it causes no pain.”

It causes no pain? You mean you just don’t feel it. The bandaging on his knee was certainly white, but the inner lining of his boot was reddish-black—

evidence of repeated staining by blood.

“Do you happen to have a rod or plank about the length of the core, Master Dahlia? It will only have to be sturdy enough to get me to my carriage.”

“Would it be okay with you if I made something out of metal instead? It’s easier for me to shape metal than to carve wood; I can also process it afterward so that it’s not so cold.”

“Ah, a magical toolmaker can do such a thing?”

It was a technique that many alchemists and magical toolmakers learned and also something that college offered, though not everybody was capable of doing it, as the magic required the right affinity. Metal was also more magically conductive than wood, so it wasn’t too hard to shape. As Dahlia removed the wooden pylon and then measured and recorded its dimensions, something caught her attention. “Considering your prosthesis is inserted into your shoe, is it not difficult to use your heel?”

“Hm? I am unsure if I understand what it means to ‘use my heel.’”

After Dahlia drew a large T on a sheet of paper to represent the human foot, she explained how the whole thing, from heel to toe, came into contact with, then pushed off the ground.

“Ah, like how a real foot behaves. But would a heel not be too fragile? Metal would be sturdier, but perhaps that would be too heavy?”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Lord Bernigi, Chairwoman—may I share my opinion?”

“Aye, Marcella; no need to be reserved.”

“The prosthetics that commoners use are made by cutting and shaping soft woods, making them quite affordable but not long lasting.”

“Is that perhaps something that affects someone in your family?”

“Rather, it is something I have learned from my time with the Couriers’ Guild—I had a coworker there who had suffered a terrible injury during a long haul and could not return to the capital within seven days.” Even the most severe injuries to limbs were often completely cured, though this seemed to be a

privilege for those living near the capital, which had a temple. Marcella proceeded to sketch a wooden prosthetic leg that looked something like a curved board, though its form suggested that its user could do without a cane once they mastered the technique.

“So, this is what commoners use? Without a shoe, however, it is plain to see the leg is artificial.”

“Would that be a problem, Lord Bernigi?”

“Nobles either hide their injuries or they remain confined to their homes, especially in the capital—not having treatment brings the financial situation of one’s family into question, and moreover, others may consider it ignoble, see it as a sign of failure for a knight, or otherwise find unreasonable faults...” The pain in his voice shone a light on the gloomy parts of nobility. Improvements to prostheses meant improvements to mobility; there shouldn’t be any shame in this.

“Pish, what drivel! We should make a prosthetic so amazing that it can be something to boast of!”

“Marcella, I— No, you make a good point.”

To describe the former vice-captain of the Beast Hunters, someone who had lost his leg while defending one of his knights, as a failed knight was blasphemy. Furthermore, the prosthetic leg was something that could help the disabled, something that gave support to those who needed it—it was nothing short of a wonderful invention. As a craftsperson, Dahlia could not understand why anyone would disparage it. And if it wasn’t noblelike enough, then “a prosthesis so amazing”—something with enhanced capabilities and better design—was called for. “Shall the three of us make a new kind of prosthetic leg?”

“How do you mean?”

“Heck yeah, Dahlia! Let’s make something that will trample over all else!” Marcella then promptly apologized for letting his raw emotions show too plainly, but Bernigi once again proved to be a broad-minded man and laughed it off.

However, a prosthetic leg was far different from a static magical tool—it had

to be as sturdy as can be. The material Dahlia thought of was the same one used for the Galeforce Bow, and there was quite a lot in stock here. She retrieved the white, uniquely shaped object from a shelf, and the eyes of both men before her grew wide.

“If my eyes do not deceive me, Master Dahlia...”

“This is green horse, yes.”

“Horse bone, huh?”

Despite the doubt in Marcella’s voice, he was on the mark. Green horse bone’s magical properties made it great for use as an enchanting material, but its physical properties also made it great for processing—its combination of toughness, elasticity, and durability made it very useful. Shaping it required a gentle stream of powerful magic, a more delicate touch than when working with metal. As she kept in her mind a streamlined shape for ease of use, Dahlia formed the piece of bone to the shape of a pointed shoe at one end. “This should be close to the correct length; I will now form the socket.”

“I thank you.”

Bernigi was somewhat lean, but his frame was large and his back was broad. Therefore, his right knee was likely under a lot of stress, so Dahlia made an impression of the space between where his right knee and the prosthesis would connect, then she molded body heat conservation material and impact absorption material to the cavity. She gave the suspension system elasticity and extended it up to connect to his thigh so that it wouldn’t come off without warning. “Could I have you give it a try?”

The elderly man stood up with the cane in his right hand and took a few timid steps. The prosthesis seemed to fit just right with no discernible play in the socket. “It seems very well-made. However, the flexibility does not quite inspire confidence; would it be possible to enchant it with hardening to reduce that?”

“Would it not be better to allow some compression? It would spring back after each step, and it should be less fatiguing this way.”

“Ah, is that correct? I suppose I shall only find out by using it more.” Bernigi began to speed up toward the wall, his heel dragging ever so slightly on the

floor; it might have been hard to lift up his leg.

After wondering about what she could do to help, Dahlia recalled another osseous material: skybat bone. Supposedly it was often used to support kites and the like in flight, so maybe its slight buoyancy could be useful here as well. “Lord Bernigi, could you please sit back down?” Dahlia ran her idea by him as she removed the prosthesis from the now-seated man’s stump, and after getting his consent, she made a liquid mixture with the pulverized skybat bone. Her rainbow magic spread the blue concoction from the heel to the toe, then up the leg to the knee. Dyed from white to a deep blue like the sky, the prosthesis glimmered just once. Perhaps a little too conspicuous; she thought it might be good to wrap it in leather or color it some other way.

Bernigi, though, seemed to like it. “How beautiful the shade is...” He then helped blood bond it to himself; with his magic coursing through the magical tool, it should be more controllable.

Marcella also lent a hand and supported Bernigi every time he put on and took off the prosthesis during fitting.

“Could you please test it out again?”

Bernigi paused after a false start to lean his cane against the workbench, then he walked to the rear of the room and back again. His heel did not once drag, and his gait looked quite natural. “Fine work! My left leg feels slightly heavier now, though I suppose I could simply wear a lighter shoe.”

“Chairwoman, this is coming from a layman, but would it be possible to enchant Lord Bernigi’s shoe with skybat as well?”

“Oh, that way, it would balance with the prosthetic.” It was a sound idea, and Bernigi confirmed that his shoes had not been enchanted before. With his approval, Dahlia applied the same enchantment to one shoe, turning it from dark brown to a navy blue.

Bernigi forwent his cane and walked around some more, then he nodded twice. “I can manage just fine without my walking stick. So long as I do not take up too much time from either of you, I would like to go out into the hall.”

“By all means. Marcella, could you please accompany Lord Bernigi? I have

some paperwork to take care of.” Though Bernigi had his own attendant, it would be better if he had people to support him on both sides.

Marcella accepted her request with a smile, then followed the elderly man.



Out in the hall, Bernigi asked his attendant to enjoy a cup of tea in another room. But the nobleman was in the home of the Scalfarottos, a family outside of his own faction; even a rookie knight like Marcella knew it wasn’t quite right for Bernigi to be alone here.

Yet, the attendant-cum-bodyguard said nothing to protest and instead bowed, saying, “I leave Lord Bernigi to you, then,” which elicited a bit of a tense acknowledgment from Marcella.

Bernigi then began taking big strides down the hallway, arms swinging freely, unhindered by a cane. It looked natural enough, but he wobbled left and right; the prosthetic was brand new, after all.

“Excuse me, Lord Bernigi, but would you please allow me to take your arm for safety?”

“Take my left arm, then, if you please. It would not do for me to fall over in someone else’s home.” Though his smile was soft, his arm was anything but—there was much more muscle there than was immediately obvious.

They continued down the hallway, but suddenly the old man leaped sideways, nearly falling. Marcella grabbed on tight and planted his feet firmly.

“Much appreciated. I was attempting to flow my magic into both my prosthesis and shoe, but I clearly failed to do so evenly.” Sweat had formed on his wrinkled brow.

Marcella was fully keen on the hardships of magic control—his recent endeavors in that area had had him struggling too, but for a late bloomer who’d only recently begun studying, that much was to be expected. “Yes, it’s not easy at all, is it? I have been trying to create bricks, but, well...”

“Ah, making them rectangular with sharp corners, are you? My attempts in the past all ended up as large spheres. Hopefully you have had more success?”

“Pickling weights for me—erm, that is to say, I have been making many round balls as well.”

The men shared the same failures as wielders of earth magic—and now the same laughter too. But maybe more importantly, they shared the same blood. Though Jonas had never explained it to Marcella in as many words, he knew that Bernigi was someone from his father’s family; considering his age, he was probably his grandfather or granduncle.

“Mind if we run?”

“Not at all, sir.” But seeing the old man’s smile, Marcella had no inclination to ask for clarification. Bernigi was very humble despite being a former marquis. He might’ve looked a little scary, but his words and actions were the opposite. Some time ago, Marcella had been asked if he would like to be adopted by the D’Orazi family, but he had rejected Bernigi’s offer on the spot; to stay as a commoner and live with his wife Irma and his soon-to-be-born children was all he wanted.

“I should like to think I have a good grasp on it now.” After walking up and down the hall some more, Bernigi got a good grasp on control of either his magic or his prosthetic. Whatever the case was, he sped up and did not stumble. “Next, we challenge the stairs!” He nimbly walked up the steps and even began skipping them midway through, but that wasn’t something easily done in lockstep, so Marcella followed behind him instead. At the top of the stairs, Bernigi did not ease into his question, asking. “Say, Marcella, how many are in your family?”

“I live with my wife currently, and soon there will be four in our family. Back home, I have my parents and two younger brothers.”

“Ah, three brothers? You must have quarreled a fair bit, then.”

“All the time when we were children, sir. That said, as the oldest sibling, I had to go easy on them.”

He had body strengthening magic as well as a few years on his brothers, so he hadn’t ever seriously scrapped with them. Marcella had also often mediated between his younger siblings, carrying his middle brother under his right arm and his youngest brother under his left. More than fighting, though, the three

of them had been mischievous brats who played pranks on their parents all the time; boys will be boys, as they say.

“I have sons myself, and they, too, did their fair share of fighting when they were young. We all have earth magic, so many rooms in our home were more like sandboxes. Argh, I even remember the time when they colluded among themselves to build a sandcastle—at that size, a sand palace, even—on my bed.”

“Huh?” How terrifying. The twins would likely have powerful earth magic. *Is this what’s in store...?*

“Your twins have earth magic too, aye? You had best brace yourself.”

“I, I see...” *Welp. Looks like the Nuvolaris gotta get themselves a big-ass broom.*

“My boys once made a ball of mud and tossed it back and forth. Indoors. As one might expect, a point came at which one failed to catch it, and that punched a large hole through the wall. Unfortunately, covering that specific part of the wall was a portrait of our ancestors. Never have I been so afraid of my wife Mersela as I was then...”

“Pfft!” He failed to contain himself.

“Ah, and Bernardi—my youngest son—he was physically the strongest, but he was the gentlest one.” That casual drop of a name confirmed that the old man before Marcella was his grandfather by blood. “He was a Beast Hunter like myself, and he was a very fine knight—he even cut off one of the hydra’s nine heads.”

Marcella tried his best to not let his expression or voice be affected by the emotions welling up inside of him, but he couldn’t help his tone being a little stiff. “I see. And, um, what was he like?”

“He was a kind, strong, and gallant knight, and a son of whom I was very proud. Too good for me, in fact.” Each word weighed upon Marcella’s ears. There was no way Bernigi did not know that his grandson was before him.

The pair of black leather gloves swayed on Marcella’s belt—the pair that was a memento of Bernardi.

“I was a failure of a father to him...” Faint as a phantom, the sentence tumbled from his lips, making one question whether Bernigi had said anything at all.

Marcella, however, did hear it—although that didn’t mean he could say anything in response.

“Let us return, now, lest we keep Master Dahlia waiting.” A smile was on his lips, but his brown eyes dared not meet Marcella’s. “Shall we?”

“Very good, sir.” Marcella led the way, hoping to support the old man, who marched down the staircase. But his prosthetic failed to find one of those steps. “Lord Bernigi!” It was too late to grab just his arm; Marcella instead caught him by the chest, planting his feet firmly on the steps. Fortunately, the collision didn’t send the two men tumbling down, and once Marcella was sure they were safe, he was finally able to relax.



The old man in his arms, however, was still. “Sorry, Marcella...” With utmost tenderness, Bernigi moved his right arm to embrace his savior.

Whichever of the two Marcellas the apology was intended for, this Marcella took it in. What was the right response? Bernigi might have been his grandfather, but he was still a former marquis. Marcella did not intend to introduce himself as his grandson, and neither did he intend to join the family. He ought to have simply put on a mask and pretended he knew nothing. He ought to have responded with “I am glad that you are unharmed,” as if he thought the old man was apologizing for the fact that Marcella had needed to catch him. But his grandfather’s arm was trembling, and Marcella could not ignore the truth. “To have my father and mother’s blood in me and to live as I do—I’m happy.”

“...Is that right?”

Through the windows, the light beamed, blinding and burning, and Bernigi had walked so many laps of the hallway as well—it was only natural his downturned face was dripping. The two of them stood there motionless for some time.



By the time Marcella and Bernigi returned, Dahlia had just finished penning the third document.

“My apologies for taking up so much of your precious time, Master Dahlia.” Bernigi swung open the door and walked in with nimble steps, brandishing a delighted expression; it was hard to tell he was wearing an artificial limb. Marcella trotted in behind him. “I walked the hall twice from end to end, and I did not even have problems skipping steps as I hopped up the stairs!”

“Oh, r-really?” As wonderful as it was to hear, she couldn’t help but be concerned about the sudden intense physical activity. Dahlia’s eyes inadvertently flittered over to Marcella, who was looking a little awkward.

“Everything went smoothly, Chairwoman.” There was more to it than just his words—his eyes were moist and his brow was damp. He looked mentally quite spent, likely as a result of having to worry about Bernigi tripping. Dahlia felt

sorry for foisting the task upon Marcella.

“Master Dahlia, not only can I do away with my walking stick, but I have found a spring in my step. What an absolutely remarkable prosthesis—or perhaps this ought to be deemed a magical tool?”

“It is equal parts magical tool and artificial leg, so maybe it should be dubbed the magic prosthesis?”

“Magic prosthesis!” echoed Bernigi. “Brilliant!”

Dahlia had no objections to Marcella’s suggestion either; it was to the point and easy on the ears. “An application of leather on the prosthesis to match your boots should disguise it fairly well, I believe.”

The suggestion was made on the basis that nobles preferred prostheses not to be so visible, but Bernigi shook his head. “I prefer it the way it is. It truly is a ‘prosthesis so amazing’ that I should like to condition my body now. Allow me to proudly wear it on display for the world to see—and I ask that you not hesitate to send me your invoice afterward.” He straightened his back and raised his voice; his brown almond eyes looked deep into hers. “Master Dahlia, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you.” Bernigi placed his right hand to his left shoulder—the sincerest and most proper gesture of appreciation from a knight.

She jumped to her feet. “I am happy you liked what I made—er, not to put myself on such a high horse!” Her panic soon subsided to make way for despair; it was only now that she thought of better responses. “It is an honor that you would use a creation of mine” or even a “The pleasure is all mine” would have been so much better than whatever she’d blurted out. Well, the prosthetic leg had indeed been made of horse—green horse bone, to be precise—but in any case, her disrespect to a former marquis was not intended.

“I adore it! And with the extra bone in my leg, I suppose one could say I ought to have more spine now.” Bernigi guffawed; how considerate it was of him to roll with her terrible and unintended pun.

“With your mobility restored, perhaps you could be reinstated as a royal knight, Lord Bernigi.”

“Marcella, you flatter me. I may be able to walk better now, but my knee is still an issue.”

“I know of a soup made with chicken skin and cartilage that is good for joints; lots of leek or other herbs can help mask the flavor if you find it unsavory. Many in the Couriers’ Guild make this recipe because—”

Marcella continued to explain to Bernigi how commoners dealt with joint disorders, like a grandson trying his darndest to help his grandfather—how touching, thought Dahlia.



Sometime later, when Bernigi had become used to his new prosthesis, he ventured out to the training yard behind the D’Orazi manor and gathered a handful of the knight-guards who weren’t preoccupied. “I have returned—may we spar?”

The guards in the yard were all in middle age, if not a bit beyond that; they had been with Bernigi since very early on. Was their knight of a master suddenly reminiscing about the blade? Was he here to check whether their skills hadn’t degraded? Or perhaps, gods forbid, that this was his final spar? Different assumptions ran through the knights’ heads as they accepted their master’s request, and they each took a training sword.

Everyone was shocked three separate times during the session: first, their master was able to stand without a cane because of a blue artificial leg; second, the elderly man hardly held back and sparred as normal; and third, their master’s swings and footwork were unpredictably agile, and the knights had had a hard time keeping up. It was difficult not to show their surprise.

Having satisfied himself, Bernigi laid down his training sword. “Thank you for your time. I have yet to become accustomed to this new magic prosthesis of mine, and I feel I lack heft and strength in my body. Allow me to spar with you again after I adjust to it.” Having expressed his appreciation, he left the training yard.

The guards, finally understanding his earlier words, bowed as he left. One of them tightened the grip on his training sword. “Lord Bernigi really has returned...”

Their master had served illustriously in the Order of Beast Hunters as their vice-captain before retiring when he had failed to protect his subordinate and lost his leg. He had trained his youngest son up to be as mighty a knight as himself, and the young man had followed his father's footsteps, but he had been slain during the battle with the hydra. However, the then marquis and proud knight hadn't once lamented his loss, hadn't once shed a tear in front of his guards; they had only been able to stand silently by their master's side. That heavy burden had weighed upon his shoulders, and, before anyone realized, it had made the elderly man stoop. It turned out that Bernigi's ailing health hadn't simply been old age taking its toll—forgoing his cane and standing up straight, Bernigi looked larger than ever.

After sparring, the knights headed toward the changing room to get out of their sweat-soaked clothes. They glanced out the window to see Bernigi speeding around on a horse; his attendant was chasing around the man with a full head and face of white, who was laughing like a boy. It must've been so long since Bernigi had ridden alone, but he certainly didn't look to be out of practice. With a suit of armor and a sword in hand, he'd look ready to ride into battle—fitting for a man who used to be known as the One Who Makes Monsters Cry.

The guards all stared with eyes glazed over. "I think I'll start training early in the morning from tomorrow onward."

"You read my mind." Others nodded in agreement.

Seeing Bernigi, who'd been known for being stout and a skilled swordsman during his time in the Beast Hunters, move so freely brought true joy to his men. To overcome his old wounds and revive as a knight were things to be proud of. But he had "yet to become accustomed to" his magic prosthesis. After he got used to it and adjusted himself to it, the elderly man would easily beat them—what would happen to his active bodyguards and their pride?

"Who the hell gave that thing to Lord Bernigi anyway?! That's so not fair!"

"No, it is on us to train harder! We knight-guards aren't going to lose to a lousy magical tool!"

"Yeah, bring on the training!" Their rowdy voices filled the changing room.

The D'Orazi knights conditioned themselves as though they were preparing for something—thus said the rumors that would circulate among the nobility in the near future.

The Broad Shield and the Veteran's Revival

In the castle's training grounds, a heavily built man dashed with a broad shield in hand—it was black and had a winged dragon and crossed swords painted on its face, the insignia of the Order of Beast Hunters. In what seemed to be some kind of training in evasion, knights who had donned gray armor charged toward the shieldman, but he bashed their swords away and slammed them left and right. Most who were tossed to the ground managed to get back up, but once in a while, there were those who were sent flying through the air with loud *thunks*. Knights in red armor did their best to catch these men raining down, but not all of them received such a luxury, meaning some landed on the cold ground on their backs or bottoms—they instead received attention from a mage with healing magic and knights bearing potions. The man with the broad shield, Randolph, turned around and returned to where he'd come from. Though flinging armored knights must've taken a lot out of him, he continued in his role.

"That is incredible..."

"Randolph has always been quite skilled with the shield, but he now looks more capable than ever," explained Griswald, the vice-captain.

Though Dahlia was standing far from the action, she felt the intensity of it all in her bones. The clashing of sword against shield and flying knights were honestly somewhat frightening, but as tough as the training was, there had never been any casualties or serious injuries before—something that could only be achieved through much practice with the broad shield, so Griswald had said.

This afternoon, Dahlia had come to the Beast Hunters' headquarters to conduct improvements on the broad shield—which probably sounded like a bigger deal than it was, which was as simple as slapping some impact absorption material on. As for Randolph, he had requested padding about three fingerbreadths thick at the grip so as not to hinder his hold and about a fist's width where the elbow and knee would contact when he used his full body to

brace. Whereas Dahlia was barely able to lift up the broad shield, Randolph had flailed it around with one hand to test how it handled. He had also tested out added impact absorption on his leather gauntlets, but it wasn't for him, as it hadn't felt comfortable when paired with a sword—he often exchanged his broad shield for one, especially when eradicating monsters.

Two knights, who wielded a bow and a war hammer, respectively, had also been interested in applying the material to their gloves. The bow knight had asked whether it could be used for the fingers supporting the bow and the ones drawing the bowstring, while the other had wondered if it could be used to reduce the shock felt when striking with a war hammer. There was a lot that Dahlia wanted to know as well, so she had hoped to interview them at a later time. If it turned out to be viable, then she would turn to Jonas and other weaponmakers for further advice.

“Volf and the others are up next, and we may have the chance to see how they flipped over the giant boar.”

“Sorry? I thought this was training for evasion.”

“Volf slew the real deal last time by attacking its head from straight above. It's as though he grew a pair of invisible wings this summer.” Griswald flashed a knowing smile; the invisible wings were due to Volf's sköll bracelet.

“I have heard that Volf once took a shield to his celiac plexus during training...” Dahlia realized the sudden concern that was welling up inside her and looked away, and just then, there he was, standing at one edge of the training grounds and swinging a training sword that was on the longer side. Volf just so happened to be looking this way too, and he raised his left hand and smiled. Dorino raised both hands, and the two other knights with them laughed; they seemed not to be one bit nervous about the broad shield waiting for them.

“You needn't worry, Master Dahlia. We knights are a tough bunch—the Scarlet Armors doubly so.” That Griswald had seen right through her made Dahlia blush a little.

When Dorino shouted, “Ready anytime,” Randolph crouched and hunkered behind his shield, then charged toward the group of knights. The first to take

the challenge was Dorino, whose head-on blows were deflected. A loud clank reverberated through the air, and the tip of his sword separated and flew off in some direction. Dorino himself was then sent flying high, but he managed to do a flip and land safely on the ground before rushing forward again—a good sign that he hadn't been hurt.

The two other knights rushed in afterward; the first struck from the right with his large training sword, and the second thrust with a blunted spear from the left in a marvelous display of coordination. However, Randolph swung his broad shield to redirect both weapons away, then whipped it back, striking his assailants with its edge. The attackers tumbled with the impact.

Up last was Volf. The tall and lean figure left but a red afterimage as he was smacked by the shield. As with the three before, there was a bit of time before he managed to land. He promptly changed directions and sped toward Randolph again. "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

"Come at me!"

The black-haired bird soared through the sky, aiming his talons straight down at the man with the broad shield. But instead of covering himself, Randolph bent one knee and crouched down. "Hraaagh!" The next instant, an indescribable clash sent the falling youth rebounding into the sky—Volf practically reached the clouds.

"Volf!" Dahlia's scream escaped her lips before she could swallow it. But the other Beast Hunters seemed to have been taken by surprise too, and they ran toward the scene.

Volf had taken the brunt of the broad shield like a ball being sent in the air; in her previous world, cheering would have accompanied this home run. After he crash-landed, he stood up but immediately sat back down and remained in that position. Dahlia desperately wanted to run to him like his squadmates did, but Griswald made a good point and said, "Volf needs to be examined for injuries," and she was stopped in her tracks—she'd only get in the way if he needed medical attention. Volf sported a stiff smile as he spoke in a soft voice to the knights who gathered around him. As she worried more by the minute, one of the mages gave up his robe to cover Volf, and he was taken away.

“Is, um, is Volf okay? Please tell me he didn’t suffer any serious injuries...”

Dorino, who came by, answered her with a cheery smile. “He’s okay! It’s nothing serious at all. He’s going to get changed out of his dirtied clothes, and he’ll be back before you know it.”

“Oh, thank goodness...” But that only alleviated some of her anxiety. Seeing that Volf had been unable to move for a while there, it wasn’t unlikely that he’d broken or hurt something badly. Dahlia decided to ask him directly afterward.

As they sped toward the building, a black-haired mage confided words of advice. “Master Dahlia is filled with concern for you, Sir Volf—it might be a good idea to go see her after you get changed.”

Volf, who had the mage’s robes draped over his shoulders, clenched them tight in both hands. “Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

“The least one man can do for another. It’s quite the unexpected injury you have received, though.”

“Yes, I know. This has never happened to me, so I was quite flustered...”

The mage responded to Volf’s strained laugh with one of his own. “There is little you can do to train for something like this. Perhaps the trousers you wear to combat ought to be strengthened at the seat, as I have never seen quite so much damage before.”

“I’m with you there...” The whispering men hurried to enter the Beast Hunters’ building.



When he alighted from his carriage at the castle’s lot, all eyes immediately turned to him—the elderly man with white hair and beard had donned a dark gray suit of armor, a single deep navy combat boot, and a sky blue artificial leg. Supporting him was nary a cane, nor was he flanked by attendants; only a lone guard followed behind him. Most nobles tended to hide their prosthetic arms or hands; he, on the other hand, drew attention to it. People he passed by turned around to gawk, people stared from a distance, and people peeked out from behind closed windows, but not one person had any words for him aside from

the usual greetings—rather, not one person dared to say anything more. The man puffed out his chest, took large steps, and kept his tawny eyes pointed straight ahead. Never had anyone so proudly and boldly walked in the castle with such a visible prosthesis before.

The owner of the sky blue leg, Bernigi, strutted into the Order of Beast Hunters' headquarters, greeted the people there, and headed straight to the training grounds. "I have heard that Grato has yet to conclude his meeting, and I am hoping I could be allowed to observe in the meantime."

"Of course, Lord Bernigi. We are honored to receive you." Griswald offered those pleasantries before looking down to Bernigi's leg—this must be the magic prosthesis that he had heard about from Ivano. He'd also heard that Bernigi no longer needed a cane, but he hadn't thought the leg would turn back the clock for its wearer too—so Griswald wanted to jest, but he instead paid an honest compliment. "Is your artificial leg as comfortable as it is beautiful to look at?"

"It is perhaps better than I deserve." A spate of nostalgia burst from his expression as the elderly man gazed upon the training grounds. The broad shield session had ended, and all Beast Hunters were beginning their regular conditioning; the distinctive din of training swords and vigorous shouting echoed in the air. Envious and itching to join, he tightened his right fist, something that Griswald did not fail to notice.

"Perhaps just observing won't suffice, Lord Bernigi."

It could have been seen as a slight toward an elderly man with a false leg, but the knight certainly did not take it that way. "I am still far from being able to compete with the Sorcerer of Water." Bernigi pointed his tea-brown eyes at the man with that nickname.

Something about the intense gaze made Griswald reflexively tense up, but he wasn't about to show it on his face. Though he prided himself on his ability to slay monsters with water magic and a lance, "Sorcerer of Water" was all but an exaggeration. He could not imagine giving that old knight a beatdown; Griswald would need much more training before that could happen.

"I have been conditioning this old body of mine; would you allow me to participate with the young folk?"

“We would love to receive your instruction, Sir Bernigi.”

With a firm nod of the head, the veteran accepted the training sword that Griswald extended toward him, and as he strode forward, his sky blue magic prosthesis gleamed with every step.

The meeting regarding equipment ended, and Grato brought Ivano along to the training grounds. At one end, Dahlia, accompanied by Volf and Randolph, was applying more impact absorption material to the broad shield, likely fine-tuning it. Meanwhile, the jumble of Beast Hunters and their swords, spears, greatswords, and shields were rattling against each other and training in both attack and defense in the center. Most armor visible out there was gray, and a few wore red, but there was also a spot of blue that shouldn't have been there—it was an overcast day.

The vice-captain approached Grato and the others, sounding a little uneasy as he updated his superior on the situation. “Captain, Lord Bernigi has come and is participating in our training...”

Bernigi's blue prosthesis stuck out like a sore thumb; there was no blending into the crowd of knights for him. Though he might not have been as muscular, quick, or as sharp as he was in his prime, his skills had not withered away, and if anything, his feints were even better than before. It might have been due in part to his prosthetic leg, though rough-and-tumble had always been Bernigi's style. His trickiness was a good learning experience for the young knights.

Although he was embroiled in sparring, Bernigi noticed Grato's arrival, and he slipped out of the action and headed toward the group of spectators. “They are all tremendously strong, Grato! Their fundamentals are rock solid too. I am pleasantly surprised to see what you have achieved here!” The old man was beaming, and his complexion was far better than it had been when they'd met the other day. He even looked a size larger, if such a thing were possible. And more than anything, the light had returned to his tea-brown almond eyes.

“A new artificial leg, Lord Bernigi?”

“Aye, this exceptional magic prosthesis was a very kind favor from Master Dahlia. Rather fetching, is it not?” Indeed, the prosthesis itself had a very

pleasant form. He no longer required a cane, his strides were large, and his steps were firm. But it wasn't just the looks—that she had used magic to make up for his abated muscles was awe inspiring. “With this, I plan to recondition my body for spring.”

“Spring? Is there something happening then?”

“I am hoping to all-out spar against you, *Captain*.”

Grato's lips and eyes curved at the emphasis Bernigi placed on his title. He wasn't just speaking to an optimistic old man but a ferocious knight—there was still Beast Hunter inside him. He heard that Rossetti had invented the impact absorption material and, along with that, a magic prosthetic leg that was easy to move around in; it seemed as though the sky-blue magical tool had restored his senior's fighting spirit. When Grato had joined the squad, it had been Bernigi who'd first taught him how to fight with a sword. The prospect of sparring against him was nothing short of thrilling. Sure, no one escaped the ravages of time, and the years had accumulated for Grato as well, but his abilities more than made up for it. He might not have been in his prime anymore, but he was still in active service and, more importantly, he was the current captain of the Order of Beast Hunters—he could absolutely not lose to a retiree.

“As you wish, *ex-Vice-Captain*.” Before he knew it, a ferocious grin crept across his face too.

“Ah, Master Dahlia is in the process of crafting another magic prosthesis for me, and the three of you ought to come observe next time. I should like us to train together in the spring.”

The other two names that Bernigi mentioned afterward were his juniors, though they were Grato's seniors. Grato recalled the tough instruction and rough lambasting he'd received in his youth, and he could but awkwardly smile as he failed to find a suitable answer. The veteran tended to say too much and he'd had a distinguished service—in other words, it was tricky.

Certainly seeing through him, Bernigi guffawed. “We are discussing whether other prostheses and supportive tools like this magical artificial leg are possible. Not just from the squad—there are knights from all the orders who have lost their mobility and are retired with time and money on their hands. I am hoping

to get everyone involved.”

That more people could move freely again and support others were both joyous things; next year, the castle would surely have a happier crowd. This would likely make things even trickier, though.

“Anyway, I ought to return to my lessons.” Bernigi, who seemed not to have had enough exercise yet, returned to spar with the knights.

As the elderly man swung his training sword again, Grato and Ivano watched from behind with tired expressions. “Ivano, you told me about the magic prosthesis, but you failed to mention *this*...”

“I hope you can forgive me—I did not know of this either...” Ivano had never seen it in person and had only learned of it from Dahlia’s report; this was hardly his fault.

“I am not criticizing you; just a bit surprised is all. Still, the impact absorption material, the cloth, and the magic prosthesis on top of them—quite a few things in the works, eh?” Though it was Grato himself who had asked Dahlia to be the Order of Beast Hunters’ advisor, he had to say it had been a brilliant decision.

The vice-chairman cleared his throat, interrupting the captain as he basked in his own ingeniousness. “Sir Grato, I, erm, have yet something else to report to you: the Scalfarotto Arms Works is trialing the impact absorption material for saddles and carriage seat cushions, and Mr. Forto of the Tailors’ Guild will be unveiling an improved version of the zephyricloth before long...”

Grato could but laugh at the way Ivano’s navy eyes were pointed at the ground as he said that. But it was good news that they were developing so many magical tools for the Order, and he was genuinely grateful—to make expeditions easier was to give them an advantage in battling monsters. That their resident magical toolmaker was advancing too quickly, that too many people had become involved, or that he had no clue which direction things were going—these were misgivings Grato could never express aloud.

Incidentally, Dahlia had a serious look on her face and impact absorption material in her hands. The knight nicknamed Lord Reaper was smiling as he

spread open a glove. The bow knight was contemplating where to stick the padding. Behind the bow knight was the wielder of the war hammer holding his beloved weapon and a pair of gloves, giddy as a child. Beside them, the vice-captain watched with a smile, his favorite spear in one hand and a pair of gloves in the other; it seemed like he was waiting his turn. Others glanced at that group, and likely, some of them would begin lining up as well.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Ivano, not on behalf of the Order but for my own sake: I hope the Rossetti Trading Company will begin to deal in medicine—”

“Sir Grato, I have just what you need.” The master merchant had come prepared. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out exactly what had been requested. “This medicine for the stomach is made of bear liver, and many have avowed its efficacy. I cannot dispense with it.”

Ivano’s smile was perfectly manufactured, but his navy eyes looked just a little fatigued; Grato assumed he was no different. He could foresee things getting rather hectic. “I’ll likely need a large supply this coming spring. You have my thanks in advance.”

Interlude: The Weight of a Sword, the Weight of a Pen

“Forty-six...” Bernigi muttered softly as he turned over the page. On his desk in the D’Orazi manor were penmanship worksheets for children. As a small mound had accumulated, so had his sense of accomplishment. His handwriting was so awfully illegible that he had regularly delegated paperwork and letters to his wife and subordinates; it had become all too natural to simply scribble his signature on the bottom and call it done. As such, this situation had befallen him. But if it was for a great-grandchild’s hand, going through a child’s education again was no hardship—so long as his children and grandchildren did not witness this happening, at least.

His attendant and the maids had been dismissed from the study. His instructor and wife Mersela scrutinized the tip of his pen. Though she herself worried about wrinkles and becoming somewhat plumper, with her long, white hair tied into a chignon, she had the dignity and elegance of a mature noblewoman. “It is said that one hundred pages are required for any changes to your handwriting and three hundred pages for you to develop muscle memory, so keep working at it, my dear.”

“And I shall!” Bernigi boomed with enthusiasm as he began carefully scribing ink on the forty-seventh page.

When the boys were young, she had taught them to write as well. Bernigi had once secretly peeked at their littlest son Bernardi’s practice, and it had frankly been terrible—he had been told to take his time and try his best, but his printing had been large and messy, like what one would expect from a child; he’d gripped one edge of his sheet. “I can see that you have improved!” he’d commended his son—then, to add to the encouragement, Bernigi had flipped over the practice page and written, “Just like me” in his own large and messy print.

Bernardi had giggled and treasured that sheet of paper. He’d often said,

“Father, I want to become a knight like you,” and in time, he’d done just as he’d proclaimed he would, despite having the magical strength to be a mage; he’d chased his father’s footsteps and become a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters.

How was it, then, that they had come to be at odds with each other? Bernigi hearkened back to the day twenty-odd years ago.

“There is a woman who I’d like to marry—”

In the study, Bernigi smiled when he heard those nervous words coming from his son, a knight who wore his Beast Hunter’s uniform far more properly than his father did. Just the day before yesterday, Bernigi and Mersela had been conversing about how it was about time their youngest son found himself a spouse, but Bernardi had gone on to tell them, “I am yet lacking as a knight, and I have failed to even find romance; I have no intention of marriage.” He rarely, if ever, participated in teas or soirees, so that he himself had found someone came as a surprise.

“Good. And have you told your partner?”

“Yes, and she said yes as well. However...” Bernardi paused and drew his lips tight. His hesitation suggested it was someone less than appropriate, perhaps a noblewoman from another faction or someone with whom he had a large age difference, perhaps even a maid or a worker whom he frequently saw at the castle.

If they shared the same feelings, then Bernigi would like to do whatever he could to facilitate the relationship. “From which family does she come?”

The son’s kite-brown eyes looked unflinchingly into his father’s. “Marcella is her name, and she is a woman from the red-light district.”

Bernigi heard him just fine, but there were a few moments between hearing and understanding. The D’Orazis were a marquise that traced its lineage back to the founding of the kingdom. It had produced many royal knights and mages, and others even regarded it as possessing prestige. Bernardi had been educated and raised well as a D’Orazi. Why, then, had he been so easily fooled by a prostitute? Their relationship was founded on monetary exchange; there was

no doubt she had deceived him. “What joke are you playing, Bernardi?” His words came out stronger and louder than he had meant.

“Father, I am serious.”

“Be rational—this is about money.”

“No, it isn’t, father. She does not wish for nobility or wealth. As long as Marcella and I can be together, I need neither status, my knighthood, nor money. All I want is to be with her.” There was no uncertainty, no humor in his gaze—it was obvious that his feelings were not superficial. But a harlot? Could the same have been said for her?

“Are you deliberately trying to sully the D’Orazi family?”

“If I may not receive your blessing, then please disown me.”

“Calm yourself, you fool!”

“Time will not change a thing! I have been thinking over this for the past two years, and not once has my love for her changed!”

Two years, but Bernigi hadn’t heard it mentioned once, nor had he noticed. The two of them continued their heated exchange, neither yielding one step to the other. This was the first time they had argued, and it hurt his head so.

“I shall return to the barracks, father.” In the end, Bernardi’s farewell was formal—distant, even.

Bernigi only nodded. There was no changing the boy’s mind when he was so infatuated, but perhaps time would cool him down—so he thought, as he pretended to go over some documents and his youngest son walked out of the room. This would be the last interaction he would ever have with Bernardi.

The next day, a hydra appeared at the border. By the time Bernigi found out, it was evening already, and the Beast Hunters had long since been dispatched on sleipnirs; Bernardi had joined the reconnaissance party. Bernigi could not find it in himself to express his concern. His son had never suffered any grave harm since joining the Order, and he would return with merit, or so Bernigi continued to convince and reassure himself, at least. He would return, and they

would continue their discussion with cooler heads. And just as he repeated that to himself for the myriadth time, a messenger arrived—Bernardi had been killed in action.

At the same time, a mess of responsibilities fell upon Bernigi; there was no time to mourn his son's death. The casualties within the royal orders and along the border had been great. There were too many dead and critically injured, and there was a call for others to take their place. Due to the appearance of the hydra, other monsters were moving about; they needed to be exterminated, and nearby settlements had to be on high alert. Then came rumors that the hydra was being chased toward Ordine so Ehrlichia would not suffer more damage, followed by rumors that Ordine was casting spells to direct it to Ehrlichia; the two nations were very tense for some time, to say the least.

As he assisted the orders and aided various organizations, time raged by. When it seemed like the worst had passed, Bernardi's personal belongings arrived from the barracks. His estate was distributed among his brothers and his comrades. Bernigi kept one thing for himself: a brown letter case. It had been a present for his son to celebrate him entering college. It had been well cared for; the leather still had an impeccable shine. Any epistles or love letters, he would toss into the fireplace without reading; any debts, he would go and pay—so he had decided before he opened the lid. Inside were Bernardi's letter of assignment from the Order of Beast Hunters, requests for leave, and other documents. There were even documents that detailed requests for equipment that had been denied as well as receipts for rations and consumables for expeditions.

Bernigi caressed the messy writing that was so like his. "You sure were a Beast Hunter through and through, huh, Bernardi?" The tears that had welled up were about to fall, and Bernigi grabbed all the papers from within. Stuck to the bottom of the case was a worn-out handwriting worksheet—in messy handwriting, "Just like me." Bernigi fell to the floor. Grasping the pile in between his fingers, nearly ripping them from the case, he could but wail.

Busy days came and went. Bernigi went to gird on his sword as usual, but its weight caused it to nearly slip out of his hand. He had been maintaining his

body despite losing a leg; what, then, was the cause for the sudden heft? And though his artificial leg had not changed, it had become heavier and begun to drag on the ground. This must be what was called age. From that day, Bernigi began preparing to withdraw from the public eye. He finished helping out the royal orders, then had his son and his wife succeed to the marquisate. Bernigi would appear if called upon and give advice if asked, but gone were the days of taking initiative. His wife and sons did not blame him, nor did others say anything.

When Bernigi went to the castle to say his final goodbyes, one of the Beast Hunters who had been under his command passed him by. “Vice-Captain! Would you allow me the chance to face you again sometime?” The knight shone the brightest smile.

Bernigi had long since retired, yet here he was being addressed by his old title. Ever since receiving a prosthesis and using a walking stick, he had lessened the intensity of his conditioning, and his body had become leaner. For the knight to request instruction was surely just a roundabout way of asking Bernigi to cheer up; this onetime bugbear of a knight had turned thoughtful and chivalrous. Rather than reveal his sword had become too heavy for him to wield, Bernigi did his best to act the role of a mean superior. “Once you get better, Grato.”

“Yes, sir!”

The cheer in the voice stung. Bernigi knew best of anyone that it was unlikely he would ever spar again. But for his health and so that he did not get even more out of shape, he swung his sword in secret and continued walking on his artificial leg. Regardless, neither sword nor prosthesis became any lighter.

Many moons had passed since then. Age spared no one. Bernigi had not been an exception, and it was time to square away his affairs—and then came an invitation to observe the Beast Hunters on their expedition. Its sender was the current captain of the Order, that knight he had called his junior. When he had still been a rookie, he had tended to jump into the fray even before the Scarlet Armors; Bernigi had had to grab him by the scruff all too often; that Grato had become captain was miraculous. The invitation mentioning armored crab

reminded Bernigi that it was one of his late son's favorite foods. With a pang of nostalgia, and considering the fact that it would likely be the last time Bernigi would see the Beast Hunters on an expedition, he accepted.

At the campsite, the knights enjoyed the fall day—they were enjoying themselves *too* much. They were too careless, too vulnerable, too easygoing. Bernigi could but worry unduly. He silently begged for them not to depart before him like his subordinates and his son Bernardi had, and he stepped away.

It was then that he met the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, Dahlia. In that chilly carriage cabin, she shared the thinking behind her magical tools and the warmth of her portable warm air circulator—she softened his stubborn heart. Since when had Bernigi come to a standstill? As they watched the Beast Hunters share laughs, he realized he wanted to use the time he had left to step forward and walk again.

He returned home in high spirits and told Mersela all about his day. Though she listened with a smile, a slight weariness plagued her due to the pain in her joints; he cut the conversation short. It was then that the Scalfarottos' Jonas, with Marcella in tow, visited. Right after speaking with them in the carriage, Bernigi flew over to Mersela again; their grandson, their great-grandchildren, the hands—there was so much to tell her.

“Mersela!” He burst into the room gasping for breath.

“What's the matter?!” Fearing that he'd gotten himself hurt, she went to examine him for any injuries. He had crossed swords with Jonas only metaphorically, but the alertness roused by the attendant's blight still gripped Bernigi.

He had intended to tell her the whole story, but he couldn't prevent his excitement from leaping out. “I saw our grandson—I saw Marcella!” When Bernigi realized he was causing a misunderstanding, he hastened to explain himself, stumbling over his words; he had not, in fact, seen the woman Bernardi had loved. She was no longer of this world, but she had given birth to a son and named him Marcella. He was a commoner and employed as a knight by the Scalfarotto family, who were sheltering him. His wife was also currently big with

child. *That* Marcella had come to the D'Orazi estate's carriage lot.

"What is he like?!"

"Just like Bernardi—a fine man!" Not only was his explanation lacking, Mersela seemed somewhat disappointed that she had not been able to meet Marcella as well; she grasped her husband's arm. "Forgive me, but, erm, my bones will soon break."

"You jest, my dear. My dainty little hands couldn't possibly break your arm, surely." Their magic was at the same grade, so her body strengthening magic was hardly a laughing matter. Bernigi knew better than to say anything to the contrary, though.

He then told her all about the current situation, Marcella, the business with the Intelligence Office, the happenings with Marquis-to-be Guido Scalfarotto, the attendant Jonas Goodwin, the Beast Hunters' magical toolmaker Dahlia Rossetti, what was planned for the near future—until sunbreak, the couple chatted away, and the wine they shared had never been so delectable.

"I should like to place Marcella within our reach, but he himself does not wish for it. Furthermore, the Scalfarottos are soon to become a marquisate, meaning we would be at the same rank."

"He is their knight, and our families are of different factions—we can't simply take Marcella by force. The Scalfarottos must have some weakness to exploit, though."

"I should also like to instruct Marcella and our great-grandchildren well, but that, too, would fall under the Scalfarottos' jurisdiction. So that you and the boys can meet him, I shall have to find a reason to invite Marcella here." When Bernigi realized he'd already begun to devise plans for what he ought to do, whom to use, and whom to involve, he laughed at himself. "Just as I had wanted to conclude my affairs, here I am wanting more already."

Mersela smiled with utmost elegance. "Oh, my. How could a former marquis such as yourself not take what he wants? We simply have to create a reason for Marcella to visit, do we not?" Her pear-colored eyes were usually kind and gentle, but they were now lit by a green flame; they were so beautiful that Bernigi fell in love again. During the expedition today, he had received a

delicate push on his back from that redheaded magical toolmaker, but the supportive shove he'd always relied on—a shove enhanced by body strengthening magic—came from none other than this woman.

“Aye, Mersela, you are right. As long as I still have sands in my hourglass, I shall see how long my arm can truly extend.” Bernigi showed her the smile he'd cultivated as a noble, to which she gave a resolute nod. “I shall have to make my return, then.”

“I look forward to dancing with you again.”

It was plain to them both—Bernigi and Mersela were to return to the proverbial center stage of nobility. It was time that they put on smiles, held daggers behind their backs, extended their long arms as far as possible, and saw as far into the future as they could. They had a desire, and now they had to reach for it. With the remaining time they had on this earth, they could not shirk away; they had to play the part of a greedy and cunning noble couple. That twilight, Bernigi and Mersela set out into the world again as former marquis and marchioness.

“You’ve stopped moving your hand, dear.”

Mersela’s voice snapped Bernigi back to the present moment. He was in the middle of practicing his penmanship, yet, unawares, he had let his gaze shift to the sword mounted on the wall. “I have been thinking about changing my sword.” The sword he'd always carried was fit for a knight, but after using the training sword against the Beast Hunters, he now found that his lacked heft and length.

“You mean—how about placing an order for a new one?”

Mersela always knew precisely what he wanted. In contrast with her serene demeanor, she'd once had the moniker of “All-Prepared”; though the current marchioness had inherited that title, she had learned it all from Mersela. The D’Orazi clan traced its lineage to the years of the kingdom’s founding, but it had never been one of wealth, and many did not understand that when there were no wars to be fought, the only thing that spoke within noble circles was money. When Bernigi had been the vice-captain of the Beast Hunters with no voice,

Mersela had managed the family and accumulated wealth and influence, providing him with the opportunity to walk forward without needing to watch his back.

The day after they had decided to return to power, Mersela piled her desk high with letters. Her writing had always been so beautiful that young nobles would beg her to teach them. She had frequently written in the past: to say hello, communicate, send news, introduce people to one another—letters of all sorts. Since Bernardi's death, she had stopped due to the pain in her joints, but now she had resumed with the help of analgesics.

She and Bernigi, along with the current Marchioness D'Orazi, had begun to participate in and host more tea parties and soirees, and Mersela was seeking new gowns and dresses; Bernigi had recommended her an up-and-coming couturier with boundless energy. Though she was bound to go over budget and buy more than she planned to, that was but a trivial matter.

"A new sword would be nice as well, but I have just the thing in mind." Bernigi walked to a shelf and reached into the back. The sword he produced had nary a decoration on its scabbard or hilt, and its blade was painted jet black—the one he had used during his time in the Order. It was longer and heavier than the sword he carried now, and the weight was balanced toward the tip for faster swings; it was a difficult tool to handle. He stepped away from the desk and gave it a few light swings still in its scabbard, but the weight was no impediment to him. He decided he would resume carrying this sword starting tomorrow.

"Would you like to take your medicated bath for your pain soon?"

"I shall do so before I sleep—I would like to get some exercise first." Bernigi had intended not to show it on his face, but apparently it was obvious by his movements—how shameful. Since he had received his magic prosthesis, he had dedicated a lot of his time to familiarizing himself with it and to moving around every day, which exacted its toll on his muscles; his unicorn horn magical tool helped, but it could only do so much. Afraid of being too conspicuous outside, Bernigi had been walking around in a room, and he had even begun running in the halls. He had tripped and tumbled at times, turned too quickly and run into the wall at others. The floor would end up covered in his sweat, and after he slipped and flopped on the ground a couple of times, Mersela had emplaced a

maid with a mop in the room. When he tried skipping two steps at once, failed, and crashed down to the bottom of the stairs, Mersela had emplaced a healer by his side; she had not accepted his claims that he would be able to make it next time. What she never failed to do was smile so tenderly when Bernigi covered himself in new bruises every day. One could not ask more of one's wife.

But there had been gains for his pains—he had even managed to spar with the Beast Hunters. That said, he was yet to move as perfectly as he wished, and he lacked the strength he desired. Furthermore, his hips and shoulders still felt too stiff. There was one measure, one that he had dared not to mention. With palatable disgust in his mouth, Bernigi uttered the monster's name. "Mersela, please order skybat powder for me..." Powdered skybat flesh was not only good for hair and skin, it was also effective when one's joints had limited range of motion—so the priest Aroldo had told him in secret.

"I shall also prepare dried forest serpent meat for you. Why don't we both partake in them starting tomorrow?"

"Mm, aye..." Bernigi was hardly happy. Forest serpent was not a problem, but skybat? He had no intention of putting on the airs of a gourmand, but *that*—that could not be called food. Well, if he thought of it as medicine, then that was only natural, but seven whole days of it would be pain and suffering; it would even sour drinks. To think about it, skybats likely hated him more than he them: he had slain them in expeditions, used them in his leg, and even taken them as medicine.

That reminded him of the redheaded magical toolmaker who had said something along the lines of being on a high horse. Bernigi had asked her to replace the cracked pylon of his artificial leg, but what she had come up with was a beautiful sky blue magic prosthesis. After taking Marcella's suggestion, she had worked the green horse bone with an intense focus; Bernigi had faith in her after seeing the utmost trust and bond between her and his grandson. Still, when he first put on the magic prosthesis and took a step, Bernigi had trembled within: it was so plain to see that it was artificial, so he had worried that it would be something he could only wear at home—just a few moments after, that thought had gone, never to return. The prosthesis had been even lighter

than he had imagined, and it had provided sure support and a tight fit. When he'd flowed some magic into it, it had almost felt like his leg had regrown. It had been confidence-inspiring. Not only could he walk, he could easily run—hell, he had felt as though he could even leap and soar.

As he'd basked in the magic prosthesis's glory, Dahlia had trusted Marcella with the task of supporting Bernigi. The two men had walked the halls back and forth, and they had walked the stairs up and down. Bernigi had used muscles that had been dormant for too long, and his physical pain had been searing, but that had then been eclipsed by a priceless, irreplaceable moment.

The desire to return to knighthood and the possibility of actually doing so had grown stronger the more accustomed to the magic prosthesis he had gotten. Magical tools were rather interesting things. In the form of the green horse bone replacing his leg, the skybat enchantment, and the various products made from slime powders, magical tools benefited the Order's expeditions, and they might even be able to bring this retired knight back to the battlefield. It was now he realized: perhaps monsters loathed nothing more than that redheaded magical toolmaker. Bernigi patted his sky blue leg and grinned.

"I can tell you have taken a liking to your magic prosthesis, dear."

"Aye, I sure have."

"I imagine you can dance very well now."

Still grinning, he nodded. People and interpersonal relationships were uncanny things. News that a young common woman had become the Orders' advisor had raised Bernigi's suspicion—was there something more than met the eye? But no, the magical toolmaker named Dahlia Rossetti not only did not have a hidden side, she carried her true self for the world to behold. When they had first met at the campground, she had lent him a supporting hand, and then she had earnestly illustrated that her creations were for the sake of the Beast Hunters. She had leveraged her connection with the Scalfarottos to save Marcella and his family too. And now, with this sky blue magic prosthetic leg, she had even enabled Bernigi to return to being a knight in fighting trim. How could he possibly thank her enough?

"The payment to Rossetti Trading Company has already been settled, and

their vice-chairman expressed that there is no need for any sort of gratuity.”

“I figured that is Master Dahlia’s character.” Ivano’s refusal of more money or goods had been in accordance with his chairwoman’s wish that future clients could afford the same service. It was not in the spirit of mercantilism, but it was very much in the spirit of Dahlia to behave so. Bernigi had already racked his brains for a way to thank her, and he knew if he were to ask her directly, it would only cause her much panic and trouble in figuring how to politely refuse him; that, though, transferred the trouble onto him.

“We shall have to find a way to express our gratitude someday, shan’t we?”

“Aye, we can dwell on that some more—but we will return the favor eventually.” As a D’Orazi—no, rather, as an ordinary knight, Bernigi so vowed.

“There is also Lord Jonas Goodwin whom we must repay.” Warm were her words, but scorching embers were at their core. That a youngling such as him had so easily outplayed her husband must have given her a grudge. Perhaps it was somewhat unjust—never ever had Bernigi been so soundly beaten before, and that was worth merit—but perhaps this was a battle for them as a couple. With what time they had left, they would conquer their last foe.

“Ah! Forty-seven pages will have to do for today!” Bernigi grasped his sword and shot to his feet—one of them sky blue. “From today forth, I shall endeavor to return to Beast Hunter form. I shall mingle with them, then, with this leg and sword, run rings around them.”

“Then I shall return to social intercourse with other noblewomen. I shall write many more letters, host tea parties, and visit the opera.”

Neither the weight of a sword nor the weight of a pen was as substantial as the rapacity of the nobility.



“A good way to gather intelligence, I say.”

“Oh, there is naught but kindness in my heart when they speak to me about what they have on their minds.”

Women from other noble families spoke in soft whispers. “When something is troubling you, seek advice from Lady Mersela D’Orazi,” they often advised. Regardless of faction or age, Lady D’Orazi was always there for other women to provide good offices, aid the younger generation in their romantic pursuits, and even resolve troubles that they did not want the gentlemen to know—or at any rate, such was her reputation. She radiated a gentle grace, and she was influential within the nobility and various businesses, so many people placed their trust in her. The reality was that every word that reached her ears was used to enrich her own family. Though the current Marchioness D’Orazi was now known as All-Prepared, the name had originally belonged to Mersela until she retired from most circles due to her joint pain. Many noblewomen who felt indebted to her never ceased paying social calls, making Mersela far more popular than Bernigi had ever been. She was his anchor, and she was the last woman he’d like to make an enemy.

“Speaking to others eases many issues, you see.”

“Mersela, your grin betrays you for a villainess.”

“You and I are not so different, then, my dear husband.”

He needed not a mirror to know how wicked his own was, and how like hers.

The Sleipnir's Trouble and Father's Footsteps

"Oh, did we get a new carriage?" Waiting outside the Merchants' Guild to take Dahlia home was not her usual horse-drawn carriage but one with gilded doors drawn by sleipnir.

Mena turned to her with a smile. "Our usual horse is 'off to see a prospective partner,' and it went back to the ranch. It'll get colder and colder too, so the vice-chairman prepared this carriage with a closed, heated cabin and rented this foal to go with it."

Though it was as big as a grown sleipnir, there was a childlike sparkle in its black eyes, which were pointed at Dahlia. There was something familiar about its appearance and its happy nickering. "Is that perhaps Purple Grape's foal?"

"How sharp of you, Chairwoman. Number Twelve here loves purple grapes too, so I hear."

What a delightful surprise reunion—this was the exact sleipnir that had been pulling her carriage when she had first met Volf, and maybe it even remembered him too. Something caught her attention, though. "What do you mean by 'number twelve,' Mena?"

"That would be the sleipnir's name. There are many horses for hire, so they often resort to numbering them." It made a lot of sense, but it was nonetheless a little unfortunate.

As she drew close to the beast, Marcella appeared, carrying a chest of goods to be delivered, as did Ivano, carrying a briefcase. "The new carriage looks very promising. You're not afraid of sleipnirs, Chairwoman?" asked Ivano.

"No. In fact, I've hired this one before."

"Oh, what a coincidence." Ivano sandwiched his briefcase under his arm and approached the sleipnir. He demonstrated his familiarity with horses by locking eyes with it and slowly stroking its mane. Number Twelve was enjoying the attention when it suddenly began sniffing him. "Sorry to say, but I don't have

any apples or pears for you—oh, I forgot about this; this is what you must be smelling.” He took a step backward and retrieved from his jacket pocket what appeared to be a crusty green bar of agar but was actually the result of the experiments some time ago—the thing created by enchanting green slime mixture with fire magic. “I had forgotten I’d scraped this off the table and stuffed it in my pocket. Mr. Forto said this is unsuitable for weaving into fabric, unfortunately.”

“Lucia expressed the same, saying that it was too fine and delicate.” The magical toolmakers at the Tailors’ had run some experiments on the fibers, but what they had made was closer to paper than cloth, and they had found out that it even dissolved in water given enough time; it was far from suitable for clothes.

Marcella demonstrated his experience as a courier. “Green slimes not only eat plants but just about everything else, so I can’t imagine it could be turned into fabric.”

“It is what it is. It would be foolish to expect to run into nothing but succe—Gah!” Taking advantage of the situation, the sleipnir whipped its head toward Ivano’s hand and twisted its tongue around the green cake of fibers. “Hey, that’s not food! Come on now, spit it out!” He scolded the sleipnir like a father would.

Sitting on the coach box, Mena guffawed. “You’re sticking out green hay, Vice-Chairman—of course it’s gonna be eaten up. Sleipnirs are quite the gluttons, so you’re never getting that back, you know?” It whinnied like it was agreeing; its mouth was empty already.



“Ack, you’ve eaten it all already...”

Dahlia wasn’t convinced that it was a laughing matter. “That wasn’t hay, Mena, that was processed green slime. What if it hurts the monster? Should we call for a veterinarian?”

“You two don’t need to worry so much. Sleipnirs aren’t regular horses, and they’ll eat whatever they can get; grasses, meats, fish—nothing will really hurt them. They’ll even gobble up small monsters too.”

“But that was enchanted slime—dried and powdered, but still. I wouldn’t want the other properties in the mixture upsetting its stomach or anything.”

“Dahlia, sleipnirs eat green slimes. When they’re resting on the side of the highway and they spot one, they’ll use one of their front legs to crush its core and chow down.”

“Oh...” Well, what Marcella had just said wasn’t in the bestiary. Sleipnirs were far wilder than she’d imagined.

“It’s not like sleipnirs go hunting for slimes when they have time to kill—they’re more like treats,” explained Mena.

“The slime doesn’t need to be dried first so that it doesn’t burn their mouths?”

“Nah. It’s just like Mena said—sleipnirs eat whatever they can get. They’ll eat proper food, of course, but they’ll happily crunch on shells and bones alike after applying strengthening magic to their mouths.”

“Whoa.” She glanced at Number Twelve. Those pearly whites sure looked tough and healthy, but she had never imagined it could simply eat slimes.

“It seems to have really enjoyed it too.” The sleipnir brought its muzzle to Ivano’s breast and nickered as it looked up at him. “Hey, cut it out with the puppy dog eyes. But I guess I do have another piece in my pocket.”

“You’re a pushover, Vice-Chairman!”

“Very well, then, Marcella. *You* go ahead—look into its eyes and say no.”

As though the sleipnir understood the entire conversation, it pointed its

glossy black eyes at Marcella. They stared each other down for a bit, but he was the first to give in. “Ah, well, I don’t think that stuff will hurt it; might as well give it the other piece.”

“See! You’re no better, Marcella!” Triumphant was Ivano, though they had both lost to a monster; Dahlia knew she would have fared no better, so she kept her mouth shut.

Mena chuckled at them from the top of the coach box. “That’s a pretty filly for you.”

“Sorry?” Dahlia needed a little clarification.

“She is very popular with the male horses, see, and they intended to use her as a broodmare, but her personality was far too strong for that—so the shop owner said,” explained Ivano.

“Are male horses too difficult to pair with female sleipnirs?”

“It’s likely that her standards are somewhat unrealistic. It’s said that she dislikes other sleipnirs too, and that she even kicks and runs away from would-be mates who get too persistent. She’s a high horse, if you get what I mean.” The way Number Twelve was squinting in bliss as Ivano petted her, she seemed like the gentlest creature, incapable of acting so aggressive; maybe it was a lack of chemistry.

“She’s got attitude, eh? Well, the stronger she is, the better she is at pulling a carriage,” said Marcella.

“That’s a good thing, then. I hope she’ll one day find a person—er, a partner she likes.” The sleipnir nodded in agreement with Dahlia.

Two days later, Dahlia and Volf went to the station in the West District near the Green Tower. Inside the basket she was carrying were two bunches of purple grapes—a slightly pricey treat during wintertime. In the back of the lot were the stables where the sleipnir named Number Twelve was. While Mena held down the fort, Ivano and Marcella had arrived earlier and were now speaking with the veterinarian.

“How is she, Doctor?” Voicing concern was Ivano—not only had Number

Twelve not eaten since the evening before yesterday, she hadn't slept a wink at night.

Normally, sleipnirs ate, well, like horses, but feeding it the processed green slime must've harmed it somehow, so last night, they had called for a veterinarian who also treated monsters. Dahlia couldn't help but worry, hence her and Volf's visit today.

"There is nothing wrong; in fact, she is extremely healthy." With sleeves now rolled back down, the vet once again donned a coat.

"But for a sleipnir to lose appetite for so long surely can't be right."

"That is simply because she is full—she is brimming with magic."

"She's full?"

"She's brimming with magic?" They looked on in confusion.

As though realizing a little more explanation was required, the vet smiled and continued. "Sleipnirs are monsters. Unlike regular horses, their sustenance is magic. Wild sleipnirs can go for some time without needing another meal when they feed on magic-rich monsters. Though it would be unlikely from a monetary standpoint, domesticated sleipnirs can be fed monster flesh or quality herbs; perhaps this one has eaten something like that. A sleipnir moving around the city also does not expend much magic unless it uses body strengthening magic, therefore I believe that she merely does not need to eat yet. Monitor her and feed her when she needs to be fed."

"Whew."

"If anything, Number Twelve is in peak physical condition. Her restlessness is due to excess energy, so I recommend taking her for a long ride and letting her gallop it off. Oh, and be sure that her rider is very experienced." Thus concluded the vet's visit, leaving behind a relieved party.

The sleipnir in question had had her eyes fixed on the basket. "Seems like you can give her a treat, Dahlia," said Volf.

"Everything has a dessert stomach anyway, right?" As Ivano's audience giggled, Dahlia extended the sleipnir a single purple grape. Number Twelve

nickered and lapped it up, tickling the palm of her hand. “I’m glad she’s perfectly fine, though I have got to say that it’s quite surprising that such a small amount could fill her stomach for two days.”

“I suppose it must’ve contained a great deal of— Oh! With that stuff, we wouldn’t need to bring fodder on our expeditions!”

“Sorry?”

“Ah! I’ll go gag the veterinarian right now. Marcella, you handle the staff at the station later.”

“Will do!”

“Who do we go to first, Ivano? The squad or my brother? Guido is home today.”

“Lord Guido, and as soon as possible! See if you can request we experiment on the other Scalfarotto sleipnirs too!”

“On it! Dahlia, once you’re finished here, head back to the tower.”

“Oh, uh, okay.” She couldn’t quite follow the conversation, but with everyone in such a great rush, she found it even harder to question them.

“Sorry, Sir Volf, could you accompany me for a while after I speak to the vet? I am going to purchase this sleipnir, but if we were to go by ourselves, it would take too much time, and I’m afraid they would learn about what has happened, so I’d like to borrow your name to speed up the process.”

“Sure thing!”

“Chairwoman, after Marcella sends you back home, just wait there and I will report to you afterward! In the meantime, think of a better name than ‘Number Twelve’ for our new girl!”

“See you soon, Dahlia!” The two of them rushed out of the stable before she even had the time to respond.

“I suppose you would like an explanation right about now, Chairwoman?”

“If you would, please, sir.” The flurry around her had scattered her thoughts; she lost track of whom she was speaking to, and they giggled about the sudden

formality.

“Horses graze on pasture, are fed hay, and are okay with the occasional fruit treat, but on long journeys like the Beast Hunters’ expeditions, they are fed fodder. Each can go through about half a large sack of wheat in a day, while sleipnirs eat close to double that. In the winter, a third of a wagon’s capacity could be dedicated to feed, and if space is at a premium, then expensive medicinal herbs are used instead.” A large sack of wheat was close to thirty kilos—a shocking amount. “Furthermore, both must be fed at least twice a day—horses especially cannot be fed too much at once—and they spend a long time eating. But if sleipnirs can be fed that dried green slime product, then they would only need to eat once a day. The stuff that was in Mr. Ivano’s pocket takes up hardly any room at all, and Number Twelve finished in a flash and came out of it in peak physical condition.”

“I get it now!” It took a while, but the light bulb finally lit up—the green slime fibers were good feed for sleipnirs and were good for long trips. No wonder Volf was in such a hurry.

“If this comes to fruition, then I’m sure the Couriers’ would use sleipnirs and that dried green slime stuff for everything.”

Marcella muttering and reminiscing about his former home brought to Dahlia’s mind the image of Augusto’s face—he was probably already swamped with yellow slimes, and now he might have to deal with green slimes on top of that; she felt rather sorry. Idaea would likely have a big smile on her face, though.

Marcella then left Dahlia so he could silence the station workers, which should be over with quickly. In the meantime, she fed Number Twelve more of the grapes that the sleipnir so dearly wanted. One by one, she sated herself on the whole bunch, then began sipping some water.

“Say, was the green slime yummy?” Of course, she wasn’t really expecting an answer, but the sleipnir pointed her black eyes at Dahlia and nodded twice; there was something special about how a monster seemed to actually understand human language. Dahlia had met Number Twelve the same day she met Volf, hired her by chance, and now would be purchasing her too—if that

wasn't fate, then what was?

On that day too, the sleipnir had loved her fruit snack. Dahlia looked at the remaining bunch in her basket and voiced her curiosity. "Which do you like better—purple grapes or green slime?" Number Twelve's eyes grew wide before her gaze turned gloomy and fell to the ground. She moved her mouth as though she were chewing something. Dahlia learned that sleipnirs, too, had troubles of their own.

The villa had recently begun renovations on the headquarters of the Scalfarottos' Weapons Development Team, and its two rooms had been expanded today. Volf and Ivano entered the building and found Guido and Jonas there examining the work.

"Oh, have you come to learn about construction, Volf? I can't help but notice Madam Rossetti's absence, however."

"Dahlia is at home today. Would I be able to take up some of your time today, Guido? There is something I would like to speak to you about."

"For you? Absolutely. I recently acquired some very delicious green tea—let me get someone to put on a pot for us." He seemed to be in an especially good mood today.

Ivano stopped Guido on his way to the parlor. "Excuse me, Lord Guido, I believe our conversation would best be held somewhere our voices will not travel." His quiet voice was accompanied by a red glow from his cuff link—an anti-eavesdropper.

Guido narrowed his eyes and pointed his feet in a different direction. "Very well. Let us go somewhere more private."

Their destination was deep within the estate, where Volf and Dahlia had gotten their scolding about magic swords. In that windowless room, each took his seat, then Guido folded his hands atop the table. Jonas stood in silence diagonally behind him, though he did not completely erase his presence.

"Brother, the truth is that—"

Volf jumped straight in sans pleasantries, explaining about how the sleipnir

had eaten the enchanted green slime, her condition afterward, its versatility, the potential for the Beast Hunters, and so on.

After he had finished listening, Guido slid his gaze over to the person beside Volf. “Ivano, aside from those of us at the meeting, your employees, and the workers at our carriage station, does anyone else know about this matter?”

“The veterinarian, whom I have hushed already, does.”

“The one that we use? Good. Any others? Would there perhaps be anyone at the carriage lot at the Merchants’ Guild who might have overheard or overseen this?”

“I doubt it. We spoke in the stables at the station, and the workers there should be affiliated with the Scalfarotto family; Marcella has silenced them as well.”

“Very good. I shall send a directive to make sure. Oh, Jonas? Could you take a fast horse to Lord Bernigi’s and request his presence for urgent business?”

“At once, sir.” He bowed, then left the room as silently as he had stood.

Why was Guido clarifying the situation with Ivano, despite Volf being the one who had been speaking to his brother? Why the rush to summon Bernigi? Questions coursed through Volf’s head as he, without a word, looked to his brother.

“Now, then, Volfred.” When he called out his full first name, Guido’s tone was affectionate—terribly so, and it sent a chill down Volf’s spine. “I am so happy that you have done as you promised and come to speak with me, and for that, I thank you. This would have become quite the nuisance had it gotten around to everyone’s ears. However, as long as you plan to be with Madam Rossetti, you must hold a higher ken.”

“‘A higher ken’? Forgive me, brother, I don’t think I understand.”

“If such good feed for sleipnirs were to be mass-produced, what do you think would happen?”

“It would enable the Order to travel during our expeditions and respond to emergencies much quicker. I believe it would also be very effective for

transporting the injured back to the capital and managing supply lines too.”

“Yes, it certainly would. It would be very desirable not only for the Beast Hunters but also the other orders and people involved in transportation. However, there are not as many sleipnirs as there are regular horses. Well, even if more were caught or imported from Ehrlichia, they would still ordinarily eat pasture, hay, or other fodder. What do you think could arise from this?”

“Erm, perhaps sleipnirs would be captured in excessive numbers, there could be a potential for scrambles, or negatively affecting the breeding regimens and feed production for current horses?”

“Indeed. Well, the kingdom has a hand in the management of raising sleipnirs, so they would likely subsidize ranchers to acquire more of them and switch feed production to raising slimes. What, then, do you think would happen afterward, Ivano?”

Volf looked to his side—Ivano was pale in the face. “It would lead to military use.”

“Precisely. Those who make decisions in the kingdom would undoubtedly consider it. Terrifyingly fast horses that need not eat nor rest? Riders who can go wherever they please as long as the horses have a path? What could be better for ambushes and assaults? With just twenty sleipnirs, a squadron of advanced mages could storm and take any stronghold along the border. Then Ehrlichia would send out dragoons.”

Guido spoke with such detachment that it seemed no more than a hypothetical, but the threats were real. Then again, the advanced mages, mystic knights, and magic crystals of Ehrlichia were no less dangerous.

“Like with magic crystals, would it work if we get the kingdom to establish regulations, keep the manufacturing processes a secret, and set a maximum on the amount that can be sold? That way, it should not become a problem for our neighbors.”

“You have to understand that other nations will analyze the product. Besides, do you know how they use our crystals?”

“Do they use them differently elsewhere?”

“They in fact do. Fire crystals are used in war to set things and people ablaze, freezing rings are used for assassinations by freezing the inside of a target’s mouth, barrels with crystals of various elements can be thrown as bombs—the list goes on. There has even been a case in Išrana in which someone used fire and wind crystals to explode their emperor’s horned camel and themselves along with it, you know?” Magic crystals and magical tools were so commonplace in Ordine that Volf had never imagined they could be used that way; he gulped. “The Kingdom of Ordine is referred to as the crystal kingdom and Ehrlichia as the land of herders. There, they use magical lanterns on night patrols and waterproof cloth on the roofs for livestock. Those in the countryside who raise cattle, horses, sheep, and the like aspire to have all three—waterproof cloth tents, magical lanterns, and compact magical stoves. ‘Rossetti-mades’ are quite desirable too.”

As Volf thought how those words would please Dahlia, Ivano bowed. “I apologize for my indiscretion, Lord Guido.”

“No, no. Exporting wares and expanding one’s company is your duty as a merchant; it’s just that it happened much sooner than I had expected.”

Volf didn’t understand why an apology was warranted. But he did understand that if he’d been left out of this conversation, it was nothing good.

Guido saw through Volf and began again in a soft voice. “Allow me to explain, Volf. There are fewer advanced mages or mystic knights in Ehrlichia than in Ordine. They do, however, have many, many more sleipnirs. Once the Ehrlichians, who place such great importance on animals and monsters, find out about this slime-based feed, think of what they would do to learn how to make it for themselves—or even what they would do to acquire its inventor?”

“That won’t do!”

Volf hadn’t even considered the effects the product would have on international relations or equine husbandry. “Brother, I—I don’t wish to expose Dahlia to danger. Would it be best to set this matter aside?” Yes, he wanted it for the Beast Hunters, but absolutely not at the expense of her safety.

“I shall not ask you to give up on this project. If it can be produced once, it can be produced again; it would also be good to have something like this as

emergency feed. Hmm, let's see... How about keeping a limited supply for when emergencies arise, like dispatching orders or transporting the injured? It could be framed as something along the lines of a special sleipnir potion. There might also not be much of a choice but to feign that this was an experimental accident in order to delay its spread and adoption. It might also be wise to begin with reducing its efficacy as well."

"I see. Thank you."

"It would put us in a precarious situation if our Weapons Development Team were the sole party, so I shall speak to Lord Bernigi, as he is from a different faction, and see if we can come up with a way to disguise the product's laboratory and development. We shall also need to bring in an alchemist skilled with medicinal herbs. And of course, the profits will be privileged to the Rossetti Trading Company, though, as whatever front we devise will receive all the credit, the company shall also be remunerated by coin or otherwise. Does that sound fair, Ivano?"

"Certainly, Lord Guido. Thank you very much, and we shall entrust this matter —"

"Would that keep Dahlia safe, Guido?"

The elder brother smiled, and he looked at his youngest brother as though he were a child. "This time, yes. But you must be more careful from now on. Would you like to learn how to protect Madam Rossetti in the future?"

"Yes, please."

"There are three ways of accomplishing your goals. First, you could forbid her from inventing anything too conspicuous."

"Dahlia is a brilliant magical toolmaker. I cannot do that."

"My thoughts exactly. Then on to method number two: have the kingdom or a high-ranking noble protect her. That can be achieved not by staying as an advisor to the Beast Hunters but by becoming a resident magical toolmaker for one of the larger royal orders; I can give her my referral should that path be chosen. Another path along the same lines would be to have an aristocrat hire her as a magical toolmaker. She would not enjoy the same degree of freedom,

but her safety would nearly be guaranteed.”

“If possible, I wish that Dahlia can continue to make the tools that she wishes to make.” The way that a glint appeared in her green eyes as she assiduously experimented could not be shackled—should not be shackled.

Guido nodded. “The third option is for you and Madam Rossetti to wed. She would have the freedom and protection that our family and faction can afford.”

“Your jokes have gone too far, brother!” Volf’s shouting elicited neither laughter nor shock from the two other men but rather awkward looks.

“I’m dead serious. I am Madam Rossetti’s noble guardian. Surely you can see our protection would only be strengthened were she to become one of ours?”

“In that case, could we not adopt her too?”

“That would make her our father’s daughter and your sister or my daughter and your niece—either way, you would not be able to marry—”

“Please, lay off the ribbing—Dahlia and I aren’t in that kind of relationship.” Guido had always harped on with his teasing; Jonas too, for that matter. *I wish they would stop making light of her.*

“If you say so, Volf. Let us put down adoption as the fourth method, then. If Madam Rossetti so wishes, then I can arrange for it to happen.”

“Our family, really?”

“Lord Gildo or Lord Grato would not refuse either should we make the same request of them. She would become a noblewoman of a traditional marquissate family, making her not only safe but also eligible for quality marriage partners—nothing but long-term benefits, I say.”

“I...I see.”

“In any case, you ought to go to Madam Rossetti and have her keep mum about this product. You and I have more business to attend to, Ivano, so I shall be taking up more of your time.”

Volf looked beside him and, after Ivano nodded in confirmation, bowed to Guido. “Very well. I appreciate you giving me your time, Guido.” He made extra effort to prevent it, but his voice still squeaked.

After seeing the mixture of concern and affection that marked Volf's footfalls as he walked out the door, Ivano righted himself in his seat. Aside from Jonas as attendant, that left the guest and the host in the room, who looked each other in the eyes for a few silent moments.

"You seem to have something to say, Ivano."

Though Ivano felt like he'd grown just a bit more accustomed to speaking with nobles, this nobleman was an entirely different beast. But his nerves be damned. "I was thinking perhaps you were somewhat overbearing with Sir Volf."

"Is that right? My baby brother may be too precious, but I could not spare him this time. I wonder why he is so adamant about not admitting his feelings, though."

"Some operas have long preludes."

"Well, so long as there is a finale, I shall wait with anticipation. Regardless, if this project proceeds with Madam Rossetti's name on it, it would surely bring too much unnecessary attention and, therefore, danger to her. Her only notable invention being the waterproof cloth would also raise everyone's suspicions."

He looked into Guido's frosty blue eyes and smiled. "That is because the chairwoman's father had been protecting her."

"I have heard that Carlo Rossetti is Madam Rossetti's only kin, but I know little else besides his name. Would you please tell me about what he was like?"

"Certainly. Mr. Carlo was an unparalleled magical toolmaker, an upright man, and a wonderful father." How many inventions he'd made, how many people he'd helped through business at the Merchants' Guild, how much he could drink, how much care he'd given Dahlia both as his daughter and a magical toolmaker—ask anybody who had known Carlo and they'd tell the same tales.

Guido did not once interrupt but listened quietly and attentively; he only responded with a firm nod of the head after Ivano had finished. "It sure seems that Madam Rossetti's father was very capable."

“I have yet to become a fraction of the man he was—I doubt I will even when I get to his age.” And Ivano meant it. Carlo had been as refreshing as a breeze and always surrounded by voices of laughter. Even after receiving his barony, he’d never been prideful but remained as humble as he’d been when he was a commoner, yet he’d amassed enough power to protect his friends from the grasp of the nobility. Though he’d employed a maid at one point in time, he’d never remarried, raising Dahlia alone to become the exceptional magical toolmaker and woman she was now. The partner he’d arranged for her was questionable, but perhaps Carlo had done so due to his own health or lack thereof. It was almost as though he’d predicted his sudden passing—but Ivano shook that thought from taking hold of his mind; he’d never heard anything of the sort from Carlo, and it would have been disrespectful to make false assumptions.

“They say that a daughter chooses a partner using her father as a standard.” For Dahlia, that would be Carlo. He’d been her only family and her magical toolmaking master, and that was a high bar.

“That’s quite the heavy thing to hear.” Both Ivano and Guido had daughters, and they couldn’t help but think about Volf’s as well as their own situations.

The room fell silent, and the silver-haired man pointed his eyes to the closed door, undoubtedly thinking of Volf. Guido caught himself staring, then vaguely shaped his lips into something of a smile. “I feel for my brother—he has big shoes to fill.”

Boiled Turnips and the Youth's Escape and Digression

It was nearly evening by the time Volf arrived at the Green Tower. Thinking that he might be quite chilly when he arrived, Dahlia had an early dinner prepared and waiting. "What's the matter, Volf?"

"So, um, I spoke with my brother." The gold in his eyes paled as his gaze found its way to her—bad news, most likely.

If it was so hard for him to broach the subject, then it was no time for her to be smiling. "Shall we eat first? We can take our time to chat afterward."

"Sure. Uh, what is that anyway? Some sort of tuber?"

What she transferred from the large pot to fill each bowl were shiny white hemispheres. "This is a turnip boiled in salted water." Nearly too big to cup in both hands, the turnip halves had been stewed low and slow. She'd originally planned to blend the whole thing into a potage, but she'd ultimately decided on this method since it was so sweet. "You can slather it with some butter and sprinkle on some salt, then scoop it out with a spoon. If you get bored of it, you can also try the miso sauce with ground chicken." Fearing the turnip would be too plain on its own for Volf, she had made extra sauce with ground chicken and miso; the Beast Hunters had shared the latter ingredient with her after the field training session, and it tasted similar to the aged red miso found in Japan.

"It wasn't too hard to cook that gigantic turnip, was it? Sorry to have you do this for me every time."

"Nothing could be simpler than simmering it, and everything else was preprepared too. Besides, you brought me the ham and cheese last time." She'd been rather busy as of late, so the warm veggie salad, salted cabbage, cut ham and cheese, and the egg drop chicken soup with turnip greens had been prepared ahead of time. Accompanying the meal was rather watered-down liquor with a squeeze of lemon, perfect to warm up with on a chilly day like

today. Her father had dubbed this the “Common Cold Preventer,” which probably wasn’t too far off the mark considering the supplement of vitamin C. If anything, though, her father had drunk too much for good health. “Let’s eat while the turnip is still hot.” It wouldn’t do if the butter couldn’t melt.

The duo dug into the hemispheres with their spoons, blowing on the steaming bites before putting them into their mouths. With little effort, the halves of the turnip nearly dissolved, filling their mouths with its rich flavor and the sweetness brought out by the salted butter. This turnip must have been harvested as late as possible for it to be this size, making it a delicacy found only at this time of year. After a while, she reached for the miso and ground chicken sauce. The salty pungency of the miso and the savoriness of the ground chicken were tempered with a sprinkling of sugar, mixing exquisitely with the turnip’s flavor on the palate. The notes of butter sometimes shone through as well, providing a rather delicious accent.



Though it bore the same name, the miso found in this world was quite different from the ones of her previous world—it had a lot more salt and lacked the sweetness of soybeans. Still, its flavor reminded Dahlia of the dinner table of her old home; nostalgia swam in and stung her eyes. With a downward-cast gaze, she sipped from her glass, and it brought forth memories of Carlo. *It would've been nice if I could've had my dad in this world try this too.* It only made her eyes sting worse.

“There’s something off about this.”

Dahlia panicked and looked up at Volf, who was supporting his forehead with one hand, his eyes closed; he looked awfully troubled by something. “Sorry, what is it?”

“You’re telling me that boiled turnip can taste this good, taste better with butter, and even betterer with a drizzle of sauce? What is this, some sort of hop, skip, and jump?”

“I’m pretty sure this isn’t track and field.”

“Then tell me how it improves so rapidly.” The word “improvement” made it sound like it wasn’t very good to begin with, but it was just like Volf to describe food in peculiar sorts of ways. He was all smiles as he gracefully put the spoon to his mouth. “I’ve had turnip in soup or salt pickled but never like this before.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t find restaurants serving something this large as is.”

“Are turnips better the bigger they are?”

She had a feeling that he’d find the largest ones in the market if she answered in the affirmative, and she vehemently answered in the negative. “Its size isn’t proportional to how good it tastes; it’s dependent on the cultivar, the weather, the conditions of the soil, and so on.”

“No kidding? That makes them the same as horned rabbits and forest serpents, then.”

“Huh?” How had turnips turned into monsters? Never mind the horned rabbit, but the Green King that was feared by all travelers? The forest serpent was a source of rare materials, and though she’d heard that the Beast Hunters

consumed it, it was by no means ordinary food for ordinary people.

“Horned rabbits and forest serpents are tastier when they’re plump.”

“I-I see.”

“That’s why they both go so well with a sweet barbecue sauce. Since horned rabbits make good ham, the squad and I were discussing whether the same might not be true of forest serpents. Unfortunately, we haven’t encountered one recently to test out our theories.” Upon hearing that the Beast Hunters would slay one on sight for food and seeing Volf’s excited smile, Dahlia felt nothing but pity for the monster. Forest serpents would probably be better off if they just stayed in the forest, didn’t attack people, and avoided the knights. “Speaking of monsters, have you thought of a name for the sleipnir?”

“Her eyes are a beautiful black that sparkles under the sunlight, so I was thinking of ‘Iris,’ meaning ‘rainbow.’ I’ll ask everyone for their opinions too.”

“Iris is a great name! I didn’t know you had such fantastical, cool names in you, Dahlia.” He had been looking into her eyes, but now he used his glass as a shield.

Her gaze sharpened as though to pierce through him, and she continued in a quietened voice. “Volf, what sort of name were you expecting?”

A pause. “She likes purple grapes, so ‘Grape.’”

Another pause. “Surely that’d be *too* on the nose.” Truth be told, that had been one of her top alternatives, but she’d reveal that to him when pigs flew; other top secrets included “Gray” because of the color of her coat and “Black” because of her eyes. Good thing she’d arrived at “Iris” after deliberating.

“Dahlia, about what my brother said,” began Volf before stopping to shift his body squarely toward her, his hesitancy slipping in and out of view.

She sat upright as well. “Don’t worry, Volf, you can give it to me straight. I know not anything and everything will go exactly as we hope. What I wish for is to keep making magical tools that provide convenience to their users.”

“Okay. The truth is that—”

Volf explained that because the matted green slime fibers could replace a

sleipnir's meals, they would greatly increase how far it could travel, potentially resulting in sleipnirs being excessively captured or fought over, as well as negatively affecting their breeders and feed producers. It was much more than Dahlia had ever imagined, and her eyes glazed over. He went on to describe how the product could be used in military affairs and how it might involve Ehrlichia—prolific use and adoption would come back to bite her.

Seeing her tension, Volf rushed to follow up with more positive points. The product itself was very useful and could save lives. Guido was her noble guardian; he would protect her to the best of his abilities and help her out if anything were to happen. She could and should also get the advice of Guido, Jonas, and the guildmasters before her invention was released into the world. If something truly awful were to arise, Grato and Bernigi—both from marquisates—would always be there to help. Everyone mentioned was tight-lipped and had either profited through Dahlia's magical tools or been directly helped by her, and none of them would throw her to the wolves—so Volf fervently insisted.

“I appreciate it.” Her thanks were nothing short of genuine. She hadn't ever imagined her invention could potentially impact international politics or anything of the sort. And as thankful as she was, she felt equally guilty. “I really should learn to think things through, huh?”

But Volf immediately put a stop to her sorriness. “You're great because you're you, Dahlia. The magical tools you make bring joy to the world. Me, the squad, Lord Bernigi, to name a recent example—you name it, we've all been touched by your work. I, um, wish I could say that I will keep you safe, but I unfortunately lack that power. What I will do is everything to the extent of my capabilities, and that goes for everyone else as well. That's why I want you to keep inventing the tools that you do.”

Was that a request? A plea? A prayer? Whatever it was, his sincerity was found swimming in those golden pools pointed at her. It took a few moments before she could retrieve the words that his eyes had caused her to lose her grip on.

“Thank you, Volf.” Dahlia meant every word of it. She leaned over to refill his glass with more spirits, and Volf naturally squeezed a lemon in without any prompting. There was no toast, yet they put their glasses together; it was

enough to ease her nerves.

As a magical toolmaker, she wanted nothing less than for her creations to make the lives of others just that little bit happier. However, the outcome of her craft and research could go in another direction. It was something to grasp and accept. To continue making magical tools with her friends' support and other trusted people's assistance was where she found her own happiness.

A few sips later, Volf cast his gaze downward. "We were just spitballing, but, uh, we thought that maybe we could protect you better if my brother were to adopt you, Dahlia."

"Huh? Like, into your family?"

"Yeah. Guido will become a marquis next year, and that will make his protection quite formidable."

His tangent suggested to her that this was just a silly joke between the two brothers; a commoner like herself couldn't possibly be adopted into an earldom. She'd planned to keep her maiden name until the day she died, but if she were to be adopted, her surname would change. Dahlia imagined her name spelled out on paper. "'Dahlia Scalfarotto?' Jokes aside, that just does *not* fit."

"Erm, it wouldn't be so bad, I mean..." The way he trailed off there made it obvious he was just saying that to be nice, not to mention his golden eyes shifting about.

"I mean it just hypothetically, but if I get adopted, that would mean you'd become my older brother."

"That's, uh, yeah, that'd be correct if my father were to adopt you."

There *was* that time when the shopkeeper had mistaken them for siblings when they went to buy that estervino set. It was weird, but also kinda funny.

"Dear Brother Volf..."

"Pfft!" That was a perfect spit take if ever there was one.

Maybe that was disrespectful to a nobleman like him. Maybe "big bro" would've been slightly more acceptable. In any case, she felt terrible for saying

it. “Sorry! I didn’t think it’d be *that* funny to you. Um, let me go get you a towel and some water!” She raced to the kitchen as he kept his mouth covered with a handkerchief.

“Whew.” As he had the borrowed handkerchief against his mouth, Volf somehow managed to catch his breath. He couldn’t tell if that had been shocking or funny. It was plain confusing. “‘Dahlia Scalfarotto,’ though...” It sounded better than he’d expected.

The other suggestion that Guido had made came to mind, but he desperately shook his head to rid himself of the thought; it was too rude to even bring up to someone who had become and would continue to be his friend. If Dahlia had been his little sister, how it would have been growing up together. Then again, if she were to become his sister now, it wouldn’t be a problem if they were always together. Any suspicious people who got too close to her would be dealt with by her brothers—that was to say himself and Guido. That way, he could keep Dahlia safer than ever, help her, and be with her forever.

“Maybe ‘Dear Brother Volf’ isn’t so bad after all...” The youth’s escape and digression had yet to end.

Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—Miniature Freezer

“You’ve nailed it!” Carlo’s voice boomed through the workshop of the Green Tower.

“Yay!” Despite being an adult already, Dahlia jumped up and down in celebration, a habit that she’d never gotten out of since she was a little girl; her father couldn’t help but smile. What she was so happy about was the miniature freezer on the workbench, which Carlo had just conducted a quality inspection on. “This makes me a proper magical toolmaker now, right, father?”

“A proper *miniature freezer maker*, sure. But you’ve still got lots to learn about working with ice crystals.” Compared to water crystals, the ice variety was harder to utilize in magical tools, as it was easy to configure the output to be too strong. The magical circuitry involved was tricky too—too fine or too little and the output would cut out; too thick and it’d run the crystal too strong and burn through it too quickly, making it uneconomical to operate. Anyone working with ice crystal circuitry was bound to walk the path of trial and error, and every magical tool had its own sweet spot. The miniature freezer was no exception. Its bottom and four sides required very precise circuitry to circulate the cooled air, and its lid and body required kraken tape to keep the heat out and insulate the contents. It might have sounded simple, but there were no corners that could be cut. Carlo squinted at the kraken tape wrapped around the lid.

“I’ve gotten better at sticking on kraken tape, haven’t I, father?”

Gotten better? Hell, she’s about to surpass me. “That you have.” He tried his damndest to not show his dread as he considered doing some practice before bed tonight. There was no way he would allow her to overtake him yet; this was a matter of his pride as her father and her master. “All right, now get changed so we can go commemorate your success.”

“Huh? Where are we going?” Her eyes grew wide when he responded with

the name of a somewhat well-known upscale restaurant in the Central District. “Can we really just walk in like that?” she asked.

“Of course. I’m going to get changed too.” He wasn’t about to tell her that he’d made a reservation three days prior already, as he had known she wouldn’t need a second chance to perfect the freezer—that was how good she’d become.

A carriage took them to the royal capital’s Central District. The restaurant was slightly dated, but its popularity and quality had never declined, so it cost extra coin to reserve a table. The father and daughter entered their private room on the second floor, where they toasted with a glass of red wine each. Not long afterward, courses were brought in one by one: a colorful frittata with fish and finely chopped vegetables, a small pizza with ham and marbled cheese cut into diamond shapes melted on top, and seafood salad—swanky dishes that typically appealed to women. Dahlia’s eyes sparkled, and she truly savored every bite. Then, the star of tonight’s dinner and the restaurant’s signature, the roast beef, was brought in. The slices of meat had been twirled into the shape of roses, and the large white plate had been decorated in detail—painted, even—with drizzles of red wine reduction. Its beauty reminded Carlo of something; he found his hand had stopped. He decided to wash the memory away with the contents of his glass.

Across from him was his daughter, who had just begun to bite into the first slice of the roast beef. “It’s amazing! I’ll definitely never forget this day.” A beaming face accompanied those words, which were so terribly alike to those his late wife had once said.



Teresa had been the eldest daughter of an earl, yet she had wished to spend the rest of her life with a commoner like Carlo. Unfortunately, it had not been a marriage that her house, the Lambertis, had celebrated. She had chosen her own husband and left the matter of succession to her younger sister, so everything had worked out. Hell, his father-in-law had even bluntly said not to give Teresa back. His mother-in-law, though, had begged Carlo to take care of her daughter and had even slipped him a letter containing instructions on how

to reach them in case anything should happen. She had not cried that day, but her eyes had been red. She had apologized for not sending a dowry with their daughter, but he didn't need a single copper from them—all Carlo had needed was Teresa.

So it was that Teresa, along with furniture that her mother had bidden her bring, had arrived at the Green Tower with her maid Sofia. Sofia had originally been Teresa's wet nurse, and it was thanks to her that someone with a noble background like Teresa could make do in a place like the Tower.

Teresa had fallen ill when she was with her parents, but in her new home, she slowly recovered. A month later, the physician had said that there was no longer anything to worry about; the three of them toasted with red wine that night. Sofia had found it endearing that this was the couple's first time drinking together, but after the fourth bottle, she had reprimanded Carlo.

Teresa was a mage, but she was a woman who knew much about magical tools too. Before her marriage, she had frequented Professor Lina's laboratory to get her advice on magical tools that could be employed in her family's domain. However, because the earldom had already been passed down, Teresa's father had told her not to get involved anymore. Carlo felt sorry for her, but what could he have done? It was an internal affair of the Lamberti family.

Time went by as Carlo endeavored to provide a comfortable life for his wife and Teresa learned to do housework and assist her husband. Then, one day, Sofia brought him a letter emblazoned with the Lamberti coat of arms; the sender was his father-in-law. "A letter for you, Mr. Carlo."

If it should say to return Teresa, he'd decline without giving it a second thought. And so he forwent a letter opener and tore open the envelope. Addressed to "The skilled magical toolmaker Carlo Rossetti," it asked in a very dignified tone whether he would be willing to be adopted into a noble family that was a relative of the Lambertis and whether he needed any financial assistance for his research. The last line read, "Praying that you and your family are in good health" in slightly larger text. *What happened to not caring about your daughter?* Carlo supposed the earl's rejection had been just for show. "Damn nobles." With the letter in hand, he went up to the rooftop, where his

wife was hanging laundry; Teresa laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

By the time the season had passed, Carlo began to wonder if there wasn't something he could do for Teresa, who couldn't go anywhere too bustling, to celebrate their marriage. The problem was that he knew very little about how to be a gentleman to a lady, so he sought advice from his good friend Dominic, the scrivener.

He'd arranged for a meal to be delivered from a well-known restaurant in the Central District. By the time the food arrived, it was no longer as hot as it would optimally be, but it was a proper full-course dinner. There was no waitstaff at the Green Tower, so the dining table was covered in plates. Across from Carlo sat Teresa, wearing a white dress that she'd bought since moving here.

He'd figured a meal with his beloved wife was sure to be delicious, yet midway through, he found he could barely taste the delicacies. This was presumably the kind of dinner she'd once been served every day, save for the lack of servers, the food getting cold, and having to clean up afterward. She was not made for cotton but for shiny silk dresses; she was not meant to become acquainted with the chill of this drafty old tower, nor to see her own hands roughened by housework—in short, she was supposed to live a much happier life.

Yet here she sat, smiling, as though she saw through his insecurities with her enchanting red eyes. "Carlo, I shall absolutely never forget this day. You bring me so much joy."

As Teresa's soups became worthier of praise, Carlo continued developing magical tools at a quick pace. His voice caster had already elevated him to candidacy for a barony, and one more achievement to his name within a few years would likely confer the title upon him; so said his college friend Leone—hence Carlo's hard work. Once he became a nobleman himself, he would be able to announce to the world his marriage to Teresa. There was no signed contract, but he had been obliquely promised as much in a letter.

It was then that Teresa became pregnant. They were overjoyed; the gap in

magic between the couple had made it no easy feat. Never had a response arrived quicker than after she had informed her father about this news. “We wish to visit your family with the promising toolmaker,” it simply read; Carlo could but laugh. “Though our home is but a very humble one, we invite you to come visit once things settle down,” she wrote back, which elicited laughter from the couple.

The next month came, and terrible morning sickness began to beset Teresa; she kept vomiting, failed to stomach any food, and barely held down water. When the physician could do little to help, Carlo did not waste time in reaching out to the Lambertis. They suggested that she stay with them until childbirth so that they might emplace physicians and nurses by her side around the clock. Carlo might have refused adoption or financial support, but this was an offer he could not; the what-ifs terrified him so. Teresa was loaded onto a carriage where she could lie supine, watched over by a physician and a priest, then taken to the Lambertis’ manor.

Though the change of scenery did not stop what was plaguing her, the effects had apparently lessened. She regularly sent letters, albeit short ones.

Just before their child was to be born, a black carriage arrived at the Green Tower to take Carlo to see his wife. Earldom Lamberti spanned a large area and was one of the breadbaskets of Ordine. He’d already heard as much, but the sight of field after field outside the carriage window really drove home the point. He arrived at the estate and saw Teresa, and after a few days, the labor pains began. Carlo waited in the room next door, skittering around like a rat.

Their child arrived in their world the next day. It would turn spring any day now; the skies were as blue as could be. “Thank you...” was all he could manage to say to his wife. With the sleeping infant lying beside her, Teresa’s smile was that of a goddess, despite her lack of color. He smiled back at her and their daughter. Should their baby be a girl, the name they had chosen together was Dahlia. It was plural in Ehrlichian, like a garden of her namesake flowers, so that she would be blessed with loved ones ever surrounding her and bringing joy to her life. That mother and child were fine after the birth was already blessing enough, though.

Thus a new member joined their family, and they would live happily ever after

—or so he thought.

Teresa was not in peril, but her health was far from great after the ordeal of childbirth. Both mother and child stayed behind in the Lamberti household, and Carlo returned to the capital. Magical tools to be crafted had piled up, and for some time, he burned the midnight oil nightly.

When he was finally able to deliver the goods to his old friend's company, he received a mountain of supplies for his newborn. They were piled up in one of the rooms, awaiting the day mother and child returned. But Teresa's recovery reversed. For a period, the letters stopped coming, and he worried; when the next one finally arrived, it said that birthing Dahlia had taken a lot out of Teresa, who was then suffering headaches. The ones after that contained short updates on their situation, all penned by a maid.

When mother and child would return was still up in the air, and after two months had passed, Carlo's worrying only increased. Despite understanding that it was improper, he wrote his next letter not to Teresa but to Earl Lamberti. The response was simple: come. There were no explanations. Yet another black carriage arrived at the Green Tower for Carlo.

Teresa's father, now rather gaunt, received him in the Lambertis' parlor. "I'm very sorry to have to ask this of you, Sir Carlo, but I hope you can separate with Teresa." No pleasantries, no segue; he didn't even wait for a response before continuing. "After childbirth, Teresa said that her head ached, and then she collapsed. She managed to escape death with the help of the physician and priest, but she's lost memories of what has happened in these past two years, and the priest has asserted that she will not recover them."

"What are you—" Carlo couldn't understand—didn't *want* to understand—what was being said.

But the earl continued. "As Teresa married into your family, it was planned for her sister Milana to succeed ours. However, Milana was approached by an aristocrat for her hand in marriage. We were told to adopt the aristocrat's son as our successor instead. The Lambertis are now stripped of our control, and, very likely, they will increase our taxes on grain."

The suddenness of all the noble talk had Carlo's head spinning. "But that would make them usurpers. Is it not possible to seek help from the kingdom or the law?"

"We have tried to no avail. They have the law in their pockets. Senior families of our faction are being forced to raise the tax rates too. Our harvest is meager in comparison to the size of our domain—we lose too much to wildlife and monsters. So that we can protect our subjects, we must turn to another faction for help and offer Teresa for marriage to cement our ties."

"Teresa is *my* wife, damn it!"

"I'm afraid that this is Teresa's desire."

"What?"

"She lost her memories. She's reverted back to her old self, handling my official duties, and she read the letter. Since her sister was being married to another family, Teresa said that she will offer herself. I beg you to respect her wishes." This made no sense to Carlo. Teresa would never wish to leave him like this. But given her amnesia, perhaps this was the obvious choice for her. "She will tell you the same should you meet her, but, please, do not cause her to suffer."

"'Cause her to suffer'?" Because she would not remember her past with him? Because it would make her new life harder? Even if she knew everything, would she not make the same choice? Carlo seethed, yet his mind was empty of the words to express his emotions. He gnashed his teeth and tightened his fist—then Sofia yanked him backward by the arm.

"Mr. Carlo, let us step out for a moment."

Father-in-law or not, he was still an earl, and Carlo was still a commoner—there was no taking back violence. Carlo apologized to Sofia for having forced her to be the considerate one, and they exited the parlor. Teresa's mother had been waiting in the hall, and she took him and Sofia to another room. He folded his hands together tightly and put them to his forehead for a while, praying for deliverance from this nightmare.

"We understand that this must be very hard to take. For the past couple

months, neither the physicians nor priests could return her memories nor improve her condition.” Teresa’s mother, at the other side of the table, glued her gaze to the ground.

“Condition? I had heard that Teresa was healed by the priest. Has she not recovered?”

“I suppose my husband has not told you of this. Even Teresa herself isn’t aware of it, but her disease is inside her head and can never be fully cured. Her headaches and symptoms are intermittent, but they plague her to this day. She requires someone capable of healing magic by her side in order to survive, and that person is, well, her groom-to-be.” The message between the lines was “You can do nothing to help,” and Carlo had no response. “We are incapable of helping our daughter. I beg that you save her life.” His mother-in-law bowed and remained bowing.

“Please, no need for this.” Carlo’s dumbfoundedness eventually gave way to that single sentence. Despite his confusion, he understood that neither he nor they had the power to help Teresa. And, more than that, he keenly felt his powerlessness. Carlo prayed for a miracle to descend upon them. “I ask that you allow me to see Teresa one more time—one last time, as a magical toolmaker she has never met before.”

After some time, Sofia led Carlo to a room at the back of the manor. Inside was his wife, countenance pallid, wearing a dress and resting on a sofa. “Lady Teresa, this here is Mr. Carlo Rossetti, a magical toolmaker who has come from the capital. Master has instructed him to pay his respects.”

“I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Rossetti. Welcome to the Lamberti home. I am the eldest daughter, and my name is Teresa Lamberti. Please forgive my wretched state during my convalescence.” Teresa stood to deliver a well-practiced introduction, smiling a perfectly executed smile. Her hair was glossy red, her eyes were crimson, and she was adorned in a wine-colored dress that contrasted with her wan skin. She exuded the essence of a noblewoman—she was Teresa of Earldom Lamberti, an aristocrat who did not know Carlo.

“It is my privilege to meet you, my lady. My name is Carlo Rossetti.” An

unfamiliar voice, even to himself.

“May I know what kind of magical tools you are currently crafting?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Summer is just around the corner, and now is the perfect time for the vent—”

Icy brine filled his chest as he answered Teresa, who addressed him as nothing but a visitor. True love could maybe, just maybe, overcome memory and illness—so Carlo prayed with every fiber of his being, but the gods were deaf to his pleas. Teresa had promised him that she’d never forget that day, yet he was nothing but a stranger to her now.

Their inoffensive introductions came to a quick conclusion, and Carlo studied Teresa. She had soft hair, warm cheeks, and delicate shoulders. Her words had always tumbled out quickly when she spoke of her interests, her humming had often been slightly out of tune, and she had always stumbled and blushed when she tenderly whispered words of love. No amount of conversation with her had ever been enough for him, and they had laughed at silly jokes together and talked about their modest dreams of the future.

But if his Teresa was to turn cold and lifeless just as suddenly as he had lost his parents, he wished to bear with the pain of witnessing her decline; he did not want to ever forget her or be separated from her. He wanted so badly to plead with her to remember him—but he stifled his affections; the rending memories were all his to endure. *Live, Teresa—I’ll be okay as long as you live.*

Carlo looked Teresa in the eye and smiled, saying softly, “Lady Teresa, I thank the gods above for the joy of meeting you.”

“My, the honor is all mine.” Her beautiful smile, so like a doll’s, was as perfect now as ever.

Carlo and Sofia returned to the parlor, where Earl Lamberti was still seated. He heard their silence and guessed what had transpired—the guilt and pity in his expression said it all. “Sir Carlo, you are still young. Forget about my daughter and marry someone new. We shall raise the child.”

“And who is this ‘we’ to whom you are referring?”

“We shall have her adopted by our kin who are commoners, and we shall financially support them. She will never live a life of want.”

“There’s no way—” The rage that burned inside him made him spew fire, but he cut himself off when he saw the earl’s fist clenched white.

Until a few months ago, this man had simply been Dahlia’s grandfather. He had held his granddaughter in his arms with a grin on his face. He had even pestered Carlo before he’d left last time, asking him if he’d move from the Green Tower to somewhere closer to the manor and promising to construct a magical toolmaking workshop in the Lamberti home. Now, however, Carlo realized that although he was Dahlia’s grandfather and Teresa’s father, he was nevertheless Earl Lamberti as well—an aristocrat who had his subjects to protect; such was what nobility entailed.

“Dahlia is my daughter—I will raise her,” Carlo declared.

“Raising a newborn as a single man is no easy task. It will surely hinder your work too, and considering your future—”

“Even if I have to hire help, even if I have to take a break from my work, even if I have to borrow money, I *will* raise Dahlia!”

No sooner had he vented his agitation than Sofia took a step forward. “Mr. Carlo, please take me with you. I should be of great assistance to you, as I was Lady Teresa’s wet nurse. Ah, but it would be very difficult to do this alone, so I would also like to bring my daughter for the first two years. May I please have your permission, Master Lamberti? There are also some other things that we would need, like—” She directed a list of requests toward the earl: her daughter, who was also a maid; two goats; diapers; newborn clothes; letters of introduction for the capital; and many other things.

With that, Carlo, Dahlia, and the two maids left to return to the Green Tower. Seeing them off was Lady Lamberti, eyes puffy and red.

Hectic days followed. As precious as his little daughter was, Carlo hadn’t expected raising an infant would be *this* difficult. He didn’t want to leave it all for the maids to do, so even as he worked, he also gave all of himself to nurturing his baby. Every moment of respite from his craft was a moment to

think of Teresa and his anxieties for the future; he could not find it in him to rest even at Sofia's urging. However, workload-heavy days and a habitual lack of sleep had his head spinning and, one day, brought his knees to the ground.

He tried to disguise his fall as a loss of balance when Sofia rushed to his side, but she clutched him by the collar. "Mr. Carlo! If anything happens to you, who will be here to protect your child?!"

Her words struck him where it hurt. All the pain he had managed to bottle up inside of him came dripping onto the floor. "I've already failed, Sofia—I've failed to protect Teresa." Carlo had traversed the gap in age and status between himself and Teresa, yet her sickness had taken away her memories and her love for him. Though she was alive, the woman he once knew was no more. How could he protect her? Was there even a way to do so? Moreover, how could he, all by his lonesome, protect his daughter from now on? Carlo did not have the slightest faith in himself to bring Dahlia joy, but he did have worry in abundance.

To the man collapsed in a puddle of his own tears, Sofia proclaimed, "All you have to do is to love Dahlia twice as much and protect *her*, Mr. Carlo!" She made it sound so simple, but there was a confident smile on her face. "My husband died shortly after I gave birth to my youngest child, but I took that love for him and loved both my children doubly so."

"I suppose I have lots to learn from you, Sofia."

"You sure do. Now, Mr. Carlo, this is no time to be lamenting. It takes a whole village to raise a child, so throw away whatever pride you have and lean on everyone to help you—if someone needs help, help them." She always seemed so generous and kind, yet there was something shadowy to her smirk. "Help them so that they then owe you."

"Like a debt?"

"Precisely. Bank up those debts so that if something goes terribly wrong, no one can possibly refuse you when you go collect them."

That reminded him of the mountain of requests she had made to Earl Lamberti, but he kept his curiosity to himself. "That is a very good point, ma'am. I hope you will impart to me many more lessons." Thanks to her words, Carlo

finally managed to stand up and smile.

He bore no hate nor grudge against anyone—there was no time for that. He would love Dahlia and use the love he bore for Teresa to love their child twofold. Until Dahlia was independent—no, for as long as he lived, he would defend her however he possibly could. And he would take Sofia’s lesson to heart and endeavor to create these debts—such were the three vows he made to himself.

Carlo continued to work as a magical toolmaker and raise his daughter, but he also began talking to others about and asking for help with the things he needed. At the same time, he also began reaching out to help his friends to the best of his capabilities. The most important lesson he’d learned was that he was not the only one who had anxieties and struggles in this thing called life.

Despite his insecurities, Carlo continued to care for his darling daughter, who had her mother’s red hair and her father’s green eyes. When she began to crawl, she inevitably found herself in danger. When she began to toddle, she inevitably fell onto her bottom and cried. Learning to walk only brought more danger upon herself, and he ran for her whenever she had a little tumble. Sofia scolded him for being overprotective, and Dahlia then refused his help, saying, “Father, you’re going to get yelled at!” Of course, whenever he saw the tears that pooled in her green eyes, his chest would ache as if to punish him for failing to protect his daughter. So, instead of helping her physically, he nagged her to be more careful. Thanks to that, “I’m fine!” became something of a pet phrase for Dahlia, though he was never fully able to believe her *I’m-fines*.

When she caught colds, he would stay up all night to be by her side before falling asleep. When she was in primary school and fell on her face during a race, she said she’d received treatment at school, but a faint scar marked her forehead, and he carried her to the temple. When she seemed off during college, he turned to his friend who worked as an instructor for all the details. When she became Professor Lina’s assistant after graduation, he checked in with her employer to make sure there weren’t creeps trying to get too close to her. When black slime dissolved her arms, Carlo, in tears, wrapped a sheet around her and carried her to the temple.

Dahlia had big dreams, and he ensured she studied hard so that life would be easier for her as an adult. She wished to pursue magical toolmaking like her father, and she wished to become good enough at it to make a living working anywhere. She wished to make magical tools for the common people, and he wished she would never stray from that path. He wished she would never have to witness ill-boding eyes that sought out magical tools to be weaponized, nor witness her own arms covered in blood, nor the unspeakable horrors that hid behind the nobility. He wished for her to have wrinkles from smiling all too much—as a father and her master, he would do anything he could to achieve that for her. Even now, Carlo lived to protect his daughter.

“The soup is also so incredibly yummy. I don’t think I can ever forget how good it is.” Across the table from him was Dahlia enjoying her food, her smile somewhat reminiscent of Teresa’s. But ever since Dahlia was a child, she had always claimed that she looked like her father. She was like both of them, yet like neither of them—Dahlia was Dahlia. She was his irreplaceable daughter, and she was his magical toolmaking protégée to whom he passed down his techniques and knowledge.

I pray, with all earnestness, that you will lead a joyous life, beloved daughter of mine. Even if I were to lose my memories of this life, I’m sure I would be able to recall everything that has happened when I cross over to the other side. Wherever that is, I’ll boast to my wife Teresa all about our daughter Dahlia—how wonderfully she has grown, what fun we have had, and every minute detail of our time together. I know I’ll be able to tell my wife that even though she was gone, I was able to love my daughter twice as much in her stead.

Carlo trusted the steam from his bowl of soup to fog up glasses and hide his tear-filled and downturned eyes. “Yeah, me either—I’ll never forget.”

Bonus Translator's and Editor's Notes

[Osman/TL]

I think we're seeing a trend—much like the previous, volume 8 had a few good food and drink scenes but also lots of magical toolmaking! I felt like there were many more emotional scenes and much more feasting on their payoffs this time around as well, and all that family stuff in particular really gets the waterworks going for me. Not only were we rewarded with Bernigi connecting with Marcella, but we were also rewarded with the chapter dealing with Carlo's grief, lost love, and struggle to move on—emotionally devastating, in the best way. Here's a theory: Teresa lost her memories because she gave birth to a child who was born with the memories of an adult Japanese woman.

For the next volume, I'm hoping for more drama and, dare I ask, romance. Dahlia hasn't found herself in much trouble yet—the outcome of her setback with the slime feed for sleipnirs was just that Guido will take care of things—so I want to see true consequences for her inventions. Perhaps even more people will need her help next time around, and maybe she could find herself in a situation where she'll need to make an important but unfavorable deal.

Dahlia: Volume 9 and *Lucia: Volume 3* are also getting published in Japan on the same day this EPUB is releasing, so there's lots to look forward to! Oh, and there's also the anime in the works! Gosh, I'm so excited for it.

I have been trying something new for this volume, and I'm not sure if everyone has noticed, but I'm eliminating dialogue tags wherever possible to make the writing cleaner and, hopefully, better. For some parts, it's quite easy, like preceding a line with "X answered Y's question." For some parts, it's not quite as so. None of the dialogue is ever tagged in the Japanese, so when there's a large group speaking at once, the reader has to rely on understanding speech patterns and character voice to merely guess who is speaking. I wonder if anyone has noticed this change, and if you did, was it natural?

Once again, my deepest gratitude goes to series editor Shakuzan. He never

fails to give the writing those crucial fixes and extra spice. A lot of the clever wording comes from him, you know! As well, thank you Ryoko for the assistance and for being an intermediary. There was this very vague part in the Extra Story where it needed some extra light, and her wealth of knowledge and contacts made it make a lot more sense. Thank you both!

Finally, thank you, dear readers. I love interacting with all of you on the forums and the Discord server, so always feel free to reach out if you ever want to chat!

[Shakuzan/ED]

I have very little to add except that I think this is my favorite volume of *Dahlia* that I've worked on (both in terms of the story and in terms of Osman's translation). I appreciate Osman's forbearance and that of our project manager, Kristine Johnson, during the nearly three weeks in which I was editing while traveling in a non-American time zone.

You've Got Questions, We've Got Answers

heimdal7 asks: **"How have you handled keeping all the different noble ranks correct?"**

[Osman/TL]

Honestly, it's simple! Niki, the previous translator, set everything up neatly for us—the names of each rank and the hierarchy they occupy are clearly defined. The ranks in *Dahlia* and *Lucia* are also a direct match with the kazoku system of Imperial Japan, so it's easy to check the dictionary or Wikipedia if I forget.

[Shakuzan/ED]

Notably, kazoku was instituted as part of the Meiji-period trend toward Westernization; as such, it was designed to match European peerage systems to some degree. Thus, it's less like Niki arbitrarily chose "baron" as a translation for *danshaku* and more like the nineteenth-century Japanese government

introduced *danshaku* as a translation for the English word “baron.”

Lily Garden asks: **“In this volume, we see Dahlia working with a sizable number of the cast to experiment with magical toolmaking. If you guys were given the chance, what kind of stuff would you make with Dahlia?”**

[Osman/TL]

I’d love to come up with a magical vehicle with her. I love mechanical things, and I’m a bit of a gearhead, so I’d like to develop a car or maybe even public transportation. My second pick would be to develop some sort of magic weapon, if she and the people around her would allow it. Wouldn’t it be so cool to have your own personalized magic sword? (Oh, no, I sound like Volf now!)

[Shakuzan/ED]

I think about this question constantly! We know that magic cosmetics exist, so I’d have to believe that at least one variety of slime can be ground up into a sunscreen that doesn’t feel greasy or tacky after you apply it.

Based on the incredible heads of hair on every major male character in *Dahlia* and *Lucia*, regardless of age, I have to conclude that someone has already invented a cure for hair loss. Hopefully it isn’t skybat meat, but if that’s what it takes, I think I could endure the taste...

kingpendragon asks: **“Since you have to read ahead to translate the story, how do you avoid accidental spoilers in the translation? Like, wording something in a way that makes sense to you but *the characters* wouldn’t yet know?”**

[Osman/TL]

Yeah, this really is something a translator should keep track of, but it’s not as difficult as it seems! *Dahlia* and *Lucia* are written in third-person limited,* so the narration doesn’t generally reflect knowledge that a given character

wouldn't have. As long as I translate the text as is, it naturally avoids spoiling anything that would come up next.

*This rule is sometimes broken.

Geezer Weasalopes adds on to the previous question, asking: **“The flip side of that question: what about the times it turns out you chose...*poorly*...when translating something due to not yet being aware of something impacted by it later on?”**

[Osman/TL]

Indeed, I can't know everything that may or may not happen, and sometimes, the best we can do is to make an educated gamble on how to play it safe. Most of these guesses we make are probably inconsequential. Take, for example, in “Field Training and Armored Crab,” where there is a line that goes “The warm glow of the magical lantern bathed a fresh sight: knights out of their uniforms.” The source text says it's a warm light, but it wasn't clear whether it's talking about color or literal heat, and so we decided on wording that is ambiguous enough to account for both possibilities.

For parts that I truly can't wrap my head around, I turn to the *Dahlia* wiki and my friends Ryoko and Motoko—you might have seen me thanking them in the TL/ED notes before—who are caught up with the web novel version. If anything stumps them, they can also communicate with God for me, if you catch my drift.

Geezer Weasalopes also asks: **“How do you research things required to make proper sense of things you might not have had contact with before, such as prosthetic limbs, never mind all the tailoring and food-related stuff?”**

[Osman/TL]

One of the mottos I live by is *it's not what you know, it's how you use your resources to find out what you want to know*. In short, I spend a lot of time searching stuff online. I'll be talking about prosthetic limbs below, but for that

case specifically, I exercised due diligence and looked up the proper real-life terminology—e.g., “socket” and “pylon.” You never know if anyone in the audience is an expert on any particular subject, so I feel it’s very important to do my utmost to get facts and details correct. I have no background knowledge on tailoring, so *Lucia* requires me to spend a lot of time researching, which means less time for actual translating. I have a deep fascination with food, cooking, and alcohol, so writing dining scenes and the descriptive prose within comes very naturally to me, fortunately.

Cidolfas asks: **“With the main series and the *Lucia* spin-off already out there, what other *spin-off* from the *Dahlia*-verse would you personally want to see? (I’d be interested in a *Magical Researcher Idaea Mustn’t Miss a Thing* myself.)”**

[Osman/TL]

Idaea is definitely a strong contender for a potential spin-off. I think I’d be interested in stepping back in time and seeing how shit everything was when Bernigi was a Beast Hunter, then it could expand how Grato became captain too. Since there’s a clear start and end point, it could be very neatly contained within a few volumes if it doesn’t sell, but also include many expeditions if there is a lot of interest.

[Shakuzan/ED]

Osman and I have discussed this a fair bit! Jonas seems like a character who probably has adventures of his own, but on the other hand, many of his formative moments have already been described in *Dahlia* and in volume 1 of *Lucia*, so I assume there’s more coming in future volumes of both series...

Doused Raven

His hair was the color of a doused raven, his skin of fine porcelain, and his eyes a deep gold.

[Osman/TL]

“Doused raven” is a term that has come up in volume 7 to describe the color of Volf’s hair. It’s a traditional term for a woman’s black hair, says Wikipedia, so it feels appropriate for a pretty boy like him. It would be just as easy to call it “raven” or even “jet-black,” but I enjoy how quirky the “doused” part is when translated literally to the English language.

Quarter Spoon

To one spoonful of water in a small white dish, Dahlia added a quarter spoon of the scales, then began stirring, turning the liquid into what looked like a snippet of lamé.

[Osman/TL]

The source text for this part is something akin to “two ear picks’ worth,” which I must admit that I do not enjoy the connection with earwax. Is it a standard phrase in Japanese? I haven’t encountered it before as a measurement unit, but even then...

Sashimi

[Osman/TL]

In the chapter “Field Training and Armored Crab,” raw fish and seafood was referred to as “sashimi.” Though it felt unnatural to have the people of Ordine use a Japanese term, I’m going to assume it’s translated in Dahlia’s brain and therefore parsed it in a way that made sense for her.

Miso and Tomalley

Afterward, it was simply a matter of continuing the feast, with some putting miso and tomalley into their crab soup, some cooking the treasurefish in the soup, and some still gorging on raw crab and grilled crab, all with drinks in hand.

[Osman/TL]

Incidentally, tomalley is 蟹みそ in Japanese (lit. “crab miso”), so this is them putting in miso and crab miso into the crab soup.

Speed Dial

The barrage of questions made Dahlia’s head spin; if only she could call Master Jonas over.

[Osman/TL]

The end product is exactly like what the source text says, but I originally liked “speed dial” for its flavor—i.e., “If only she had Master Jonas on speed dial.” Alas, I felt like I would be adding too much to the novel, and that the concept of speed dial is probably kinda dated because who still uses speed dial anymore when phones can store all your contacts that could be looked up almost instantly?

Desert Worm

Humans generally avoided slaying it, though; the kingsnake ate the eggs and larvae of the desert worm, keeping their population in control.

[Osman/TL]

In the source, 砂漠蟲 is read as サンドワーム. However, in volumes 3 and 4, the same kanji were read as デザートワーム instead. It turns out that was a typo—something I wouldn’t have known if not for Word of God.

Dame Chairwoman Rossetti

“Why, there are always more people looking for work. Those who were in a slump now sell ten times their previous output—they even revere her as ‘Dame

Chairwoman Rossetti.’”

[Osman/TL]

In this part, I originally had “Lady Chairman Rossetti,” but I found it too literal and lacking pomp. It also arouses ambiguity—“Lady” as in the counterpart to “Lord” and not “woman chairwoman Rossetti.” Shakuzan came up with this alternative, which reads infinitely better.

Masks

With Marcella accompanying her as her assistant, Dahlia moved to the smaller testing chamber, where the two of them donned masks. She had forgotten to wear one the other day on account of intoxication, but yellow slime powder was extremely fine, and it irritated the throat without proper protection.

[Osman/TL]

Technically, if they’re hoping to filter out airborne particles like aerosolized slime powder, they should probably wear respirators—though I’m not sure if that technology exists.

Dahlia-chan

[Osman/TL]

Marcella is the only person who addresses Dahlia with the *chan* honorific. To paraphrase myself from *Lucia* Volume 1’s bonus content, those who consume Japanese media probably have come across the term before; for those who haven’t, it’s generally an endearing way to address girls or one’s close friend. I would’ve liked to use “Dali” or a similar nickname, but that one has been used for another purpose, and Marcella’s always called her “Dahlia” anyway, so I figured I’d best not change anything.

Dunasphera

[Osman/TL]

Ah, another brilliant name from Forto! Or perhaps...me? He he. In Japanese, this material was named 砂丘泡, read as ドーナボーラ *dunabōra*. Both the kanji and the reading mean the same thing: literally “dune bubbles.” The reading is derived from Italian (or maybe even Latin). However, I didn’t think keeping the Italian “bolla” conjured up the idea of “bubble” or “foam” in English, so I traded that for more pizazz à la zephyricloth. “Dunesphere” was one of my alternative picks, as thought would be fully English like how “zephyricloth” is too, but we figured “duna” and “sphaera” are simple enough to understand.

Welsh Onion

[Osman/TL]

In “Boar Hot Pot and Yuzu Liqueur,” Dahlia prepped some *negi* for the dinner. I’ve previously called it a leek for simplicity’s sake—and lots of people do too—but it’s technically not the same thing. However, *negi* hasn’t yet permeated English yet, and “Welsh onion”—what I ended up with—didn’t feel to me as though it was a common enough term in American English (nor my native tongue of Canadian English, for that matter), but I decided on the latter for accuracy. Surprisingly, kombu, “an edible kelp that is typically dried and aged and used especially in Japanese cooking as a seasoning in soup stock,” *has* permeated English enough for it to be included in Merriam-Webster.

9,999 Coins

[Osman/TL]

In “Interlude: The Fledgling Takes Flight” during a flashback scene, Ivano answered a math question as “9,999 *coins*.” The source has him saying 九千九百九十九枚です. 枚 is the counter for flat object like coins, and [it’s dotted \(an emphasis similar to bolding\) to boot](#). “9,999 coins” sounded weird to me, but Shakuzan and I figured it was the best option as it avoided assuming the value of the coin (i.e., “9,999 copper”) and “9,999 pieces” might not evoke money clearly enough.

All About Prostheses

[Osman/TL]

In the chapter “Scientific Discourse and the Magic Prosthesis,” there is a subtle addition I made. I had “prosthetic” as the noun for when Marcella speaks, but I had everyone else use “prosthesis” as the noun as it sounds a little more formal. As well, the technical term for the post of a prosthesis is “pylon,” but I figured it might be too technical for some to understand, so I opted for “core” during dialogue.

-ass

“Your twins have earth magic too, aye? You had best brace yourself.”

“I, I see...” Welp. Looks like the Nuvolaris gotta get themselves a big-ass broom.

[Osman/TL]

The -ass suffix apparently has roots in AAVE and it was first attested in the 1920s, so I wasn’t sure if it’s completely appropriate for the setting or for Marcella to use. The source text was also nowhere near as vulgar. All in all, the current phrasing felt very Marcella to me.

High Horse

She jumped to her feet. “I am happy you liked what I made—er, not to put herself on such a high horse!”

[Osman/TL]

You might have seen a few usages of the phrase “high horse” in the last quarter of the volume. This all stemmed from the chapter “Scientific Discourse and the Magic Prosthesis.” Regarding the quote above, the source text says something closer along the lines of “I’m glad that a nobody like me worked out for this matter.” The “nobody” part was an idiom, and this is 馬の骨 (lit.: “horse

bones”), meaning “person of doubtful origin.” As the matter gets brought up later, I had to preserve the meaning and the element of horse, which was no easy task.

Iris

[Osman/TL]

The name that Dahlia gave the sleipnir was Iris, pronounced [i:ɾɪs] and not [aɪɾɪs]. The Japanese is イーリス, which is not the usual pronunciation for the name “Iris” either but rather, and perhaps specifically, for the Greek goddess’s name.

[Osman/TL]

This past year and six volumes have been a highlight of my time as a translator, and I find it difficult to say that I will be putting a hiatus to this career, meaning that this volume is my final one. Perhaps you’ll see my name pop up in another novel or on another medium in the future, but for now, thank you so much. Thank you so much for being such great fans. I love your comments, jokes, and kind messages on the forums and on the J-Novel Club Discord server. I love the day of the week when I get to wake up to your reactions to the work Shakuzan and I have done. I will undoubtedly miss translation, but most of all, I’ll miss my dear readers. To paraphrase Niki in the notes of his final volume, this has been a magical series, and I’m glad this journey was with all of you. I’m sure the next translator will also do an amazing job, so please give them the same support you’ve shown me. Should you ever wish to drop a message to say hi or to ask me more questions, you can find me at the webbed site formerly known as tweeter @AVGTranslations. Until whenever and wherever we meet, farewell.

[Shakuzan/ED]

I have to echo Osman: it’s really nice to have readers who don’t kvetch too

terribly much. When I look at the forum threads for other series, I can't believe the chutzpah of some of the commenters. Translators have their work cut out for them without a bunch of kibitzers offering *their* input!

Anyway, I'll spare everyone the schmaltzy farewells and simply wish Osman good luck in her future endeavors. I'm sure that she, being a maven translator, will find no shortage of opportunities! I struggle to imagine *Dahlia* without Osman, but now, in spite of my promise, I'm getting all verklempt, so I'd better stop here.

For *Dahlia in Bloom: Volume 8*, that's the whole megillah!



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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 8

by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by Osman Wong Edited by Shakuzan

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