

Lucia and the Loom

Weaving Her Way to Happiness

2

Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Esora Amaichi
Character Designs: Kei



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Filluna

Dahlia

Lucia

Forto

Dante





Lotta


Zilo

Hestia

"You two look...
incredibly...
magnificently...
fabulous!"

"What do
you think,
Lucia?"

"Like you
suggested, boss,
we swapped
our choice of
shoe color and
coordinated them
with clothing we
had on hand."

A young woman with short, spiky red hair and red eyes, wearing a white V-neck top. She has a small flower accessory in her hair and a surprised expression with her mouth open. The background shows a cityscape at night with lights and a blue sky with clouds.

"I wanted to
make myself look
nice for you when
I saw you off."

Rebecca

A young woman with long, straight black hair and green eyes, wearing a black lace dress. She is sitting on a dark red tufted sofa, looking down with a sad expression. The background is a simple indoor setting with a window.

"I'm meant
to play the evil
queen, but I'm
short and plump,
so I won't look
very impressive
onstage."

Cassandra

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The Magical Garment Factory and the Zephyricloth

Goodness. There really is no predicting things.

The sunlight that streamed through the window and reflected on the glossy wooden floor was dazzlingly bright. The young woman blinked once against it before signing a document with a slightly trembling hand.

Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia Fano—she didn't like how childish her handwriting looked.

Lucia was a clothier who designed and created garments. However, up until two months prior, her main line of work had been making socks and gloves at her family of five's workshop. She had occasionally worked elsewhere too, but nearly every day, she had worked a knitting machine or sewed. However, today she was signing her name on a document in black ink on the stately desk of her office as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, a factory affiliated with the Tailors' Guild.

"Thank you, Head Manager Fano. With that, the transfer of the Magical Garment Factory is officially complete. If any concerns should arise while you make use of it, please feel free to contact me regardless of the time."

The man in the elegant dark brown suit took the document with a smile. He was the architect and the supervisor of the construction of the Magical Garment Factory. The building was, as he'd said, officially theirs. Just a moment ago, the two of them, along with the factory personnel, had toured the building to make sure everything was in line with the design specifications.

The Magical Garment Factory was brand sparkling new; construction had just been completed yesterday. It was a sturdy three-story building made of reddish brick. It even had space in the back for carriages to stop and for horses to rest.

The building's interior design was equally splendid. Lucia's office had ivory-colored walls and dark brown wooden floors. The furnishings had a classic style and were reddish-brown in color, and a low-pile red rug blanketed the floor.

The workrooms' floors had no rugs and instead were furnished with floorboards that wouldn't easily trap dust. The large workbenches that filled the rooms were free of any scratches.

This interior design had been completed in such a short period of time. Lucia reflected on just how hard the workers must have pushed themselves to produce this level of quality so quickly.

"Thank you so much for this wonderful, beautiful building. We will come to you if we need anything."

"Your words are far too kind. We look forward to hearing from you in the future." The man, older than her father, gave her a deep bow.

After she watched the supervisor leave, Lucia turned to look out the window. From her office on the third floor, she had a view of the blue sky and the capital's cityscape.

The Kingdom of Ordine was the largest and most populous nation on the continent, and its royal capital was said to be the most prosperous city on the continent, and even in the world. Moreover, compared to other nations, Ordine had the loosest regulations when it came to clothing. In other countries, cross-dressing was heavily scorned, and some places even restricted the color and style of garments by social class. Lucia had been very shocked when she heard that was the case not only with school and work uniforms but also with everyday wear.

Naturally, even in Ordine, clothing differed between nobles and commoners. However, it was still quite normal to see commoners wearing collared shirts, women wearing pants, and men wearing accessories. And even if one were to wear eccentric clothing, although one might get a few curious looks, one wouldn't be reproached for it.

For a clothier like herself, a city full of people donning various styles while out and about was a fun and delightful thing. She was also grateful the city had such a large array of clothing stores, fabric shops, and stores that sold accessories like buttons.

As Lucia thought admiringly about her city, she focused her gaze on the windowpane. There, she saw herself reflected in the glass—deep green hair,

dark blue eyes, short stature despite her high heels, and a somewhat childlike face despite the fact that she was in her twenties. As a child, she'd been compared to a dayflower.

Today, she was wearing one of her favorite pieces of her own design—an aqua blue dress with cute puffy sleeves. At the dress's low collar, she wore a short wine-colored tie held in place with a gold pin. The short, puffy sleeves, which were easy to move in, alternated between aqua blue and light yellow and were tied off with small ribbons at the cuffs. The low-volume skirt of the dress fell past her knees, but it spread out nicely when she spun around, making it easy to move around in.

This dress was actually an improved version of a design she'd made once before. This time, instead of cotton, she had used a beautiful, sleek silk material, and the pin, which had originally been gold-plated, was now—albeit small—real gold. She had also lengthened the skirt by a handbreadth and added some pretty lace at the hem. Lucia's favorite outfit, adorned with lace and ribbon, gave her courage and spirit.

She couldn't help but smile toward the window. Even she was pleased to see her cheerful face overlapping with the blue sky.

"That's a pretty nice view you've got here. Are you staying in here a while longer, boss?"

The voice that came from behind her belonged to the assistant manager, Dante Cassini. He had dark green hair that looked nearly black, vivid green eyes, and a well-featured face. He had a good fashion sense too. Since today was the day that the ownership of the Magical Garment Factory would officially be transferred to the two of them, he hadn't dressed in his usual casual fashion. Instead, he wore an austere sage green suit. The shirt underneath, with a light green and white double collar, looked very stylish.

Dante was from a viscount's family, so he also carried himself with refinement. He had a sharp tongue but also the impressive ability to keep it in check around nobles and at work. By all rights, he was more suited to the role of head manager.

Incidentally, most of the staff called Lucia "chief," but for some reason, Dante

alone insisted on calling her “boss.”

“Nope, let’s head to the workroom! If we don’t prepare everything we need to today, we won’t be able to start operations tomorrow,” Lucia said, grabbing the somewhat oversized bag she always carried around before heading toward the door.

There was a reason that the Magical Garment Factory had been constructed so quickly. While the Tailors’ Guild had established the factory, the Merchants’ Guild and Adventurers’ Guild were also collaborating on the project, in addition to which the factory had the support of the royal knights’ Order of Beast Hunters.

For most, the words “Magical Garment Factory” might bring to mind enchanted tailcoats and dresses for nobles, or perhaps mages’ robes. However, they were actually in the business of making toe socks and drying insoles. They were not to be looked down on as mere socks and insoles—these were proper magical tools that brought much-needed relief to the royal knights, including the Order of Beast Hunters, as well as adventurers, civil officials, and anyone else who wore leather shoes.

The socks absorbed sweat from between the toes and were enchanted with a fire crystal to provide a mild drying effect, which greatly reduced stickiness and clamminess. The drying insoles absorbed sweat from the soles of the feet and, having been enchanted with powdered green slime, also provided the sensation of a faint breeze. When the two were used in combination, no matter how much one moved around in leather shoes or combat boots, one’s feet would stay smooth and dry.

Both the toe socks and the drying insoles were the inventions of Lucia’s close friend, the magical toolmaker Dahlia Rossetti. She’d originally designed them for her father to solve his problem of having sweaty shoes in the summer. When Dahlia had come to Lucia to make a prototype of the toe socks, the seamstress had immediately accepted. Due to the unusual shape of the socks, Lucia hadn’t been able to make them using just her family’s workshop’s sock-knitting machines; she had also been obliged to employ a glove-knitting machine and hand sewing to finish them. It had taken her some time, but they’d turned out pretty nicely. Unfortunately, Dahlia was never able to give

them to her father. He passed away suddenly before they were finished.

Just work on it in your spare time—so Dahlia had told her, but Lucia couldn't help but wish she had been able to finish them faster.

Then, that summer, Dahlia had unearthed the toe socks and drying insoles she'd stashed away and had given them to a friend in the Order of Beast Hunters. That friend had worn them on an expedition, and having experienced their pleasant effects, he'd given them to other knights to try. Before the end of the day, the Order of Beast Hunters had commissioned an order for the squad, to be purchased regularly in bulk. Lucia thought it was only natural that she had needed to have that dizzying sequence of events explained to her twice. But after hearing all the details, it made sense.

While out on expedition, the Order of Beast Hunters spent long periods of time without taking off their combat boots, so the inside of their boots would get sweaty from traveling and fighting against monsters. As a result, many knights contracted a skin infection known as athlete's foot. That posed a big problem, since they couldn't very well have it treated at the temple or request medicine from a doctor while out on expedition. The issue could, however, be remedied with the toe socks and drying insoles, hence the bulk order.

"It feels so nice. It's like the swamp in my shoes has turned into a breezy meadow."

That was apparently what the captain of the Order had said in praise of the first batch of deliveries. Lucia was glad to hear it.

Moreover, the Order of Beast Hunters weren't the only ones itching for the toe socks and drying insoles. The royal knights, civil officials, the Tailors' Guild, the Merchants' Guild, the Adventurers' Guild—many seemed to suffer from the effects of Ordine's warm climate on the insides of their leather shoes.

It was decided that the Tailors' Guild would mass-produce the socks and insoles, and on that same day, the Magical Garment Factory was established. Having been the one to make the prototype toe socks, Lucia was asked to take on a training role at the Tailors' Guild, and then, being an expert on the socks, she became the interim head manager of the factory. Following that, somehow or other, she became the *official* head manager of the Magical Garment

Factory.

There truly was no predicting how things would unfold in this world.

“Chief, have you finished signing the transferal document?” a blonde woman called out to Lucia after she and Dante had descended the stairs en route to the workroom.

“Yep! I was kind of nervous, though. How does the cutting room look, Hestia?”

“The cutting machines are top-notch. We should be able to work more efficiently.”

The woman’s purple eyes squinted as she smiled. Her name was Hestia Tonolo, and she was one of the factory personnel. Though she was skilled at stitching and knitting, her forte was cutting cloth. Despite being older, she was Lucia’s subordinate.

For the opening day of the Magical Garment Factory, she was wearing a simple, formal navy blue suit. Her silk blouse had a slight aqua hue, and at her neck, she wore a ribbon tie fastened with a small pin that held an amethyst matching the color of her eyes. It was an outfit that could look plain if not pulled off exactly right, but it was elegant and flattering on Hestia, emphasizing her beautiful figure. Her waist-length blonde hair was even more gorgeous than her accessories.

“Is the office to your liking?” Hestia asked Lucia. “Does it seem like a suitable place for doing paperwork?”

“I don’t know about that, but the office itself is wonderful!”

All the furnishings in her office were of the highest quality. Even the empty bookshelf was charming. The large desk she’d just used to sign the document reminded her of the kind of a high-quality piece used in government offices. Despite the size of the desk, the chair was smaller and aligned her back well, making it comfortable to sit on. It also came with a footstool to keep her feet from hanging in midair. Everything about the office was perfect, but how long could she really expect to use it?

“But I know I won’t be using it for long, so I’ll need to make sure to keep it

clean.”

Hestia and Dante responded at the same time.

“What? Why do you say that?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Well, once the toe socks and drying insoles are fully on track here, my job will be over. Then someone else will take over as head manager.”

Lucia had gotten the position because she had made the original toe socks. She called herself a clothier, but she’d never been formally schooled in the profession. She had learned from skilled couturiers she knew and had sewn a good number of her own pieces, but she lacked both work experience and industry knowledge.

Objectively speaking, a commoner like herself couldn’t expect to hold on to this position for long. The Magical Garment Factory often dealt with nobles, after all.

Dante let out a sigh. “Boss, what are you saying? No one can take over for you at this point.”

“He’s right. And there’s still much to be done with the toe socks and drying insoles. I want you to be the head manager for a long, long time.”

“Thanks, you two!” Lucia responded with a smile.

Her subordinates, who were both older than her, were such great people. They had a wealth of knowledge when it came to clothes, and they were both highly skilled. Furthermore, the two of them were from noble families, so they were well-versed in the customs particular to nobles, from their etiquette to their speech.

Working with them, Lucia couldn’t help but keenly feel all the things she lacked. And it was precisely for that reason that once the toe socks and drying insoles really got off the ground, she would be replaced with another head manager. That seemed the most likely outcome.

“Besides, by the time we can mass-produce the toe socks and drying insoles, we might just get another magical tool-related request.”

“Dante, I’m not sure...” Hestia said, trailing off with a grimace.

Something like that *was* unlikely to happen. In the past, the Tailors’ Guild had never mass-produced magical tools. Waterproof cloth, made using powdered blue slime, had become popular a few years ago, but the Merchants’ Guild had handled that. Although, since it was a cloth and had ultimately come to be used for raincoats and ponchos, it wouldn’t have been strange if the Tailors’ Guild had been entrusted with it.

It was then that Lucia realized something. “Now that I think about it, Dahlia also invented the waterproof cloth...”

Lucia looked off into the distance as she thought of her red-haired, green-eyed friend. She was kind and smart, and though she usually was more of a listener than a talker, that changed when the subject turned to magical tools. If someone asked her to explain a magical tool, her eyes would light up and she would become talkative, launching into an overly detailed explanation of the tool’s mechanisms and materials. Whenever she was struck with an idea, she’d start scribbling notes down furiously on the spot. When Lucia would stop by her workshop to bring her something while she was testing out a tool, Dahlia wouldn’t even notice her come in. Another friend described her as being more single-minded than a cat with a toy, and Lucia had to agree.

But no matter how gifted a magical toolmaker she was, Dahlia probably wouldn’t create a never-ending stream that would need to go through the Tailors’ Guild. After Lucia had that thought, she felt a shiver run down her spine.

Odd—she didn’t think she’d dressed lightly. Was she coming down with a cold? Bright sunlight was streaming through the hallway windows, though.

“Something wrong, boss?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s go to the workroom!”

The three of them proceeded down the new hallway.

Today marked the factory’s opening day as well as its first day of operations, so that morning, the entire staff had dressed themselves up nicely before arriving at the factory. Everyone exchanged words of celebration, checked out the room, and admired the new equipment and fixtures.

However, this wasn't the day to celebrate. Rather, it was the start of their race against a deadline. In the workroom where Lucia, Hestia, and Dante were headed, the staff was already preparing to fight.

"Dante, what's our quota for today?"

Dante took out his notepad from his inner pocket and read aloud from it, his face grim. "We need 120 toe socks by tomorrow, and we currently have fifty completed."

Lucia tilted her head. "What? Didn't we have one hundred at the end of day yesterday?"

She'd thought they had plenty of time to work today. Where had those other fifty socks run off to? Sometimes, involved parties would take some as samples or to test them out or to bring to someone who had begged for a pair. However, it was rare for them to be taken out after the end of the workday. In fact, there were only a few people who were authorized to access the Magical Garment Factory's storage after hours in the first place.

"A request was made to the Tailors' guildmaster last night to bring toe socks and drying insoles to a most highly exalted personage in the castle."

"Huh? You can't mean..."

Lucia and Hestia stopped in their tracks at the same time.

A most highly exalted personage in the castle. The only person who could fit that description was the one who wore the golden crown—and considering how many toe socks had been requested, they must have been distributed to the family and others in their circle.

"I see, I suppose no one is safe from athlete's foot..."

"Yeah, and I'm sure many of them wear leather shoes. I highly doubt they wear sandals..."

"You two, don't you dare say another word! I don't want to be accused of lèse-majesté," Dante groaned in a low voice. Lucia exchanged a glance with Hestia and kept hush. What was now certain was that, from today until tomorrow, they'd have to work even harder to replenish the stock that had

been ferried away to the castle.

“All right, let’s give it our all today too!”

On the other side of the door, the factory staff were waiting for them with a smile.



In just a few days, Lucia and the rest of the staff became accustomed to the Magical Garment Factory’s new building and its workrooms.

The rooms were much more spacious than those in the conference room of the Tailors’ Guild, so they could fit more workbenches inside, which raised their efficiency markedly.

At the Tailors’ Guild, they had often passed by guests and other guild staff in the hallways, so they had to take care when carrying thread and finished works. But now, there was no issue with them noisily dragging carts down the hallways.

Also, their manager, Lucia, was a commoner, and she had told the staff she wanted them to freely offer their opinions, so everyone spoke to each other in a relaxed manner. Every day, the workroom was filled with the sounds of lively chatter.

The knitting machines, made up of small, hooked needles attached in a circle, had been turning nonstop since the opening day. The looms were used to make the regular part of the sock and the toe part of the sock separately, which were then diligently yet quickly sewn together by the stitchers.

Despite their tight deadline, there was no sense of desperation. They made sure to have their morning and afternoon tea and to break for lunch, and they animatedly chatted about clothes, accessories, and fashion trends in the capital.

By the next morning, they were able to meet their quota of toe socks in time, proving they were able to operate without pushing themselves too far as long as they produced no irregularities.

Even if they would need to make more in the future, the factory had another workroom, so they would be able to bring in more knitting machines and personnel to meet the increased demand.

That afternoon, the entire staff lined up in one of the workrooms, all to watch one man. He had vibrant blond hair tied back in a ponytail and stood before a standing workbench regarding the object in his hands with ocean blue eyes. His tall, slender figure and handsome profile would have made him look at home on an opera stage.

“How do they look, Mr. Forto?” Lucia asked, a bit nervous.

The man who stood before her inspecting the toe socks was Forto—Fortunato Luini. He was the guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild and the head of the Luini Viscounty. He was a talented couturier with good fashion sense, and he was their superior.

His outfit today was a striking summer blue three-piece suit made of monster silk, consisting of a white shirt and an exquisitely embroidered jacket and vest. His shoes looked black at first glance but actually had a bluish tinge. The color coordination with his suit was superb.

The ensemble gave off a different impression in the sunlight. It was just like him to easily pull off such a look. He always wore outfits that were pleasing to the eye—outfits Lucia felt she could learn from. Whenever she returned home after seeing him, she would document his clothes, shoes, and accessories. She could never tell him that, though.

“Each one is excellent. Operations for both the toe socks and drying insoles are officially up and running here at the Magical Garment Factory,” Forto said, smiling as he removed his white gloves. The workshop exploded into cheers.

“We finally made it over the mountain! But I have a feeling another mountain is just around the bend...”

“Oh, just let us celebrate for now, Zilo!”

The one who had likened the factory’s official opening to crossing a mountain was a man in the prime of life who sported a short, dark gray beard that suited him well: Zilo—Zistavolo Contini.

When he’d first introduced himself to her, he’d made her laugh telling her how his name had caused him a lot of trouble during exams in school. But she was convinced when he told her how it was spelled. Not only was it long, but

the spelling was tricky too. It was likely for that reason that, when they'd had a few drinks together, Zilo had kept repeating, "People ought to name their kids something simple! Something easy to spell!"

Initially, everyone had laughed at him, but when Zilo wrote it down for them, they could only nod in agreement.

"Now we can celebrate the opening of the Magical Garment Factory!"

In reality, this was far from its opening day; the factory staff had already been hard at work for several days. Nevertheless, they had decided among themselves that they would celebrate after they were officially in operation. That way, they'd be able to relax and enjoy the celebration.

"All right, time to party! Where should we celebrate?"

"Let's go where we went last time!"

"Yeah, I liked that spot!"

The place everyone wished to go was the three-story restaurant in the South District, near the Central District. They had delicious meat and fish as well as a wide selection of alcohol. Remembering the taste of the lemon sherbet she'd had there, Lucia nodded in full agreement.

"Okay, everyone good with that? Any other suggestions? Okay, that seems like a no. Mr. Forto, will you be joining?"

"Of course. They serve excellent pizza."

"I'll go make a reservation, then."

In the middle of their spirited conversation, one of the factory's clerks entered the workroom.

"Pardon me, but Mr. Ivano Mercadante from the Rossetti Trading Company is here with an urgent matter to discuss with Mr. Forto. He requested that Head Manager Fano join as well, if possible."

Lucia's ears pricked up when she heard her name and the word "urgent" in the same sentence.

"Very well. Bring him to the reception room, please," Forto responded in a

voice that was quiet yet still managed to carry across the room. Then he turned his blue eyes to Lucia. “I shall go first.”

“Okay, Mr. Forto. I’ll be right behind you, right after I assign everyone their tasks!”

No further explanations were needed. An urgent matter coming from the Rossetti Trading Company—that is to say, from chairwoman and magical toolmaker Dahlia Rossetti—meant they would be getting busy. Lucia knew that instantly.

After Forto rushed out of the room, Lucia turned back to face the workers.

“Hestia, hold off on making that reservation. If Mr. Ivano is here, that means there’s probably more work coming our way. Everyone, I’m sorry about this, but please try to pick up the pace as much as you can so we can stock up on our inventory! But also don’t overdo it with overtime, please. Conserve your energy!”

Everyone responded with begrudging acknowledgment. That was only understandable, since they’d been looking forward to the party.

“The Rossetti Trading Company is the developer of the toe socks and drying insoles, right? If they found an issue with them, then shouldn’t we temporarily stop the production line?”

“No, I’m sure that’s not why he’s here. The toe socks and drying insoles were completed a while ago. If there had happened to be a problem, they would have sent a messenger to stop us, so I think this has to be about something else.”

“Maybe they’re here about an urgent commission for someplace that really needs them?”

“There’s no one in Ordine who would get priority on delivery over the royal castle.”

“Besides, wouldn’t something like that go through Mr. Forto directly anyway?”

Zilo and Dante were right. In that case, Lucia could only think of one thing.

“Maybe...she has a new one...”

“A new one? Do you mean a new clothing-related magical tool?”

“But I heard the Rossetti Trading Company has only two employees. How could they have possibly come up with something new already? Or do they employ multiple magical toolmakers to develop tools?”

“No, just the one. The chairwoman herself is the magical toolmaker, but I have a feeling she’s no longer holding herself back making tools.”

“She’s no longer holding herself back...from inventing?”

Dante looked at Lucia like she had two heads. But Lucia had a feeling that up until now, Dahlia *had* been holding herself back—as her friend, she felt certain about that.

Dahlia had said that every time she tried to invent new magical tools, her master and senior apprentice—her father and fiancé respectively—would always question her: “Is it safe? Is it useful? Is it necessary?” Her friend had told her with a strained smile that because of that, there had been times where she’d give up on making certain things.

Dahlia was incredibly talented, but sometimes she let her work get the better of her. She had a history of getting burned, bruised, or otherwise injured via magical tools, so Lucia understood her father’s and fiancé’s worry. But those two weren’t around to stop her anymore. Dahlia’s father had passed away, and her engagement had been broken off.

Presently, Dahlia seemed happy with her endeavors as a magical toolmaker. A few months ago, she had established her own company and brought on a reliable person as a colleague.

Dahlia’s right-hand man was Ivano Mercadante, a former Merchants’ Guild employee and so-called apprentice of the vice-guildmaster. He was a merchant who even had a friendly relationship with Forto, guildmaster of the Tailors’. And today, that very same man had come here with an urgent matter.

“I have a feeling we’re about to have our hands full with work, so just be prepared for that!” Lucia watched as each member of the staff gave her a skeptical nod in turn, then she headed for the reception room.

The interior of the Magical Garment Factory's reception room was furnished with a glossy, dark brown table on top of a red carpet and surrounded by black sofas. From the ceiling hung a magical chandelier that emitted a dazzling light.

This room was primarily for receiving nobles, but since the Rossetti Trading Company was an important business partner, Forto had decided to welcome them here. If he hadn't been here, Lucia knew she would have just brought them to the head manager's office or to a workroom. She made a mental note to be more mindful.

"I apologize for calling on you so suddenly. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to meet with me," said Ivano of the Rossetti Trading Company, greeting them with a professional, congenial smile. His sand-colored suit and smoothed-down hair made him look even more stylish than when he'd worked at the Merchants' Guild. She'd heard that Forto had picked out that outfit for him, which wasn't the least bit surprising.

"Ivano, will the Magical Garment Factory be getting more work coming their way, by chance?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

"In that case, let's cut to the chase."

Forto and Ivano must have both been very busy—they got right down to business. The two of them worked incredibly fast.

"Very well, then. Our chairwoman has developed a new cloth magical tool, and we'd like to request your involvement."

"Gladly."

"Also, the chairwoman and I would like to bring the actual tool here. When would be a convenient time?"

"When's your earliest availability?"

"How about this afternoon?"

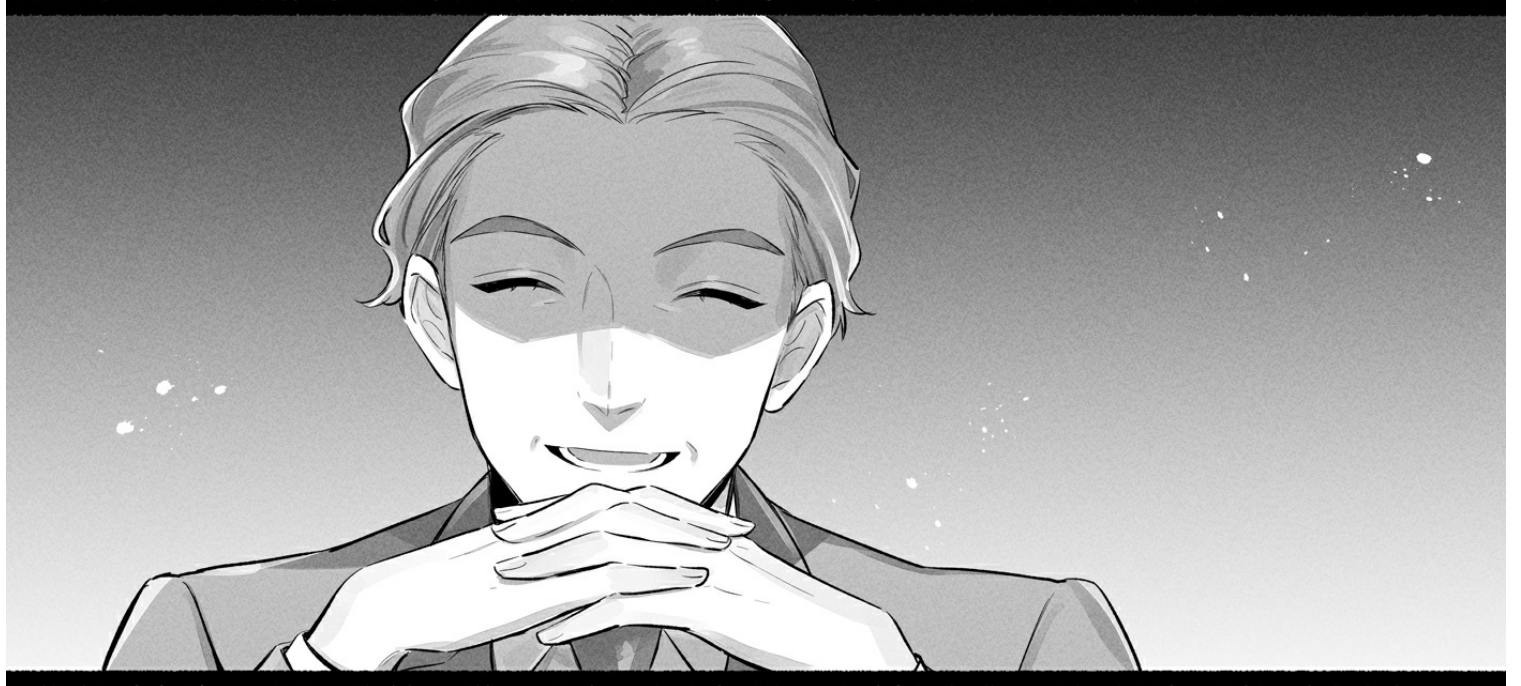
"I'll clear my schedule."

The two of them were so quick to decide things, Lucia wondered why she was even here.

“Mr. Forto, I do have one request. We would like to codevelop this tool—it still doesn’t have a name yet—with the Tailors’ Guild.”

“Is that necessary?”

“I believe this tool will rival the waterproof cloth.”



“Huh?”

That got Lucia’s attention. It must have gotten Forto’s too, judging by how his shoulders twitched.

The waterproof cloth was a very useful fabric. On top of its excellent waterproof qualities, it was lighter and easier to work with than leather. It had already brought exciting changes to fashion, from raincoats to cloaks that provided protection against wind. Something that was on par with the waterproof cloth? *What the heck could that be?* Lucia wanted to see the tool itself right away.

Just as she was beginning to feel like a dog being told to wait after getting a whiff of good-smelling food, Forto leaned forward and said, “Ivano.” His voice was pleasant and his smile perfectly formed, but the look in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. “Am I correct in my understanding that, in exchange for Rossetti Trading Company crediting the Tailors’ Guild with codeveloping the tool, we will handle the profits, distribution, and other such matters on your behalf? Let us establish the interest rate after we see the tool itself, and we’ll try to meet your other terms to the extent possible.”

“I appreciate your expediency, Mr. Forto,” Ivano responded with a grin that was a chilling mirror image of Forto’s.

Despite the fact they were both smiling, Lucia felt like she was listening in on a conversation between two villains. But was it really okay to already decide this much before seeing the tool? Also, was it even okay that she was sitting in on this conversation? Honestly, she would have felt more comfortable if she’d been invited to sit in with them *after* the tool had been brought in.

It was then that she realized something. In this room, the person closest to the inventor of the tool, Dahlia, was Lucia herself.

“Mr. Ivano, Dahlia will be coming too, right?”

“Of course. She’ll be here shortly.”

They hadn’t made an appointment, and yet they already planned to come here this afternoon. The merchant laughed. He had anticipated everything brilliantly.

“Welcome, Dahlia!”

“Welcome to the Magical Garment Factory!”

“Thank you all for your hard work, Mr. Fortunato, Head Manager Lucia, everyone.”

Having just arrived at the factory, Lucia’s friend Dahlia greeted everyone formally. Her outfit today consisted of a white blouse with ribbons tied at the sleeves and a flowy navy blue flare skirt. The luster of her silk tie, an accessory she never used to wear often, really brought out her complexion. The ensemble suited her very nicely.

Though personally, Lucia thought a blouse with a wider neckline or a V-neck shirt would look even better on someone with a neck as lovely as Dahlia’s. Lucia chided herself for once again fixating on a person’s outfit before anything else, then led Dahlia to the reception room. There, Dahlia laid out several pieces of light green fabric on the low table.

“This is my newly developed magical tool, a cloth that produces a faint breeze.”

“A cloth that produces a faint breeze...”

Her words were intelligible enough, but what exactly kind of tool was it? Lucia had no idea just looking at it.

“Here, see for yourself,” Ivano said as he handed a light green scarf to Forto.

As she looked on, Lucia waited for Dahlia to deliver the explanation. She began to do just that, speaking in an even tone. Whenever she talked about magical tools, her whole aura changed. All of her prior nervousness vanished, and her expression became that of a magical toolmaker. It was an amazing thing to witness. Lucia had once told Dahlia that, but she had just looked back at her in confusion.

“The fabric has been enchanted with air magic using green slime.”

“Green slime...”

That’s Dahlia for you, all right. This was the woman who had used a

staggering number of blue slimes to make the waterproof cloth. Their mutual friend, Irma, had once said, *Someday, slimes will start running away from you as fast as they can the second they see you.* Lucia had to wholeheartedly agree.

At any rate, a fabric enchanted with air magic to prevent it from sticking to your skin was groundbreaking stuff. If Dahlia could make something with an even stronger breeze, then it would work wonders to combat the outside heat. It would be ideal as underwear for the summer or for people who did manual labor.

Next to Lucia, Forto started planning one practical use after another for the cloth, starting with undershirts, to lining for helmets, backs, chests, and braces for the royal knights. The designs he effortlessly sketched out seemed good enough to be realized straightaway.

Nobles especially would be delighted to have this air magic-enchanted cloth—Lucia was sure of that. After all, even in the summer, noblemen primarily wore suits, and when visiting the castle they wore three-piece suits with a jacket, pants, and vest. Noblewomen also wore long dresses for formal occasions. A method to combat heat and sweat was essential. Nonetheless, it was bad manners to remove one’s suit jacket, and it was considered embarrassing to have sweat stains. *Such ridiculous conventions,* Lucia wanted to say.

When Lucia heard Forto say there were even some people who fainted the moment they boarded a carriage, she started to realize this could also be a life-threatening issue. There was a magical tool called the pocket ventilator that was powered by air crystals to reduce such occurrences, but that tool was a bit noisy, and if the angle of the wind was wrong, it could ruin the silhouette of an outfit. A fabric that could just emit a faint breeze wouldn’t have those problems—as she thought of that, Lucia reached for the table and picked up the light green cloth, which she’d been staring at.

“A cloth that produces a faint breeze! I get it!”

Everything came together now that she felt it for herself. There was a faint breeze flowing from the cloth in her hands.

“Ooh, it’s so nice and cool...”

Unable to contain herself, Lucia wrapped the fabric around her neck and then

buried her face in it. It was cool and refreshing but not too cold. This sort of cloth could undoubtedly be used to make lingerie or worn under a dress.

Lucia excitedly prattled on about how the fabric could prevent underarm sweat and be used for lining brassieres, corsets, knickers, and petticoats. With this, dresses could easily be kept clean. Forto immediately acknowledged all her suggestions.

Expensive clothes were frequently ruined by sweat stains. When light-colored dresses became stained with sweat, people often had no choice but to dye them a different color or to lamentably part with them. Above all, sweat stains presented a huge problem for wedding dresses in the summer. In order to prevent stains, brides would often avoid drinking anything all day—a terribly ascetic practice on a day when one wanted to look one’s most beautiful.

Amid their discussion, Dahlia mentioned she wanted to market the fabric to the general public too, which Lucia thought was a marvelous idea. She really wanted this cloth for herself as well. If it could be mass-produced, that would lower the costs. This “cloth that produces a faint breeze” was a magical tool, so it made perfect sense for it to be manufactured by the Magical Garment Factory. That would mean the factory would soon be faced with an avalanche of work, but Lucia was excited nonetheless.

Forto, in his usual efficient fashion, was already thinking of ways to involve the Adventurers’ Guild. Lucia wanted them to ask them for their help as soon as possible.

When they started discussing whether there was anything that could be done about the pale green color, Forto suggested, “Why don’t you try using the dye-fastening method our tailors and dyers use?”

He explained that it was a secret technique used in the Tailors’ Guild. If the method could easily change the color of the cloth, then it would be the optimal material for clothing. While Lucia was feeling inspired by all the possibilities, Dahlia handed her a handkerchief that was enchanted with stronger wind magic. The breeze that blew against her palms was even more forceful than that of the fabric she’d held earlier.

Suddenly, she was struck with an idea. She lifted her skirt and tucked the

handkerchief at the top of her thigh-high stocking, which made the hem of her skirt gently billow up. The refreshing breeze felt wonderful against her slightly sweaty legs, and she loved the way her hem gently swayed.

“Superb,” Forto murmured from beside her. Lucia vehemently agreed.

This was revolutionary for skirts. In the summer, it would keep skirts feeling breezy and prevent them from sticking to skin, and in the winter, it would keep them from feeling too weighty. This would have a great impact on how people walked in long dresses and even pants. Lucia wanted nothing more than to get her hands on long rolls of this fabric in bulk, not just a handkerchief-sized piece.

“Dahlia, you’re a genius!”

Lucia had been entirely sincere, but Dahlia just laughed it off. “Oh please, Lucia.”

Even Forto told Dahlia he wanted to offer his sword to her. Lucia completely understood his feelings. Dahlia should have been immensely proud of herself for creating something like this, but instead she was being relentlessly modest.

Furthermore, Forto christened this cloth, enchanted with wind magic via the sacrifice of green slimes, zephyricloth. Lucia thought it was a great name, one bursting with poetic imagery.

As her heart raced with excitement, Forto said, “Right, why don’t we relocate to my estate? We can continue our discussion, and I have a workshop where we can test things out using as much fabric and material as we’d like. We can also bring some trustworthy stitchers with us to try out various creations. Wouldn’t that be a delight?”

The personal workshop of Fortunato Luini, guildmaster of the Tailors’—it was sure to be filled with all kinds of wonders. Forto explained that his workshop was stocked with a collection of fabric and threads made from monster materials.

“I have fabric made from several types of butterflies and spiders, foreign-raised monster silkworms, and baphomets as well as sleipnirs and unicorns. Perhaps most extraordinary, I have thread made from the antennae of giant crayfish.”

“That sounds fascinating...”

Dahlia’s eyes took on another look entirely. She was still practicing some self-restraint, but she leaned forward and turned her full attention to Forto. *Just like a cat staring at a toy.*

Forto started explaining in detail the materials that could be used for magical tools too.

“Weaving thread made from unicorn fur into fabric gives it a mild resistance to illusions. It is often woven into cloaks to help prevent adventurers from being led astray by fairies. High-ranked adventurers even use it for their tents.”

Dahlia’s eyes sparkled as she listened raptly and started taking diligent notes. “Mr. Forto, why would fairies lead people astray?” she asked.

“One theory is that they don’t want them getting near their dwelling places, but fairies are also quite capricious creatures. Sometimes they even laugh as a group when they catch sight of someone wandering around lost. They never help them afterward, however, so it can be a matter of life or death in some cases.”

Lucia could understand the fairies not wanting humans encroaching on their homes, but the second half of what Forto said sounded more frustrating than all else.

“Our neighbors in Ehrlichia raise many monster silkworms,” he continued. “The silk they produce is shinier and far more durable than regular silk. It’s also resistant to water damage and doesn’t wrinkle easily.”

Lucia had also obtained a good amount of that silk recently. As a clothier, it was a material she was extremely grateful for.

“Is that right? Maybe it could be used to make tools for kitchens and bathrooms...”

“Miss Dahlia, if you’re looking for thread that’s resistant to water, then I have to recommend one made with the crayfish antennae I mentioned earlier. Exposure to water doesn’t affect its durability, so it is very long-lasting.”

“Is that thread similar in strength to kelpie?”

“Even more so, I believe. It will take some time, but if you’d like, shall I have the Tailors’ Guild procure you some?”

“That would be lovely, Mr. Forto.”

“Then I shall let you know when it comes in. Giant crayfish become active in the river abroad starting from the spring, so it may not come in for a while.”

Forto went on to explain the habitat and ecology of giant crayfish. Dahlia muttered that he went into more detail than a bestiary, but Forto always seemed to know the latest information. As the Tailors’ guildmaster, he must have needed vast knowledge about monsters. Just as Lucia was mentally telling herself she probably needed to study up more, her boss changed the subject.

“There is a monster called the silverwind butterfly that has the most beautiful silver wings. They actually look more like moths than butterflies, and they’re only found on a certain island, but their scales can be used to make very high-quality silver dye.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of that dye before, Mr. Forto.”

“That’s because the art of safely processing it was only recently discovered. However, it’s mainly used to dye animal fur or hides and doesn’t adhere to plant-based textiles well, so its uses are somewhat limited.”

“Is it dangerous unless it’s processed?”

“It can cause pain to your eyes, nose, and ears, and it can even throw you into a terrible coughing fit. It can be mistaken for influenza at first, so the material needs to be handled with care.”

Just as they said a beautiful flower had its thorns, apparently a beneficial moth had its dangers too. But Lucia wanted to try using that high-quality silver someday. She listened attentively as Forto continued his lecture on monster materials, fabric, and dyes. He answered each and every question she and Dahlia threw his way without any hesitation.

Their teacups were refilled, they were brought a fresh tray of snacks, and then came sandwiches for dinner—when Dahlia had filled up every page of her notepad, Ivano said, in a serious tone, “I’m afraid I have to interrupt. Our chairwoman has an early start tomorrow, so do you mind if we end here for

today?”

Forto was about to respond when his attendant came over and whispered something in his ear.

The guildmaster nodded reluctantly. “Yes, very well. I suppose it’s improper to keep two young women late into the evening...”

He sounded really disappointed. Lucia had to admit she felt the same. However, outside the window, the bright moon was already high in the night sky.



“You seem tired, chief. You feeling all right?” Hestia asked worriedly.

Lucia responded with a shake of her head. “Yep, peachy! I just went a little overboard sketching out designs.”

After she returned home yesterday, her excitement from the day still hadn’t worn off, so she’d spent all night sketching designs until the early hours of the morning.

She had been disappointed that she hadn’t been able to see Forto’s collection of monster materials used to make clothing yesterday. When Forto had extended his invitation for a second time, Ivano had stopped him, looking serious when he said, “It would be improper for commoners such as ourselves to accept such a sudden invitation to your estate.”

His words had snapped Lucia out of her reverie. Of course commoners like her and Dahlia couldn’t just up and go to a viscount’s home. Not only would they cause trouble for his household staff, but Lucia was sorely lacking in knowledge of noble etiquette. If she had been going with Hestia and the others from the Magical Garment Factory, then maybe. She would love to see Forto’s workshop someday with everyone if they ever had the chance.

Lucia suspected Dahlia had gone straight to work after she returned home late last night, or maybe had woken up first thing in the morning to make zephyricloth. Around teatime that morning, twelve handkerchief-sized zephyricloths had been delivered to the Magical Garment Factory.

Lucia gave a general explanation of the cloth to the staff, and everyone

showed a lot of interest in it. They all worked hard to finish their work in order to carve out some time in the afternoon in which they could experiment with the fabric themselves.

“Now then, allow me to explain in detail what exactly this zephyricloth can do!”

While reading from the notes Dahlia had written out, Lucia explained how the cloth was enchanted with air magic using green slimes, how there was little concern of it changing in quality since some time had passed since it was made, and how they should be careful when working with it in case it might cause some people to break out in a rash.

After she finished, Lucia showed everyone her sketchbook designs and explained the cloth’s possible uses for underwear, suit linings, dress linings, and so on.

“What an amazing fabric!”

“I never knew slime could be useful for something like this!”

Everyone was spellbound. A new product was already exciting enough, but a new function brought them to whole new levels of enthusiasm.

“Chief, can the cloth be washed with soap?”

“It can be washed gently in water, but it’s still under review whether it can be washed with soap or not.”

She began taking questions, but a lot of the staff’s queries were about things she didn’t know either. Still, the answers would have an impact on how they’d handle the cloth.

Could a needle pass through it? What kind of thread should they use? Was it okay to fold it? To wash it? How hot could the iron be when ironing it? Did they have to worry about the heat of the iron degrading the fabric? Every question was unanswerable without actually trying it out. Lucia decided to write down each question in an itemized list to bring to Forto and Dahlia later.

Following the question-and-answer portion, she decided they should divide up the twelve squares of zephyricloth to test it out for themselves.

“You too, chief?”

“Yep, I’ve already put it on!”

Lucia picked up the hem of her aqua blue dress.

“It feels really refreshing when I put it at the top of my stockings. With a larger piece of fabric, I could attach it all around the hemline. Just imagine how fluttery that would make a dress look!”

Lucia stood up and gave a twirl. The hem of her dress billowed up gently.

Hestia, Zilo, and Dante all spoke up at once.

“Hold on, chief! You’ll expose yourself!”

“Hey, chief, that might be a little *too* provocative!”

“Boss, please stop, for all our sakes!”

The other members of the staff were laughing or had frozen up entirely. She wished they would just calm down.

“It’s fine! I’m wearing shorts underneath! Mr. Forto gave them to me.”

Lucia lifted up her skirt to show that she was wearing a pair of opaque, doubled-layered silk shorts underneath. They were dark blue and quite long, reaching down to her knees. Forto had given them to her in a paper-wrapped parcel that morning.

When he’d handed it over, he’d said frankly, “Use them when you’re testing zephyricloth on the hem of your dress.”

Lucia had accepted them, figuring he wanted her to wear them out of consideration for the others present, and not necessarily just because there were men in the factory too. Though she doubted Forto would ever look at her in that way in a million years.

“Mr. Forto’s always thinking ahead...”

“*That’s* what you’re thinking about?”

“I kind of want to ask exactly why he decided to give you those shorts, but I also kind of don’t...”

“It’s the chief. Need I say more?”

Her staff was talking about something or other, but Lucia paid them no mind. She continued to twirl around to check the movement of her skirt. It was endless fun how the dress curved up even more naturally than normal. Plus, thanks to the shorts, she could spin around as much as she wanted without having to worry about anything above her knees being visible. Unfortunately, she spun around a little too much and grew dizzy.

“Oh no, chief! Are you okay?” asked Hestia.

“I’m okay. I think I can spin even more with practice. Testing out how the cloth affects skirt and dress hems is important work.”

“Well, sure, but...”

“I want to try it too! I’m bringing shorts tomorrow!”

“If I could get some zephyricloth that produces an even stronger wind, I’d want to try making my cloak flutter in the wind...”

“Oh yeah! You’d look like a cool knight!”

While the staff’s enthusiasm was rising, Dante put a hand on Lucia’s shoulder, looking slightly perturbed.

“Boss. After you spin one direction in your dress, spin in the other direction the same number of times. Just like dance practice.”

He spun her around in the opposite direction several times, and it worked. Her dizziness quickly went away. For someone like Lucia who didn’t know much about dancing, it was a very helpful tip.

“Okay, everyone should try it out for themselves too!”

“I want to try it out on my underwear too. Any guys who feel comfortable changing, let’s head to the next room.”

“Good idea. If any ladies don’t want to get undressed, you don’t have to! And anyone who doesn’t want to join can go back to what they were doing!”

In the Tailors’ Guild, men and women split up when trying on clothes, but there were also some people who refrained from participating. Same-sex

marriage was recognized in Ordine, so it wasn't just about separating the genders. Some people just didn't want to participate, some were from noble families and couldn't get undressed in front of others, some didn't want their skin to be seen by others, while some didn't want to see others unclothed. Anyone who fell under one of those categories continued their work in a separate room.

"All right, chief. Here's hoping none of us catch colds!"

"I'll keep making as many toe socks as I can!"

And so the men who wanted to try out the zephyricloth on their clothes and anyone who wanted to return to work left the room.

"Okay, I'm going to try sewing the zephyricloth onto the inside back part of a camisole."

"I'm going to try basting it at the underarms of this blouse."

"I'm putting mine on a petticoat, where it hits against the thighs."

The women who remained in the room started out by testing the zephyricloth on undergarments and lingerie. The stitchers opened up their respective sewing boxes and got right down to sewing. Unsurprisingly, the light green zephyricloth was slightly visible through the white cloth.

"Do you think I should place it higher up on the back of the camisole? Or maybe toward the center?"

"I think it would feel most refreshing against the shoulder blades."

"How about on a dress? What do you think about putting it under the bust?"

Deciding where to affix the handkerchief-sized zephyricloth presented its own headaches. But they were still in the testing stages, so they decided to experiment with sewing the pieces onto different spots using a quick basting stitch, then afterward try on the finished pieces. They layered blouses and shirts over their undergarments and camisoles.

Hestia was first to speak. "With a camisole like this, I won't have to worry so much about sweat stains on my blouse!" she said, beaming. She preferred to

wear blouses with elaborate collars, such as ones that were ruffled or double-layered, so a method to mitigate heat and sweat would be great for her.

“Not only will this keep the sweat stains down, but it’ll also help with not getting chilly after sweating. That would really help with my shoulder pain...” another stitcher chimed in with a smile and a nod.

The zephyricloth could also be useful to prevent chills from sweat that didn’t quite dry all the way. It truly was an exciting material.

“Pfft...hrk...!”

The blouse one of the stitchers had just put on was covering her mouth, and she was starting to become unsteady on her legs. Lucia rushed over to her to help take her blouse off.

“Are you okay? Do you feel sick?”

“I’m sorry... It was tickling me so bad, and I couldn’t breathe from laughing... Then my knees started giving out...”

The fabric had tickled her so badly that it had made it hard for her to breathe. It was a good thing she hadn’t fallen and gotten hurt.

“Aha ha! This one’s really tickling my armpits!” the stitcher next to her said. She’d been able to get the blouse off herself, but she had tears in her eyes.

“Maybe armpits aren’t the way to go...” muttered Lucia. “Wait, it doesn’t bother you, Hestia?”

“It feels so nice and cool. Maybe changing the placement or the sizing would help. That way, the breeze can blow in a way that doesn’t make it tickle.”

Lucia jotted Hestia’s ideas down in her sketchbook.

Next, Hestia put on a petticoat. “I don’t mind the wind on this either.”

“Mr. Forto mentioned that civil officials would really like that, since they have to sit for so long at a time. Sewing them into the lining of pants and skirts would really help with sweat.”

“I’ll try it,” Hestia said. She sat down on a chair. “Ooh, it feels very nice behind the thighs. They don’t stick together even when sitting down.”

Another stitcher, wanting to try the same, sat down in another chair, then raised a shriek. “Thighs are a no! A definite no!” She pulled down her petticoat and slapped the backs of her thighs.

“Was it that ticklish?”

“No, but it felt like tiny insects were all over me. I couldn’t stand it.”

“Ah, I guess that’s another thing to think about besides it being ticklish...”

That was understandable. Even though the fabric didn’t bother Lucia, she could see how it could feel like tiny crawling insects to some people, which was naturally an unpleasant sensation.

“We might have to let prospective buyers try it on first so they can get an idea of how they feel about it...”

It could be dangerous if the clothes weren’t personally tailored. The slightest mistake would turn an article of clothing into a torture device. Lucia and Dahlia shared the hope of one day making the cloth available to commoners. But based on how things were going, selling uniform, ready-made clothes didn’t sound feasible.

“Maybe we should start with scarves and then go from there...” Lucia muttered.

One of the stitchers walked up to her and asked, “Chief, do you think the zephyricloth is going to end up being fairly expensive?”

“I think so, yes. At least at first. The price might drop after we’re able to mass-produce it, but that depends on the green slime.”

“I see...” The stitcher looked so disappointed, Lucia had to wonder if excessive sweating was a big problem for her.

“If you really need it, you can take some of the prototype zephyricloth to test out. I’d ask you to write a report on it, though.”

“Oh, no, I was just thinking if it became more affordable, maybe we could use it to make diapers. My baby suffered a terrible diaper rash over the summer.”

“Diapers...?”

Infants went through countless cloth diapers. While they might be affordable for nobles, buying that many diapers made out of zephyricloth would be beyond a commoner's budget.

"They've got great ointments for that now. Why don't you ask a doctor?" someone else suggested.

"No, that's okay," the stitcher responded with a shake of her head. "My kid's already out of diapers. I just thought it'd be nice to prevent other babies from getting diaper rash."

What a kind thought—no, what a wonderful thought. The stitcher also made a fabulous point.

"That would really broaden our clientele! Nobles have babies too, and babies need all sorts of things! We have to work hard to mass-produce the zephyricloth and try to bring the price down by five percent!"

The potential applications for zephyricloth were endless—it could not only be used for the linings of dresses and suits but also for diapers and children's undergarments, and undershirts for manual laborers who spent the day working outside.

"Someday, people might say, 'There's nothing better than a zephyricloth diaper in the summer!'" Hestia said, her purple eyes squinting as she smiled. But instead of waiting for *someday*, Lucia wanted to make that day come as soon as possible.

"Speaking of, I bet the others have formed some opinions by now too," said one of the stitchers. And it was right at that moment that they heard a voice.

"It's hot! I'm opening this window!"

One of the stitchers in the next room over had evidently opened their window. The voice carried over on the wind and came in clear. On the ladies' side, they'd preemptively half-opened their window before their discussion due to the heat.

"Apologies for the wait. I've finished stitching the cloth onto two shirts in the workroom, on the underarms and the back. Take turns trying them out!"

That was Zilo. It sounded like he'd brought over a couple shirts that he'd sewn zephyricloth onto.

"Are you going to use that one?"

"Hey, that one's a grade stronger. Don't put it there. The regular one should be more than enough."

"No, I think putting it right here is the best way to keep it from getting sweaty!"

It sounded like some were still working on sewing, with a few being particular about the placement of the zephyricloth.

"Very nice! This undershirt feels great. This is definitely the way to go to keep your back cool in the summer."

"Urgh! Putting it under the armpits might not be for everyone..."

"Aha ha! Yeah... I don't think I can wear a shirt with it wrapped around the collar. It feels like a little bird is flapping around in there."

"I guess some people are just more ticklish than others. It doesn't bother me."

They heard the sounds of laughter and discomfort—it seemed things had developed along the same lines over there.

"This might really be good as a set of undergarments. It should help the sweat dry off when sleeping at night."

"It might make you catch a cold, though, no?"

"What about bedsheets for the summer instead?"

"Oh, I like that! My apartment gets really hot. I'd pay a month's salary for something like that."

Why didn't I think of that? Lucia wondered as she listened in, when all of a sudden, she heard a loud stomping sound.

"Whoa! Why're you jumping around?!"

"Ahhh! It's shrinking!"

“That’s why I told you not to attach the strongest one there on your boxers! The placement is crucial! Use your brain!”

“I can’t get it off!”

The voices coming through the window went from being just loud enough to overhear to a noisy cacophony of shouting. The situation seemed to grow even more chaotic. Zilo was guffawing, Dante was trying to help but wasn’t quite able to, and one of the stitchers was apparently writhing around on the floor. It sounded rough. The last thing Lucia wanted to do was call out to them. In fact, she wanted to pretend she hadn’t heard a single thing.

With a stiff smile, she whispered, “Let’s not mention anything unless they do.”

Everyone in the room wordlessly nodded.



Zephyricloth was such a thrilling material. Sewn into lingerie, undergarments, dresses, underneath suits, inside armor—its applications would only grow from here on out.

The toe socks and drying insoles were getting off the ground too. They were working on both projects at the same time, which meant much more work for Lucia. She’d been prepared to have to work overtime, but Dante was taking care of coordinating with the Tailors’ Guild to prevent that.

“Boss, a message came from the Tailors’ Guild. Some extra stitchers are coming to help with the toe socks, so we’ll be covered for that batch of deliveries. For the drying insoles, the cutting will be handled by the guild’s cutters, and their mages and magical toolmakers will handle the enchanting and inspections.”

“Tell them they have our thanks.”

“They know. That’s why they also said to give them priority on buying the toe socks once we’re over the mountain. Ten pairs per each of the ten helpers.”

“Sounds like we’ve just been given more work to do...”

They had seen the true potential of the toe socks, and as a result, the number

of toe socks and insoles they had to make had increased.

“You can’t fight it, boss. Debts always accrue interest,” Dante said with a solemn look on his face. He was certainly right.

After preparing everything they needed, they welcomed the inventor herself to the factory.

In the second workroom, Lucia’s friend, the magical toolmaker Dahlia, bowed her head deeply and said, “Thank you for having me here. I look forward to working with you all.”

Forto smiled, and the factory staff, the mages, the magical toolmakers, and the dyers from the Tailors’ Guild all returned her greeting. The reason they had gathered here was because, starting that day, they would be working together to identify the zephyricloth’s specifications, as well as testing out ways to improve it.

Dahlia was wearing green work clothes, and she looked very nervous. Lucia lightly touched her arm and whispered, “Dahlia, you can relax. No one cares about hierarchy. We all express ourselves openly here.”

“Thanks, Lucia. But I don’t know anything about clothes, so I have a lot to learn from everyone here,” Dahlia whispered back. The factory staff turned their gazes toward her.

“The boss’s friend is nothing like her, huh...?”

Lucia heard what Dante said loud and clear. Later, she wanted to ask just exactly what he’d meant by that.

“Now then, let’s discuss the key elements and possible improvements to the manufacture of zephyricloth!”

Normally, they would have started with self-introductions and some sort of preliminary explanation. However, neither the Magical Garment Factory nor the Rossetti Trading Company had a lot of time to spare. Everyone acknowledged that they would get right to work.

“Okay, let’s start with identifying the specs!”

Everyone took a sample of zephyricloth and tried out cutting it with scissors

or fabric cutters.

“It feels like the blade doesn’t cut through it very easily. It’s not as bad as the waterproof cloth, though.”

“I think it has to do with the slime’s properties. Someone with body strengthening magic should have no problem. Or you can use a mythrill cutter.”

Cutting the zephyricloth presented a minor problem but not a serious roadblock. What they needed to be mindful of was their sewing.

“Hmm... It makes my eyes dry if I don’t get the direction or distance between stitches right.”

“Can I please work on the table? I can’t focus when it touches my legs.”

“The fabric with stronger wind makes my fingers feel weird...”

The stitchers used their fingers for checking fabric and thread, so many had sensitive fingers. The cool breeze coming from the cloth must have bothered them. That being said, it wasn’t as if they could wear gloves to sew.

“Can you get used to it?”

“Maybe, but honestly, I think it depends on the person...”

Some people were more ticklish than others. And she couldn’t exactly tell someone to just get used to feeling ticklish.

“Maybe we should have all the stitchers try sewing and then have whoever wants to volunteer take over from there,” Lucia suggested.

Forto nodded. Next to him, a magical toolmaker took out two sheets of fabric.

“I’ve checked the durability on these already. After the fabric was brought to us, I cut it in half. I washed one half a hundred times and saw no reduction in its effects. However, I would advise against using strong soaps.”

They washed it a hundred times, already? Lucia guessed that the toolmaker had done it personally rather than delegating the task to another. Their hands were bright red.

“Does that make the fabric fray or something?” Dahlia asked.

“Yes, and it may pill. That can happen with waterproof cloth too, so I think it’s

due to the properties of slime.”

The two toolmakers continued their discussion of tools. Lucia lumped blue and green slimes together in her mind, but apparently they were quite different. Once the toolmakers started discussing the names of different chemicals, Lucia gave up on trying to follow along.

Just identifying the specifications of the cloth took up a great deal of time, so they ended up taking a late tea break.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, would it also be possible to apply this enchantment to a fabric made of monster material?” the toolmaker asked.

“As long as their magic doesn’t conflict, I think so. But it would be hard to enchant without high magic.”

“Yes, I thought that might be the case. But I believe if we could enchant an undershirt woven with unicorn hair, it would be quite marketable to noblemen.”

Lucia, listening in on the discussion, had suddenly heard something she didn’t quite understand. “Just noblemen?” she asked. “I think women and adventurers would want to buy something like that too, though.”

Dante jumped in to explain. “Oh, boss, unicorn hair has a mild antihallucination effect. It also prevents confusion and has calming properties. That’s why noblemen value it highly.”

“So it keeps you calm while working?”

“Well...in the sense that it keeps the blood from suddenly rushing to your head and stops you from doing anything stupid, yes.”

Noblemen were expected to always act in a refined and calm manner, so she could see why they would find a shirt made with unicorn hair to be useful.

“It is good to wear while working too, and allegedly, if you wear undergarments that are made with unicorn hair when proposing, your partner is more likely to accept,” Forto commented.

“Wow, really?”

“I’ve never tried it out myself, so I cannot say for certain.”

Forto had never used it himself. Lucia swept her eyes around the room, but all the men shook their heads at her. Evidently, no one here had tried it.

“I think I’d want to try it out...if it works for women too.”

“I need a partner first, though...”

The stitchers became lost in thoughts far away from the factory. Lucia sympathized, but right now, she wanted to know more about unicorns. “Dahlia, you’ve said unicorn horn is used for magical tools too, right?”

“Yeah, it can be used as a painkiller or to relieve stiff shoulders.”

“I recall that it’s a common practice among noblewomen to give magical tools made of unicorn horn to their daughters.”

“Interesting. I suppose that would contribute to the decline in the unicorn population.”

“They’re in decline?” Lucia asked.

“They used to be seen in the woods by the eastern highway, but not so much anymore.”

That was surprising. It meant unicorn materials would be hard to come by.

“Maybe they’ve just moved to a region without humans? I’ve heard an adventurer talk about spotting unicorns in a forest they never used to inhabit.”

“Yes, I think it’s possible they’ve relocated to avoid contact with humans,” said Hestia. “The woods near my family’s house used to be inhabited by quite a few unicorns when I was a child, but according to letters from my mother, they haven’t been able to catch any at all recently.”

“Catch?”

That sounded like something a hunter would say.

“Yes. They fetch a high price, so they’re favored by hunters.”

Lucia hadn’t misunderstood, then. But unicorns were agile monsters that could even use magic. Weren’t they a dangerous quarry for regular hunters?

While Lucia was pondering that, another stitcher spoke up and asked, Lucia was also curious about the rumors that unicorns had a fondness for beautiful

maidens. “Hestia, is it true, then? That you can lure a unicorn with a beautiful maiden and then use arrows or traps to catch it?”

“The unicorns in the forest near us would emerge whenever small children were playing in the vicinity, so we’d leave out a pile of dry fruits and cookies soaked in strong alcohol for them to eat—though they eventually switched to soaking them in strong sedatives.”

“So you get them drunk and then catch them?”

“No, they’re killed while they’re in that drunken state.”

“Whoa... That sounds kind of brutal. They come out to see some kids and then get killed?”

A unicorn looking affectionately at frolicking children sounded very picturesque, but then, after they’d taken the drugged bait, that was the end for them. It was a little cruel. Others seemed to share Lucia’s feelings. She heard several people mutter, “Poor things.”

Hestia, however, smiled softly and said, “There’s a mutant strain of unicorns in the forest by my hometown. There have been times when they’ve kidnapped children and frozen them in ice to keep on display. That’s why the locals have come to a consensus that they’re monsters undeserving of mercy.”

“Well, sure, that’s your only option at that point!”

“They should be eradicated for that!”

Hestia’s comment had everyone convinced now. Who knew unicorns could be capable of such sickening behavior?

“Unicorns freeze children...to keep on display?” Dahlia asked from Lucia’s side. This must’ve been a shock to her too. Her arms were crossed and she was trembling.

Now that they all had a deeper understanding of mutant unicorns, they decided to return to work.

The next day, Dahlia taught the magical toolmakers of the Magical Garment Factory as well as the mages who were enchanting the drying insoles how to

enchant the zephyricloth.

That morning, all of them had arrived in the same carriage. Dahlia had explained to them that it wasn't a difficult enchantment; those with high magic should have no problem getting the hang of it. However, when the magical toolmakers and mages had watched her perform the enchantment, they'd all had deeply furrowed brows.

That piqued Lucia's curiosity. Out in the hallway, she surreptitiously asked one of the Magical Garment Factory magical toolmakers about it, and he explained that it was no easy feat to enchant powdered green slime uniformly in a lattice.

When she pressed just *how* difficult it was, a man who was also knowledgeable about clothing said with a faraway look in his eyes, "It's about as difficult as uniformly sewing the hem of a flared skirt around its whole perimeter."

Lucia was impressed. Something like that was still impossible for her.

But Dahlia's work didn't just include instructing others. At the same time, the testing of the dyes and dye-fastening method were underway. For that, Forto and the dyers had brought a large volume of dyes to the factory's storage and were testing out one thing after another.

Of course, they needed zephyricloth in order to test out the dyes, so Dahlia tirelessly enchanted cloth for them to use. When she ran out of magic, she drank a mana potion in place of tea, then got right back to work. She was like a machine.

When Lucia told her to take it easy for the sake of her health, Dahlia expressed her concern more for the price of the mana potions. It was true that mana potions cost a steep two gold coins a bottle, but her friend's health was far and away more important.

From morning to night, Lucia monitored Dahlia's condition, and eventually, the magical toolmakers and mages reported that they were sufficiently able to enchant the cloth. That was a great relief to hear, but the dark circles under their eyes were very telling of their struggles. Lucia felt sorry that they'd had to push themselves, but she had deep respect for them for being able to learn the enchantment method in such a short period of time.

After working together every day, Dahlia and the factory staff started to feel more at ease around each other. While the work itself was interesting, getting to chat with each other during their tea and lunch breaks was a lot of fun. The topics that dominated their conversations were clothing, monster materials, and magical tools.

On Dahlia's last day at the factory, they broke for tea earlier than usual. For the occasion, they prepared tea from premium leaves, plenty of sweets, and dried seafood. The spread wasn't that much different from their usual fare, but they decided to take their time to savor it all today. Lucia wished they could have had a leisurely meal with everyone to officially celebrate the completion of the zephyricloth, but it seemed that would have to wait.

"Aww, Dahlia! I wish you could just stay with us at the Magical Garment Factory!" Lucia cried to her friend, who was sitting next to her.

Forto followed up immediately, "I have to agree. Why don't you take this opportunity to stay with the Tailors' Guild? We can set up a magical toolmaking wing just for you."

Dahlia favored them with an uneasy smile and said, "I appreciate the thought, but I'm slow at enchanting, and I know nothing about clothes."

"The Rossetti Trading Company affiliated with the Merchants' Guild, you two. Don't get carried away now," cut in Ivano, an employee of said company. He had brought in some snacks for their last day as a gesture of appreciation and had ended up staying for tea as well.

Forto narrowed his blue eyes at Ivano. *Maybe he was actually serious about recruiting Dahlia to the Tailors' Guild?* Lucia wondered. But he had to have known how impossible that was.

"Now then, it's time to sample these delicious treats! Take what you like!" Zilo said, picking up one tray of snacks. He turned to Dahlia and asked, "Chairwoman Rossetti, would you like some apple pie and dried kraken?"

"Y-Yes, thank you."

Dahlia looked at Lucia as if questioning how he knew what she liked. Zilo's

recommendations for her had apparently been *too* on the mark. He also passed Lucia a slice of apple pie and some sugarcoated fried potatoes. It seemed like a lot of food, so she decided she'd share with Dahlia.

"How about you two over there?"

"I'll take some dried kraken, please."

"I want salted fried potatoes!"

Hestia and Dante responded at the same time. Those two always had a craving for bar snacks.

Once everyone had their tea and snacks in front of them, they dug in as they conversed.

"It's so nice having tea with everyone like this," Dahlia said sincerely in between sips of tea.

"Do you always work by yourself?" Lucia asked. "Do you make sure to take breaks?"

"I usually work alone in the tower, yeah. And I...try to take breaks."

"Sounds to me like you get too wrapped up in what you're doing and forget."

Lucia was well aware of Dahlia's tendency to hyperfocus. There had been times when she'd say something right next to Dahlia, only to get completely ignored.

"There's a saying that sewing in short bursts brings out artistry, while sewing for long stretches only brings out fatigue. Taking proper breaks is essential for sewing well. That's why we at the factory never skip our morning tea, midday lunch, or afternoon tea breaks. You should take care to rest too, Chairwoman Rossetti, if you're working long hours."

"I-I will..." Dahlia responded.

That seemed to have resonated with her a little too strongly. Lucia, somewhat worried, asked, "How long do you rest when you take breaks? And how long do you go without resting, when you're really focused on your work?"

"When I'm really focused... Probably until the afternoon. But no more than

half a day. I rarely work from morning to night without a break.”

Rarely still meant *sometimes*. Lucia also doubted Dahlia went without a break for no more than half a day. She suspected she worked continuously after lunch until late in the evening. Lucia had known Dahlia long enough to know that was true without having to ask.

“Maybe you should have someone with you who brings you tea and tells you to take a break. Like a maid, or an assistant, or even a roommate,” Lucia suggested. “*Before* you collapse from exhaustion.”

“Okay, Lucia. I get it. I’ll start using a bell timer,” Dahlia said, giving her a smile that showed her she really didn’t get it at all. Lucia seemed to remember Dahlia had already tried using one of those in the past and had said she hadn’t heard it go off when she was too focused.

“Chairwoman, we’ll talk later,” Ivano said from Dahlia’s side. Maybe he would try to convince his boss to be more careful. Lucia really hoped so.

“I know, why don’t you remain here at the factory? You could simply borrow a room to work in,” Forto jumped in to suggest. Lucia couldn’t help but think that was a good idea too.

After their lengthy afternoon tea, they went over the results of the zephyricloth tests.

There were no issues dyeing the cloth from its original light green to a darker color. Dyeing the cloth in light colors depended on the compatibility of the dye with the fabric, so that would undergo more testing. Ivory might be doable with certain fabrics, but pure white was currently unachievable. The dyer explained with clenched fists that they would also test out compatibility with other monster materials. The silk they had tried dyeing white had turned out a fairly light color, but it still wasn’t the same as pure white silk.

The safety of the cloth would continue to be monitored, but as of now, no issues had been detected. However, there was the possibility some people might not react well to it, so consumers would have to be adequately cautioned about wearing the fabric. The factory’s magical toolmakers would also be monitoring the fabric’s safety. When Dahlia heard she would continue receiving reports, she smiled happily.

When the time came to roll out the product, they would first send a provisional shipment to the Order of Beast Hunters to see how the knights responded to the cloth. The Magical Garment Factory's personnel and some of the Tailors' Guild staff would also be testing out the product concurrently.

Furthermore, for those who absolutely insisted on having a prototype for themselves would have to consult with the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild—in other words, anyone who couldn't be denied a sample would receive one on the sly. Just as with the toe socks, if the one who wore the golden crown requested the cloth, no one could refuse.

And with that, the Magical Garment Factory's zephyricloth manufacturing operation was in business. Dahlia thanked everyone, her relief clear on her face, and then she and Ivano boarded a carriage and left. Lucia felt a little sad watching her go.

“And that's another day done!”

After the inspection of the toe socks was complete, Lucia returned to her office to write up a daily report, though there was no need to submit it right away—Forto, to whom she would have turned it in, had been working with her that entire time. He was probably grappling with his own mountain of paperwork that had piled up in the last few days at the Tailors' Guild.

As Lucia was putting her things away in her bag to go home, she realized something. She'd left her ruler behind in one of the workrooms. Deciding she'd stop by on her way out, she exited her office and descended the stairs.

“Oh?”

Just as she was about to enter the workroom, she noticed someone standing there with their back turned to her. She wasn't aware of anyone working overtime today. She was about to call out to them when a voice came from inside.

“Oh, so you came back, huh?”

“Look who's talking. I want to practice the enchantment, so give me half.”

The open door allowed Lucia to recognize them by their voices. One was a

magical toolmaker and the other a mage who had worked on the zephyricloth.

“I couldn’t enchant it as well as her while she was here...”

“I get it. Being able to enchant so uniformly at her age—it’s impressive.”

Lucia knew immediately who they were talking about.

“We can’t get dependent just on having high magic. We need to work harder.”

“You said it. We’re a disgrace to the Tailors’ Guild if we can’t even enchant some fabric. We can’t lose to Madam Rossetti!”

They’d all looked like they were enchanting the same to Lucia, but apparently they didn’t see it that way. She’d heard that these two had been members of the Tailors’ Guild for a long time and were both very skilled.

Those two acknowledged Dahlia as a craftsperson on their level—no, as a craftsperson they should aspire to. Feeling a mixture of jealousy as well as pride for her friend, she decided not to call out to the two in the room or even to go inside. Instead, she quietly returned to the hallway.

“Impressive...” she said, reflecting on the pair’s conversation. She sincerely agreed. “Yeah, Dahlia is an amazing, talented magical toolmaker.”

For being as young as she was, Dahlia was a skilled, competent toolmaker who was inventive to boot. On top of that, she was the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, which had established business in the castle faster than any other company in the history of the Merchants’ Guild.

The toe socks, drying insoles, and zephyricloth that Lucia was now involved with were all Dahlia’s inventions. Lucia had become the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory entirely thanks to Dahlia. Sure, Lucia had been the one to create the toe socks, but that had been at her friend’s request. If Dahlia had asked someone else to do it, then they would have become head manager.

It wasn’t as if Lucia knew much about magical tools. Her sewing and knitting skills were suboptimal, and she knew nothing about managing work operations or schedules. And she lacked the charisma necessary for leadership. All she had was her youth, motivation, moderate knowledge about clothing, and the skill of

a novice artisan. Her list of shortcomings was appallingly long.

And the list didn't end there. She needed Forto, Dante, and even Hestia's help when it came to anything about nobles. Even though she was appreciative of their support, could she really let herself stay dependent on them?

Lucia was being paid a good salary as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. She was very grateful for it, since she wanted to open up her own atelier and boutique.

Although the work was hard, it was more exciting than all else, and she'd lucked out with her boss and her staff. It was rare to find a workplace like this. That was why, as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia had a responsibility and an obligation to do her best.

I'll work my hardest in this opportunity I've been given, Lucia thought, squeezing her fists tight.

She thought about what she currently lacked—not as a clothier, but as the head manager of the factory. She could think of one thing after another. Among those three seemed absolutely critical.

The first was knowledge of noble etiquette.

Without that, she'd cause not only trouble for herself but also for the Tailors' Guild and her own family. Presently, she was relying on Hestia's help when greeting visitors and using proper etiquette when being invited to a noble's house, but she couldn't keep asking for her help each and every time.

The second was familiarity with the peculiar expressions nobles used.

Sometimes, innocuous phrases could be catastrophically misconstrued. Lucia remembered how Dahlia's face had turned pale as a ghost when she'd shared her own stories about that. Lucia felt she was being given a pass right now, but it'd be dangerous if she were ever misunderstood to be making a commitment to something. Also, she didn't want to offend anyone due to her own ignorance.

The third was learning about noble families.

Not only did different noble families belong to different factions, but various families were close due to business or marriages, and some purposely distanced

themselves from others. Some had troubled histories with one another or just did or did not get along personally. It was likely impossible that Lucia could understand the ins and outs of everyone's situation, but at the very least, she wanted to learn about the families who would be clients or whom she would otherwise come in contact with. Someone might even be offended by her complimenting them on their beautiful or stylish clothing. She also wanted to know what nobles typically wore so she didn't accidentally wear something similar.

All three were points she didn't feel confident in—or rather, points she knew she was clueless about—but they were things she'd have to learn. Lucia made up her mind.

“I'll ask Hestia and Dante for help!”

She decided then and there—she would ask those two to help fill the gaps in her knowledge about nobles.

The Castle and a Dress for a Friend

What a long journey. They were still in the capital, so distance-wise, they hadn't traveled that long. But it *felt* long.

So Lucia mused as the two-horse carriage rocked down the road. Outside her window, she saw tall white-stone walls. As the carriage continued down the road, large buildings and three prominent towers also came into view.

They had arrived at the royal castle of the Kingdom of Ordine. These spacious grounds formed the cornerstone of this kingdom, including the castle as well as the buildings used by the aristocratic government and the royal knights.

Lucia had never thought she'd ever have anything to do with this place, but the castle was the main client of the Magical Garment Factory. While she felt grateful, there was also a small part of her—or rather, a very large part—that couldn't quite wrap her head around how things had developed.

"So, have you gotten used to visiting the royal castle yet, Lucia?" Forto asked with a smile from the seat across from her.

That day, the two of them were headed to the royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters to hear the knights' and the captain's opinions on the zephyricloth. Up until this past spring, Lucia had spent her days in her family's small workshop, making socks and gloves on knitting machines. Their main clients were the Tailors' Guild and small shops, but now she was being invited to the Order of Beast Hunters' wing of the royal castle. A few visits weren't enough for her to have gotten used to it.

"It still makes me nervous," she said.

They would be gathering the opinions of the Order's knights directly. She was feeling the pressure. Not to mention that they would first be meeting the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, Marquis Grato Bartolone.

Lucia had been the one to make the set of clothes they would be showing to him. Nevertheless, she hadn't expected Forto to request that she handle

explaining the product. She waited for him to tell her he was joking, but he'd just kept smiling at her.

Yesterday, she'd felt appreciative of the opportunity she'd been given and had resolved to become someone worthy of her position as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory and a face of the Tailors' Guild—someone who didn't always have to rely on others. However, she felt like that resolve was being put to the test a little *too* soon. She still hadn't finished reading her book on noble etiquette. Her knowledge of the topic was hardly even superficial—she felt like she hadn't so much as scratched the surface. Honestly, she wished they could have postponed this meeting. But at this point, all she could do was steel herself and face the music.

"I have faith in you, Lucia."

Where exactly did that excessively high faith in her come from? He'd be absolutely no help if she caused any trouble in the castle.

"I will do my best," Lucia said, straightening her back.

The large castle gates looked as though they'd swallow their carriage whole.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Ordine's royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters!" the knights greeted them with a smile. At her height, Lucia had to crane her neck to look up at them. The knights wore black uniforms and combat boots, which looked exquisite on their muscular physiques. They were like a congregation of simple, functional beauty. Lucia wished she could see them in their casual wear too. She couldn't help bringing her work into everything—it was like a disease.

Lucia and Forto were first brought to the captain's office. Already waiting on the sofa inside was a knight with dark gray hair and red eyes—Captain Grato himself.

"Thank you for inviting us here today."

After she and Forto gave their standard greetings, Lucia promptly jumped into her explanation of zephyricloth. Her nerves refused to settle down, but that only meant it was better to get it over with now, before her face muscles

started to freeze up. After she explained what the fabric was and its points of caution, she arranged the articles of clothing she'd made on the coffee table.

"These have been made according to the sizing you provided us with. Please let me know which you would like to try on."

"Right. I'd like to try on the bandanna, the scarf...the shirt, the boxers...and the knee braces."

So, everything? He'd inspected each item individually, but it seemed he'd ended up wanting to try them all on. Lucia gathered up the set of clothes, wrapped them in a cloth, then handed them to the knight next to Grato.

While the captain changed in the other room, Lucia and Forto headed to the Order's conference room. The squad was already there waiting for them, their expressions full of anticipation and curiosity. Lucia's nerves *still* refused to settle down.

Thankfully, Dahlia was here too. When they met eyes, she noticed Dahlia looked a little anxious. *We can do this*, Lucia mouthed to her friend, who responded with a nod and a smile.

Forto started things off by introducing himself to the roomful of knights as the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. Then, he lightly touched Lucia's shoulder, signaling her to take a step forward as he had previously instructed her. She did so, then spoke from her diaphragm.

"Now, we would like to ask you all to try on some items of clothing made with zephyricloth. Today, we have prepared caps meant to go under your helmets as well as undershirts, and boxers. The sizes have been stitched into the fabric, so please check them before you try them on."

The knights cheered excitedly.

"Hey, you animals!" one of them shouted. "Don't get changed in here! Go to the other room!"

It was said that to a clothier, clients sometimes looked like no more than a foundation for clothes, but Lucia also thought the body of a muscled man was beautiful in itself. But naturally, they couldn't get undressed here.

As the rays of the afternoon sun streamed through the windows, the knights moved back and forth between the conference room and the room next door, their voices loud and lively.

“Whoa, this feels so refreshing! This’ll be great for summer expeditions!”

“This’ll help with heat rash for sure!”

The satisfied smiles of the knights made Lucia’s heart soar. This wasn’t the time to be nervous. Right now, she had to do her job as a clothier. She tried to perk herself up and consciously lifted the corners of her mouth into a smile.

Forto had his sketchbook open on the table. Lucia was sitting beside him, and next to her was Vice-Captain Griswald. Sitting at the other table was the inventor of the cloth, Dahlia, with her friend and Order of Beast Hunters knight, Volfred, on one side of her and Ivano on the other.

They were here to listen to the knights’ opinions, and each one of them was in rowdy spirits—occasionally, someone burst into raucous laughter, perhaps from getting tickled by the fabric. Fortunately, even when a knight started doubling over in laughter, another knight with quick reflexes supported them, so there was nothing to worry about. No one ended up writhing around on the floor, as had happened at the Magical Garment Factory.

“Head Manager Fano, about this zephyricloth scarf—is there any way to make it a little bigger?” a knight asked. “Also, if it can be done, I’d like a button to fasten it in place.”

“Yes, that’s definitely doable. How big would you like it to be?”

The knight held his hands apart, and Lucia measured the distance with a tape measure. When it came to clothes, the difference between the customer’s perception of their size and the reality could lead to tragedy. That was why it was absolutely necessary to confirm measurements.

“I’d like to use these as underpants when riding horseback, but, um...is there anything that can be done about it tickling my thighs?”

“There is a version of the cloth that has a softer airflow,” said Forto. “Also, it can be attached in a specific area, so for horseback riding—”

The knights stared fixedly at Forto as he sketched out a quick design.

“Can this be attached to the backs of gloves? It’d be great if I could do something about my sweaty hands when I’m wielding a bow.”

“Yes, of course. I think the placement of the fabric will make a significant difference. Do you mind if we make a glove that can be taken apart so you can try that out first?”

They ended up dividing their work by having Lucia listen to feedback about the measurements, while Forto handled anything related to armor and horseback riding, of which he was knowledgeable. Lucia found their work fascinating and engrossing, but once break time came, she closed her sketchbook, then slipped out to use the restroom. She always tried to go as soon as she could when she was nervous.

As she made her way back down the hallway to the conference room, she saw a green-haired young man standing outside the door.

“Pardon me, my name is Kirk Leonardi, knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. I wanted to express my appreciation for what you did for my fiancée, Marialuna Vollandri, and her sister Delphina. Thank you for making both of them such beautiful, flattering dresses.”

After giving his polite greeting, Kirk smiled at her softly. That simple gesture eased some of her tension.

“I’m Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I’m glad they enjoyed wearing my designs.”

“I’m not merely being polite—I genuinely thought they were lovely dresses! Maria looked stunning, and Delphina looked very classy... The dresses suited both of them so well, and the designs were entirely unique and distinct from one another. They were both—no, the entire family was thrilled!”

“...I’m very delighted to hear that.”

Lucia’s heart warmed as she remembered how happy those two had looked that day. A short while ago, she had designed personalized dresses for a pair of twin sisters. For their whole lives, they had been dressed in the same clothes and worn their hair in the same style, just because they were twins. Their

mother's own complicated past had made her insistent on that, and no one had been able to point out the harm she was inflicting on her children.

However, the young man before Lucia now had gone to the twins' mother out of love and convinced her that even though the two girls were twins, each was her own individual and should be allowed to dress how they wished. Lucia had then simply accepted their request to make them clothes that suited each of them. She felt Kirk was deserving of much more praise than her.

At any rate, from now on, those two would no longer match clothing and hairstyles; each would dress according to her personal tastes and become even prettier in her own way. Lucia was very proud that she'd been able to help with that.

"I'm afraid it's not much, but I hope you can make some use of this, Head Manager Fano. Maria helped me decide on it."

Kirk held out a blue pouch that was adorned with a simple ribbon rather than wrapped in paper. The pouch was opened and unbuttoned. *I'm supposed to look inside now, right?* Lucia wondered nervously as she accepted it.

"I know couturiers spend a lot of time drawing, so these are notepads. Please feel free to use them simply for cleaning the nibs of your pens."

Lucia looked inside, and the scent that wafted up made her break into a smile.

"They smell so nice... Thank you! This is so lovely."

Inside were two notepads, each no bigger than the palm of her hand. On one cover was a design of pink roses, on the other, pale blue roses. She smelled a faint, delightful fragrance—the pages were even scented with rose perfume. It was a very fancy gift.

It would be a waste to use them—Lucia wanted to keep them as decoration until the fragrance faded. Or maybe she should enjoy sniffing them in the pouch? She couldn't decide.

Lucia would have expected nothing less from Marialuna Vollandri's fiancé. *So this is Kirk Leonardi, the deeply thoughtful man I've heard so much about.* Kirk had apparently spent his first paycheck from the Order of Beast Hunters on a pair of pearl earrings for Marialuna. She wished he could give her brother,

Massimo, a quick lesson on how to treat women.

“I sincerely hope you like it. I hope Marialuna and Delphina can call on you in the future too.”

“Of course, I hope to hear from them again.”

They said their goodbyes in the hallway and then parted ways. After Lucia watched Kirk disappear into the room, she went right back to sniffing the notepads thoughtlessly. The scent really was wonderful.

A quiet voice from behind her made her jump. “Lucia.”

“Yes?! Mr. Forto, is something the matter?”

“No—but a word of caution, just in case. Depending on what it is, a gift from a noble can be a proposal of courtship.”

“Oh, it’s okay. They’re just notepads, ones that smell really nice.”

She showed Forto the opened blue pouch, and he gave a cursory nod.

“I presumed it was a simple thank-you gift, but I just wanted to let you know. The gifts you should be cautious of are bracelets, rings, pendants, and the like. Bracelets especially can be dangerous. There have even been instances when an unsuspecting person has accepted a bouquet of flowers with a bracelet hidden inside, upon which the other party insists it means they are now engaged.”

“What an unfair trick...”

Lucia doubted she’d ever find herself in that situation, but that was the last sort of thing she would want to accept.

“Earrings and brooches can be fine,” Forto continued, “but please avoid accepting accessories worn at the collar. Especially anything with a family crest.”

What about collar accessories that looked like brooches or vice versa? Also, she hardly knew what any noble families’ crests looked like. Not accepting anything was probably the safest option.

“I don’t think I’d be able to recognize those, so I just won’t accept them at all. Otherwise, I’ll ask Hestia or Dante.”

“Please do. Feel free to come to me for counsel as well. Ah—and please refrain from accepting any stationery sets.”

“What? But notepads are okay?”

“Notepads and notebooks are just fine. Stationery sets, or expensive pens that match your hair or eye color, imply the gifter wants you to write them a love letter.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me... Oh, I’m sorry. I mean, I never would have imagined.”

Forto laughed after she accidentally muttered her inner thoughts. “I wish this was knowledge you could do without, but nobles have an irritating habit of making a mess of things. Please ask about anything that seems suspicious to you. If they give you trouble, you may tell them to go through the Tailors’ guildmaster.”

“I will, Mr. Forto.”

What a caring, attentive boss. She’d never had better treatment in a work environment. Lucia was about to follow up with a thank-you, but Forto spoke up first.

“Yesterday, I placed an order for several sketchbooks, so I shall give you some too. Please make use of them as work supplies.”

“Thank you! Oh, is this your way of telling me to be diligent in my work or something?”

“Precisely. Make sure you do just that.”

The pair laughed, then returned to the conference room to hear more of the knights’ opinions.



“Ugh, the nerve of that old coot!”

“Lucia, while I would love nothing more than to agree, make sure you don’t share those thoughts outside this room... It is very disrespectful to speak that way about the head of a marquis family.”

They were in the manager’s office of the Magical Garment Factory. Sitting on

the sofa across from Lucia was Forto, his expression sour.

The zephyricloth had received rave reviews from the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters. They had finished listening to everyone's feedback and had pretty much settled on a delivery order, but just when she was starting to relax, a man with gray-streaked blond hair had shown up.

Gildovan Diels—the royal head treasurer and head of the Marquisate Diels.

He wore a standard dark gray three-piece suit, and Lucia could tell at a glance that it was a fine-quality suit, perfectly tailored to the man's figure. His gold, two-feathered lapel pin was a magnificent addition to his outfit. If it hadn't been for the situation that had unfolded, she would have found his ensemble quite charming.

Lucia had heard the Marquisate Diels was a renowned family, home to many strong knights. It was also the family that had hosted one of her friend's debuts.

However. *How. Ever.* The head of that very same Marquisate Diels—Gildovan Diels—said the following to Dahlia, chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company:

"That is Chairwoman Rossetti, yes? Perfect. I have come to return the budget statements for the camp stoves."

The delivery of the camp stoves had mostly been settled. Coming here for that reason just sounded like an excuse to cause conflict. Captain Grato had tried to explain that the costs for the stoves were well within the budget for improving expedition conditions, but the treasurer's response was ice cold.

"Allow me to be frank. This is an issue regarding trust in the Rossetti Trading Company."

It was true that Dahlia had only just established her company, so it didn't have many past accomplishments to speak of. *But still, if the magical tools she made weren't actually good, then how would she have gotten recognition from the Order of Beast Hunters?* Lucia was infinitely frustrated she was unable to voice that point.

Dahlia, however, took it all in stride. When the treasurer told her sarcastically that maybe she could set up a spot in the castle to justify the cost of the stoves,

she'd accepted his proposal while looking him straight in the eye.

Gosh. How was it that Dahlia usually got so flustered or embarrassed by the smallest things but became remarkably resilient in moments like these? Lucia was internally applauding her friend's cool demeanor when Gildovan made his final remark.

"Let's see just what you're capable of, little lap cat."

He'd said it in a low whisper, but Lucia had heard it clear as a bell. *Shut your mouth, you old codger*—she'd almost delivered him a swift kick then and there, but she'd gritted her teeth and held herself back.

Dahlia was clenching her fists so tightly they were turning white, and her mouth was in a hard line. The term "lap cat" was often used to imply someone was the mistress of a noble. To think that man suspected Dahlia, of all people, of such a thing. Lucia had never heard anything so preposterous. First of all, Dahlia was the most hardworking person she knew. During their school days, she'd hardly ever spoken of having any crushes, and her partner for dining out had always been her father, Carlo. Even her engagement had been like a business partnership. Dahlia had honestly looked relieved when they'd broken things off. *Excuse my language, but how dare that bastard say something so horrible to Dahlia!*

Lucia's anger still hadn't abated, hence her currently venting her frustrations in the office.

"The toe socks, the drying insoles, and now the zephyricloth—they're all great magical tools! How else would she be doing business with the castle?! And the knights in the Order are so ecstatic about every single one! I can understand wanting to lower the price, but calling her a *lap cat*?! How dare he!"

Lucia had half a mind to march right back to Gildovan and say something like *I bet you're the one with a mistress!*

"I got it, boss. Your anger's coming through loud and clear. But try to calm down with a cup of tea, won't you?"

To the right of Forto, Dante was setting down some tea on the table. Due to the nature of their conversation, Forto had sent away the maid. Lucia was

twisting a handkerchief in her hands, and Hestia, who was next to her, patted her on the shoulder.

“I’m sure there’s much you’d like to say, chief. We’ll hear you out, but first, drink some tea.”

Encouraged by the kindness of Dante and Hestia, Lucia managed to take a sip of tea. But the sweet, perfect-temperature tea did nothing to cool the anger boiling inside her.

“The Magical Garment Factory wouldn’t even exist if it wasn’t for Dahlia!”

“You are exactly right,” Forto agreed. “So, shall we do what we do best?”

“And what would that be?”

Dahlia had even stopped the Order of Beast Hunters when they tried to tell her they would stand up to Gildovan themselves. What could *they* possibly do?

“We can prepare a dress for Miss Dahlia to wear when she gives her presentation at the castle in three days. It can be a rental from the Tailors’ Guild, or we can make some alterations to—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Forto! Please, let me take some time off before the day of Dahlia’s presentation. I know it’s a big inconvenience, but I *need* to be the one to make Dahlia’s dress.”

Making Dahlia’s dress was the only way Lucia could support her, but she wouldn’t be able to make it in time if she started from scratch today. But even if she had to alter an existing dress, Lucia wanted to be the one to sew it, with her own hands—to cheer on her friend.

“What are you saying, Lucia? Dahlia has done a lot for the Tailors’ Guild and has worked side by side with the Tailor’s Guild in research and development. You will be making her dress as a representative of the Tailors’ Guild, so this will be considered official work,” Forto said with a broad smile.

What a wonderful boss. “Thank you. I really appreciate it!”

As Forto rose to his feet, he gave out instructions. “There’s no time to waste. I will bring over some green and blue fabrics. Lucia, you pick out designs that seem fitting—Hestia, advise Lucia about designs appropriate for a baron’s

daughter. Dante, you handle assigning the factory staff their tasks. If we don't have enough personnel, I'll call some over from the Tailors' Guild." He adjusted his tie with his fingers, then continued, "We'll make the dress as a zephyricloth prototype. Let us do whatever it takes to finish it in three days."

"Yes, Mr. Forto!"

Thus began their race against the clock. Lucia sent a letter home telling her family she would be staying overnight at the Magical Garment Factory. Hestia advised Lucia on which of her designs were suitable for a noble. Dante picked out a pattern paper from an existing dress so they could modify that instead of having to create one from scratch, then assigned workers to get right to sewing.

Hestia cut the fabric while the stitchers helped with the sewing. Other factory personnel and helpers from the guild continued making the toe socks and drying insoles. Despite all that, it would still be fairly—no, *extremely* difficult to finish the dress in time. The only solution they had was to enact a human wave tactic.

Zilo took the lead on recruiting people to stay late at the factory.

"Anyone looking to make some money, work overtime! You'll be handsomely compensated! But if you have things to take care of back home, don't force yourself to stay. And anyone who has an important appointment or date, leave. I don't want to be stomped to death by a sleipnir!" he said, making the stitchers laugh.

"Teacher Lucia, Teacher Zilo, will we be given supper?" Dante asked, putting on a high-pitched, childlike voice.

"Of course! We'll stuff you full of snacks and dried seafood!" Lucia responded resoundingly. She was planning to pay for everything out of her own pocket.

"I'm sold!"

The humming atmosphere felt more like they were all about to start drinking, not make a dress. There would be no partaking in alcohol inside the factory, though.

And so the stitchers took over the factory's second workroom, which they had been using to make zephyricloth, and soon the floor was abuzz with activity.

The Tailors' Guild made it a practice to refrain from having its employees work overtime, and in the cases when it was required, they always made sure to compensate everyone involved adequately. They also had some reserve staff when others absolutely could not work overtime. Lucia had assumed that practice had existed for a long time, but apparently it had only been implemented in the last few years.

Some people needed to return home early because they had young children or sick family members to look after. Nobles often made last-minute orders for clothing. Forcing people to work could result in skilled workers resigning, which would be a much bigger loss—so Forto had calculated, which had led him to enact that policy.

Lucia listened to Zilo in surprise as he looked down at his hands and said, "I've been here for a while, so I know full well how things used to be, and I think Mr. Forto did the right thing. We don't have any guild staff running out on us anymore."

He'd said it in a joking tone, but no one laughed. Next to him, Dante picked up where Zilo had left off, nimbly sewing the lining to the dress.

"The old Adventurers' Guild really went through hell when they decided to listen to some higher-up nobles and reduce labor costs. The situation was terrible until Vice-Guildmaster Augusto took over. I heard they sometimes didn't have enough adventurers to send on jobs, and they had to send a capable member of the guild staff to hunt, dismember, and process monsters, and then even deliver the materials."

"That's far too much work. That one person was doing the job of a high-ranked adventurer."

"Yeah..."

This discussion reminded Lucia of the irritable veteran adventurer who had been present during the toe socks meeting. She remembered his face and name, but she decided to keep it to herself.

"Having a good boss really is super important, huh?" Lucia murmured.

"You said it!"

“I completely agree!”

Just as several people spoke up in agreement, there was a knock at the door.

“I’ve brought refreshments, so take a break and— What’s gotten into you all?”

When Forto entered the room, everyone smiled at him as if they’d rehearsed it.

Lucia kept her attention on sewing the dress. She had been napping as little as possible and secretly taking an antidrowsiness medicine; she’d convinced herself that it was fine since she was young.

Late at night, during her second all-nighter, her inability to use body strengthening magic caused her fingers to start bleeding from chafing against her needle. Forto, who had been sewing next to her, had made her bring him a potion, claiming he’d pricked his finger. But then he’d silently poured it into Lucia’s tea. When she tried to apologize for the trouble, he purposefully stabbed his own finger and drank some of the potion too.

Lucia had no idea what to say. She hadn’t imagined a nobleman could be so obstinately conscientious. She was concerned about his pain, but feeling unable to apologize, she forced herself to smile and said, “That must have hurt. Please be careful!”

Then, for some reason, he chuckled at her.

But thanks to that, she’d been able to sew the contour of the dress, from the bust to the waist. That was a great relief—that was the part she hadn’t wanted to leave up to anyone else.

“We did it!”

Ultimately, they just barely managed to complete the dress on time, by the morning of the day of. The sun was painfully bright against Lucia’s eyes.

The dress was a deep navy blue, the fabric being something Forto had had in stock. Although it wasn’t quite lustrous enough for a soiree, it had a nice sheen

and rich color. They'd used a silky, aqua blue fabric for the lining and added patches of zephyricloth to prevent sweating.

Both the exterior and interior materials of the dress felt nice to the touch, and the dress was easy to move in. Even Dahlia, who wasn't used to long dresses, should have no problem walking around in it.

The shape of the dress was basic. It was on the longer side, but not so much that it touched the floor, and the chest and back were modestly covered. The design highlighted Dahlia's slender neck and wrists, while some pleats around the middle worked to minimize the allure of her firm waist. The outfit would be paired with a set of genuine white pearl necklace and earrings, borrowed from the Tailors' Guild.

Dahlia was the daughter of a baron, and as such, this was the best type of dress she could wear to the castle. It was a beautiful dress that would make her look dignified but wouldn't invite flattery or flirtation. Lucia thought it was the perfect outfit to serve as Dahlia's "battledress."

Lucia and Forto brought the dress to the Merchants' Guild, and as luck would have it, Dahlia had arrived at that exact moment. Lucia thought her friend would be overjoyed, but Dahlia looked at the navy blue dress in bewilderment. Then, she thanked them and apologized profusely.

"This dress is too nice for me..." she said, and Lucia knew she must have really felt that way. Dahlia had a hard time accepting help from others, even her friends. If Lucia didn't make an active effort, Dahlia would never say a word about needing help and would end up shouldering all of her burdens alone. And yet, if someone else was in trouble, Dahlia didn't hesitate to lend a hand, even at her own expense. But that was exactly why Lucia was thankful to be her friend.

Before she could offer any words of support to Dahlia, who looked ill at ease, Forto did so first.

"This is your battledress, for when you go to the castle. Go in there with your head held high."

"It's your battledress!" Lucia echoed. "You give that old geezer what's coming to him!"

Hearing their words, Dahlia's face blossomed into a smile. Then, she went into another room and changed. The dress fit her like a glove—it looked even better on her than Lucia could have imagined. Overwhelmed with glee, Lucia hopped up and down on the spot. Forto took Dahlia's hand and told her how lovely she looked, which Ivano put a stop to, saying they were short on time.

Then, Dahlia boarded a carriage, and left for the castle.

“Please, *please* let Dahlia's sales pitch go well!”

While her dress looked perfect on her, it was another matter entirely whether the meeting would go well. That was why Lucia couldn't help but say a prayer as she watched the carriage grow smaller in the distance. Seeing her do so, Forto smiled.

“There is no need to fret, Lucia. Even if it doesn't go well, the Rossetti Trading Company can still do business with the castle. Several families have written her recommendation letters, as have the Merchants', Adventurers', and Tailors' Guilds.”

All the plans had already been put in place. Lucia was impressed. *So this is what guildmasters are capable of.* However, she couldn't stop herself from pouting a little.

“Mr. Forto, I wish you would have told me that a little sooner. Just for a little peace of mind.”



“My apologies, Lucia. The recommendations were only just collected this morning,” he responded serenely, but when Lucia looked at him in surprise, she saw that he had dark circles under his blue eyes.

He had really pushed himself for Dahlia’s sake. The other guilds had probably done so too.

“Thank you for working so hard to make that happen, Mr. Forto! Ah... I probably shouldn’t have said that, huh?”

She realized it as she was saying it. It was best to avoid telling a nobleman he’d worked hard—she remembered that from her conversation book. Even though she remembered reading it, apparently it hadn’t stuck.

“That is correct. Noblemen place importance on staying calm and composed, so pushing oneself to get a job done is considered the result of poor planning. It is better to prepare for everything in advance and make provisions for any emergencies. If you find yourself wanting to express similar appreciation to someone in the future, just ‘Thank you’ will suffice. But as for me, I happily accept your sentiment, Lucia.”

Lucia was very glad Forto was such a capable boss, and a gentleman at that.

It was now time for Lucia to return to her regular duties as head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. She was starting half a day late, but she wanted to try to balance the accounts by the end of the workday. After forcing herself to down a cup of strong black coffee, she headed for the factory.

“Thank you so much for your help,” Dahlia said with a deep bow. She had arrived at the Magical Garment Factory that evening. Lucia had gone to meet her in the hallway, where they’d had a brief chat.

“Thank you, Lucia. This dress is so pretty, but it’s also really comfortable... I was surprised it didn’t lose its shape while I was wearing it.”

“The right size really makes a difference, Dahlia. Don’t get the wrong idea that looser clothing is always easier to move around in,” Lucia whispered, making her friend blush. Dahlia had a habit of picking clothes one or two sizes too big, with the idea that they would be more comfortable.

“The dress was the hit of the presentation. The people there all commented on how lovely it was. I gave referral letters to those who asked for them, so you can look forward to hearing from them.”

“Thanks, Mr. Ivano!”

When did he have time to write up referral letters? Dahlia’s vice-chairman really works fast.

Afterward, they all moved to the reception room. Lucia sat next to Forto and practically leaned over the table to hear all about Dahlia’s presentation. Dahlia and Ivano took turns telling him that it had all gone well and that the Order had decided to adopt the camp stoves for their expeditions. Also, they’d cleared up any ridiculous misunderstandings on the part of the head treasurer, and he had sincerely apologized.

Thank heavens. As she listened, Lucia could only offer platitudes, repeatedly telling them she was relieved and congratulating them on their success. But when Dahlia announced she had been made adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters, Forto froze momentarily—then let out a loud laugh.

“Congratulations. Please, allow Lucia and me to make you a dress for when you receive your peerage.”

“Pardon...?” Dahlia asked, her eyes wide.

“Did you say...peerage?” Ivano followed up.

Lucia had no idea what her boss meant either. She turned to look at him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Forto, I’m not quite sure I follow, but do you mean to say our chairwoman might receive a barony sometime in the future?”

“Not quite, Ivano. Ah, I suppose you’re uninformed about these sorts of things too?” Forto’s smile grew even broader as he explained. “Now that the Rossetti Trading Company has become a purveyor for the Order of Beat Hunters, you needn’t worry anymore. Not only will they prioritize your company as a supplier, but you will also enjoy a certain amount of protection from them. The Order will act as a mediator to prevent any sabotage or unmanageable deals.”

That way, Dahlia's company wouldn't receive any other unnecessary comments like the ones from Gildovan. Lucia was relieved to hear that. However, her boss continued with his bright tone.

"Advisers are highly respected in the castle, so as a rule, they are candidates for peerages. To be precise, it is essentially set in stone."

"I— What...?"

"Ordinarily, barons are assessed through recommendations, so it will take about a year before you receive your title. There is no chance an adviser will fail that assessment, so, sometime next year, we will be welcoming Baroness Rossetti into the world."

At Forto's words, Dahlia's shoulders slumped. "I-I'm very honored..."

This should have been great news, but Dahlia's green eyes had darkened. Maybe the prospect of the shock and the pressure to come was overwhelming after all that stress and fatigue from visiting the castle. Lucia could understand that.

Suddenly, Lucia thought of Dahlia's father, Carlo, who had always welcomed her to the Green Tower with a smile. If he were still alive, he would have been the most overjoyed of anyone and would have celebrated with his daughter. It was unfortunate he wasn't here. Lucia could never replace Dahlia's father, but as her friend, she put on her most enthusiastic smile and said, "Congratulations, Dahlia! I can't believe I get to make your dress! I'm so excited!"

"Thanks, Lucia... It still doesn't feel real..." Dahlia responded, looking more fatigued than joyous. Lucia knew what would make her happy—a certain black-haired knight of the Order of Beast Hunters bringing her flowers.

Afterward, Lucia stood in the entryway of the Magical Garment Factory and watched as Dahlia and Ivano boarded a carriage to leave. Forto soon followed suit and made to board another carriage, saying he was headed to the Adventurers' Guild.

While she was seeing him off, Lucia finally relaxed. *That's one thing taken care of.* Now she needed to head to the workroom to help sewing zephyricloth, then

make the prototype gloves for the Order of Beast Hunters, staying overtime to — *No, actually, I really need to go home on time today and get some sleep or else*—but the moment she thought that, her vision went black.

“Lucia?!”

Forto, who had been about to board his carriage, caught her in his arms. Her vision was still spinning so badly that she couldn’t raise her head.

“Are you all right?! I’ll call a doctor!”

“No, I’m okay... I’m sorry, I just felt a little weak.”

Forto was still holding her up, but she felt like she couldn’t immediately walk. She was begging her dizziness to go away when she heard another voice at her ear.

“I’ll carry her. You’ve been staying up all night too, Mr. Forto, so you should go home early and get some rest—”

Halfway through his sentence, she felt arms circle around her back and under her knees, and then she was smoothly scooped up.

“Dante! Really, I’m fine...!”

“Do you really think you can even hold scissors or a needle in your state? I’m throwing you in a carriage and sending you home.”

“I’m sorry...”

She was causing trouble for both her boss and her assistant manager—she felt a rising urge to cry at how pathetic she was.

“You don’t need to apologize, boss. We made Chairwoman Rossetti’s dress on time, and we’re on schedule with our deliveries. Everything worked out. Now it’s time for you to take some time to recharge and—actually, you need to sleep like the dead.”

“Like the dead...?”

It was true she felt dead tired, but did he really have to phrase it like that?

“Honestly, Dante, mind your wording,” Hestia said, arriving at their side. “I’ll ride home with her, so please go home early today, Mr. Forto.”

“All right,” Forto said. “I leave Lucia in your care, then.”

Accompanied by Hestia, Dante carried Lucia to another carriage. Once inside, Lucia thanked the two of them, then leaned against the wall. The inner walls of the luxury carriage were covered in a soft cloth that dampened the rhythmic sounds of the moving carriage. Lucia couldn’t keep her eyes open.

“I can’t believe she’d be so careless...” said Dante, letting out a deep sigh. He was sitting across from Lucia, who was leaning against the wall, her soft breathing audible as she slept.

“She hadn’t slept a wink for two days straight. Everyone was so worried about her,” said Hestia, letting out a similar sigh of her own. She was sitting next to Lucia and keeping her steady.

“She and Chairwoman Rossetti must be really good friends.”

“Yes, enviably so.”

Chairwoman Dahlia Rossetti, who had spent time in the Magical Garment Factory—inventor of numerous magical tools, Lucia’s friend, and the recipient of the dress they had all worked so hard to make. A highly competent, standout individual was at a higher risk of being criticized by those higher up, and evidently that was what had happened at the castle.

The royal castle, the culmination of the labyrinthine mess that was noble society, a place filled with conflicting agendas. From an aristocrat’s perspective, the safest thing to do was stay away and not get involved. However, Forto and Lucia had jumped into the fray to fight as couturiers. As he’d watched the two of them do so without any hesitation, Dante had felt unable to just sit back, and before he knew what he was doing, he had joined them in working overnight—though since he still had to make sure the factory ran smoothly, he couldn’t do any more than the one night.

“She even took medicine to keep herself awake.”

“And yet you couldn’t stop her, could you, Dante?”

“Neither could you, Hestia.”

The two of them exchanged a look that said each blamed the other. They had both known Lucia had been working too hard. And yet neither of them had been able to say anything to her because of how earnestly she'd been working.

In spite of her dainty frame, she'd spread out those heavy rolls of fabric and, with Forto at her side, discussed what worked and what didn't. She'd inspected the pattern paper intently, her eyes lighting up as they cut the fabric, and expressed admiration for the stitchers' nimbleness.

Even when she'd been sewing for so long that her fingers were stained with blood, she didn't let the pain show on her face; her only concern was not getting the fabric dirty. That was why, no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't tell her to stop. And even if he did say something, he knew there was but a slim chance she would have listened anyway.

"I know our boss is a diligent worker, but I don't want her to feel she has to push herself so hard," Dante said.

Hestia trilled a laugh. "That just means we, her employees, have to push ourselves even harder, *Mr. Assistant Manager*."

Dante merely responded with a smirk and a nod.



"Uh...hnn?"

The curtains were closed, yet the morning sunlight pouring in through the windows was painful to Lucia's eyes. Actually, considering the angle of the sunlight, it must have been closer to midday. It was then that she finally awoke.

After work yesterday, Lucia had celebrated the news of Dahlia's barony and seen her off as she left in a carriage. Then, relief—and collapse. Forto had kept her from falling to the ground, and Dante had picked her up in his arms. Dante and Hestia had brought her home, and she'd crawled into bed with barely a word to her family. There was no denying she'd been sleepy and physically exhausted, but she couldn't believe all the fuss she had caused.

When she went to get changed, she noticed a card on top of her desk.

"Head Manager Fano, please take two days off work," Lucia read aloud.
"Signed, Assistant Manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Dante Cassini..."

That angular penmanship was definitely Dante's. After whispering the contents of the card aloud to herself, Lucia sighed. They had all been under the demands of an impossibly tight schedule, yet she alone had collapsed from fatigue. She had some serious self-reflection to do.

"Am I really the only one who has no stamina?"

I mean it. Starting tomorrow, I'm taking up jogging to get in shape—but no sooner had she thought that than her stomach growled and she realized she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon. After changing into her comfortable sky blue dress, she headed to the kitchen, where her family was gathered. It seemed like she'd come in right as they were eating lunch.

"It's not really morning anymore, but good morning!"

"Morning, Lucia. Feel better?"

"You still don't look so good..."

"Lucia, if you're ill, I'll call the doctor."

"No need," Lucia said. "I was just a little sleep-deprived. I'm much better now!"

She was sure she sounded energetic, but her family was still looking at her with concern, so she decided to give a sincere apology.

"I'm sorry for worrying you!"

"When that Dante fellow carried you in here, I wondered what on earth happened..."

"Don't stay overnight at work so often. It doesn't matter how great the pay is if something happens that you can't recover from!"

"That's right. Your health is what's most important, so please be more mindful about that, Lucia."

Her family lectured her one by one. In the past, this would have annoyed her to no end, but she could tell just how worried they were. She was just thinking she should say something when, for the second time that day, her stomach growled.

“You haven’t eaten a thing since last night, have you? Here, have some soup with boiled egg.”

“Here, take some bread. Freshly cut. I’ll eat the end, so take some from the middle.”

“Here, Lucia—I just bought this strawberry jam yesterday. Sweets perk you right back up after a hard day of work.”

There was something embarrassing about being fussed over like this, but today, Lucia happily decided to let herself be doted on. Brown bread with strawberry jam and vegetable soup with bits of bacon and a hard-boiled egg—it was what her family always ate, but it was delicious. Once she finished eating, she felt completely reenergized.

“I’m taking some time off from the Magical Garment Factory, so after I take a shower, I’ll come help out at the workshop.”

“The only thing you’re doing today is resting, Lucia. The workshop will be just fine.”

“Taking time to rest is also part of working.”

“You need to take it easy every now and then.”

“Go ahead and spend the whole day sketching designs.”

Her entire family had put a stop to her idea at once. *Why do they all have to be in sync now?* she wondered.

Lucia ended up spending the day cleaning and tidying up her room. She woke up the next day feeling completely back to normal, but her family still refused her help at the workshop. They even stopped her when she tried to cook, saying they would buy food from a cart instead.

She could have used all the extra time on her hands to sketch as many designs as she wanted, but she couldn’t stop feeling anxious. Each time she opened her sketchbook, her mind was filled with thoughts of the Magical Garment Factory—were things going smoothly right now? Were they being given even more urgent work to do? Amid her restlessness, her brother Massimo came to bring her a flat, light blue box.

“Lucia, a package came for you.”

The box was from Forto and the Magical Garment Factory staff. There was an envelope on top, inside of which were two cards, each one filled with signatures and messages from the entire staff. The messages telling her to take care and get better soon were nice to read, but was the one that said, *Be good and sleep* really necessary? Lucia smirked at the angular penmanship.

She placed the box on the kitchen table and carefully opened the lid. A deliciously sweet aroma wafted up from inside.

“Get-well-soon pastries? They look pretty good,” Massimo commented.

“Why don’t we all have some with afternoon tea? I know it’s a little early, but they’re best fresh.”

“You’re right. I’ll go call everyone.”

After Massimo walked off at a brisk pace, Lucia turned to look at the pastries again. There were fifteen of them, each one shaped like a pretty flower. Typically, flowers were sent as get-well-soon presents, but it seemed the staff felt she would prefer sweets over flowers. And they were right on the button.

Tomorrow, she’d return to the Magical Garment Factory full of energy. With that determination in mind, she started to brew some tea.

The Manager's Apology and the Aristocrats' Strings

"Everyone, I apologize for causing you so much trouble! From now on, I will be more careful not to let something like that happen again," Lucia said, bowing her head to the entire staff in the Magical Garment Factory's largest conference room. She had taken two whole days off, yet everyone greeted her with worried expressions.

"Don't worry, you didn't cause any trouble. You barely took any time off, anyway. Are you sure you're really okay, boss?"

"Are you feeling better? You pushed yourself really hard!"

"Please ask us for more help next time!"

"Chief, I think it's best if you stay seated and only give out instructions. We can bring you any documents and fabric you need."

Hearing everyone's warm words made Lucia's nose tingle. She fought back the sensation with a smile, then raised her voice and said, "I'm fine now, really! I've made a full recovery."

Everyone responded with relief and smiling faces, and this time, Lucia's eyes started to water. As she again fought back the sensation, Zilo came up and clapped her on the shoulder.

"It's not just the chief who needs to be careful—everyone here needs to make sure they're not overworking themselves. Overworking, much like getting an advance on your salary, always comes back to bite you. And once you're over thirty-five, all-nighters start to take an even greater toll on your body, and they take longer to recover from too, so keep that in mind!"

"I know that all too well!"

"Zilo, please don't talk about getting old!"

The room echoed with sounds of laughter and wailing.

"On a serious note," Hestia said, "overworking really isn't good for you."

Especially not for your skin.”

“Says the woman with flawless skin.”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Hestia’s skin look bad! Even though you work as much overtime as everyone else! Tell me what cosmetics you use!”

As the conversation turned lively, so did it start veering off in other directions. This was how things always went at the Magical Garment Factory. Lucia was happy nothing had changed in her absence.

“Okay, that’s enough!” she called out, clapping her hands together. “We can hear about Hestia’s beauty routine at teatime! Let’s work hard to meet today’s goals and prepare for anything *unexpected* that may come up tomorrow.”

“Yeah, let’s do it!”

“We can do this!”

Most of the personnel nodded cheerfully and then headed back to their own workstations. Lucia watched them leave. Zilo remained by her side, frowning as he stroked his beard.

“Something wrong, Zilo?”

“No, I was just thinking, we haven’t had a week yet without something unexpected coming up...”

“When you put it that way, it sounds like no matter how much we make, the stock in our warehouse never increases...”

The toe socks, drying insoles, and zephyricloth. Every day, they worked hard to make enough to meet their production goals, plus a little extra. But the Magical Garment Factory’s inventory never grew.

Whether it was the azure-eyed messenger from the Order of Beast Hunters coming to them on the verge of tears for their priority delivery, or Forto carrying something out with a deeply furrowed brow, their inventory was being shipped out left and right. While Lucia was incredibly grateful they had such demand, this was likely placing a heavy burden on the factory personnel.

“I should ask Forto to hire more staff,” she stated.

They needed to secure more workers, not only to create a buffer with their inventory but also to take into consideration the possibility of people needing to take sick leave and vacation.

The Magical Garment Factory staff was made up of clothiers like Lucia and Dante who were involved in the entire production process from designing to manufacturing, cutters like Hestia who were adept at cutting tricky cloth or complex curves, stitchers who mainly worked on sewing, knitters who worked the knitting machines, and office clerks who handled communications and administrative tasks.

Even those who mainly worked the knitting machines also worked as stitchers, so for convenience, they were often called stitchers as well. However, since the toe socks were the main product of the factory, knitting had become an especially important job, so highly knowledgeable and skilled knitters were incredibly valuable to them. It was for that reason that Lucia tried to make sure to refer to them as knitters.

Considering their current workload, Lucia wanted to bring on two more stitchers and one more knitter, plus, ideally, someone who was an expert in the unique qualities and peculiarities of different fabrics.

“Boss, we’re still doing all right. We can fill our stock if we all just put in a little more effort.”

“He’s right,” Hestia agreed. “I’m sure we can speed up our pace, and if we work overtime...”

“No, no extra overtime. I don’t want anyone ending up like me. Not to mention, the more you overdo things, the less efficiently you work,” Lucia said, reflecting on what had happened to her. She was grateful for everyone’s perseverance, but she didn’t want anyone to have to go as far as she had.

“Besides, a job is something you do every day, not something you need to push yourself to your limits for. I’m not saying it’s not important to get better at your craft, and sometimes a rush order comes your way, but if you keep exerting yourself past your limit, someday you’ll just break down. That’s why I want to ask Forto now rather than later.”

“But we’ve only just opened. If I were you, chief, I wouldn’t change

anything...”

“Give it some time,” Zilo said. “If you ask now, then it might reflect poorly on you as a boss.”

“I don’t care about that. Isn’t it part of my job to make requests like these anyway?”

Having a workforce shortage right after opening was evidence of a boss’s incompetence when it came to assigning and managing work. Lucia knew that would make her look bad, but that wasn’t what was most important at the moment.

“If I don’t take good care of our workplace, then we won’t be able to produce quality products.”

One of the knitters, a young man, had happened to stay behind in the room. He said, with a dreadfully faraway look in his eyes, “I wish I could write those words on a giant piece of paper and paste it on my old boss’s desk...”

He must have experienced many hardships at his old workplace. Lucia herself could think of a few unpleasant experiences at her part-time jobs, but that was exactly why she wanted to avoid creating that sort of work environment here.

“Okay, I’m going to apologize to Mr. Forto, so I’ll ask him about bringing on more staff too!”

“Boss...”

“Chief...”

She turned away from her colleagues, who seemed to have much more to say to her, and then walked toward the door. For some reason, Zilo cried out, “Godspeed!”



“Please forgive me for the trouble I have caused you!” Lucia said, bowing deeply to Forto, who was sitting behind the desk in his office at the Tailors’ Guild.

She had gotten so absorbed in making the dress for her dear friend that she’d neglected her own health. And she had even collapsed, causing Forto himself

trouble. She wanted to express her apologies as soon as possible—and her gratitude. So, although she knew how busy Forto was, she'd requested they meet, even if only for a short time, at his convenience, which happened to be now.

But Forto didn't utter one word of criticism—he just expressed appreciation of and concern for her. “Thank you for your hard work, Lucia. You did a wonderful job. Did you get as much rest as you needed?”

“Oh yeah, I slept like a rock— I mean, I have made a full recovery.” She'd started speaking as she would to a friend but quickly self-corrected.

Forto smiled but otherwise gave no heed to her crude slipup. “Occasionally, our work requires us to push ourselves past our limits in order to meet a deadline. In the future, make sure you look after your health and rest well once you get over the hump.”

Forto hadn't told her never to overdo it again. On the contrary, he had validated her.

Lucia had wanted to finish Dahlia's dress on time by any means necessary, but she was also aware that that had been her own selfish desire. Yet Forto had happily joined her in making the dress. She felt utterly indebted to him. They'd had similarly tight schedules, but he'd remained calm and collected as he worked, something she was very impressed by. He never showed one hint of strain. It was amazing how his skin and hair never lost their vibrancy.

“Um, Mr. Forto, do you do anything to take care of your health?”

“Ch-Chief,” whispered Hestia, who had accompanied her here. Lucia had been planning to ask her about her beauty routine later, but maybe nobles actually found this topic of conversation inappropriate.

“My health... I suppose I eat proper meals and get a moderate amount of exercise,” Forto answered promptly. Of course that was all he did. He had a strong constitution from his days training to be a knight and a physique that didn't easily put on weight. Lucia was a bit jealous.

“That tells me nothing helpful,” Lucia responded frankly, and Forto smiled at her charmingly.

Since she knew he didn't have a lot of time to spare, she moved on to her next point.

"Mr. Forto, I have a request as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I apologize for bringing this up so suddenly, but I wanted to ask if it was possible to hire more personnel at the factory."

"Certainly. How many people do you require?"

"O-Oh, um—two more stitchers, one knitter, and if possible, I'd like someone who's knowledgeable about fabrics to come by periodically."

"Understood. Do you mind if I leave the selection process to Zilo and Dante? Some people may or may not be suited for the work, so they'll be quicker at suggesting those qualified for a transfer."

Lucia had been bracing herself for him to ask her if this was really necessary, or to question her ability to effectively manage. Instead, he had promptly approved of her request. She was very grateful.

"Thank you. Also, I want to apologize for my incompetence as a manager to —"

"That's simply not true, Lucia," Forto interrupted. "The reason the factory doesn't have a surplus of inventory is because right when we reached our limit on orders, we were also hit with special exceptions and a new product. If anything, this is my fault for not hiring more staff. Moreover, we cannot guarantee there will be no more 'special exceptions' in the future. I'm terribly sorry about that, but there are certain individuals even I am unable to refuse..."

"Of course, those types of situations are... I mean, that is inevitable..." Lucia said evasively.

Customers like the one who wore the golden crown—whom Dante had indicated as a prior recipient of their products—could under no circumstances be refused. Rather, that was a client they had no choice but to happily serve.

"If there is anyone in the Tailors' Guild's manufacturing division who you would like to have transferred to the factory, you have my permission to poach them. Oh, but do refrain from taking anyone in a leadership role, myself included. If you pull up the roots of the Tailors' Guild, it won't be able to

function anymore.”

Lucia and Hestia couldn't help but laugh at those words; Forto was also chuckling.

After their meeting concluded, Lucia said goodbye and left Forto's office, feeling relieved that her request for more staff had been met with approval.

The day was warm, so she was sweating a little. She'd worn her sky blue three-quarter-sleeved dress, but perhaps it was a little too heavy for the weather. She was walking down the hallway, musing about that, when she spotted two men coming up the stairs.

Walking in front was an elderly, white-haired gentleman in a three-piece suit. The sleek, dark gray suit looked to be made of monster silk, and the lapel of the jacket was a shade darker. The vest underneath had black edges with exquisite embroidery. The shirt he wore was summer silk, and his slim, blue tie was held in place with a silver pin.

The height of his collar, the length of his cuffs peeking under his jacket sleeves, and his cufflinks, which were one shade darker than his tie—his outfit was so impeccably balanced, Lucia wanted to take another lap around just to see it again.

Behind him was a man wearing a matte, dark blue suit. He was likely the other's attendant. His suit was almost exactly like what every other attendant wore, but the lapel of his jacket was embroidered with tendrils of ivy the same color as the rest of his suit. His tie was ash gray with a light blue tinge, but there was a soft, vertical gradation of hue that made it look as though the fabric changed color in the light. Lucia suspected he must have also held some rank or status.

Hestia moved to the edge of the hallway, and Lucia followed after her. As the distance between them and the other pair rapidly closed, Lucia was about to greet them, but the man in front spoke first.

“You there—are you the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory?” His navy blue eyes narrowed at her, as if he were sizing her up.

“Yes, I am. My name is Lucia Fano. It is a pleasure to make your acquaint—”

“Make sure you are diligent in carrying out your duties.”

“Yes, I will do my very best.”

Even though she’d been cut off, Lucia maintained a professional smile and nodded. The elderly gentleman passed them by without even offering his own name, his attendant wordlessly following behind him. After they watched them walk away, Lucia and Hestia hastened down the stairs.

“Chief, that man upstairs, he was the Tailors’ guildmaster before last—”

Hestia explained the man’s identity; that, in turn, explained his attire. His outfit could only be that of someone with an obsession for clothes. Lucia wished she could get a tour of his closet—no, his walk-in closet. That was just how spellbound she’d been by his clothing.

“His outfit was wonderful...” Lucia said wistfully.

“But he didn’t even give his name, and he didn’t even bother to call you by yours either...”

They were standing at the bottom of the stairs on the first floor of the Tailors’ Guild. Hestia pouted her well-shaped lips.

It was generally considered rude to call someone by their job title and not their name when first meeting them. However, that man was a noble of some sort, and she was a commoner. To the former guildmaster of the Tailors’, Lucia was just a young newcomer who had no experience working for the guild, and who wasn’t particularly well-known as a clothier. She couldn’t ask for much more than an appraising glance and a detached greeting.

“I think that was natural. I’m a commoner, and I still don’t have much experience making clothes. It was nice enough for him to say something to me.”

Lucia had attended a noble’s ball as an attendant in the past, and people had more or less pretended she wasn’t there. She was just happy she hadn’t been completely ignored in the hallway.

“You know, you don’t have to take that sort of treatment. You *are* the head

manager of the Magical Garment Factory, after all.”

“I’m not going to get worked up over such a small thing—*because* I’m the head manager.”

Lucia recalled the clients of her family’s workshop and people she had worked with at her part-time jobs. Many of those people she held a lot of respect for, but there were also those she did not.

There were customers who looked for excuses to complain, bosses who vented their frustrations at their employees when things didn’t go as planned, coworkers more experienced than her who got angry and blamed her for their own mistakes, and unmotivated colleagues who were always looking for a way to slack off—each one was an unpleasant experience, so much so that she often found herself losing her temper or crying in secret. However, she couldn’t remember a time when that had resulted in those people changing their behavior.

“Getting mad or crying over things isn’t going to make anyone change. Bosses, customers, whoever—they’re not going to change just because you want them to. The only things you *can* change are your own actions, your job, and your environment.”

“Chief... Just...take care of yourself, okay?” Hestia responded, her purple eyes tearing up. If that was how she felt, there was something Lucia really wanted to ask her for.

“I will. Hey, how about we do something fun—come with me to get a triple stack of pancakes! I feel a little self-conscious eating them by myself.”

“I’d love to!” Hestia replied.

Having something fun to look forward to helped wash away bitter memories. Lucia decided that the one thing she would keep in mind about the elderly gentleman from earlier was his stunning outfit.



“It’s been too long, Forto.”

“Yes, it has been ages.”

Forto stood up from the sofa to welcome the man into the Tailors' guildmaster's office. The man was this room's former owner—the guildmaster before last.

His shiny white hair was smoothed back, and he wore a summery, dark gray three-piece suit. His outfit was just as refined as, if not more so than, the ones he had worn during his tenure as the Tailors' guildmaster. The man sat down on the sofa, then began to speak without any preamble.

"A transport ship carrying foodstuffs from the Eastern Kingdom has gone missing prior to entering Ordine's waters. Soon after, there were reported sightings of a sea serpent near the regular route."

"A sea serpent...? I did hear about a ship carrying provisions from abroad that was attacked earlier this year."

"Sea serpents are difficult creatures to fight. Other nations can't subdue them so easily."

Those employed to guard ships were normally able to fight off krakens, but sea serpents were another story. They were incredibly quick and slipped away easily. Even a high-speed ship had trouble catching up to them.

"Ordine's naval knights are also still quite lacking," the man continued. "Should the situation continue to escalate, it may be best to turn to the Mercenaries' Guild to protect the ships. That won't be cheap, however."

"I will handle things once I have all the information."

While the Kingdom of Ordine was at peace, that did not mean that every corner of its territory was safe and secure. Outside the royal capital, it was possible to run into monsters even on the main road. They had an even stronger presence around battlegrounds in forests deep in the wilderness as well as in the sea.

"Also, the next duchess of the Duchy Lavagnino is with child. You should prepare a gift and a sales promotion."

"Very well. Thank you for informing me," Forto responded, straightening his back. The former guildmaster was still quicker than him in finding out information. "Since you have taken the trouble to come all the way here, why

don't we enjoy a leisurely cup of tea?"

"I appreciate the offer, but unfortunately, I must decline. I have three more meetings over tea after this one, and I'm afraid I'm starting to have to run to the washroom much more frequently these days. Aging is such a pain."

"Nonsense, you are still quite sprightly."

Although the former guildmaster claimed he was retired, Forto felt he was even more active now than ever. How else in the world was he picking up on information faster than Forto himself, the current guildmaster and head of a viscountcy?

The man brushed Forto off with a smirk, then folded his hands on top of his knee.

"By the way, I presume the Magical Garment Factory has already gotten off the ground, yes? Isn't it about time to replace the head manager?"

Forto had been anticipating this the moment he received notice of the man's arrival. *This* was his reason for coming. Forto plastered a businesslike smile on his face and said, "I have no plans to replace the manager. Work on the toe socks and drying insoles is going steady, but the development of the new fabric, zephyricloth, still needs some time."

"Be realistic—a head manager without a title can't possibly hold her own against nobles, can she? It's not as if you can always be by her side."

"I cannot, but Dante can."

"Is he really enough? He may have skill as a clothier, but he knows little of profit. It seems Hestia is with her currently, but her family connections aren't all that useful. As for Zilo—well, I don't imagine he can help much either."

Forto had thought he might say that. He intertwined his fingers before responding.

"If necessary, we can combine the factory with the guild's operations. Above all, the workers at the Magical Garment Factory are very fond of the head manager, so replacing her would harm morale."

"What in the blazes do the factory staff see in her? I happened to see her in

the hallway just now, and she just looked like a cute little girl. Does she hold some special talent for sewing or knitting that makes the staff respect her so much?”

“Not particularly. Others are more skilled at sewing than her, and the same goes for knitting. There are also many among the staff who are couturiers with excellent design skills. However, I know of no other woman who has learned to do all that she has at such a young age and can also bravely stand up to nobles.”

“Ah, I see. Clearly you have quite a high opinion of her.”

He’d injected a bit of teasing into his tone, but Forto continued without paying it any mind.

“I *was* the one who asked her to be the manager, after all.”

“Guildmaster Fortunato Luini has always had a sharp eye. Well, if she is that well-liked by the staff, that’s a talent in itself. It might be a good idea to get her adopted by a family in the same faction sooner than later, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure about that. Please, take a look at this.” Forto placed a sheaf of parchment on the table.

“What’s this?”

“These are the names of all people who personally endorse Head Manager Fano.”

On the parchment was a list of nobles’ names.

Jasmine Enrici, the baron’s daughter for whom Lucia had made a dress; Arturo Testino, the former head of Viscountcy Testino, for whom she’d tailored a suit; Marialuna and Delphina of Viscountcy Volandri, the twins for whom she had made individualized dresses; Seward Chiesa, the head of Earldom Chiesa and a diplomat; and Lunetta Calega and her father, Baron Calega, who had signed jointly. Each one of them had requested clothing from or consulted with Lucia. While Forto had had some involvement too, they were primarily her clients.

As the man went down the list of names, his navy blue eyes narrowed and grew stern.

“In such a short time? It seems odd, no...?” he asked, his voice full of doubt.

Forto had to admit if their positions were reversed, he'd probably have felt the same. A few short months after becoming head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia had achieved results that even an aristocratic couturier couldn't have easily, all with a smile on her face.

"Some flowers bloom when they have freedom to be creative. That's my thought."

Lucia found genuine enjoyment in creating dresses and skirts, listening actively to others, and freely expressing and sketching out her ideas—that freedom of hers was her weapon. A noble, who was constrained by convention, couldn't have had the same creative output.

"Perhaps her open friendliness feels refreshing to her clients, or perhaps she's easy to like—either way, even if you let her have that freedom, she needs a wall to protect her from others and keep her where you want her. Are there no noblemen who seem to suit her fancy?"

What the man was suggesting wasn't a wall to protect Lucia but a cage to trap her in. However, that wasn't a thought Forto could express aloud.

"Not that I am aware of. Besides, she has had her hands full with work, so I doubt she's already..."

"What in the world are you waiting for, then? If she doesn't have someone, then it should be *you*. The two of you get along, don't you?"

The man spoke as if he already knew that to be true. Forto's voice was quiet as he responded, "We don't have that kind of relationship."

"You can *build* that relationship," the man remarked with no hesitation.

This man had taught Forto all he knew about being the master of the Tailors' Guild. Unable to form a response right away, Forto cast his blue eyes downward. His primary job as guildmaster was to discern what was beneficial or harmful to the Tailors' Guild. That was what this man had drilled into him. He had never forgotten that responsibility, not for a single day.

There was one more thing he'd taught Forto: that it was a matter of course for nobles to bring talented individuals into their own families, or into families within the same faction.

“You can’t lose her to a different faction, Viscount Luini.”

The man’s ill-boding voice hung in the air. Forto lacked the energy to even offer a rebuttal.

“I will do my best.”

There was still so much he was incapable of. Racing through his mind were all the things that were still out of his reach.

A Lesson on Nobility with Friends

After everyone finished their work for the day, most of the factory personnel went home.

Lucia, Hestia, and Dante remained in the manager's office, the red light of dusk filtering in through the windows. They sat in armchairs around the low table. Recently, whenever they had time, Hestia and Dante had been teaching Lucia about the etiquette and peculiar expressions of the nobility. They were currently in the middle of one of those lessons, and the absurdly difficult content was making Lucia's brain melt.

"This! Makes! No! Sense!" Lucia groaned, holding the sheets of paper Hestia had given her.

Written on the pages was a list of expressions used by nobles that one had best evade, give careful thought before responding to, or avoid entirely. There were even two postscripts providing extra warnings written in red ink.

Hestia had generously taken the time to transcribe her own personal experiences, as well as those of family members, colleagues, and friends who were nobles, and compiled them in this list. According to Hestia, she'd had to be cautious of these since her days as a college student. *Even beautiful women have it rough sometimes.*

"This one here—*please remove your gloves*. How does asking someone to take their gloves off mean you're trying to court them?"

The first line was already incomprehensible. She'd been raised in a workshop that made gloves, and yet she was wholly unfamiliar with that expression.

"Typically, the only people a single noblewoman will touch with her bare hands are family or those she considers closer than mere friends. That's why someone asking you to remove your gloves for their sake amounts to saying they want to be close with you," Hestia explained succinctly.

Dante gave his own helpful explanation. "Sorry to be blunt, boss, but it's like

telling someone you want them to touch you with their bare hands. It's better to deflect so they don't get any wrong ideas. If a guy asks you, 'Shall I take off your gloves?' then you can respond with something like, 'The weather's a bit chilly' or 'My fingers will get cold.' That'll let him know you're not interested in him. You can use it in the summer too."

Though the content of this lesson pertained primarily to women, he *was* part of the nobility. They'd decided it would be a good idea to have a man's perspective on what to be cautious about, so he had kindly joined them for this portion of the lessons.

"But clothiers usually work barehanded anyway. I can't use a needle with gloves on."

"That may be true, but I'm sure you're being sought out after for an arranged marriage, no? You should consider yourself part of the gentry," said Hestia.

People considered gentry were those who held a certain amount of influence, such as those with managerial positions in a guild, or chairpeople and vice-chairpeople of prominent companies. Until early summer, Lucia had been knitting socks and gloves at her family's workshop. Being called part of the gentry just didn't sound right to her.

"I'll be careful, then. Oh, this one's also confusing. 'Have I seen you somewhere before?' I'm sure people say that when they've met someone but can't remember their name." Lucia didn't see how that could possibly translate into being a proposition.

"That one essentially means 'I am interested in you,'" Hestia said. "For nobles, not remembering the name of someone who you've met before is quite rude, so if they've forgotten, they'll either ask their attendant in private or have them look into it. It is very rare that they ask the person to their face, though it might happen in cases when it's been ten or so years since they met, for instance."

"Asking someone directly if you've met them before becomes 'I like you, so please give me some of your time.' It's a go-to pickup line for nobles. People use it even if they know the other person's name."

Who knew there were such baffling pickup lines out there. Lucia considered herself pretty good at remembering people's names, but apparently she would

have to be even more careful.

“So it’s kind of how commoners would say ‘Let’s have tea together’?”

“Basically,” said Dante. “But nobles use that too. Except it’s very rare for high-ranking nobles, since they require a poison taster and their parents’ permission when attending a tea party.”

“High-ranking nobles don’t have many chances to speak freely with the opposite sex in the first place. Many of them are engaged at a young age,” Hestia added.

High-ranking nobles had more important things to worry about than having tea. She most likely wouldn’t even be approached by someone like that. Lucia put aside those thoughts for now and moved on to the next page.

“Okay, now this one. ‘Please let me take your coat.’ Explain?”

“I suppose that one is referring to wanting someone to remove their coat and get comfortable...” Hestia hedged delicately.

Dante followed up, saying deadpan, “Not your coat, but your dress.”

“I’m still not following.”

“To put it plainly, it means ‘Take your clothes off.’”

“Wait, Dante! I’ve *definitely* told customers at the Tailors’ Guild that I would take their coats for them before!”

She remembered saying that to a nobleman, and a married one at that. The man had given her his coat seemingly unbothered, but had she actually committed an embarrassing gaffe?

“Obviously that’s different,” Dante said. “You were at the Tailors’ Guild.”

“I doubt anyone read any hidden meaning into those words when in places that deal with clothing.”

Lucia felt a wave of relief. Indeed, if people who worked with clothes were taken the wrong way for saying something like that, then they’d never be able to do things like take measurements or have their clients try on clothes.

Lucia continued down the page. A few lines, like “Let’s partake in a nightcap”

and “Let’s watch the sunrise together,” were pretty self-explanatory. But then she ran into one that was even more confusing than the others.

“‘Shall we stargaze from the west window together’? Why the *west* window specifically? If you’re going to look at a constellation, there’s a much more romantic story associated with one in the *southern* sky.”

“The sun rises in the east, so specifying the west means you can sleep in the next morning.”

“It’s like inviting someone to enjoy a late night together.”

Is that really supposed to be romantic? Then Lucia thought of a workable response.

“Since work keeps me busy, if someone says that to me, I could respond with ‘I’m fine—I can stargaze from the Magical Garment Factory.’”

“That could be taken as meaning you have a partner at the Magical Garment Factory already. That definitely works as a rejection,” said Dante approvingly.

Lucia had never had any of the lines on this list used on her in the first place. She doubted there would ever come a day where she’d need to turn someone down.

“There’s also the opposite: ‘Shall we spend time together as the moon sinks below the horizon?’ If someone says that to you, you can either pretend you didn’t hear them or just ignore them. But under no circumstances should you laugh,” Hestia warned.

“The moment the moon sinks?” Lucia echoed. “That also means spending the night together, right?”

Dante elaborated. “It means, ‘Let’s just have a quick romp. There’s no need for us to spend the entire night together.’”

The two of them were nobles, all right. Neither one of them was so much as blushing as they explained. Lucia’s mind was reeling. She pressed her hands against her forehead and sighed.

“Nobles talk in such confusing ways... I just don’t see the connections...”

“Maybe you don’t need to. Your safest bet is to find someone whose

background you know and who has been vetted by an intermediary, then date from there,” Dante said. He’d made a perfectly sound argument.

Maybe he’s right.

“Yes, in the name of security, arranged may be the way to go, but ideally, I’d like to fall in love...” Hestia’s purple eyes looked longingly into the distance. She was always so put together, to the point that she sometimes came across as cold. But if anyone were to see that expression on her face, Lucia wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up with a line of suitors out the door.

“I’m sure you’ll find a wonderful partner, Hestia. You’re beautiful, kind, smart, a hard worker, and you’re a killer fabric cutter.”

“Thank you. I’ll pray to God that someone who says such nice things to me will appear one day,” Hestia responded. She stood up. “I’m worried about insects flying in, so I’m going to close the window— Oh, look. The moon is out.”

“Oh, wow. It looks like it’s going to be some time before we can drink under a full moon.”

Outside, a bright crescent moon had come out. Even the stars were becoming more visible. Then, Lucia was suddenly hit with a realization.

“Hey, back to stargazing from the west window—would it be bad to say something like ‘I want to look at the moon with you’?”

“Chief, you didn’t actually say that to someone, did you?”

Uh-oh, it is bad. That much was certain, based on how fast Hestia was speaking.

“Yeah, to my friend’s dad. But I was a kid! And my friend was there with me!”

“And what did he say back?” Dante asked.

“He said, ‘You got it!’ and the next day, the three of us looked at the moon and the stars together. On the roof of their tower.”

“Their tower? They must have had a big house if they had a tower. Is your friend a noble?”

“She’s a commoner. Oh, but actually, Carlo—my friend’s dad was a baron.”

“That must have been a shock...” Dante said, his words full of sympathy for Dahlia’s father.

Carlo acted very much like a commoner, so maybe he hadn’t been familiar with that phrase. Even if he had been, he would surely have overlooked it. In fact, Carlo hadn’t betrayed the slightest hesitation when he agreed to look at the moon with her.

She and Dahlia had been assigned an independent science project that involved observing the movements of a celestial body for one night. Dahlia had chosen the eastern star and Lucia had chosen the moon. Carlo had wrapped Lucia and Dahlia up in a blanket, and the three of them had gazed at the sky, occasionally nodding off, until early morning. It had been a chilly autumn night, but Lucia still remembered the taste of the hot milk they’d drunk, sweetened with a generous serving of honey.

As Lucia recounted that memory to Dante and Hestia—how she had fallen straight into a deep sleep after daybreak, and how her father had come to get her and carried her home on his back—nostalgia welled up inside her.

“That’s a heartwarming story if I’ve ever heard one. I feel bad for thinking otherwise.” Dante let out a deep sigh.

“What do you mean?” Lucia asked.

“I’ve heard about men asking their kids’ friends to become their third wives someday... Never mind, forget I said anything, boss. That’s completely different from you and your friend’s story.”

“No way! There’s such a thing as taking a joke *too* far. That’s the sort of thing that’ll destroy your kid’s friendship.”

“My childhood was filled with men who said those types of things too,” Hestia said. “They would say passion has nothing to do with age. That sort of thing leaves deep cracks in friendships that aren’t easy to repair. Though I prefer not to remember.”

Hestia smiled coldly, and Lucia and Dante kept their mouths shut tight.

I hope that nobleman who ruined his daughter’s friendship for what he said to Hestia has seriously reflected on his actions. Lucia coughed three times.

“Anyway, this really is too much. All these confusing expressions just make me want to never open my mouth.”

Dante burst into laughter. “Imagine that! You wouldn’t be you if you were quiet, boss.”

Lucia pouted at him. “Dante, you’re so mean! You big meanie! I can be quiet when I want to be.”

“I really think you should seriously study these, chief. If you don’t, someone might start treating you as their lover one-sidedly. It becomes quite a nuisance if they’re persistent, and you’ll want to cut it all off with sewing shears,” the purple-eyed beauty said, trembling as she gingerly tucked her blonde hair behind her ears.

“Yikes!” Dante said, trying to laugh it off.

However, hearing what Hestia had had to endure so far, Lucia couldn’t bring herself to laugh with him. “Hestia, I truly hope you meet someone special,” she told her.

“Same to you, chief.”

The two of them met eyes, then Dante cleared his throat.

“Boss, I’d like to ask you sort of a personal question. Are you interested in women?”

The Kingdom of Ordine recognized same-sex marriage. While there were relatively fewer same-sex couples, such romances were nothing out of the ordinary. It was for that reason that this question was often asked when two people first became close friends so that neither would unwittingly try to set the other up with a prospective partner they weren’t interested in.

“I don’t have a preference. Well, I guess I should say I don’t know, since I’ve never dated anyone before. I think my preference is whoever I fall in love with and start dating.”

“Is that so...? Chief, I hope you can meet someone special.”

“Me too! But I’m too busy to worry about that kind of stuff right now!”

“You can say that again,” Dante said with a nod.

Lucia remembered a question she wanted to ask—whether Dante, the son of a viscount, already had a fiancée or not. “By the way, Dante, are you interested in women? Do you have a fiancée?”

“I’m interested in women, yes. But I don’t have a fiancée or a girlfriend.”

“Oh, I thought you would. Do you have high standards or something?”

“Not really, but ever since I got into dressmaking, I kept ending up alone...”

“That just sounds like you’re not trying hard enough. You need to feed fish even after you’ve caught them, you know.”

“Boss, you’re so mean! You big meanie!” Dante cried, mimicking Lucia’s earlier tone.

After the three of them recovered from their laughing spell, Lucia took out an envelope and sketchbook from her bag. “Before I forget. To pay you back for the lessons, Dante, I’d like to get you some of that red wine you had at the restaurant we went to. How does a dozen bottles sound?”

“A *dozen*? That’s too expensive. One bottle is more than enough.”

“Nope. That wouldn’t be fair compensation. Right, here you go. I got coupons from the liquor store nearest to the guild that can be exchanged for a bottle each. Professor Dante, I look forward to learning even more from you!”

“You’re just as fast paying for lessons as you are at work... Well, I’m not going to turn down all that wine. Thanks.”

Lucia held the envelope in both hands and passed it over to Dante, who took it with a smile.

“For Hestia, um, I thought I’d make you that dress of my design that you mentioned you liked. I made some small changes to suit your style a little more. What do you think?”

Lucia opened up her sketchbook. Inside was a drawing of a slim, black dress with fine embellishments. Hestia had expressed her admiration for the dress at the Magical Garment Factory party the other day.

Wanting to make the dress easy to move around in, Lucia had designed it to have a fitted silhouette until just above the knee, where the skirt of the dress

would flare out like a blooming flower, but without becoming so voluminous that it would be difficult to walk around the city. The chest was quite open, but with some added black lace to soften its allure, and also to keep her from getting cold.

There was lace on the collar and the wrists, and a ribbon tied around the back. However, there would be hidden fasteners on the left side of the dress so Hestia could dress and undress by herself. Lucia planned to make the ribbon look as nice as possible before sewing it on herself.

The matching cropped black jacket, which would stop right at Hestia's waistline, would also be adorned with black lace here and there, as well as tiny ribbons on the shoulders and neckline. The ribbons, too, were black, meaning they wouldn't stand out at first sight, but they would faintly reflect light with movement.

Lucia already had the materials for the ribbons, and she'd checked the many samples' color and luster by holding a magic lantern at various angles. She didn't mention to anyone else how sore her muscles were the next day from picking up the magical lantern so many times.

Even with the lace and ribbons, Lucia felt the dress would be a mature, lovely, yet cute outfit. And more than anything, it would look amazing on Hestia.

"Thank you! It looks even more splendid than before! I can see myself wearing it! But I was the one who wanted this dress, so I'm going to pay for it."

"Nuh-uh. A commoner should pay an instructor teaching noble etiquette between five to eight silver coins per lesson. That's the standard rate. Considering I'm going to need twenty more lessons, the cost of the fabric for this dress and the stitcher I'll need to ask for help should make us about even."

"Is that right...? I see—you're averse to the idea of being indebted to me, chief..." Hestia said. She cast her eyes down, looking melancholic.

"Hestia?"

"It's nothing. I just thought, even though I am your subordinate, I could have also been your friend. But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that that's impossible professionally."

“Huh? I’ll happily be your friend. But I thought we already were?”

“What?”

Each of them looked at the other with her head cocked, neither on the same page. Lucia decided she needed to start from square one.

“Okay, then, Hestia, let’s officially declare ourselves friends from here on! Sound good?”

“Oh, of course! I’d be happy to. But in that case, I’ll teach you about etiquette without needing any form of compensation.”

Lucia thought about the situation in light of Hestia’s personality. She wanted the dress Lucia had designed, so she would pay for it. Etiquette wasn’t anything exceptional to her, so she would teach it to her for free. But to Lucia, things were different.

“I appreciate the thought, but to me, the information you were taught from childhood and even learned in college is incredibly valuable and significant. I’m sure you remember how hard you had to work to learn it all, right? As a clothier, I want to think that the clothes I make also hold that same significance.”

After hearing Lucia out, Hestia beamed and nodded. “Okay, I understand.”

Dante, who had been keeping quiet, was giving them a tender look.

“What about you, Dante? Won’t you be the chief’s friend too?”

For some reason, Dante’s eyes darkened and he started mumbling to himself. “Friend...friend... Ah yes, that word...”

“Is that a no, Dante?”

“What’s wrong, Dante?”

In response to Lucia and Hestia’s overlapping questions, Dante clenched his fists tightly. “You two, don’t you know? Don’t you know the pain of a boy asking a girl to go out with him, only for her to say, ‘Let’s just be friends’?!”

“Uh...”

This probably wasn’t the right moment to laugh or poke fun at him, but Lucia

had no idea what she should say in response. She looked to Hestia for help. Hestia, in turn, smiled radiantly at Dante.

“No one likes a man who brings up his pathetic past, Dante.”

“And no one likes a woman who says heartless things, Hestia.”

“Alas, I don’t mind being disliked by a gentleman I don’t care for.”

“Ah, very true. Reverse the genders, and I have to say I agree.”

Lucia’s head ached as the pair’s conversation took an unexpected turn, their voices frigid. *I don’t know how we ended up here.*

The two of them must have been hungry. It was well past dinnertime.

“Um, hey! Why don’t we go grab a bite together? I know a great place in the South District!”



Unfortunately, Dante said he had some things to take care of, so in the end, only Lucia and Hestia went out for dinner. They went to a small eatery in the South District. Lucia had heard about this place from one of the stitchers. She was worried there wouldn’t be space for them, but thankfully, a private room for two people had just opened up.

“How about we start with bruschetta, and then...”

Bruschetta was sliced hard bread that was toasted and topped with garlic and olive oil. This restaurant also added diced tomatoes and basil, as illustrated on their menu. Commonly served as an antipasto, bruschetta was also a good way to avoid getting sick from drinking if one ate it immediately after a toast—or so Dante had once told her.

“They have raspberry wine here. That sounds fun. Why don’t we try that?”

“Let’s go for it! I also want fried prawns, kraken, and veggies, and a salad with tomato, boiled egg, and pesto sauce, and a grilled ham and cheese sandwich. If I have any room at the end, I’ll order dessert.”

“Then I’ll have sliced ham, salted green vegetables, marinated sardines, and a spicy meat pie.”

Something about Hestia's order sounds very chic, Lucia thought. After they gave their order to the server, their wine and bruschetta were quickly brought out to them.

"Cheers to becoming friends!"

"Cheers to a lasting friendship!"

After saying their toast, Lucia and Hestia clinked their wine glasses together. In Ordine, it was customary to touch wine glasses in the belief that it drove away evil spirits and warded off bad luck. The same was done with wooden mugs of ale. This was something like second nature to Lucia, but apparently it wasn't a custom in Ehrlichia.

As a friend who had gone abroad as an interpreter had once written to her, Ehrlichians considered glass drinking vessels very valuable and feared they would cause injuries if they broke; thus, no one in Ehrlichia clinked glasses together. *I just don't feel right drinking wine without toasting glasses*, her friend had written, and Lucia understood completely.

Lucia took a big sip of wine, quenching her thirst. The raspberry wine was on the dry side and full-bodied. A sweet yet tangy aroma of raspberries filled her nose, while the strong alcohol overwhelmed her taste buds.

"This wine tastes delightful. Is it too strong for you, chief? Shall we order some ice? Or maybe a different drink?"

"Ice sounds good."

The wine was good, but it was too potent for Lucia. It was bad manners to add ice to wine when dining with nobles, but she was free to do so in the restaurant. She asked the server who had delivered their food for some ice.

"Hestia, do you want to try the fried prawns and fried kraken?"

"Don't mind if I do. Won't you have some ham and marinated sardines, chief?"

Lucia sipped at her glass of wine and ice as she and Hestia took turns sampling each other's foods. The fried fare was perfectly crispy on the outside and juicy on the inside. Fried prawn had always been a favorite of hers, but she was

surprised at the freshness of the kraken and the sweetness of the fried onion.

The grilled ham and cheese sandwich arrived a little later than the rest of the food. Its gooey cheese was melting down the sides and onto the plate, so Lucia ate the piping hot sandwich with a knife and fork. From its cross section, she could see there were two types of ham and two types of cheese, a clever combination that kept the flavor interesting. The sandwich was much larger than she was expecting, and she was worried she couldn't eat it all. That turned out to be an unnecessary concern, though.

The square-cut ham that Hestia shared with her was well seasoned with spices, and it paired surprisingly well with the raspberry wine.

Next, she alternated between the salted green vegetables and marinated sardines, both of which had more sophisticated flavors.

"This is so good..." Lucia said. "Whenever I order food alone, I always go for flavors I know I like. I'm happy I got to try some new things."

"Me too. I know some people find these flavors to be a bit unconventional, though. I just prefer eating foods that I grew up with."

"I get that. Though for me, it's crespelles from a stall that's been around since before I was born."

Crespelles were thick wheat dough pastries that were grilled and filled with various ingredients. Unlike crepes, they were folded into squares. Each food cart sold their own style using different ingredients, such as sautéed meat and vegetables, seafood, and even fruit. Lucia's family often bought some for dinner when they were too busy to cook.

The workers at the Magical Garment Factory had also begun eating them quite frequently. Once, Lucia had been asked what she wanted for lunch, and she'd half-jokingly said they should compare crespelles from different stalls. Zilo had latched on to the idea immediately and put in the orders, and the next day, they'd had a lunch party where they sampled and compared different crespelles.

Lucia was happy the factory staff had enjoyed the lunch party, and a few days later, crespelles had appeared on their lunch and dinner menus. They also

continued having their crespelle lunch parties intermittently. *Our staff are all highly adaptable.*

“Chief, before the Magical Garment Factory, you used to work in your family’s workshop, the Fano Workshop, right? Did you do any sort of apprenticeship at an atelier before that?”

“No, I didn’t. After primary school, I worked a few other jobs while also working at my family’s workshop. There was a couturier who started teaching me from primary school, but I didn’t go to school for design or anything.”

Ever since Lucia became the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, it had become more common for people to ask about her personal background. Her response—that she hadn’t gone to school for dressmaking and had never apprenticed at an atelier—often left her interlocutor shocked. But Lucia had learned from Ranieri, an incredible teacher and friend, so she felt she was skilled enough for her age.

“Is that right? You’re very good at what you do, so you must have been taught by a superb teacher.”

“Yeah, he was the best!”

She wished she could show him off to Hestia, but he was likely still traveling around the Eastern Kingdom and Iřrana. He also hadn’t had the kindness to send his pupil a single letter, which saddened her a bit.

Lucia shook away those feelings, then asked Hestia, “When did you decide to pursue a career in clothes?”

“Me? Well, I have absolutely no magical ability, despite being born to a viscount family from outside the capital. As far back as I can remember, I was told to hurry up and leave the house. I believe I was fifteen when I officially decided on what to do.”

“That sounds pretty cruel to me. Is that just the way it is for nobles?”

“Yes, I’d say it’s typical. But I wouldn’t say it’s cruel; it’s just a matter of what I’m suited for. I learned that early and was raised thinking that was the way things were, so it didn’t feel cruel to me. I did find it disappointing I was the only one among my siblings who didn’t have magical ability, but such is life.

There are even people from ducal families who can't outwardly express their magic, and there are some commoners who end up with powerful magic that skipped generations."

Lucia knew about that too. The magic one was born with had a significant impact on occupation and marriage. There were stories about those who were born under nobility but, due to their lack of magic, had to yield their hereditary rights to their younger brothers or sisters. Other stories told of commoners born with powerful magic who were then adopted by noble families when they were very young. Lucia had heard such tales even from primary school.

"Before I decided, I first followed the civil service studies track in college. My family started bringing up the topic of arranged marriage early on, and I was told to either become someone's second or third wife, or go to college. They said I could either find someone to marry in college, or get a job that would make me self-reliant. To be honest, I entered college with the hope that I could meet someone nice."

"And did you?"

"I mainly received invitations for casual affairs from other nobles. Also people who wanted me to be either their mistress or second wife."

"I can't imagine why. I'd think you'd have no problem finding a nice, serious partner."

"Having no magic is a fatal flaw for a noble. It can be necessary for a family's line of work. For instance, a family that has produced mages for generations will prioritize a prospective partner's magical ability above all else."

Talk about a cold world. Did nobles *ever* take feelings for and compatibility with their partners into account?

"Well, if you're looking for love, why not cast a wider net and include commoners?"

"Chief, don't take this the wrong way, but how many commoners do you think there are on the civil service track in college?" Hestia asked.

"Um, maybe thirty percent of the class?"

“In my class, it was fifteen percent. Among those, there were some who were already from wealthy merchant families, gentry, and others from families who held a certain amount of social standing. They all also placed great importance on magical ability. Also, I kept my distance from girls who were being sought out by sons of high-ranking nobles. It only resulted in competition, and I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself.”

A cold, bone-chilling world. Did *any* of these people experience blissful romance in college?

“Did you ever have a noble be persistent with you?”

“Not quite, but when I was asked to be someone’s second wife, I turned him down with the standard ‘I don’t think we’re a match, so let’s stay friends.’ After that, he went to my parents, but they told him that I had no magic and would just be an inconvenience to him. It seemed his family also wanted things to end there. But being rejected must have been quite a shock to him. He took a lot of time off from school...”

“Did his parents take him out of school or something?”

“No, but his school friends blamed me, saying I had misled him.”

“Oh, please!”

“What Dante said earlier reminded me of that... I really said some terrible things to him.”

Lucia recalled Hestia’s chilling smile. Apparently, she had been remembering a painful thorn from the past.

“You can apologize and explain tomorrow.”

“It’s so embarrassing. I thought it was all in the past for me.”

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed, Hestia. You can’t do anything about someone getting down in the dumps over unrequited love. The ones who should be most ashamed are his friends for sticking their noses into someone else’s business and blaming you as if they know the whole story.”

It was outrageous enough to criticize someone else’s love life, but commenting on a romance that was over and done with? *That warrants being*

stomped on by a sleipnir, Lucia thought earnestly.

“Chief...”

“Let’s talk about something else. So, what was going to school for fashion like? Did you enroll after college?”

“No, I started taking night classes at the fashion school while I was still in college. I wanted to learn a trade. The people I met there were all very kind. There were even some students who were much older than me.”

“Really? What were the classes like?”

“They were divided between theory and practical application classes. We learned about drafting and revising patterns, sewing and cutting, ironing... We even learned about the special qualities of specific fabrics and the history of clothes. We didn’t create many original designs of our own. I suppose the classes were more focused on the production process.”

“It sounds interesting. So you had to study history too, huh...”

A history exam would probably have given Lucia some trouble.

“History, yes, but we didn’t have to memorize any timelines, chief. We mainly learned about the difference between old and modern clothing, Ehrlichian fashion, and examining changes in materials used over time. Did you know, a hundred years ago, commoners only wore undyed or brown clothing? Maybe a hundred years from now, clothing will be even *more* colorful, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yeah! I need to live as long as possible!” Lucia responded. She was one hundred percent serious, but Hestia laughed. Lucia genuinely wanted to see the capital bursting with even more multicolored clothing than it was now.

“I enjoyed cutting fabric, so I joined the Tailors’ Guild as an apprentice, took the official examination, and became a staff member. Seeing how passionate I was about cutting fabric, Mr. Forto made me vice-manager of the cutting room. That was last year.”

“And then you joined the Magical Garment Factory, even though you’d just gotten a promotion. I’m really grateful you came to us. You’re the best at cutting zephyricloth.”

“Please, I’m grateful to be doing such interesting work. Though, since I can’t use body strengthening magic, I can’t cut things like monster leather. I always have to ask Dante to do that for me.”

“What if you used a mythrill cutter?”

“I buy my own fabric cutters. I want the handle to be made to my preferences, so I can’t share it. I’ll buy a mythrill cutter once I’ve saved enough money.”

Instead of a dress of her own design, Lucia should have given Hestia a mythrill cutter to pay her back for the lessons. Lucia suspected it cost quite a lot, though.

“Anyway, I can’t imagine becoming someone’s second wife as a college student. It just feels like such a faraway thing.”

“Marriages between nobles also involve occupations and domains. I’ve heard Mr. Forto might take a second wife soon too. He only has one daughter, and it seems like his wife isn’t in the best of health...”

“Really? I wish I could meet her someday, but I need to make sure I know my etiquette first.” As Mr. Forto’s subordinate, Lucia didn’t want to make a bad impression on his wife.

“What about you, chief? Did you like anyone when you were a student?”

“I only finished primary school, but I was having so much fun studying clothes that I didn’t even think about that sort of stuff. After that, I worked in my family’s workshop and other jobs, and I made clothes in my free time. I did have a male colleague, but we were never anything more than friends.”

Lucia reminisced on those times. He really had just been someone she’d had fun conversations with, and nothing more. But as she looked back on her loveless student days, she remembered something from even further back.

“Oh, but I’ve given someone an embroidered handkerchief before!”

“I believe I remember us having a similar conversation before. Who did you give it to?”

“...It’s a secret. I feel like if I tell you, it’ll all vanish like a dream.”

Lucia was honestly unsure if she should call him her first love or not. *Mr. Sunset*. As they stood in the alleyway, his reddish hair and eyes had looked beautiful in the light of dusk. She still remembered his kind voice encouraging her up as she cried.

But that was a memory from when she was six years old. There was a good chance she was romanticizing their encounter. Besides, even though she'd given him her handkerchief, she'd been too young to know the implications, and like as not, so had he. *Can I even really call that a first love's handkerchief?* Right now, he was as distant from her as a dream.

"It seems that person left you with a nice memory, chief." Hestia's purple eyes softened into a kind smile.

Lucia responded, slightly embarrassed, "Yeah! Also, Hestia, please call me Lucia outside of work!"

"Okay, Lucia."

When Hestia said her name with a smile, it already sounded familiar to Lucia's ears. The two friends made a second toast.

"Hestiaaa!"

The moment Hestia arrived at the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia—who seemed to have been waiting for her in the hallway—seized her.

"Come on, come with me!"

She seemed to be in quite the hurry. Thinking it must be something to do with the zephyricloth, Hestia allowed herself to be guided by the arm into the manager's office.

"Hestia, use this!" Lucia said, whipping out a slender black box. Giving in to Lucia's enthusiasm, Hestia took the box, which was actually fairly light. Lucia looked at her pointedly, encouraging her to open it, so Hestia gently removed the lid.

"Oh my..."

That was all she could say.

Inside the box was a fabric cutter. That was its proper name, but its appearance was closer to that of an ordinary knife. A pale blue sheen gave the silver blade a cool luster.

“It’s mythrill enchanted with hardening, so as long as nothing happens to it, you’ll never have to replace the blade. I asked the shop to customize the handle to your liking. Oh, that was included in the cost.”

The name of a famous magical tool shop in the nobles’ quarter was engraved on the box. This could very well be called a high-grade magical tool rather than a dressmaking tool.

“Are you sure I can borrow such a fine item? It must be expensive to rent.”

With this cutter, even someone like herself who lacked strength would be able to cut thick, double-layered fabrics. Even monster leather wouldn’t pose a problem. Considering how much it cost, she’d have to make sure to work hard.

“This was purchased just for you, Hestia. Now you have a tool that can compensate for not having magic. Just think of all the things you can do now!”

“That’s true, but something as nice as this is wasted on me. If someone stronger than me could use it, they’d be able to do much more with monster materials. I even need to ask for help to use the large cutting machines—”

“It’s not wasted on you at all. You’ll have an easier time cutting fabric, and you can just ask someone for help with anything you can’t do. That’s what this factory and your colleagues are here for. I don’t know anything about accounting, I don’t know even half the noble etiquette I should, my sewing skills are outshined by those of the other stitchers, I can’t cut perfect curves like you can, and I can’t make alterations as skillfully as Dante can. But I’m decent at being head manager, right? Even despite all my shortcomings.”

Lucia said all of that in one breath, then grinned and continued.

“Besides, it’s not a present. It’s been decided that the cutters of the Magical Garment Factory need to have their own mythrill fabric cutter!”

“When was that decided?”

“Just now. By my authority as the head manager.”

“That sounds like an abuse of authority. First of all, I’m the only cutter here...”

Hestia was the only one who held the title of cutter here at the Magical Garment Factory. She was an adept sewer and knitter as well, but cutting fabric was what she most enjoyed and was most proficient in, so that was her main task here and at the Tailors’ Guild. While Dante and Zilo were also good at cutting fabric, they weren’t called cutters. They were primarily a couturier and a stitcher, respectively.

“If we get any more fabric cutters here, we’ll provide each of them with one too. Don’t worry about it, just try it!” Lucia urged her enthusiastically.

Half resigned and half excited, Hestia picked up the cutter. It had a purple line running along its side. This cutter alone would easily have eaten up a year’s worth of her salary. When she’d worked at the Tailors’ Guild, she had borrowed a tool like this maybe once or twice a year, and she’d never gotten accustomed to using it. However, this one felt natural in her hands without her having to make any adjustments.

Honestly, the head manager always outdoes herself.

Lucia had gone so far for her. Now it was Hestia’s turn to reciprocate by working her hardest. She inhaled deeply, forced back the tears welling in her eyes, then tried her best to smile wide.

“Thank you, Lucia! I can never let such a wonderful tool leave the Magical Garment Factory. I’ll have to stay here forever.”

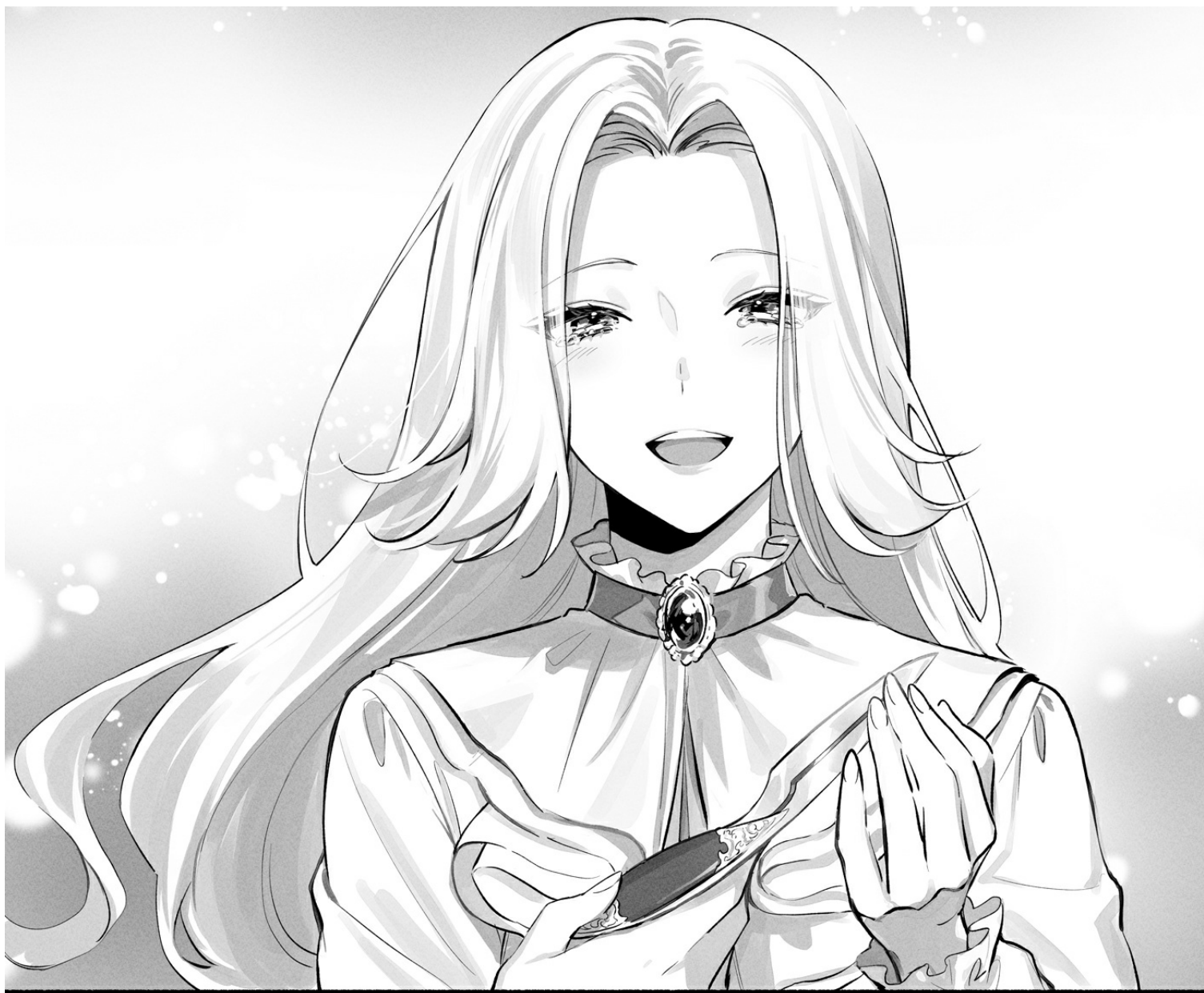
“Yeah, please do!” Lucia responded, as if Hestia were the one doing her a favor.

A girl like a sunflower—that was how Hestia had viewed Lucia, from the moment she met her up until just recently.

A hardworking girl born and raised in a normal, warm, loving family, she’d made her dream of becoming a couturier a reality. A girl who was younger than Hestia but had a good head on her shoulders and, despite enduring her fair share of negative workplace experiences, never lost her cheerful, honest disposition.

Hestia's prior perception of Lucia hadn't been so far off, but it didn't fully capture her either.

Lucia hadn't rejoiced even when she, a commoner, had suddenly been made head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, and when she was recognized for the work she did for nobles, she didn't try to parlay it into an arranged marriage or adoption. Hestia had thought maybe Lucia was afraid of nobles, but when a marquis had ridiculed her friend, she'd wasted no time in fighting back however she could that very same day. Hestia even felt envious of Lucia's ability to put forth so much effort on her friend's behalf.



Lucia was always working her hardest, raising the bar exceedingly high—so much so that the entire factory staff felt the need to stand up straight when she checked over their work.

Nonetheless, she hated when the staff pushed themselves too hard, and she cared about their health and any problems they were going through. More than anything, she never hesitated, in critical moments, to prioritize her subordinates over herself. It was a delight to work under a boss like that, but at the same time, Hestia had never had a boss who'd caused her as much worry.

Lucia's dream was to one day own a workshop and boutique to make and sell clothes of her own design, but Hestia knew she would probably never be able to support her more easily than she could right now.

Instead of a sunflower, Lucia was more like a beautiful green tree. Someday, her branches would grow wide and tall, reaching up toward the blue sky. Hestia wondered—if she told her she wanted to stay by her side and watch that happen, would she laugh?

"I want you to remain the head manager as long as I work at the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia," Hestia told her with a smile. The green young maiden simply responded with a sunny smile.

A Celebration of the Opening of the Magical Garment Factory

“A slime farm tour...”

Lucia shook her head as she closed the white envelope. She had received and read the letter in the guildmaster’s office of the Tailors’ Guild. The sender was Dahlia, inviting her to tour a slime farm. The letter was brief, but it was clear from the contents that Dahlia was ecstatic to go.

Her friend might have forgotten, but Lucia had visited the Green Tower when it was covered with drying slimes. It had been when Dahlia was a college student trying to enchant waterproof cloth with powdered slime.

Dahlia’s father, Carlo, who was also in the garden, invited Lucia to have tea with them, which Lucia happily accepted. Just as she was on her way toward the door, a black two-horse carriage pulled up. Carlo ran over to greet the carriage and accepted a letter from the knight who descended from it. Judging by the terribly stiff expression on Carlo’s face, usually so cheerful and gentle, Lucia suspected it was an important letter about work.

Feeling a little anxious, Lucia waited for him. Then, she casually glanced over at the field of slimes in the yard, which she had been trying her best not to look at. Unfortunately, the day prior, she and her brother had been reading a book of ghost stories. Although the stories were about human ghosts, the slimes reminded her of them for some reason.

The slimes are dead before they’re dried. And they don’t become ghosts like humans do...probably. So this sense of resentment I feel has to just be my imagination. As she was trying her hardest to convince herself of that, something smacked against her ankle.

“M-Mr. Carlo!”

Carlo had stuffed the letter into his pocket and returned around the same time Lucia had called his name. The creeping, half-dead blue slime was stuck to

Lucia's ankle.

"Sorry, Lucia! I guess this one refused to die! Don't worry, I'll kill it!" Carlo said, speaking as if he were some sort of villain. He hurried over and swiftly ripped off the slime with his bare hands, then smashed its core with his silver-colored cane. He acted quick enough that the slime didn't burn or harm her, but the peculiar squishy feeling of its body and the prickling irritation it caused were ingrained in her memory even to this day.

Slimes themselves weren't particularly scary monsters. All it took to fell them was a blow from a metal rod or sword to the cores inside their translucent bodies. Nevertheless, remembering the bizarre sensation of it clinging to her ankle didn't exactly make her enthusiastic about going to a place crawling with living slimes.

Dahlia's waterproof cloth was a magnificent tool, and the zephyricloth was an innovative fabric. Lucia was beyond appreciative of the applications for clothing, and she understood how valuable slimes were as a material. But every time she saw a slime, she just wished it were in its powdered form. And it *definitely* wasn't because she was still scared of living slimes or because they made her knees go shaky.

"Lucia? You look pale. Is something wrong?" asked Forto.

"No, I'm fine! It's probably just the light from the window making me look pale," she responded, making her voice as energetic as possible. She decided she would turn down Dahlia's invitation to tour the slime farm. "Are you going to join today's celebration, Mr. Forto?"

"Yes, though I have some business to take care of, so I'll be a little late for the toast. Please start without me."

There came a knock at the door. It was a guild staff member.

"Mr. Fortunato, there is a package for you from the Adventurers' Guild that requires your attention."

Forto nodded and stood up. A package from the Adventurers' Guild was likely clothing materials. Lucia couldn't stop herself from listening in.

"Unfortunately, the package is not clothing materials. It's a health and

antiaging tonic that I regularly order. Though I wouldn't recommend it for you yet, Lucia."

"A health and antiaging tonic...?"

There were advertisements all over the city touting the health benefits of certain monster materials and medicinal herbs. Maybe Forto's tonic was one of those.

Then Lucia remembered something. A monster material that supposedly made you appear more youthful and enhanced the luster of your skin and hair—powdered skybat flesh. Apparently it made your skin glowy and your hair glossy the day after you ingested it, and if taken regularly, it even reduced the appearance of wrinkles. It was considered a very appealing antiaging tonic.

Her father had told her that Ranieri, the man who'd taught her the art of dressmaking, took the very same supplement. She remembered Ranieri's youthful appearance, which had made it seem impossible that he was actually the same age as her father. His skin was firm and free of wrinkles.

Lucia, however, didn't think she'd ever be able to ingest powdered skybat flesh herself. Her father had said that it was so bitter it was almost inedible, and that the bitter taste kept bubbling back up after he ingested it, ruining everything he ate for the next three days. Hearing his experience brought Lucia to the conclusion that she would never dream of drinking it regularly.

Perhaps Forto was using that same tonic to maintain his glowing skin and shiny hair. As she stared at him, thinking that, Forto squinted his blue, almond-shaped eyes at her.

"Lucia, would you like to know more?"

"No thank you, I'm good! You know me—fit as a fiddle!"

He gave her such an unusually gracious smile that Lucia had to take half a step back. *I was right—this is something I shouldn't ask about.*

"In that case, I'll go accept the package. In the meantime, feel free to peruse these. I brought about five or six of them, so feel free to take the ones that pique your interest."

“I’d like to borrow all of them, please!” Lucia blurted out before Forto even had a chance to open the cloth-wrapped bundle. She already knew what was inside: Forto’s sketchbooks, containing his clothing designs.

After becoming head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia was graced with the opportunities to look through his sketchbooks. A precious chance to study the Tailors’ guildmaster—no, the couturier Fortunato Luini’s designs. There wasn’t a single one she wasn’t interested in looking at.

The designs filling his sketchbooks ranged from dresses to suits, from elegant to simple attire. Forto was also an expert on accessorizing, so the edges of the pages were lined with designs of tiepins and bracelets that matched each outfit. To Lucia, these sketchbooks were remarkable textbooks and reference materials.

“By all means. I’d be delighted to look through more of yours too, Lucia.”

“I’ll bring them tomorrow!”

Lucia was also going to show Forto her sketchbooks. He had kindly praised her designs as being joyful. Perhaps the monumental gap in skill between them had actually made her designs seem fresh to him.

He raised one hand slightly. “I’ll only be a moment, so wait here.”

But something felt off about his action—for some reason, it seemed like Forto wasn’t looking straight at her. In any case, she decided she’d stay put and drink her tea.

“Huh...?”

While she was enjoying the aroma of the quality tea leaves, she suddenly became aware of another scent. It was the scent of new fabric and ironing starch. When she looked up, she noticed Forto’s attendant standing by the window. Forto’s motion from earlier must have actually been him letting his attendant know he didn’t need to follow him to the next room. The attendant must have been wearing a freshly starched shirt.

He had short, slightly curly black hair and dark gray eyes with black pupils. He wore a slim-fitted, single-breasted, dark gray jacket with two buttons, and narrow-legged pants that were somewhat tight at the hems, giving him an

overall slender silhouette. His outfit was complemented by a pair of black, thick-soled shoes and a pair of black gloves that suited his long fingers. Underneath his jacket, he wore a dress shirt with a buttoned-down collar. Lucia suspected this was the source of the scent of starch. It was dazzlingly white. As a whole, it was a splendid, classic outfit, but before today, Lucia had never examined it closely. In fact, she couldn't remember seeing it before.

The man before her was Forto's attendant. He was always somewhere behind the guildmaster, or at least in the same room, so she assumed they had to have exchanged at least a few short words with each other. But no matter how hard she tried to remember seeing him before today, her memories of his face, voice, and clothes were fuzzy.

It was true his appearance was a bit plain—there was nothing very distinctive about him. He was on the taller side and had slender arms and legs, but that wasn't to say he was overly skinny. His facial features were nice, but there wasn't anything that stood out about him. Actually, even now, she felt if she closed her eyes, she wouldn't be able to bring his image to mind.

Perhaps it was rude to say, but it was like he had little to no presence. Still, she hadn't properly introduced herself to him this entire time. That was simply impolite, considering how many times they had encountered each other.

"Excuse me! Um..."

It was only after Lucia stood up from the sofa and called out to him that she realized—she didn't know his name.

"May I help you, Head Manager Fano?" the man asked, his voice as low as a whisper and his dark gray eyes peering at her.

"I apologize for never introducing myself before. I'm the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia Fano. May I ask your name?"

"My name is Lotta Sevaro," he replied after a pause, his eyes still narrowed. It almost felt like he was wary of her.

"Um, those clothes you're wearing, were they designed by Mr. Forto?"

"Yes."

“Is that button-down shirt monster silk?”

“I believe so.”

Lucia gave a start—his impassive face and terse responses suddenly made sense. He was an attendant. It was possible he wasn’t sure he should be talking to her without his master Forto’s approval. Lucia had also heard that some families ordered their attendants to say only the bare minimum to guests in order to avoid the possibility of them saying something rude. It was possible that similarly, Lotta could get in trouble for talking to Lucia on the job.

“Mr. Sevaro, are you not supposed to talk to me while you’re working?”

“No, I—one moment, please.”

Lotta let out two short coughs.

“Huh...?”

The air around Lotta seemed to shimmer like a haze of heat.

Then his coloring suddenly intensified, as if he were coming into focus—his short black hair stayed the same, but his gray, downturned eyes looked bright and color warmed his face. Lucia’s breath caught in her throat as she felt the man’s faint presence abruptly grow stronger.

“My apologies for startling you. I was using concealment.”

“Concealment! Now it makes sense. That’s amazing. I’ve never seen that before!”

From what Lucia had heard, concealment was a handy type of magic used by guards and attendants, but there weren’t many who could use it. That was when she realized her own misunderstanding.

“I’m sorry! Of course, this isn’t my first time seeing it. I never realized, even though we’ve met several times,” Lucia clarified.

Lotta’s thin lips slowly curved into an arc. “You are the first person ever to speak to me while I was using concealment, Head Manager Fano.”

“So that was why it seemed like you were barely there. Oops—is that a rude thing to say, Mr. Sevaro?”

“No. Thank you for the compliment,” Lotta said with a painfully stiff smile. Lucia felt apologetic. Even if it *was* a rude thing for her to say, it wasn’t as if he’d just tell her that straight out.

It was likely against noble etiquette for her to speak to an attendant who was using concealment. As she was trying to decide whether to say it was a good thing Forto wasn’t here or to apologize for causing Lotta trouble, she thought of something. The factory staff was having a party later today. Lotta must have attended the last one too, but Lucia couldn’t remember him being there. She suspected he had been but that he’d refrained from eating and drinking.

For today’s party, they had reserved the entire third floor of the restaurant, and there would also be guards stationed at the entrance. What better opportunity would there be for Lotta to attend the party without having to use his concealment?

“Mr. Sevaro, would you like to join us for the party today? Of course, I mean you should attend without concealment, so you can enjoy the food and drinks too.”

“Thank you for the invitation. However, I believe having a stranger attend on short notice might make the factory staff uncomfortable.”

“You’ve always been behind Mr. Forto anyway, and I’m sure that’s not going to change, so I think this would be a great chance to— Oh, will it cause a problem for your work if the others know what you look like?”

“No, I just—I am not much of a conversationalist, since I am always using concealment.”

“Then why not come just to listen in and enjoy some food and drink? What sort of food do you like?”

“Salad...I think?”

“What kind of salad?”

“The kind that has leafy greens and cheese...?”

All of his statements were in the form of questions, and he looked like he was struggling to answer.

“Is it possible you don’t remember the name of the salad?”

“Yes. I only eat what’s given to me. I’ve never tried to remember what it’s called.”

Perhaps he didn’t eat while concealed. If so, he probably had to eat as much as he could in a short period of time. Lucia decided she should provide some examples.

“Green salads are good, but there are other salads that are more filling, like potato salad and pasta salad. Bean salads keep you full for longer too. There’s also seafood salad, which is a salad with all types of seafood, like finely chopped shrimp and squid, mixed with vegetables. Oh, and the restaurant we’re going to today has a delicious fruit salad.”

“There certainly are quite a few varieties. I wouldn’t be sure where to begin.”

“You can try everything at the restaurant! If we all share plates, you’ll be able to try all the different types.”

“That wouldn’t be a bother?”

“Of course not. Our Magical Garment Factory parties aren’t very formal anyway.”

“I— Yes, I am aware,” Lotta said with a peculiar expression.

That was right—even though she hadn’t noticed him there, he *had* been to other parties with Forto and so had witnessed just how much they all let loose. In that case, he shouldn’t have anything to worry about.

“Please sit with us at the tables this time, Mr. Sevaro. I won’t feel right if you don’t,” she said. Lotta’s gray eyes wavered and then slid toward the door. It seemed he was seeking Forto’s help, or more likely, his advice, but the guildmaster still hadn’t returned.

Just as Lucia had resolved that she’d have to beg for Forto’s approval, Lotta placed his right hand on his chest. “As long as Lord Forto gives his permission, I will attend. I should have said this sooner, but please call me Lotta from now on. You hold an important position in the Tailors’ Guild, Head Manager Fano, so there is no need for you to show deference to me.”

“Thank you, Lotta. In that case, please call me Lucia. My father runs the Fano Workshop and often comes to the guild.”

“Thank you very much, Head Manager Lucia.”

I guess he won't drop the “Head Manager” part.

Nevertheless, she felt that they had managed to bridge the gap between them even if just a little.



The Magical Garment Factory often held their celebrations and dinner parties at the three-story restaurant located in the South District on the edge of Central District. It offered a great selection of alcohol, and it was well-known for its delectable meat and seafood dishes. That day, the factory had reserved the entire third floor so everyone would be able to relax and enjoy themselves.

Unfortunately for Lucia, she'd been so busy with work that day that she hadn't had time to change before the party. She arrived in the aqua blue dress she often wore to work. The only thing she had been able to change into were a pair of summery, white high-heeled shoes.

Inside the restaurant, she saw that some of the stitchers and knitters had been able to change clothes, and some had even styled their hair differently or reapplied their makeup. Lucia admired everyone's looks as she walked through the room.

“Chief, um, who is that...?” one of the stitchers asked perplexedly, noticing Lotta trailing behind her. The others also looked over at them, but no one said anything. Apparently, no one here recognized Lotta either.

“This is Mr. Forto's attendant, Lotta Sevaro. He'll be joining us at the table today!”

Earlier, when Forto had returned to the guildmaster's office, she'd asked him if he'd let Lotta attend the celebration. Forto had approved without hesitation. He'd even instructed Lotta to escort Lucia to the party while he and Dante were taking care of some business. While Lucia had been overjoyed by his answer, she could sense Lotta was slightly nonplussed. She felt as if now that he wasn't using concealment, she could pick up on his feelings better.

“My name is Lotta Sevaro. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Lotta introduced himself in a monotone voice.

Several people bowed in response. In the back of the room, Zilo raised a hand.

“Chief, why don’t you join us over here?”

“Thanks, Zilo,” Lucia said. She accepted his invitation and headed to his table. She was sure Lotta would have no trouble speaking to someone as sociable as Zilo. With that thought, she decided to seat Lotta between Zilo and herself.

“White wine for you, chief?” Zilo offered.

“Yes please.”

“We’ve met before, Mr. Sevaro, but I think this is our first time sitting together at a table like this. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Mr. Contini.”

“Please, call me Zilo. It’s easier, and there’s no need for formality. How about a drink?”

“Thank you, Mr. Zilo. I don’t drink alcohol.” Lotta didn’t have a taste for carbonated beverages either, so he ended up ordering an apple juice.

After a few more people trickled into the room, it was time for the party to start. Forto and Dante were going to be late, as expected. Lucia stood up with her glass of white wine in hand.

“Okay, everyone, I know we’ve been open and running for some time already, but I’d like to raise a tentative toast to the finished construction and official opening of the Magical Garment Factory!”

“Chief, why a ‘temporary’ toast?”

“Because Mr. Forto and Dante aren’t here yet. They said they needed to take care of some things and would just be a little later. We’ll make a real toast after they get here!”

And so they all toasted in celebration of the Magical Garment Factory’s construction and grand opening.

After the toast, everyone was eager for the food to arrive. When the colorful

spread of dishes hit their tables, a cheer went up. There were perfectly grilled cuts of veal, smoked pork sausages, a pizza topped with a generous helping of ham and mushrooms, cheese and basil pizza, boiled vegetables wrapped in meat and slathered in tomato sauce, white fish acqua pazza, and grilled skewers of small fish, squid, shrimp, and kraken. Most of the plates still had white steam billowing from them.

It was said that white wine paired best with seafood, while red paired best with meat, but this restaurant never overtly recommended doing things that way. They could enjoy whatever food they wanted with whatever drink they wanted. Lucia appreciated the fact that they were able to share food from the larger platters and order additional food for themselves individually too.

“Is there anything here you’d like, Lotta?”

“I’m not very fond of meat and fish—”

So Lotta didn’t like either meat or fish. When she asked what he normally ate, he answered salad, cooked vegetables, egg-based dishes, and bread. As she listened, she served him a slice of the cheese and basil pizza, then ordered a salad with cooked vegetables, plus potato, bean, and radish salads.

Lotta seemed uncomfortable with staying seated. Occasionally, when Lotta’s eyes lowered, Zilo struck up a conversation with him.

As the food and drinks flowed, the factory staff’s voices started getting louder and louder.

“Have you bought any new clothes recently?”

“I’ve got my eye on something. I saw a shift dress in a shop, the type that really shows off the length of your legs. But I’m on the fence, since I have a low waistline...”

“If you wear a belt above your actual waist, your legs will look longer.”

“You could add a striking belt, or a shoulder bag that’s a contrasting color.”

Lucia and Zilo responded at the same time, their voices overlapping. Beside her, Lotta was in the middle of battling against an overly stretchy piece of cheese dangling from his slice of pizza. It seemed he wasn’t used to conversing

with others.

“Hmm, then what could I do to make myself look thinner?”

“Wearing clothes that are a little roomier will help make you look slimmer. You could even tie a loose ribbon belt around your waist.”

“Make sure your ankles and wrists are visible.”

Once again, her and Zilo’s responses overlapped. At the table next to them, one of the knitters raised a hand.

“What should men do when they want their legs to look longer? Or even just taller.”

“Raise your pants up two or three centimeters more than usual,” Zilo suggested. “Use concealed buttons for your jacket and pants. Also, if you do wear a jacket, wearing suspenders underneath helps with that too. I know that’s not ideal in the summer, though.”

It was a sound suggestion, but most people wanted to leave their jackets off in the summer.

“What about wearing high heels? They have ones with the heel hidden inside so you can’t see it.”

They were called hidden heel shoes, and they were often used by noblemen. They were indispensable for making one look taller or one’s legs longer. Lucia had heard from Forto that they were often used for dancing shoes.

“You need to be careful with those hidden types when you take your shoes off. If you’re found out, just be honest and tell them you wanted to look good just for them. If they love you, they’ll overlook it.”

“And what if they don’t love you, Zilo?” one of the stitchers asked.

Zilo cracked a smile. “Scenario one, they’ll laugh and say, ‘Oh, you’re hopeless,’ then give you a pat on the head.”

“You mean they’ll treat you like a child!”

“I like that, actually! I want someone to say that to me!”

Evidently some of the men were already drunk. Lucia decided not to worry

about it.

“Scenario two,” Zilo continued, “they’ll give you a contemptuous smirk and a glacial stare.”

“Harsh. All because you wanted to look taller for them...”

“I might not mind that either...”

In this world, everyone had their own preferences. Lucia decided not to press anyone further about their statements.

“Scenario three, a shoemaker will take your shoes, wanting a closer look, and then completely forget your existence.”

“A shoemaker? Zilo, now you’re reaching!” Lucia couldn’t help herself from interjecting.

Zilo smiled and changed the subject. “Eat, eat! Food tastes better while it’s hot!”

Lucia decided to follow his suggestion. She turned to her plate of smoked sausages to dig in before they got cold. When she cut into one with her knife, juice spurted out and splashed onto her sleeve. She went to grab a napkin to wipe it off, but in her haste, she ended up knocking the stem of her glass with her fingers. She expected the glass to topple over, but before it did, a long-fingered hand swooped in to keep it upright.

“Head Manager Lucia, are your clothes all right? If you require a stain remover—”

“Thank you, but I’m fine.”

Lucia wiped her sleeve with a napkin, and almost all of the juice came right off.

That was close. If he hadn’t stopped the glass from falling, the table would have been covered in a sea of white wine.

“How do you like the cheese and basil pizza, Lotta?”

“It’s good,” he said with a smile that reached his eyes.

Lucia sighed with relief. The additional salads they ordered also started

arriving at the table. She wanted to make sure he ate as much as he wanted today, to make up for the times when he'd been no more than an observer.

One of the stitchers, who was close in age to her, called over to her. "Um, chief? Can I ask you something?"

Lucia nodded enthusiastically as she chewed her sausage.

"So, I'm actually going on a first date soon, but I don't know what to wear... Do you have any advice?"

"You always look so stylish. I think you'd look great wearing whatever you like."

Lucia wasn't just saying that—it was the truth. This stitcher was always dressed in trendy outfits, so Lucia felt she couldn't go wrong with any of her clothes.

"But I don't want this to be our first and only date... And I don't know what my date likes..."

"Hmm, in that case, why don't we ask everyone else what they think to get a general idea?"

The stitcher turned to the magical toolmaker sitting beside her and asked, "Are there any clothes that men prefer their dates wear on a first date?"

The man, who was involved in the production of zephyricloth, quickly chewed the grilled shrimp he was working on and swallowed it down.

"A first date... For summer, I think I'd like my date to wear something like a flowy, white dress."

The surrounding women who'd heard what he said all turned to look at him simultaneously, several of them glowering.

"There's no way! A white dress is the worst!"

"It won't even matter that it's flowy! I wouldn't even be able to focus on the date! I'd be at war with my own sweat the entire time!"

"Yes, exactly! I know all too well what you mean!"

Several of the stitchers gave their input with clenched fists. Even Lucia had

her hands balled up, and Hestia was nodding vigorously as she chewed on a squid leg.

“Wearing a white dress means never being able to relax, since you’re worrying about getting it dirty. It’s the same as a man wearing an ivory white suit. Or imagine wearing a thin linen suit and trying your best not to get it wrinkled,” Zilo explained.

“Ah, I see...” the magical toolmaker responded with understanding.

“White can also range from cool colors to ivory and even pale pink. And it can be either shiny or matte. And depending on the thinness of the fabric, you’ll have to be mindful of what you wear underneath too.”

“Also, a white dress can conjure up all sorts of images. It could be a white dress paired with braids and a straw hat, or a white dress that goes with an updo and pearl earrings.”

“There’s a lot to consider. I see everyone’s passion for clothes runs deep...”

“Deep? Please, we’ve barely even gotten our feet wet.”

“Oh, it goes *much* deeper. It goes to the bottom of the ocean!”

“Now that you’re a part of the Magical Garment Factory, we’ll get you just as obsessed as we are in no time!”

The magical toolmaker let his head fall into his hands as the other factory staff gleefully tried to get him on their side. They were all very passionate about their work.

As the magical toolmaker in charge of the zephyricloth, the man was already familiar with clothes and also knew about materials, fabric, and thread. But now it seemed he would dive even deeper into the wide world of fashion—or be pushed in.

“So you’re going on a first date, are you? Ah, the bliss of a blossoming relationship. Enjoy it while it lasts,” Zilo said jokingly.

From the next table, a gloomy voice spoke up. “Yes, be happy in my place too...”

“What’d you say over there? Why can’t you be happy?”

“Hee hee... I think it’s nearly over at this point, but would you care to listen?” the stitcher asked, pouring an ample serving of alcohol into their glass. It wasn’t wine but an amber liquor. And it was dark—too dark. No water or ice had been added to her glass. When Lucia caught sight of that, she could only respond, “Yes, tell us!”

Even the other tables seemed to have picked up on the curious tone shift. They stopped their conversations and turned to look at the stitcher.

“Recently, my boyfriend and I have been too busy to meet up, so I stopped by his apartment without contacting him beforehand to bring him some warm clothes for autumn. He gave me a key to his place, so I thought it’d be fine, but when I went into his room, there was a young woman there!”

“Ah, that’s no good... So, did you have it out with her?”

“No, not at all. I said I was from the Tailors’ Guild, left the clothes with her, and left.”

“Why’d you leave without saying anything?!”

“Why?! You should have let her have it!”

Everyone started loudly voicing their opinions. Lucia understood their feelings, but she wished they’d let the girl finish her story first.

“Because he wasn’t even there. And that girl, she looked like she was about to burst into tears...”

“And what’d *he* say?”

The stitcher took a gulp of her amber liquid.

“I got a letter from him today. He said she was a maid he hired to clean while he wasn’t home. Oh, by the way, his apartment? It’s just a combined kitchen and living room, a tiny bedroom, and a shower room.”

“Guilty.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I wouldn’t believe that...”

Almost everyone was in agreement, and unfortunately, Lucia couldn’t see any

other explanation either.

“The fact that he didn’t claim she was his sister makes it seem like he doesn’t want to let you go,” Zilo said. “But also, since he didn’t apologize right away, that’s about fifty-fifty.”

Lucia looked at Zilo in confusion, not understanding what he meant by that. The other stitchers looked similarly perplexed.

“Zilo, why does him not claiming the girl was his sister mean he doesn’t want to let her go?”

“He might’ve been able to get away with saying she was a sister or a relative to someone he wasn’t serious about, but if they ever got married and she met his family, he’d be found out, wouldn’t he? So he’s at least thinking about that possibility. But the fact that he gave a vague lie rather than apologizing right away hardly makes him seem earnest. He probably wants to avoid a fight and a breakup.”

“Well I’ll be...” Maybe it wasn’t something Lucia should have been impressed by, but impressed she was.

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Master Zilo. I bet you made countless women cry back in your day.”

“For the record, I was usually the one crying.”

As the conversation started to veer away, one of the knitters said, half-sighing, “That man is nothing but a coward...”

Lucia nodded. She couldn’t agree more. Never mind sneaking around behind the stitcher’s back, he should have apologized the second he was found out.

“Well, it sounds like he wants to stay with you, but what do *you* want?”

The stitcher who’d started this conversation downed her amber liquid, then beamed. “I say to hell with him!”

“Yeah! Drop that man! Now you’re talking!”

“Forget about him!”

Everyone’s voices were loud and raucous. This was what dating was like in

Ordine. Polygamy was legal in the Kingdom of Ordine, but it required the consent of all involved. There were also free lovers, who dated multiple people at the same time and didn't mind if their partners also had other partners. But this was something that was conveyed prior to the beginning of a relationship. That was why infidelity in a monogamous relationship was considered cowardly, and why most people advised the other party to break things off in such circumstances.

Now that the stitcher had decided to end her relationship, people started to give her some serious advice.

"Just in case, you should send him a letter breaking up with him. I've been accused of being a cheater because my ex saw me walking around with my new partner."

"Some people try to claim they never got a letter. Why don't you just give him a slap and call it done?"

"That could backfire. What if he gets angry? You should wait for him to leave work and, in a place where there are people around, dump him with a smile. Men have their pride, so there's a slim chance he'll try to run after you."

"If you still have your things at his place, don't go to get them alone. You should bring at least two other people to come with you if you can."

Apparently, many among the Magical Garment Factory staff had extensive relationship experience. Lucia made a mental note to go to them if she ever needed help. Not that she could imagine an occasion when she would need it.

That was when she realized—Lotta hadn't joined in on this conversation at all. Though, to be fair, it wasn't an easy conversation to jump in on as a newcomer. She whipped around to look at him. He'd just polished off his fourth salad plate.

"Um, how did you like the food, Lotta?"

"It's all very good..."

He almost sounded slightly embarrassed, but she could tell by the fact that he hadn't left even a single bite uneaten that he was telling the truth.

"You need another round! Were there any that you especially liked?"

“...The radish salad.”

“All right, we’ll get you another radish salad, and you haven’t tried the tomato and basil salad yet, so we’ll get one of those too. How about a fruit salad? I’m going to get one for myself too.”

Lotta smiled in approval at her suggestions. Reassured, Lucia ordered the additional dishes from the server.

As their lively conversation continued, the bell at the door jingled loudly. Lucia turned toward the attention-drawing pair who’d just walked in, as did everyone else in the room.

“Oh, wow! Mr. Forto, Assistant Manager, you both look great!”

“You look so different! You look amazing this way too!”

“I don’t know what else to say. I’m not surprised both of you managed to pull that off!”

Everyone expressed their admiration for the pair, but Lucia couldn’t even manage that. Her eyes widened as she stared at their outfits. They seemed to notice her gaze—they walked over to her, looking slightly mischievous.

“What do you think, Lucia?”

“Like you suggested, boss, we swapped our choice of shoe color and some clothes we had on hand to coordinate with them.”

A gentleman’s shoes are black or brown—the topic Forto and Dante had previously debated. Should a gentleman wear black shoes or brown shoes? It was a delicate subject that was not to be brought up among noblemen of differing factions and rank. But to Lucia, it was fascinating.

Forto favored black shoes, while Dante favored brown. When she’d heard about that dispute, which seemingly had no solution, she had suggested that each wear the other’s shoe color and throw together an outfit to match. The two had been intrigued by the idea, and today, Dante had picked out Forto’s outfit and Forto had picked out Dante’s. It was a fun challenge for the two of them to coordinate the clothes they had to the shoe color they wouldn’t

normally wear.

Forto, the black shoe supporter, had on a pair of matte brown shoes known as straight tips, which had horizontal stitching across the toes. With them he wore a suit of brownish green, a color known as parrot green. It was a double-breasted suit, but he'd left it unbuttoned in the front, and he wasn't wearing a vest. Despite that, the suit's streamlined shape and soft fabric ensured it didn't look odd.

His charcoal gray shirt was perfect for summer and contrasted superbly with the shiny black pocket square in his jacket. He wore no tie, and the top button of his shirt was unfastened, but instead of making him look casual, it heightened the mature charm of the ensemble. Lucia wasn't surprised to see that Dante had refrained from the safe choice of white or beige even for the end of summer.

One wrong step would have made the outfit plain, but that was prevented by the styling of Forto's golden hair, which, instead of being tied back per usual, cascaded down his shoulders in loose waves. It was the perfect accessory.

Unlike Forto's usual sharp, professional attire, this looked like what a nobleman would wear on holiday—a laid-back yet fashionable suit.

Next to him, Dante, the proponent of brown shoes, wore a pair of glossy black wholecut shoes. Each was made of a single piece of luxurious leather that was free of any seams, aside from the attached heel. Paired with those, he wore a plaid three-piece suit in navy and azure. The elaborate fabrics had a depth of hue that was visible from afar. Underneath, he wore a white silk shirt and a thin gray necktie with a light blue pattern. On top of his tie was a silver collar chain. His pocket square had the same pattern as his tie, and it looked as though the amount of the fabric visible had been meticulously calculated. That detail had Forto's name written all over it.

Dante's hair, which usually looked like he'd just gotten out of bed, was partially swept back, revealing his well-shaped forehead, which gave him the air of an intellectual. He had never looked so aristocratic—no, *princely*.

"You two look...incredibly...magnificently...fabulous!" Lucia gushed, and she meant it. But for some reason, they burst into laughter. *Excuse me, but why?*

“As long as you think so, Lucia, it was worth getting dressed up.”

“Thanks for the passing grade, boss.”

Nothing had changed about the way they spoke, but their shoe colors and outfits, so different from what they normally wore, gave them a freshness that complemented them well. They were also both very nice to look at.

Lucia wanted nothing more than to open up her sketchbook on the spot and draw every detail of their outfits from the front, side, and back, but she managed to resist that urge. She vowed to herself that she’d draw them the second she got home later.

“Mr. Forto, Dante, why don’t you two show off those outfits to clients?” Zilo suggested. “Oh, and bring your shoemakers too. I think you’d get a lot of additional orders.”

Lucia found herself nodding in agreement. It would be difficult to get orders from high-ranking nobles, whose clothing was bound by more rigid rules, but commoners and other nobles had more opportunities to wear informal clothing. A new outfit could make the wearer look splendid, handsome, and gallant in a completely fresh way.

“That’s an interesting proposal,” said Forto. “Having others pick out your clothes like this is quite edifying. It also allows you to reuse clothes that have been stored away. It’s been a while since I haven’t worn a tie, though. My throat feels a little cold.”

“I wasn’t sure how it would look, since these are my grandfather’s clothes from when he was younger, but it’s given me a new perspective,” said Dante. “It’s made me want to study how to play with light and shade a little more.”

The two of them were a couple of diligent couturiers through and through.

The intensity of the gazes surrounding them created a somewhat unsettling atmosphere.

“That suave, dangerous look really suits Mr. Forto...”

“You said it... He feels a little closer to us now, but also even more dazzling and extravagant...”

“I’m more of a fan of Assistant Manager Dante’s look. Who knew he could look so handsome!”

“I wonder if he could start coming to work dressed like that...?”

They were trying to whisper covertly to one another, but their words were clearly audible. Lucia coughed.

“Okay, now that everyone’s here, we can officially toast to the completion of the Magical Garment Factory!”

At Lucia’s words, everyone stood up with their glasses in hand and toasted with their wine and ale.

As everyone sat back down, Lotta tried to offer Forto his seat next to Lucia.

“Lord Forto, here.”

“No, please sit and eat, Lotta. Mr. Forto can take my seat—”

“Mr. Forto! There’s an open seat over here! Come sit next to me!” Dante called over, waving a hand, before Lucia could finish her sentence. He apparently wanted Forto to sit at the same table as him.

Meanwhile, Hestia, who was seated at the same table, was staring at Dante with her purple eyes wide. Hestia had mentioned how she enjoyed the elegant outfits of noblemen. She was likely enamored with his suit.

As if struck with an idea, Dante turned to Hestia, gracefully placed a hand on his chest, and said, “Pardon me, is this seat taken?”

Hestia stared unblinkingly at his face, then let out a long sigh and replied, “Dante, I never knew you could look like such a gentleman... Goodness...”

“Seriously, Hestia, just what do you think of me?”

Dante’s princeliness didn’t last long. Hestia could have also phrased things a little differently. The two were smiling and glaring at each other simultaneously. Forto laughed at the sight of them.

“As their boss, I’ll go over and put a stop to things.”

Forto walked over to Dante and Hestia and smoothly inserted himself between them. He took the seat next to Hestia, and Dante sat down on his

other side. As they talked, smiles appeared on all three of their faces, signifying that things had gone well. And with that, the party resumed.

A stitcher asked Dante for his opinion on the previous topic of conversation. “Assistant Manager, we were talking earlier about what we’d want someone to wear on a first date. Do you have any preference?”

It was true that they still hadn’t reached a conclusion.

“Hmm, my preference for this season would be a thin linen blend dress. Something summery and refreshing. I’d also prefer that she not wear something very different from what she normally wears.”

“Huh? Isn’t it better to get dolled up for a bit of spontaneity?”

“It’s a first date. It’s not a good idea to show up looking like an entirely different person. Don’t you think it’s better to reveal that spontaneity a little at a time? What do you think, Mr. Forto?”

“Very good point. I do think it’s best not to change up your image too much. If you think about it, wearing something neat and refined that’s more in line with your style will also go a long way toward reducing your first date nerves.”

“A model answer...” one of the knitters said, nodding deeply.

Lucia was also taken aback by his response, but she understood. On a first date, it was certainly important to take nervousness into account. *Duly noted.* Though, again, she couldn’t imagine ever needing to use this information.

Another stitcher turned toward Dante and Forto’s table and said, “I’m going to be attending a wedding celebration for a young lady in my neighborhood soon. Someone who used to call me a beanpole when we were children will be there too. Please, tell me what I can wear that’ll suit my body type and add some volume to my look!”

Another stitcher chimed in with slight jealousy, as did Hestia.

“Oh, but with your figure, you’d look amazing in one of those slim-fitted outfits that are all the rage these days.”

“How about a frilly-sleeved blouse with a flared skirt?”

The stitcher who had asked for advice on what to wear was tall, slender, and had long legs—an enviable physique when it came to showing off any outfit.

“Hmm...” Dante inspected the stitcher with his ice green eyes. “Wouldn’t it be better *not* to go for too much volume?”

“Huh? Do you think it wouldn’t look good on me?”

“If anything, I think you should wear a simple dress that goes below your knees, then wrap a thin ribbon around your waist—something made of soft fabric that matches the color of your dress, and make sure not to tighten it too much. For the color, you should go with either violet or light pink. Style your hair down in loose waves, and speak as little as possible. That way, you’d look like an ephemeral fairy. You’ll be able to pull that off, even with your carnivorous nature.”

“Thank you, Dante! But also, how dare you!”

“Which of us spends the entire workday talking a hundred times over about how much she wants a boyfriend? Isn’t that why you’re going to a wedding celebration in the first place? You need to reel a man in before you cook him!”

His attire might have been princely, but he was still the same Dante on the inside. Forto had started choking on a bite of his basil pizza, and Hestia hastily passed him a glass of water. Once he’d finished drinking it, he looked over to another table and, in an effort to change the topic, asked, “Did you all have any interesting conversations before I arrived?”

The stitcher who had announced she was leaving her boyfriend cut in loudly, “We were just talking about my cheating boyfriend! Let me tell you about it, Mr. Forto!”

Normally, the stitcher would never have dreamed of talking to Forto about this sort of thing. However, his current attire made him more approachable, and the stitcher’s drunkenness and heartbreak had likely loosened her lips. Forto nodded along as he listened to her retell her story.

Once she was finished, Forto stood up and walked over to her. Then he gently took away her glass of amber liquid and handed her a new glass, into which he poured red wine. At some point, everyone had halted their conversations; now

they were raptly watching Forto's graceful movements.

"It's a pity to waste your precious time on a man like that, but before you break up with him, for a bit of fun, you should style your hair and clothes to match those of the woman he cheated on you with. That will let him know you know of the affair without you having to say a word. You could even wear an elegant dress made of some fine material. Afterward, you can properly break up with him. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Y-Yes."

"Then, after you've broken things off with him, you can dress yourself up nicely to go places you know he frequents too, and even have a meal with a dashing young gentleman in some such place. Let him know you don't have a single waste thread of sadness or lingering attachment for him. If needed, I can introduce you to a young man from the Tailors' Guild."

"Th-Thank you..."

Either the alcohol or the fact that her stunning boss was very close to her giving advice made the stitcher's face turn a deep shade of red.

"Whoa, Mr. Forto, I can't believe you're suggesting such a vicious move like it's nothing..."

"Mr. Forto, what a scary thing to say..."

It was awe-inspiring how magisterially he'd stated that the stitcher should dress up and bring a handsome young man to an area where she'd either run into her ex-boyfriend or could generate rumors that would make their way back to him.

"What's terrifying about it? I'm merely suggesting she should enjoy herself looking beautiful," Forto said, turning toward Lucia with a sweet smile that sent a shiver down her spine. Magic and romance were said to be the beauty of Ordine, the country that the Tailors' guildmaster served, so perhaps it was only natural.

As their voices quietened down a bit, the server brought over a mug of dark ale. Dante took the mug, then looked in Lucia's direction.

“You just reminded me with what you said about Mr. Forto being scary—I once had a scary experience with him when I made a mistake checking the inventory and had to rush to collect monster leather.”

No one said anything about Mr. Forto himself being scary, though I’ll admit I was thinking it, Lucia thought before responding. “Dante, you couldn’t have just told the other party that you weren’t going to be on time?”

While it depended on the type, monsters weren’t easy to hunt, and it took time to tan their hide.

“The supplier came from Adventurers’ Guild, and they had no stock left. And it was an urgent delivery for the castle.”

An irrefusable client—exactly the type of situation to bring on stomach pains.

“So, what did you end up doing, Dante?”

“I went to the Adventurers’ Guild to ask if they could quickly catch some monsters for me. I even had to involve Mr. Forto, who was still just a member of the guild staff at the time.”

“Luckily, some very kind adventurers happened to be there, and they went to capture the monsters for us,” Forto inserted readily.

Dante responded in a loud voice, “The female adventurers went running in a heartbeat. I’ve never seen Mr. Forto’s face look as splendid as it did that day.”

“It wasn’t my face, Dante. It was my persuasiveness,” the handsome man said with a bewitching smile that belied his words. He almost looked like a scoundrel with the way his hair and dress were styled.

“You don’t seem like the type to be scared of anything, boss.”

“Of course I am! There are all kinds of things I’m scared of,” Lucia retorted vehemently. “Like when I sew on the wrong side of the fabric, or when I notice I’ve been sewing with the wrong colored thread after I already finished, or when I cut a garment piece a little too short...”

“Chief, please stop there,” begged a stitcher with tears in her eyes. “You’ll make the alcohol taste bitter!”

“Stop! That last one is too much!” added Hestia, likewise tearing up.

Lucia seemed to have evoked some bad memories for them. Those were the types of mistakes that everyone in the garment-making profession had committed at least once. Lucia included, of course. But it was a mystery why the error always went unnoticed until one was finished sewing or cutting.

“Slightly related, but are there any creatures you’re scared of?” asked Zilo.

“Maybe the dog that always barks when I go to collect money from one of the Fano Workshop’s regular customers. Or forest slimes.”

“All you have to do with a dog is toss them some bread or other food. But slimes? There’s nothing to them. You can kill one just by smashing its core,” Zilo said with a laugh.

But slimes were anything but cute. To put it another way, they didn’t die *until* their cores were smashed.

“I can handle dogs, cats, and reptiles. But slimes are different...”

“But slimes have been nothing but beneficial to the Magical Garment Factory, chief. Do you hold some sort of grudge against them?”

“One got stuck to my leg a long time ago. I didn’t get hurt, though.”

“What, were you hunting for mushrooms in the woods? If you don’t run away immediately after getting one stuck on you, it makes a mess of your shoes,” said Dante, the lover of shoes.

Lucia remembered that she’d heard slimes could dissolve shoes. She felt a deep sense of gratitude that that odd tingling sensation hadn’t culminated in her leg being dissolved.

The conversation moved on from slimes to monsters found alongside the highway: red bears, giant boars, forest serpents—there were frightening animals and monsters right outside the capital. Lucia listened with interest to the stories that employees who’d grown up in the countryside shared.

Lucia made up her mind to bring Lotta, still sitting beside her, into the conversation. “Is there anything you’re scared of, Lotta?”

He cast his dark gray eyes downward. The swaying shadows Lucia thought she saw must have been the flickering light of the magical lanterns.

Lotta was silent for a while, then said in a low whisper, “The sea... No, krakens, I suppose.”

Krakens often appeared in children’s stories as terrifying beasts, so they were loathed by many. Lucia, too, had hated them when she was a child. She even used to flip past illustrations of krakens in books so she wouldn’t have to look at them.

“I know what you mean,” Lucia said. “I was super scared of krakens when I was little! They eat humans and capsize boats.”

“Head Manager Lucia, what do you think of krakens now?”

“Now? They’re delicious!” Lucia said, picking up the kraken skewer from the plate next to her.

Lotta seemed to find that hilarious—he burst into a fit of loud, childlike laughter. Hearing him laugh for the first time made Lucia burst out laughing too.

After they settled down, he looked fixedly at her kraken skewer, so she encouraged him to try some. Lotta wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, then took a small bite from a skewer. He didn’t seem to find it particularly tasty, but his smile still lingered on his face. Lucia wondered if maybe Lotta was just averse to the foods he hadn’t tried before. With that thought, she sank her teeth into her own grilled kraken.

Zilo slid in next to Forto with a glass in hand. “Mr. Forto, it’s good to loosen up now and then. How about the two of us shoot the breeze a bit?”

Hestia had gone to fix her makeup, while Dante had walked off to another table to give clothing advice to a stitcher who’d asked for it. Zilo had arrived to take their place.

“Thank you. I would have felt sad had I not gotten the chance to hear one of Lucia’s funny stories,” Forto said, his joking remark half the truth and half a lie. While he did enjoy talking to Lucia, he also wanted to give his attendant and bodyguard, Lotta, the chance to let his hair down every now and then.

Despite his many attempts to invite Lotta to parties held by the Tailors’ Guild, he’d never once sat at the table. Today, however, Lucia had asked him to let

Lotta attend their party, so he'd happily left him to her. Though his bodyguard, who was always completely erasing his presence, had given him an uneasy look beforehand, he'd been able to genuinely laugh thanks to Lucia. Laughter was something even Forto rarely heard from Lotta, so he didn't want to get in the way of that.

"Mr. Forto, how about some red wine? This establishment doesn't serve O Ephemeral Goddess Who Hath Stole My Heart, 'Tis You, My Dearest Wife, but I could have it sent for?"

"This is just fine. How about for you, Zilo? Shall we ask for the white wine called A Post-Opera Promise?"

Each could easily call to mind the other's preferred brand by virtue of having known him for so long. There was some sarcasm coming from both of them, but it was only in jest.

"Now then, let's use this to toast."

With both their glasses filled with red wine, they toasted. Forto felt comforted by the cheerful voices and the occasional loud bark of laughter from around them. Nobles never threw functions like this. He felt the urge to let loose a little too, to match his outfit for the day.

"By the way, Mr. Forto, what is it you fear most in this world?"

"I'd like to ask you the same thing, Zilo."

He was fearful of many things, but it was hard to pick one of them as the *most* terrifying. He didn't want to be the first to give his answer, and neither, it seemed, did Zilo. As if perfectly timed, glasses filled with water and ice were placed in front of them.

"All right, then, why don't we both write what we fear most on the sides of our glasses and show them to each other at the same time?"

"I have no qualms about that."

The two men used their fingers to write in the cloudy condensation on the sides of their wet glasses.

"On the count of three?"

Zilo moved his overfilled glass of water toward the other man. Forto did the same.

Each of them had written the same words: *my wife*.

Three seconds after seeing each other's glasses, they silently wiped the words away with their thumbs.

Seeing-Off Clothes

First thing that afternoon, a guest arrived in the Tailors' Guild's reception room for nobles.

The tall, red-haired woman introduced herself stiffly. "Um, hello. I came at the recommendation of my friend, Ms. Jasmine Enrici. My name is Rebecca Tarquinia. I am an adventurer. It is a pleasure to meet you..."

Lucia and Forto introduced themselves in turn.

"Welcome to the Tailors' Guild. I am the guildmaster, Fortunato Luini."

"I'm Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory."

The one who had referred Rebecca to them was Jasmine Enrici, Forto's cousin. Some time prior, Lucia and Forto had taken on her request to make her engagement party dress, which they had made at the Tailors' Guild. Thankfully, it seemed she had liked it and had even referred her friend to them—but their new client surprised Lucia.

"I have heard much about your exploits as the advanced adventurer the Flame Blade."

"Oh no, I still have a long way to go! I haven't been an advanced adventurer for that long," the tense, anxious woman insisted, shaking her head from side to side.

Despite what she said, Rebecca Tarquinia was a fully fledged advanced adventurer. She was adept at using body strengthening and fire magic, which had earned her the nickname the Flame Blade. Though it was a triumph all of her companions had taken part in, one of her most famous accomplishments was hunting a griffin in a neighboring country.

If you asked anyone in the Tailors' Guild about monster materials, the names of talented adventurers would naturally come up. Rebecca was one of the advanced adventurers who dispatched monsters from unicorns, which were prized as a material for fabric, to silver foxes, whose fur was highly appreciated.

Her curly, dark red hair was cut short, perhaps to keep it out of the way when fighting monsters. She had maroon, slightly upturned eyes and a straight nose. Her skin was tanned to a wheat gold, and her well-defined muscles and broad shoulders gave her the look of a strong adventurer.

Her outfit consisted of a faded ivory shirt, a pair of simple black trousers, and a red sash belt wrapped twice around her waist. She wore a pair of tall, dark brown boots that were almost black. They looked well cared for, even if they were worn in. Lucia wondered if the black coat Rebecca wore was something she had borrowed, since it was a little small for her. Without the coat, it would have been an effortlessly stylish outfit.

“Jasmine speaks very highly of you,” said Forto.

“No way, I... Sorry! I have a lot to thank Jasmine for myself. We have been friends since primary school, and we usually spar—I mean, train with each other.”

Things were starting to come together. Jasmine was a knight who served in the royal guard, so Rebecca must have been a friend whom she did sword training with.

“What fun,” Forto commented. “Do you still spar with each other on occasion?”

“Yes, um, sometimes.”

“Next time you do so, please invite me,” Forto said with a smile, making Rebecca finally smile herself.

“To be honest, I’ve never had clothes made for myself, so I’m really nervous...”

“There’s no need to be so tense. I may be the Tailors’ guildmaster, but I am also Jasmine’s cousin. I did my fair share of swinging swords and clashing shields myself when I was younger.”

Forto spoke a touch more casually in an effort to put Rebecca at ease. Lucia was impressed as always by Forto’s ability to steer the conversation in a way that suited each customer, no matter how briefly he’d exchanged words with them.

“Is that right? Though it’s better to avoid going up against Jasmine’s shield nowadays.”

“I wouldn’t think Jasmine would outmatch you in strength, Miss Tarquinia.”

“No, not in strength, but ever since Jasmine went to work in the castle, the way she uses her shield has gotten nastier... Oh, I mean, more underhanded—No, maybe that’s worse... Umm, she’s become an expert at exploiting her opponent’s weaknesses!”

It was like she’d escalated three levels. Judging by that *oops* look on her face, Rebecca must have realized that too.

“That’s wonderful. She’ll keep the castle safe, then,” Forto said refreshingly. Lucia smiled in agreement.

Next, Forto suggested they relax over some tea. After some brief small talk, Forto asked, “By the way, it wasn’t specified in your introduction letter—what type of clothes are you seeking?”

Rebecca began to speak, then looked at Lucia as if begging her for help. “If it’s possible, I’d like to discuss this with Head Manager Fano... Um, since it’s in regard to women’s clothing...”

Rebecca’s incredibly evasive response led Lucia to think that she wanted her help with underwear or lingerie. Most nobles paid little mind to a couturier’s gender, but with this being Rebecca’s first time having clothes made for her, she likely found it difficult to talk to Forto. Lucia glanced over at him, and he gave her a curt nod.

“Very well, then. Lucia, I’ll leave her in your hands.”

“Yes, Mr. Forto.”

Thus, Forto exited the room, leaving Lucia and Rebecca alone.

“What kind of clothes are you looking for, Ms. Tarquinia?”

“Something that’s beautiful, stylish, cute, and will leave an impression...?”

There was no commonality between those images, besides which it would be impossible to convey all of them with one outfit. *Also, why did she phrase it like a question?*

“Sorry, I know it makes zero sense... Ah, I mean, I know this is an unreasonable request...”

Rebecca’s eyes wavered. She was probably getting confused because she was having trouble speaking so formally.

“Um, if you’d like, why don’t we speak more freely? In attitude and tone. I’m a commoner, so you should feel free to speak without worrying too much. I’m here today not as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory but as a clothier, so please call me Lucia.”

“That’d be great. And you can call me Rebecca. I’d appreciate it if you talked to me normally too. Adventurers have a crude way of talking, and they look down on you if you’re too polite, so I’ve picked up on that habit...”

“That’s just part of your job, right? I’d actually prefer that too, as a commoner.”

“Thanks,” Rebecca said as she removed her black coat. It really was too small for her. She let out a shallow sigh as she loosened up her shoulders. The sleeves of her ivory-colored shirt stopped just past her elbow. It looked comfortable and loose-fitting, but it also suited her well. Without the coat, the outfit looked much more natural on Rebecca.

“So, I want to apologize in advance—I only have three days. Well, actually, I want to wear it in three days...”

That meant they had two days to work. It would be impossible to make something from scratch, so they would have to alter an existing outfit. Since they didn’t have much time, Lucia decided to jump right into asking questions.

“What’s the occasion for the outfit? The appropriate clothes differ depending on whether you’re, say, going to a festival or were invited to someone’s home.”

“Clothes for...seeing someone off. Or maybe for saying goodbye...” Rebecca responded sadly. It sounded as if it were hard for her to get the words out.

Lucia found herself unable to say anything. *Maybe a dear adventurer friend died while on duty*, Lucia thought, but despite her urge to ask, she couldn’t.

Rebecca looked at her and shook her head. “Oh, Lucia, it’s not for a funeral or

anything. Um...one of my adventurer colleagues, who's sort of my senior, is going to the Eastern Kingdom."

"To hunt monsters?"

"Kind of. A researcher from Ordine is traveling there to research monsters, so my colleague is going along for six months capturing and hunting monsters. But the monsters in the Eastern Kingdom are completely different from the ones here, so I have a feeling he's going to have so much fun fighting them that he won't come back."

"Hence the send-off clothes?"

Rebecca's voice suddenly grew quiet. "Right. I want to at least wear something nice to send him off..."

Lucia suspected that colleague, that senior, was someone very near and dear to Rebecca.

"Understood. Okay, since we only have three days, we'll have to alter an existing outfit."

"I really appreciate it."

Even if she didn't have time to make a bespoke outfit, Lucia still wanted to tailor Rebecca's clothes as best she could. Even small adjustments could dramatically change the look of an outfit. For example, sewing just five stitches under the bust of a woman's jacket would instantly bring out some definition. It emphasized one's physique without any need to pad out the chest by shaping the underbust.

The same could be done for men's coats. A few stitches to add a seam on the inside of the back could change the entire effect. Adding a belt two centimeters above one's waist also naturally made one's legs look longer, whether in pants or a skirt. Playing with those marvelous illusions was part of the fun of clothes. However, going too far would look unnatural and ruin the silhouette, so it was important to be cautious.

"Okay then, since we don't have much time, let's start looking through what we have!"

“Thank you for your help.”

The pair headed straight for the Tailors’ Guild clothing rental room. It was a room intended for nobles, but if there was something in here that Rebecca liked, then they could find a similar design in the market. After Lucia explained that, Rebecca tried on several different clothes, but she grimaced at each one.

Rebecca turned down one dress before even trying it on, and another dressy, long number had made her shoulders stand out in an unflattering way. She picked out a cute pink dress to try on, but the design and color just didn’t suit her.

“I’m not sure about this... Nothing here feels right,” Rebecca said honestly, and Lucia had to agree. There truly wasn’t anything here that seemed to suit Rebecca. The clothes she had come with looked the most fitting on her.

“This room is mostly filled with clothes for nobles, so why don’t we go out and check some shops in the city?”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“Not at all! It’ll be fun!” Lucia said sincerely. Rebecca gave an apologetic laugh.

Lucia and Rebecca stepped out of the Tailors’ Guild, and under the cloudless blue sky, they visited several clothing shops in the Central and South Districts. Lucia couldn’t get a clear picture of Rebecca’s preferences even after asking, so she decided they should look around at some clothes first.

“This looks cute. Or this one, isn’t it pretty?”

Rebecca seemed to be having a fun time looking at the outfits exhibited in shop windows and examining the clothes displayed inside the stores.

“Would you like to try something on?” a shop clerk suggested. Lucia handed Rebecca an outfit she thought would look nice.

After changing into the dress in the fitting room, the first thing Rebecca said was, “This might be a little too flashy for me...”

She looked very uneasy in the simple, red dress. It looked good on her, but it

seemed it wasn't to her liking.

"Okay then, how about this white and navy one?"

The dress was white on top and turned to navy under the bust, and it had a summery design. The silhouette would also bring out Rebecca's beautiful figure. The dress was a bit open in the back, but it looked rather tasteful with Rebecca's toned muscles.

"It's not bad, but I'm not sure about the back..." Rebecca said miserably after changing into the dress. This one was fairly flattering on her, but there was also something not quite right about it. And above all, if Rebecca didn't feel comfortable in it, it was a no-go.

"How about this one?"

The shop clerk tactfully brought out a bright green suit. Aside from its short sleeves, it didn't expose much skin. The suit jacket was loose-fitting and had little in the way of decoration, and the bottom was a pencil skirt that reached below the knees. It looked a bit like a business suit, and it made Rebecca look both stylish and pretty. However, when Rebecca looked at herself in the mirror, her brows furrowed. Apparently, this one wasn't to her liking either.

After Rebecca tried on several more outfits, they moved on to another shop, but no matter what she tried on, she never seemed satisfied. Lucia couldn't even grasp what her likes and dislikes were.

"I think this white one might be the safest choice..." Rebecca said.

"Safe..."

Rebecca had just slipped her arms through the sleeves of the white dress Lucia had picked out. This was her second outfit at the fourth shop they'd visited. It was a V-neck dress with a high waistline, right under the bust, and three small, cute buttons down the middle. The elbow-length sleeves matched Rebecca's usual style, so Lucia had thought she might feel more comfortable in this. The skirt flared out and fell past her knees, so even Rebecca, who took wide steps, should have no problem walking in it. A pair of white high heels would undeniably make her standing posture look very elegant. It was with that thought that Lucia had recommended it.

Lucia actually did think that this dress seemed like the one that suited Rebecca the most out of everything she'd tried on, but to her, this was simply the "safe choice." This time, it was Lucia's brow that furrowed.

"Lucia, do you think this doesn't look good on me?"

"I think it does. It's just...um, I'm getting a little thirsty. How about we take a break?"

The dress certainly looked good on her. However, even if Rebecca went with that dress, Lucia doubted she would ever sincerely see it as *her* dress. *I want to sit her down and figure out what exactly it is that she wants*, Lucia decided.

They stepped into a nearby café. Lucia showed her Tailors' Guild identification card, and they were given a private room. Private rooms were primarily used by nobles, but this one was also used by the Tailors' Guild for conversing with and entertaining guests. Fortunately, all the expenses were covered by the guild.

They entered the smallish private room, ordered profiteroles and tea, and took a moment to catch their breath.

"I put that white dress you just tried on reserve," Lucia said. "Do you have any preference when it comes to shoes?"

"Right, I guess I can't just wear my boots, so I need shoes too. I'm not used to walking in heels—though I am used to wearing thick-soled adventuring boots."

"I'm sure we could find a pair of cute flats."

"Won't those come off if I run in them?"

"Not if they have laces. But, Rebecca, are you going to be sprinting through the city?"

"No, I'm not. Right... There I go again, thinking like an adventurer. Work's always on my mind," Rebecca said as she added sugar to her tea and stirred it with a silver spoon. Contrary to her casual speech, her movements were careful and deliberate.

"Rebecca, isn't there something that you really want to wear? I got the sense that you didn't love anything you tried on today."

A cup clattered loudly against a saucer.

“Something I really want to wear...? Something that gives me courage, but I doubt I can find something like that.”

“They might not be for courage specifically, but I hear there are magical tools that have a calming effect. Like pendants and undergarments.”

“I guess that’s an option... Maybe I should just put on a smile and see him off wearing something like that...” Rebecca muttered gloomily.

“You’re going to see off your adventurer colleague, right?”

“Yeah, he was made a baron last year, and he can use water and wind magic. We’ve been in the same party since I was a rookie. He helped take down the griffin earlier this year...”

As Lucia listened to Rebecca talk so much about one man, understanding set in. When the adventurer had said everything she had to say, Lucia folded her hands in her lap.

“It sounds like he is very important to you.”

“Yeah...he is.” Rebecca paused, and after a brief silence, she continued, “I know these types of clothes aren’t for me. Cute clothes, pretty clothes... I know what I’m wearing now suits me better, or the leather armor I wear to fight monsters.”

“That’s not true. Those might suit you, but I’m certain there are other pretty clothes that will too.”

“Thanks for saying that. But, while that might be true for someone who’s pretty like a rose, it’s hopeless for a nameless weed. I’d be happy enough just looking slightly better.” So said the advanced adventurer who’d even taken down a griffin, her voice cynical as she cast her maroon eyes down.

“You are *not* a nameless weed. Besides, any flower has the potential to blossom fully.”

“It must be hard being a couturier, what with having to listen to your customers gripe on about—”

“Rebecca!” Lucia cried, cutting her off before she could finish her self-deprecating statement. “I’m sorry, but it’s really not good form trying to move

forward while dragging your feet like you are.”

“Dragging my feet? What do you mean by that?” Rebecca shot Lucia a look of irritation with her upturned maroon eyes. But Lucia didn’t stop.

“You don’t want to dress up just to see off your colleague, do you? You want him to see you looking pretty. So why are you dragging your feet?”

“Uh...”

“You are an advanced adventurer. Shouldn’t you be going into this with all your fire and determination?”

Lucia was well aware she was being impolite, but it was clear to her at this point that going around in circles wasn’t the right way to reach a person like Rebecca.

Rebecca nodded deeply. “Okay, I get it. We’ll have a showdown, to settle things once and for all.”

A showdown? Is that an adventurer thing? As Lucia pondered that, Rebecca tightly balled her fists and said, “Before Arnie leaves, I’ll tell him I love him and get my heart broken! Even though he’ll be gone for six months—or who knows how long—I know I’ll regret it if I don’t say anything.”

Rebecca was properly fired up now, though in a way Lucia hadn’t been expecting. But there was no stopping the adventurer at this point. In fact, Lucia wanted to encourage her.

“Why are you assuming he’s going to reject you? You need to go in with everything you’ve got and knock him dead!”

“Knock him dead! Jasmine told me about this, but you really are as merciless as a fangdeer, Lucia...”

“That’s a terrible thing to be compared to!”

Rebecca had been smiling when she said it, but fangdeer were monsters that merely looked like deer. It wasn’t exactly a nice analogy.

Rebecca shifted her gaze away. “Um, fangdeer have a tendency to stomp on their weakened and immobile enemies, so...”

It really was a terrible analogy. Also, that was horrifying behavior.

“Okay, once we’re done eating, let’s go back out there and find you the perfect outfit and shoes!”

“I’m counting on you, Lucia!”

Lucia reexamined Rebecca from her head to toe. Her hair could be shinier, her lips were chapped, and her skin could use some moisturizing—before Rebecca confessed her love, Lucia would polish her up nicely.

“Let’s also get you a hair treatment, some lip balm, and body cream! I can give you my recommendations, so let’s use these next three days to make you look absolutely gorgeous!”

“Th-Thank you...”

Gazing at Lucia, Rebecca quivered as if she were looking at a frightening monster. *I can’t imagine why.*

Not long after, Lucia and Rebecca set out once again to visit more shops.



Three days later, Rebecca stood at a corner of the port.

Before long, three medium-sized ships would set sail from the capital of Ordine’s harbor to bring a mage from the castle, a monster researcher, and a baron—the object of Rebecca’s affection—to the Eastern Kingdom. The weather was clear with a strong breeze. They would surely have a speedy voyage even without needing to use wind magic on the sails.

It had taken some time to decide on an outfit, but ultimately, Rebecca had chosen the white dress she’d seen before going to the café, and a pair of white high-heeled shoes. She’d thought it was just her size, but her couturier, Lucia, had sewed some adjustments here and there on the reverse side of the dress. While Rebecca did feel that it fit better now, she couldn’t tell what was different about its appearance—though judging by Lucia’s confident smile, Rebecca figured something about it must have improved.

The thin silk stockings she wore were high-quality, yet she’d torn through the first pair she tried on, so these were her second. She felt tremendous newfound

respect for women who wore them every day. She hadn't had time to learn how to put on makeup herself, so she'd asked Lucia to do it. They'd just finished doing so in a private room at a café before she set out for the port.

Other adventurers on board the ship had just gone to call him for her. They'd also complimented her dress, saying it looked great on her. She was genuinely flattered.

As she was anxiously waiting, a man with blue hair jumped down from the deck of the ship in front of her. Someone with body strengthening magic as strong as his had no need for the gangway.

"Rebecca! You weren't home yesterday afternoon... Huh?"

Those were the first words out of his mouth after landing in front of her. Arnaldo Canova, true to form—or Arnie, which was how she referred to her friend and senior colleague.

Unsure what she should say, Rebecca resorted to asking about his health. "Arnie! Um, how are you?"

"I'm fine..." Arnie's ocean blue eyes hovered on her for a while, then he said, with great difficulty, "What's up with, um... Rebecca...you look different..."

That was all he managed to get out before his gaze wavered. She would have preferred if he had just laughed and said outright that she looked bad.

She knew it. Even though she'd tried to look fancy, to him, she just didn't look like herself. She'd been prepared for it, but it still sent a pang through her chest.

"So, um, take care of yourself."

"Yeah..."

"That's all I wanted to say, so, see you."

"Right. I'll see you, Rebecca."

She couldn't take much more of this—she turned away from him and marched back the way she'd come.

"Rebecca!"

She heard him cry out her name, but she couldn't bring herself to look back.

She had worked so hard over these last three days. Her goal had always been to become a strong adventurer, never worrying about her appearance, so she was woefully inexperienced when it came to fashion. Thanks to Lucia taking the time to walk her through things, Rebecca had pampered herself and gotten dressed up for the first time in her life. She'd gotten a hair treatment and had applied lip cream and a nice-smelling body cream. She'd even fixed up her hair and nails and worn a pearl-studded hair accessory. The whole process had been surprisingly fun, and when she'd seen her transformation in the mirror, she'd been happy—but it had all been a waste. She hadn't even been able to confess; she'd gotten tongue-tied before she could get the words out.

Rebecca had joined Arnie's party immediately upon becoming an adventurer. They had defeated monsters and collected rare plants together. Arnie was a little rough around the edges, but he had taught her so many things. As they got more and more chances to talk, they'd even started going out for food and drinks, and before she knew it, she'd found herself constantly chasing after him. However, he'd only seen her as a less experienced colleague and a drinking buddy, not as a woman. She'd known that, she'd known for a while, yet—

Rebecca returned down the path she had so painstakingly followed to the port, went into the café she'd just left, and then into the private room where Lucia was. The moment she closed the door, the only thing she could do next was cover her face with her hands.

"Rebecca?!" Lucia cried in shock when she saw the woman rush into the room. She had been expecting Rebecca to be gone longer than that—she had *just* left.

Rebecca remained standing in front of the door with her head in her hands. Lucia ran over to her and offered her a handkerchief. *Did it not go well?* Lucia wondered, but she didn't have to wait long for her answer.

"I couldn't tell him..." Rebecca said in a quiet voice. "He just said, 'You look different...'"

"Arnoldo Canova, you idiot..." Lucia muttered, quietly enough that Rebecca couldn't hear.

Why do you think she got so dressed up in the first place? Obviously she wanted to look nice for you to say goodbye. Get a clue! Lucia wished she could shout that, but maybe it was too much to ask for him to understand. According to Zilo, oblivious people would stay oblivious, and unaware people would stay unaware—frustratingly so, but apparently that was just the way some romances went. That was clear enough to Lucia when she observed her redheaded friend.

“Rebecca, I’m sure he was just surprised at how pretty you looked.”

“I wish I had made up my mind sooner...” Teardrops started to fall from Rebecca’s lowered face. “If I’d told him my feelings sooner, then at least I could have gotten my heart broken and moved on. Arnie’s a capable man, so he’ll probably find some pretty girl in the Eastern Kingdom to make his girlfriend. Actually, he might even come back with a wife... No, he’ll probably settle down over there and never come back...”

Rebecca’s thoughts were caught in a negative downward spiral, and it sounded like she was spiraling faster and faster into a dark place. Lucia was worried that once the ship launched, Rebecca would jump into the sea and sink to its depths.

“Ahhh!” Lucia shouted, then held her hands up and said, “Bend down a little, please.”

“Um, okay?”

Rebecca looked bewildered but did as asked. Lucia jumped up and smacked Rebecca as hard as she could on the shoulders. She had the tough shoulders of a weapon-wielding adventurer, so it was actually Lucia’s hands that ended up throbbing in pain.

“Hey! What was that for?!” Rebecca yelled.

“It’s too soon for regrets! The ship hasn’t left yet! You can still go back!”

“I mean, you’re right; there’s still some time before the ship leaves...but even if I go back, things won’t be any different...” the adventurer muttered in anguish, a hand over her mouth.

This really doesn’t suit her. “Even if you go back, confess, and get rejected,

your current situation won't change much either, will it?"

"Maybe, but... Ugh, I don't want to be rejected! I know I'll get drunk and cry and moan all night long and curse tomorrow..."

"And I'll be there with you, until the morning! Though I'm kind of a lightweight, so I'll be drinking orange juice. But you can drink all night and end up cursing tomorrow, then look forward to a brighter day after tomorrow."

Rebecca finally let out a chuckle. "Being a couturier really is a hard job. You even have to listen to your annoying customers drinking and whining all night."

"And you're an adventurer who risks her life fighting monsters! Are you really going to spend half a year cowering and regretting things? I don't think that sort of behavior is fitting of Rebecca, the advanced adventurer. Oh—or maybe you'll give up on him entirely and find someone better? The capital is a big city, so there are plenty of nice, handsome people to choose from," Lucia finished harshly.

Rebecca wiped away her tears. "There's no one better than him," she mumbled.

Lucia smacked her in the arm and said, "Right, out you go, then!"

"Yeah... I'm going! Sorry, Lucia! This outfit isn't for me after all."

Rebecca removed her white dress and put back on the faded shirt, black pants, and boots she'd changed out of earlier. She even removed the pearl-studded accessory from her hair. Dressed like that, she'd now definitely be able to run to him as fast as she could.

Rebecca was about to take off just like that, but Lucia grasped her arm and pleaded, "Wait, let me just put some lipstick on you! An expert on romance told me that confessing your feelings with glossy lips raises your chances of success!"

"And who was that expert?"

"My grandma!"

Rebecca was laughing so hard that Lucia could barely apply the red lipstick without smudging it. Then, Lucia swiftly covered up her tearstains with face

powder. Once she was finished, she smiled at her brightly.

“You can do this, Rebecca!”

“Yeah, I’ll be back!”

As she watched the adventurer make her swift exit, Lucia prayed earnestly that she’d be able to express her feelings.

Back at the harbor yet again, Rebecca saw the man in question still standing on the deck of the ship.

“Arnie!” she called out.

He jumped down to her, then regarded her with a very worried expression.

“What’s wrong, Rebecca?! Did something happen?”

“Um... Have a safe trip...”

She’d planned to lay it all bare immediately, but the words got caught in her throat once again. When she tried to squeeze them out, Arnie brought his hands together and bowed his head.

“Sorry about before! Um, how do I say this—seeing you look so different all of sudden, uh, you didn’t look like yourself, so... Oh, not in a bad way. I mean, you looked good before too. What I’m trying to say is, you looked really pretty...”

Hearing his mumbled apology, Rebecca smiled awkwardly. His colleagues must have told him to compliment her, and now he was forcing himself to do so. He wasn’t even looking her in the eye.

“You don’t have to say that. I...”

Her voice grew hoarse, and she wanted to run away so badly that her legs were shaking. She’d never felt this way, even when facing a strong monster. *Remember what Lucia said.* Was she going to spend her time regretting that she hadn’t told him? Was she going to move on and find someone better? She didn’t want to do either one. Besides, even if she was flat-out rejected, she could move on—maybe not entirely, but that talented couturier would keep her company as she drank and vented her feelings. That would be much better than crying alone. The one thing she knew for certain was that if she didn’t say it

now, she would regret it.

Rebecca faced Arnie straight on.

“I wanted to make myself look nice for you when I saw you off.”

“Huh?”

“Once you leave, you can forget about this.” Rebecca gathered her thoughts, took a breath—then said loudly, “Arnoldo, I have always, always loved you...!”

“...Rebecca...”

Arnoldo’s ocean blue eyes were perfect circles as they stared fixedly on her. Then, a half second later, his expression turned sour.

“Why in the hell didn’t you say so sooner?!”

“What?”

Why was he grabbing her shoulders like that? And why did he sound so angry? She didn’t understand.

“How could you do this? Right here, right now? I’m about to be stuck in the Eastern Kingdom for the next six months. If you had told me at least ten, or even three days earlier, then we could have registered our marriage and you could have come with me!”

“Hngh...?” A strangled sound escaped her throat. She must have misheard him catastrophically. That had to be it. Either that, or this was a dream or a daydream.

“Agh, sorry! My bad. I’m all confused. I’m sorry I didn’t say so first.”

“First?”

“I love you more! I’ve loved you even longer!”

“What?!”

Now *she* was the one who was confused. Her mouth hung open, but no sound came out. She could barely breathe.

“Man, am I glad the feeling’s mutual. You weren’t home yesterday, and I was thinking about buying some jewels over there so I could propose when I came

back, but, yeah, sooner is better!”

Rebecca nodded along and smiled as she listened to him, but hardly anything he said was sinking in. She pinched the back of her left hand with her right. It hurt, so this clearly wasn’t a dream.

“So, when I get to the Eastern Kingdom, I’ll take down some giant monster or a monster with a good payout, and buy the finest, prettiest jewels in my colors. Can I give you a bracelet after I come back?”

“Y-Yeah... Um, I’ll buy some too.”

“How’s this—we both get each other jewels, and when I come back, we’ll go buy the bracelets together?”

“Okay.”

“Why don’t we get bracelets made of mythril, so they’ll never break for the rest of our lives?”

“Okay.”

“Once we’ve bought the bracelets, we can head straight to finalize our marriage registration.”

“Okay.”

“Also, if we ever get the chance, let’s go to the Eastern Kingdom together—as husband and wife!”

“Okay.”

Rebecca continued nodding along in a trance, but unfortunately, time was cruel.

“Hey, Arnie, it’s time to go!” someone shouted from the ship.

“I’ll be right there! Damn it, six months is too long!”

“Yeah, it’s going to be a long six months...”

I should have told him sooner—the words she’d thought earlier resurfaced in her mind, for a different reason this time. If she had plucked up her courage sooner, then maybe she could have been going with him right now.

“I know we don’t have bracelets, but we can think of ourselves as engaged, right, Rebecca?”

“Of course!”

“Gah, screw this! I wish I could bring you with me! This is too hard!”

Arnoldo suddenly hugged her so tight that her bones almost creaked and she thought her heart would stop. How sly of him to launch a sneak attack like this—too sly indeed. What could she give him in return?

“Arnie...!”

How’s this for a sneak attack? Rebecca mustered up all the courage she had and pressed her lips against his cheek.

“Wha?!”

Arnoldo was left briefly stunned, a bright red lipstick stain on his right cheek. He reached his arms out to give her another tight hug, but—

“Arnie! The boat’s gonna leave without you!”

“Hey! Seriously, Arnie! The boat’s starting to move!”

His colleagues’ shouts were tinged with panic. He lowered his arms and backed away from her with a look of heavy disappointment.

The other adventurers weren’t exaggerating—the ship actually *had* started slowly moving away from the dock.

“Got it! I really can’t stay! I’m coming!”

Arnoldo leaped up like the wind and just barely made it onto the moving ship.

“Goodbye, Rebecca! Wait for me! My beloved fiancée!” Arnie shouted. He’d even used wind magic to make his voice carry, so there was no doubt every single person at the port could hear what he said.

The port erupted into an unending swell of cheering and whistling. The adventurers on the deck of the ship likewise started shouting and clapping Arnie on the back. Some were even kicking him—but Arnie simply looked her way with a smile as radiant as the sun, waving his hand wildly in the air. Even as the sky, sea, and ship started to blur, his smile shone through clearly.

“I will! I’ll wait for you, Arnie!”

The wind filling the sails quickly bore the ship away from her. Rebecca saw off her beloved fiancé with an equally radiant smile.





“...And so, we’re going to be engaged... Well, technically, we’re already engaged...”

They were in the drawing room of the Tailors’ Guild. Rebecca had just finished giving a clumsy summary of what had happened, keeping her bright red face pointed toward the floor.

“Congratulations, Rebecca!”

“We’ve also heard tell of your operatic, passionate tale.”

The story of what had happened three days earlier at the port had spread through the capital like a gale. The high-ranking adventurer had announced their engagement loud enough for the entire port to hear, so it was only to be expected.

“No, um... I mean, it’s true, but I think everyone will forget soon...” Rebecca said sheepishly. It was very adorable.

That afternoon, a bard who’d been sleeping in a portside tavern was roused by the commotion; now, after asking around about the situation, he was in the process of writing a song about it. Advanced adventurers were very popular in the capital, after all. When the couple reunited in six months, the bard would go from tavern to tavern singing their song, but at the moment, the three people in the reception room couldn’t possibly know about that.

“Lucia, here is your tip. Please check it, if you don’t mind.”

Rebecca placed a leather bag on the table. The contents jangled loudly.

“Of course.”

Inside the bag were four shiny gold coins. Lucia couldn’t believe her eyes. She had already received payment for the dress and alterations. A tip for a couturier was supposed to be a mere gratuity, not such a large sum as this. It was enough to make a whole new outfit, including the cost for fabric. Furthermore, Rebecca had ended up just wearing her regular clothes to see off Arnaldo. Even one copper coin would have been too much for that.

“I can’t accept this,” Lucia said. In shock, she tried to return the money, but

Rebecca gently placed her hands over Lucia's to stop her.

"No, take it. This really isn't much for me. I'm going to be a baron's wife, and it's all thanks to you. Besides, I heard tipping a couturier was a way to express gratitude. I really want you to keep it, for giving me the push I needed. If you don't, I won't be able to ask you for help again," Rebecca told her, reverting to her adventurer-like way of speech.

In response to her candid statement, Lucia could only nod. "All right. Thank you."

Lucia decided internally to save this money and use it to buy Rebecca a small accessory to match her wedding dress.

"Would you like to have lunch together to celebrate your engagement?" Forto suggested. "We could send for something from a nearby restaurant."

"Thank you, Mr. Luini, but I'm about to head to the harbor."

"Huh? Are you going after Mr. Canova?"

"I would like to, but I promised to wait here in Ordine. But since he told me he was going to buy me a jewel for my engagement bracelet, I was thinking of going after something good so I can buy him a jewel too."

"Something good?"

"A basilisk has apparently appeared in an area that's being cleared for development. The Adventurers' Guild said it's a rocky area that's not at risk of wildfires, so I can burn it to a crisp!" Rebecca exclaimed with a bright and uninhibited smile.

At Lucia's side, Forto muttered, "Burn it to a crisp...?"

Could basilisks be burned to a crisp that easily? Lucia recalled how one of her primary-school teachers had strictly warned her class about basilisks, showing them a picture of an enormous monster with a serpentine black body, a golden crownlike crest on its head, and four thick legs with sharp spurs. The scales of a basilisk were so hard, it was difficult even for an adventurer's sword to pierce through. Most frightening of all was the deadly poison it secreted from its claws. A single hit from those, and one would not be long for this world.

They were rarely encountered, but if one was ever spotted deep in the mountains or woods, any nearby humans were advised to flee as fast as possible. Now that Lucia thought of it, she'd once been unable to gather mushrooms in the western woods because there'd been a reported sighting of a basilisk that year.

"Um, isn't fighting a basilisk incredibly dangerous?"

"Oh, it's fine. An earth mage will immobilize it with rocks, and that's where I come in and roast it from a spot where it can't reach me with its claws."

"Roast it..."

A basilisk and a newt overlapped in the back of her mind.

"They're inedible anyway, and the crests on their heads are just gold in color, not real gold. Their scales and bones can be used as materials, though, so we'll retrieve those afterward. Anyway, we'll get a hell of a lot of money from the kingdom for killing it!"

"That's great," Lucia said, nodding as she shooed away the giant newt in her mind.

Rebecca covered her mouth with a start. She must have realized she'd started speaking casually, as she would when it was just her and Lucia. Forto remained silent, a smile on his face.

"My apologies for speaking so crudely! Um, next time, I-I think I'll need something to wear for my wedding party, so, um, I hope I can count on you again then. Mr. Luini, Lucia, I think I would actually like to properly dress up for that occasion..." Rebecca said with a bashful smile.

"Of course. We'll look forward to it!" Lucia responded cheerfully.

After Rebecca left the reception room with a smile, Lucia drank her tea, which had grown cold. She'd gotten so wrapped up in their conversation that she had completely forgotten about it. It seemed Forto had as well.

"I'm sure Rebecca will be just fine," Lucia stated. "She's an advanced adventurer. Maybe we should pity the basilisk instead..."

"Yes, I must agree. That unlucky basilisk is about to be charred by the flames

of love...” Forto responded, nodding.

Lucia tried to imagine the basilisk being burned red by flames, but no matter how hard she tried, she could only imagine a roasted newt. She pushed that thought aside for now and instead turned to thinking about Rebecca’s clothes for the wedding. The dress she’d worn the other day was pretty, but maybe this time Lucia could use zephyricloth to make something with a soft, billowing hem. Lucia couldn’t wait for these six months to pass. Her sketchbook was about to be filled up with so many wedding dress designs.

“I’m so glad they’re getting married. I want to make the best wedding dress I can.”

“I hope you’ll allow me to assist at this time. Oh, and on that topic, would you like to go see an opera? It’s a stage costume, but one of my bridal dress designs will be worn.”

“I would love to go!”

What type of bridal dress, what color is it, what materials did you use? Lucia asked her questions in rapid-fire succession, and Forto politely answered them one by one. It was fascinating just listening to his answers. Moreover, she would get to see the clothes he was describing for herself. That was even more exciting.

“Very well, then. Is it all right if I handle all the necessary arrangements?”

“Of course!” Lucia responded enthusiastically.

Forto folded his hands together jovially and said, “I’m very much looking forward to seeing whatever you decide to wear.”

The Opera and Old Scars

A few days later, Lucia found herself in the master's office of the Tailors' Guild, standing still like a mannequin.

"Lucia, you look as radiant as a fairy. No, perhaps even more so," Forto complimented her with a broad smile.

Lucia returned his smile and said, "Thank you. This is such a beautiful design, and it feels comfortable."

That day, Lucia had donned one of Forto's designs, a long, pale blue gown lavishly adorned with delicate lace in a slightly darker blue. It was an off-the-shoulders gown with ribbons along the back that held the bodice firmly in place. The hem fell just short of her toes, and the lack of a pannier under the skirt as well as the suppleness of the fabric made it easy to sit in a chair.

The dress was a rental from the Tailors' Guild, so the size was a little big. Lucia was slender, so to make extra certain that the bodice wouldn't slide down, it was secured to her shoulders by thin, clear straps. In order to hide those, she'd draped a white, sheer lace shawl around her shoulders. She had also drawn the ribbons on the back of the corset as tight as she could. It gave her an even nicer shape than she'd expected, but she had a feeling she would only be able to eat half as much as she usually did.

She also wore a pair of white mid-heeled shoes with sparkly, pale blue jewels dotting the insteps. This was the outfit she was going to wear to attend the opera with Forto. Hestia had told her that the dress was semiformal and would even be appropriate for a nobles' soiree.

Lucia had never worn such an extravagant dress before, and she was ecstatic at the opportunity. The high-quality silk felt like a dream. Even when she looked in the mirror, she felt no inferiority to the dress; her face had been splendidly transformed.

Lucia liked makeup and was able to apply it with some skill, but the

beauticians of the Tailors' Guild were in a league of their own. After a deep body cleanse, they had lathered her in oil and applied three coats of foundation alone. From there, they'd applied powder, long false eyelashes, and lipstick—Lucia regretted that she hadn't been able to take notes on everything they did.

Regardless, their efforts left her looking like an elegant, beautiful young maiden. She could see how, to the beauticians, her face was like a blank canvas that could be filled with whatever art they imagined.

When she thought about it, the Tailors' Guild controlled the beauty of the capital. She was wearing a dress designed by Forto, the guildmaster, and her hair and makeup had been done by the guild's beauticians—it would have been outlandish to think she wouldn't be transformed in this way. Despite her upbringing, she could even pass as the daughter of some noble. It was no wonder that Forto had commented that he couldn't wait to see what she wore. Becoming a model like this was a very educational experience.

Forto had also changed into his outfit for the opera. He wore a sleek, deep navy blue suit intended for evening wear. His jacket lapel and his vest were dark cobalt with matching intricately woven patterns. On top of his white silk shirt lay a long, slate blue tie, fastened with a gold pin that matched the color of his hair.

His shoes were midnight blue, so dark they could be mistaken for black unless the light hit them or one were looking very closely. They had clearly been picked with the utmost of care. Forto's usual silver-gray suit was nice too, but Lucia found herself absolutely captivated by the splendor of this one.

"Now, for the finishing touch—here."

Forto opened up a small, white box. Inside was a pair of pale gold earrings set with small, crystal clear aquamarine stones. They were the dangling type, so they would sway from her ears every time she moved.

"Is it really okay for me to borrow these too?"

The earrings might have been small, but those jewels held no hint of impurity. They must have been very expensive. Lucia was worried about losing them. Forto looked at her seriously and said, "Please take them, Lucia. There will be no carriage to get you today, nor flowers. This is also a way to commend you for

all your efforts thus far.”

The absence of a carriage or flowers, despite them being at the Tailors’ Guild, and the fact that they were going to see a bridal dress designed by Forto meant today’s excursion to the opera was, in a certain sense, work.

However, she remembered being warned about gifts from noblemen—were earrings safe? Although, these earrings were meant as a token of appreciation for her work, and they were from Forto, so maybe they were okay.

As those thoughts raced through her head, Forto continued, “Additionally, not giving a gift to someone I am escorting would affect the good name of the Luini family.”

“Thank you, Mr. Forto. I will take good care of them. And, um, in return, I will endeavor in my work, and...”

He’s bringing his position as a viscount into this too. After thanking him, Lucia was trying her hardest to construct a sentence appropriate for a noble when there came a loud knock at the door.

A member of the guild staff nearly ran inside the guildmaster’s office and said, out of breath, “Mr. Fortunato, we’ve received an urgent message from the Couriers’ Guild! A ship carrying cargo from Išrana has gone missing!”

“Understood. I’ll head to the Couriers’ Guild at once. Hopefully other areas of the sea are safe. Once we can ascertain the situation, we’ll send a search boat —”

Forto roughly tore off his gloves in a way she’d never seen him do before, then faced her and briefly lowered his gaze.

“Lucia, you must forgive me. I will no longer be able to attend the opera with you.”

“That’s not important right now. You don’t need to worry about that!”

Lives were in danger. There would always be another opera, but there was no bringing people back from the dead.

Forto shifted his gaze to Lucia’s side. “Zilo, please escort Lucia to the opera in my place. You will be compensated for the overtime.”

Despite the last-minute request, Zilo was happy to go to the opera with her. “I couldn’t have asked for a better assignment. I have no need for overtime pay if it means being able to attend the opera with the chief—I mean, Miss Lucia.”

“Feel free to borrow whatever you would like to wear from the guild. Thank you, truly.”

“Leave everything to me. I will do my best to act as your proxy.”

Forto dashed out of the room to change clothes. As Zilo watched him leave, he said apologetically, “Chief, keeping a lady waiting goes against my nature, but do you mind waiting here for fifteen minutes?”

“We still have plenty of time before the opera starts, so take as much time as you need.”

“I know the clothing rental room like the back of my hand, so fifteen minutes is more than enough,” Zilo said with a laugh before walking briskly out of the room—and he really did return in a mere fifteen minutes. And Lucia found herself having to do a triple take.

His jacket was sleek black with navy blue stitching and silver-trimmed lapels. Underneath, his vest and slacks were a shiny gray—silver, even. His shirt was white but with a blue tinge that gave it a cool tone.

His outfit was accented by a bright blue, puffy cravat that was held in place with a round, glass pin resembling a diamond. The cuffs poking out from his sleeves were decorated with lace matching the cravat in color.

It almost looked as if there were steel plates affixed to the toes of his black lace-up shoes, but they were actually silver pieces that glinted subtly as he walked. His outfit was fashionable down to the last detail. And that didn’t apply to just his clothes. He’d combed back his hair, fixed up his beard, and put on silver, thin-framed glasses. He looked every bit the stylish gentleman.

“Is this up to your standards, chief?”

“Zilo, you look fantastic! I wish we could go to the factory right now and show everyone!”

“Aha ha, thank you.” Zilo rubbed a finger under his nose, then pulled on a pair

of white gloves. “Now then—I, Zistavolo Contini, will be your escort for today. I will do everything within my power to ensure you, the enchanting Miss Lucia, enjoy a wonderful evening. Furthermore, I promise to ensure your safe return.”

“Thank you very much. One thing—what do you mean by ‘safe return’?”

“I mean that I will not behave in a way that will result in my being scolded by my wife,” Zilo said, extending his gloved hand to her. Lucia let out a chuckle as she placed her own hand in his.



The opera house was a very large building. Its official name was the Royal Opera House, due to its being the largest one in the kingdom. The building was constructed of yellowish-gray brick and was elaborately decorated.

There were two entrances for spectators: one that led to the private compartments on the second floor and higher, and one that led to the guest seating on the first floor in front of the stage. The private boxes on the higher floors were very expensive.

The seats on the first floor were closer to the stage and presumably gave a better view, but apparently, most nobles opted for the private boxes. Zilo explained that they were often used by those who required protection or who were attending incognito, which made sense.

The interior of the building was gorgeous with its red carpet and red decorative curtains as well as all the fancily dressed guests strolling through. Everyone seemed in very good spirits.

Lucia and Zilo entered their private box, which was on the third floor, directly facing the stage and offering them a great view. There were two chairs and one couch, which made Lucia feel a bit wasteful using this room for just the two of them.

The floors on either side of the stage were neatly divided by the rows of private box seats, and the walls curved out to give the room an oval shape. Only the upper bodies of those sitting in the private seats were visible. Some compartments were behind colored glass, keeping the interiors hidden from the outside. Those must have been used by high-ranking nobles and members of the royal family.

“The opera is about to start, Miss Lucia,” Zilo told her as she was distractedly gawking around.

She quickly took her seat, then raised the binoculars she’d been given to her eyes, which allowed her to see the stage as clearly as if it were right in front of her. The glow of the magical chandelier grew dim, and in its place, the large stage was illuminated.

Today’s program was titled *Tell Me, What is Love?*—a popular play from some

time ago that had recently come back into fashion. It was about a young lady from a noble family and an older knight who—though neither knew anything of love—were engaged to be wed due to their families' wishes.

The young woman was an idealist who wished to know what love was, while the knight asserted he could not believe in things he could not see. The two lived their lives together until a terrifying wyvern attacked their home country and the knight was forced to march off into a desperate battle.

The actors sang about how love brought despair so dark, you'd wish for death, but hope so bright, you'd want to live, as well as about how love could both weaken a person and give them strength.

After defeating the wyvern, the knight returned to the young maiden, made a heartfelt proposal of marriage, and the two pledged their love for each other. The opera ended with a wedding ceremony, and the curtain closed on the couple alone on their wedding night.

Hestia had already given Lucia the synopsis ahead of time. Lucia thought it sounded a bit cliché, but maybe that was just her cynicism speaking. However, once the opera started, she found herself completely immersed.

"Tell me, what is love?"

Is it the softness of the rays in spring? The vibrancy of green in summer?

The sweetness of fruit in autumn? The warmth of the hearth in winter?"

The blonde, angelic heroine sang her questions to the audience.

"I cannot believe in what I cannot see, so I know not what love may be."

The black-haired knight sang with a voice laden with doubt. He was also exceptionally handsome. Lucia was especially interested in the cute flower fairy that showed up halfway through.

"Love is something you fall into. Like a sleipnir without its reins, a ship without its helm,

Fallen petals in a river, driftwood floating in the sea, no one knows where its path will lead."

The opera house erupted in applause at the soprano solo sung by the fairy,

which had a superbly beautiful voice.

In the final wedding scene, the knight lifted up the bride in his arms. Her wedding dress, designed by Forto, was made of layers of exquisitely cut white organdy, and the entire dress was decorated with silver and gold trimmings that made it glitter beautifully.

At Lucia's side, Zilo elucidated the parts of the opera she didn't understand and offered commentary on the clothing as well. He was able to go into such explicit detail that Lucia wouldn't have been surprised if he were a regular spectator. She was deeply impressed.

The opera itself was amazing, but Lucia was also fascinated by the construction of stage costumes. From their appearance, to the way they enhanced the actors' movements and dancing, to the tricks that made them appear lightweight, to the budget they clearly had to work within—it was all fresh and exciting to Lucia.

The performance ended, but Lucia's excitement still hadn't settled down even after they left their box.

"Zilo, you really are amazing! I knew you were an expert on clothes, but who would've guessed you knew so much about operas too."

"Well, I come here often. This is the same opera house where my wife and I had our first date, actually," he said, a drop quieter, as he placed a finger under his nose.

"Your first date! What was that like?"

"It was her first time seeing an opera, so she was very moved by it. On our way out, I tried to build up my courage to make a move, but then a pickpocket showed up in front of the theater—my wife actually ran on the very walls of this building to catch the thief."

"Wow, guards sure are impressive..."

Zilo's wife worked as a city guard, and apparently she had the body strengthening to permit some incredible feats.

"Indeed. She was truly remarkable. After she caught the pickpocket and

handed them off to another guard, she realized she had heavily torn the dress I had given her, and apologized. The sight of her exposed leg was too splendid a sight, so I wrapped my coat around her and sent her off in a carriage. Thankfully, she mistook me for a gentleman...”

“But you *were* a gentleman!”

Zilo had escorted her to the opera, had taken no offense when she’d torn the dress he’d given her, lent her his coat, and sent her home in a carriage—what else could he have done?

“Hmm... I hate to burst your image of me, but at the time, I was a creature far from knightly.”

Lucia found it exceedingly strange that Zilo had referred to himself not as a person but a *creature*.

“Couturiers and stitchers have plenty of opportunities to become close with noblewomen. Nobles often have second and third wives, and there are many widows too. Sometimes, if you fawn over them, they’ll give you a bit of pocket money, so I spent time with them and never gave it too much thought. I’m sure you’ve heard of other young men doing similar.”

It wasn’t unusual for a couturier to have a noble as a patron. It required a lot of money to own a workshop and a store, and there were people who were willing to rely on nobles to make that happen, or who simply wanted to live lives of luxury. That wasn’t a choice Lucia would make, but she had no intention of criticizing any couturier or stitcher who did. That was why she wasn’t very shocked to hear what Zilo told her.

“I’m a little surprised that *you* aren’t surprised, chief...”

“I’m not. That’s their decision. Did you stop after you met your wife?”

“I’m not sure if I can say I quit so much as I couldn’t do it anymore. Once my ‘one and only’ came along, the rest was out of my hands.”

My one and only—the phrase had been sung in the opera as well. Once Zilo had found someone for whom there was no replacement, no other woman could hold a chance of swaying his heart.

Next, Lucia asked the question she was most curious about. “So, Zilo, have you made lots of clothes for your wife?”

“Oh, plenty! I’ve put all my love into making things for her, from undergarments to overcoats. She looks great in everything.”

“What did she look the prettiest in?”

“Her wedding dress! That’s probably the answer, but honestly, the woman I love will always look stunning in whatever she wears,” Zilo declared with a smile, and Lucia nodded vigorously.

Zilo’s truly an expert on love. Feeling inspired, Lucia was walking toward the exit of the opera house when she met eyes with a man who was coming from another direction. Judging by his sleek, green three-piece suit, he was a noble. Lucia stopped to let him pass, but for some reason, he walked over to her.

“Lovely miss, may I ask your name?”

Zilo touched her arm for a moment and gave her a look. At some point, he’d put his silver glasses back on. She took that as him telling her to stay quiet. Lucia merely met the man’s eyes and bowed her head.

“My apologies, but my lady has no peerage and would be incompatible company. She very much appreciates your kind words,” Zilo replied to the man smoothly in a tone befitting an attendant.

“That’s no matter. I merely would love a chance to discuss the opera.”

The man’s well-controlled smile seemed exceptionally suspect. Instead of answering, Lucia looked at Zilo.

“My lady is here today as part of her work for the Tailors’ Guild. She must return, else her work will be impeded.”

“The Tailors’ Guild...? Ah, an employee of Fortunato’s?” Suddenly, the man’s expression clouded over. His gaze remained on Lucia, but suddenly, it was as though he were looking at someone lower than him.

“Are you acquainted with Guildmaster Luini?” Zilo asked.

“Yes, I know him very well. We were classmates in college.”

“You are school friends, then?”

“No, I can’t say we are friends. Fortunato threw away his future as a knight. He exchanged his sword to curry favor with capricious women. What kind of a life is that?”

What an irritating man. Lucia wished he wouldn’t talk about her boss as if he knew him when he’d only gone to college with him. Plus, too much of his shirt cuff was showing through his sleeves. With such a sophisticated outfit, he should at least fix his cuffs. Also, he needed to bring the collar of his silk shirt down by a finger—it was making his neck look short. There was plenty she wanted to say to him, but she managed to swallow it all.

“Mr. Fortunato has traded in his sword for scissors. He is living a wonderful life,” Lucia said, trying her best to smile.

“Oh, don’t tell me—were you misled by him too?”

Misled? He was just her boss. She also looked up to him as an exceptionally capable couturier.

Lucia clenched her fists tightly as she used all her effort to hold herself back from retorting with her true feelings.

Zilo, smiling, stepped in to respond in her place. “Mr. Luini has done nothing of the sort. He has likely gone to visit the bewitchingly beautiful dowager duchess this evening.”

Zilo was alluding to the Gastoni Witch, Altea Gastoni. Said to be the most powerful of ducal families, the Gastonis adopted the queen so she could marry into the royal family. They were a family no one of marquis rank or lower would even dream of crossing swords with. And Altea did have regular contact with Forto, so it wasn’t exactly a lie.

The man clicked his tongue, spun away, then walked off down the aisle without another word. Lucia, her hands still clenched into fists, managed to control her breathing.

“You all right, chief?”

“I can’t believe how rude he was to Mr. Forto!”

“Y-Yeah. He was...”

“Mr. Forto’s got talent and status and prestige and skill and connections, so I can understand why he’d be jealous, but really! And he was rude to you too, Zilo! You were supposed to be my handsome partner for this evening, and he made you pretend to be my attendant!”

“Thank you! I’ll make sure to brag to my wife,” Zilo said with a laugh, but Lucia’s anger didn’t fade.

She’d had such a fun time at the opera, but now, thanks to that green-suited man, she couldn’t shake herself out of her bad mood. She wished she could just erase her memory of their interaction. She and Zilo walked out of the opera house, and on their way to wait for their carriage, he stopped.

“I can’t let you go back looking so upset. Miss Lucia. In order to ensure we end this excursion with a smile, would you join me in going to a café for some café au lait and pastries?”

“With pleasure!”

Having made Zilo worry, she gladly accepted his offer.

They found a private room on the second floor of a café near the opera house. From the window next to them, she could see people strolling down the street. There were a lot of happily chatting couples—Lucia wondered if they were coming back from the opera. Across the table that held their café au lait and mille crepes, Zilo’s expression turned serious.

“Chief, this sort of thing might happen again, so I want you to listen to me.”

“Of course. I’m all ears.”

Lucia braced herself for a warning about how to interact with nobles, Zilo spoke about something else entirely.

“Mr. Forto originally pursued chivalric studies in college. Afterward, he joined the Tailors’ Guild without going to school for clothing. There, he studied to become a proper couturier—he had quite a rough time getting hands-on experience and working simultaneously.”

“And the reason he changed tracks was because of his love for clothes, right?”

“That would be the simplest way to put it, but during his father’s generation, the family fell on hard times. For generations, the Luinis were well-known for being a family of strong, capable knights, but, well, in this day and age, making a living and the power of money are what’s important. Mr. Forto has his looks and fashion sense, and he’s always liked clothes and always gave fashion advice to his friends and his sister’s friends. And then the Tailors’ guildmaster at the time scouted him.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Lucia asked.

Zilo looked away and took a sip of his café au lait. Then he opened his mouth, and after a short pause, spoke. “The Tailors’ Guild used to be very old-fashioned... There was this idea that nobles were innately better than everyone else, and the idea that couturiers should wait upon noble clients was more prevalent than now. I was subject to the same sort of demands, and Mr. Forto would receive many invitations to spend time with noblewomen. The same happens now for clothing-related matters, but at the time, he would also bring them to operas, escort them to soirees, and if they called on him, well, he wasn’t in the position to refuse...”

Now she understood. This was what the man had been alluding to earlier. In a sense, he’d spoken the truth.

“But knowing Mr. Forto, he probably wouldn’t want you to know about this, chief.”

A hint of darkness seeped into Zilo’s lowered voice. If Forto didn’t want her to know, then why was Zilo telling her this now? But just wondering about it wasn’t going to make it any clearer. Without hesitation, Lucia asked, “Why are you telling me this, Zilo?”

“Because I always want you to be Mr. Forto’s friend.”

“I already considered us to be friends and colleagues. Were you worried that I didn’t?”

Maybe he had thought she would turn against Forto someday. If that was his line of thinking, it was very upsetting.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I just, well, didn’t want you to hear it from someone else and be shocked, or think less of Mr. Forto as a result...”

“So you were worried that if I heard rumors about Mr. Forto, I would look down on him or become disillusioned with him?”

“...A little.”

“That’ll never happen. Even if Mr. Forto kept those noblewomen company, it wasn’t like he was deceiving them, right? It’s what he chose to do for his family and the Tailors’ Guild.”

Lucia wasn’t a naive, sheltered little girl. She knew full well the grit and darkness that came with many jobs.

“I’ve been told dozens of times, whenever I talk about wanting my own workshop and store to sell my own clothes, that I could do it much faster if I found a wealthy noble patron. And I know people who have done that to own their own workshops and stores. But I don’t think I want to go that route.”

“Why not, chief?”

“Because I’m greedy. I want the love of whoever I’m with all for myself. Though I haven’t had to make that choice since no one’s approached me.”

She’d said so earnestly, but Zilo chuckled.

“I know what you mean! I want my wife’s love all for myself too,” he said, thankfully understanding what she meant. “But I think about it sometimes. If Mr. Forto had joined the royal knights, he would surely have had a successful career. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d become a knight protecting the royal family. I think that path would have actually suited him better.”

“What a thing to say, Zilo!” Lucia said, laughing at his joke.

Forto might have been well suited to knighthood, but he was markedly more suited to being a couturier.

“Mr. Forto is a couturier among couturiers! Being the Tailors’ guildmaster is his life’s calling!” she exclaimed.

Zilo went quiet for a few seconds, then suddenly burst into laughter. Once he was finished, he looked at her with a very serious expression.

“Hey, chief. I hope you don’t mind my asking, but how old are you again?”

“I’m twenty-one. I’m turning twenty-two this year.”

“Sometimes, you really don’t seem like it...”

It was true that she had a baby face, she was short, and she wasn’t very curvy. *But that’s not something you say to someone you’re escorting.*

“Zilo, I’m not sure that’s appropriate to say to the lady you’re escorting...” Lucia said with an undisguised pout. Zilo flattened his palms onto the table and bowed his head.

“Oh, forgive me! I didn’t mean... I’ll order something else as an apology! The pudding here is great!”

Soon after, Lucia enjoyed her fill of decadent pudding.



“Pardon me,” Zilo said as he entered the Tailors’ guildmaster’s office.

“Good evening. How was the opera?” Forto asked, looking up from his paperwork.

It was already night, and well past dinnertime.

“The chief seemed to like it immensely. However, on the way back, she had a run-in with a man. The viscount—”

Zilo promptly told Forto the man’s name. He was someone Forto had old memories of but whom he was no longer in contact with.

“He said you and he were classmates in college.”

“Yes, that we were...”

They had certainly been classmates—but also close friends who sparred with their training swords. But when Forto had told his friend he was going to work at the Tailors’ Guild, the other man had tried to stop him, punched him, and, for the final blow, ended their friendship. At least it sounded like he was doing well now. Nevertheless, for him to approach Lucia was more than simple coincidence.

“What’s more, he spewed the same old line about how your job is just

pandering to noblewomen—and criticized your work as a couturier.”

“I’m sure that must have been distressing for Lucia...”

“No, the chief was actually quite combative.”

“Combative? Did she do something?” Forto asked uneasily. He could never predict her actions.

“Mr. Fortunato has traded in his sword for scissors. He is living a wonderful life,” Zilo said in an exaggerated high-pitched voice, apparently an imitation of Lucia’s words. Forto wished he could have been there to hear it.

“Well—that was nice of her to say. I’ll have to make sure to drive the point—or should I say, the needle home for him.”

“Please do. Oh, and don’t forget to put poison in the point of the needle for that old school friend of yours.”

Zilo laughed darkly, the unfamiliar sound of it cluing Forto in to how angry he was. Zilo was always so kind and calm nowadays, but Forto had heard he had a checkered past. He himself had said that it was thanks to his good-natured wife that he was who he was now. One never knew where someone would end up, and who they would become. Forto himself included.

“Zilo, here’s your handkerchief back.”

“Thank you.”

The gilt silver wrapped in the white handkerchief was Zilo’s tip for acting as his proxy.

Zilo pocketed the handkerchief without checking its contents, then said, “Well, I ought to head home. It’s about time for my wife to get off her work.”

“Thank you for your hard work today,” Forto responded, smiling at the devoted husband’s words as he watched him leave. Before the door closed, he looked down. *I have a long battle ahead with this paperwork. Perhaps I should get some more coffee—*

Zilo stood in the doorway to stop it from closing and called, “Oh, right, Mr. Forto.”

As Forto looked up once more, wondering what he needed, Zilo said, on the verge of laughing, “The chief said one more thing. ‘Mr. Forto is a couturier among couturiers! Being the Tailors’ guildmaster is his life’s calling!’ And I agree!”

Before Forto could respond, the door shut. He tried to return to his unfinished paperwork, then replaced his shaking pen in its holder. He was powerless to stop the laughter bubbling up from inside.

The Tempest Queen's Dress

At Forto's request, Lucia arrived at the Tailors' Guild around afternoon teatime. She was guided to the drawing room, where a short woman was sitting across the sofa from Forto.

"Hello, my name is Cassandra Lovino. I am a singer at the Ordine Royal Opera House."

The woman had a beautiful voice like tinkling chimes. Also, Lucia recognized both her voice and face.

"My name is Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. Um, excuse me, but did you play the flower fairy in *Tell Me, What is Love?*"

"My! I am honored you remembered."

"I loved the song you sang! Your soprano voice is so beautiful, I wish I could listen to it forever."

"Thank you. Your words mean a lot," Cassandra said, and Lucia was struck once again by how beautiful both her speaking and singing voices were.

Cassandra was wearing a slightly tight-fitting black dress. The tight lace brought an unflattering focus to her curvaceous upper body, and the belt digging into her waistline looked like it was squeezing her more than giving her shape. The voluminous flared skirt looked better than the upper half of the dress, but it was, unfortunately, black. A bit heavy for this season.

She deserves better. Lucia couldn't help but think that white robe she'd worn as the fairy the other day had looked much more attractive on her.

"Miss Lovino is here today to consult about a stage costume. Since you attended the opera the other day, Lucia, I thought you might be able to help as well," said Forto.

"I appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedules, Mr. Luini and Head Manager Fano."

This was Lucia's first time hearing about it, but she didn't want to pass up the chance to work on a stage costume. She sat down next to Forto. Across from her, Cassandra folded her hands in her lap and spoke.

"My senior was meant to play the leading role in the next opera, but due to her suffering from morning sickness, I will be acting as her understudy."

A singer required stamina to fill a theater with their voice. It was not an easy thing to do with morning sickness. Lucia had no doubt Cassandra would be able to captivate an audience with her beautiful, resonant voice. The singer's expression, however, was dark and clouded.

"While I am shorter than my senior, I'm also larger sized, so I am unable to wear the same costume. There were plans to make alterations, but the couturier who was supposed to make them is no longer able to do so..."

"The couturier in charge of the opera house's costumes is a friend of mine. Two days ago, his wife went into early labor and he had to accompany her to the temple. I have been asked to take over in his stead," Forto explained.

An opera house needed a couturier who specialized in stage costumes, but it was only natural under the circumstances that they'd need someone else to take over.

"I'm very happy for everyone's joyful news, but I am not sure if I am right for the leading role..." Cassandra said self-deprecatingly. Even though the role of the leading lady had fortuitously fallen into her lap, she didn't seem particularly happy about it.

"The next opera is called *The Tempest Queen*. I will play an evil queen, but given my short stature, I won't look very impressive onstage."

It was true that Cassandra was short and plump, and she had a soft, kind face that looked more suited to a virtuous goddess than an evil queen.

"At first, I tried to ask for a taller actress who would pretend to sing onstage while I sang in the wing, but the opera house manager would not allow that."

Lucia didn't think she would want to attend an opera just to watch someone lip-synching.

“That is an acceptable singing method, Lucia,” Forto admonished her. Apparently, her thoughts had shown on her face. “To put it frankly, female singers are more often judged based on their appearances than male singers. Sometimes, they are not even judged by the merit of their singing.”

“I understand, though I have some things to say about that.”

It was the truth, no matter how much Lucia didn’t want to accept it. And it was a reality that extended beyond the opera.

“It’s only to be expected. A performance isn’t just something you listen to but also something you watch. That is why, now that I am playing the leading role, I would like to improve my appearance as best I can,” Cassandra said, leaning forward. Then, with a start, she fixed her posture. She really was a professional singer.

“Would you mind sharing what *The Tempest Queen* is about?” Forto asked.

“It’s the story of a shipwrecked prince who falls in love with the queen of the storm spirits on a stormy night.”

It sounded like a romantic story, but Cassandra had mentioned she was playing an “evil queen,” so Lucia wondered if she would be deceiving the prince.

“The two promise to get married, and the queen returns the prince to his home country so that he can abandon his family and country and prepare for their marriage. However, the king, queen, and the royal retainers try to stop him, and the prince starts to have second thoughts. The mermaids of the sea also plead for the queen to give up on a human, whose lifespan is so short. The queen goes to the appointed place on the day they vowed to meet again, but the prince doesn’t show up.”

“What a tragic story...”

“Yes. After that, the tempest queen submerges the entire kingdom, drags the prince to the bottom of the sea, and embraces him tightly. That’s how it ends.”

Wait, that goes beyond a tragic love story. That’s horrifying.

“The tempest queen washes everything away...? How romantic.”

Clearly, Lucia and Forto were not of the same opinion on this point. Lucia

noticed Lotta trembling from his position behind them. Like Lucia, he seemed to find the story scary. She wanted to talk to him about it later.

They moved on from talking about the opera to ask Cassandra about her stage costume.

“I think my hair and makeup will be fine, but as for my costume, I’d like it to make me look like I have a sizable or commanding presence. Though I also don’t want it to make me look too rotund...”

“We can put together something with a lot of lace and fabric and use a stage fan to make it flutter around. As for the color, we’ll make it navy and azure and mix in some white for the waves.”

Forto sketched out a quick design as he spoke. It was a very long, blue dress with extra fabric at the sleeves. Cassandra nodded in satisfaction when she saw it.

“If I wear this, I can sing while standing on a raised platform, and that can be moved during the intermission. The main actress moves around onstage a lot, but I’ve been told I can do things my own way.”

“Um, in that case, could we make an even heavier costume if you were being moved around on a cart instead?”

“We do have stagehands for moving heavy things, so that’s possible. But you want to make a dress heavier than this?” Cassandra asked, looking at Lucia with a tilt of her head.

“If you aren’t going to be walking, why don’t we make the dress even longer, attach the hem to your wrists, and make the bottom extra, extra long—”

Lucia sketched a new design in the sketchpad Forto had given her. She kept the basic shape of Forto’s design but made the bottom much longer and wider. When she jotted down a note that the end of the dress would extend out until it was nearly touching the audience, Forto and Cassandra furrowed their brows slightly. Lucia paid them no mind and simply continued her explanation.

“How about we use the fans to blow the dress out really, really wide? It’ll make you look bigger, and the blue dress billowing on the stage will look like the sea, which will make you look more like a tempest queen, right?”

“Head Manager Fano, the stage fans don’t have that much wind power. It may be possible if we use several, but—”

“The weight of the trailing hem will be a bit much for a singer. If we divide it into sections and have them lifted up, that could maybe work, but—”

Something that can make finer adjustments than a fan—a magical tool that her friend had invented sprang to mind.

“What if we use a dryer to blow a strong wind up from below?!”

“A dryer? Can it really be done?”

“I think it can! We can increase the power and decrease the temperature.”

The Magical Garment Factory and the Tailors’ Guild had talented magical toolmakers. It should be possible. In the past, Dahlia had created a dryer so powerful it had knocked down books in her room, so if they could tinker with a dryer and get the airflow just right, it should be strong enough to move the fabric.

“Um, wouldn’t that be a little too flashy?”

“But you’re the tempest queen, aren’t you? If anything, don’t you think you’d want to wear a sea that fills the entire stage?”

“A sea...that fills the entire stage...”

Cassandra opened her amber green eyes wide, looked down for a moment, then raised her gaze once more to meet Lucia’s.

“If I can wear the sea, then maybe even I can become the tempest queen,” Cassandra said with an invigorating smile. She might actually be just right for the role of the queen.

Lucia was surprised and relieved that things seemed to be moving along with no resistance. She and Forto escorted Cassandra out of the factory so she could return to the opera house.

Forto and Lucia moved to his office, where he ordered a guild staff member to call for Zilo and several magical toolmakers. Lucia laid out her and Forto’s designs on top of the low table. She was thinking of reconciling their ideas a

little more when Forto sat down next to her. His blue eyes gazed at the designs before turning to fix on her, making her feel a little awkward.

“Lucia, I should have brought this up before, but may I point out the biggest problem with this?”

“Um, the budget?”

She’d been relieved that she hadn’t gotten any pushback, but the design would require a lot of fabric, which would certainly pose a financial issue. Forto, however, shook his head.

“We can manage on that front. If we need to, we can wheedle funds from the opera house manager anyway. Rather, how many stitchers do you think we will need to make this dress?”

Lucia felt like she heard something troubling mixed into his response, but that wasn’t what was important right now. This was a big—no, a massive dress, and they didn’t have much time before the opening day of the opera. They had nowhere near enough stitchers.

“I’m sorry! Mr. Forto, I didn’t even think about that—”

“It’s all right. I also wanted to try making this dress, so I am equally guilty. Let us start by gathering anyone who is free and the part-time staff. We can have the part-time staff handle sewing the straight stitches and attaching the fiendfish scales. We’ll work as quickly as we can.”

“Okay!”

Forto is unflappable. Lucia felt confident that they would be able to pull through.

Zilo, supervisor of the stitchers, arrived later to hear what they had to say. Lucia had never seen him smile more dryly than he did in that moment.



“I guess it’s true that you can do anything you put your mind to...”

“I don’t know if I agree with that, chief...” Zilo closed his sewing box as he pounded on his shoulders with his fist.

One half of the navy and azure dress was draped over a mannequin, while the

other half had been laid on top of a sheet spread out on the floor of the conference room. The stitchers had lined up and sewn the dress pieces in a three-shift rotation.

The tempest queen's dress consisted of a bottom layer and a top layer in order to reduce the strain placed on the singer. The bottom layer was a corset dress with a skirt that fanned out from the waist. The top layer was a loop of fabric that hung loosely over the elbows and spread out long and wide. It was so wide, in fact, that it looked like a large rug on the floor.

Forto had gone to the opera house to take measurements of the stage, and he'd been so surprised by the size of it that he'd returned with his pen still tucked behind his ear. Next, he'd measured the length and area of the dress, groaning all the while.

Metal bracelets were sewn into part of the hem of the top layer, so every time Cassandra moved her hands, the bottom of the dress would sway in tandem. Numerous silver fiendfish scales had been carved down smaller than fingernails, perforated, and sewn onto the exterior of the dress.

The stitchers who had worked tirelessly to sew on the fiendfish scales had reported seeing flickers of silver even after they closed their eyes. Lucia had sewn on at least a hundred, but after that point, she had blanked out, so she couldn't remember how many she'd actually sewn.

The dress would be paired with a decorative silverwork belt, a silver necklace with dark green jewels, and a dainty silver circlet adorned with a glimmering, teardrop-shaped blue gem.

They brought everything to the opera house so Cassandra could try wearing it onstage, and Lucia couldn't stop herself from beaming at the sight. The dress looked a hundred times better on Cassandra than the black dress she'd worn to the Tailors' Guild.

"Now then, Head Manager Fano, we will take over from here."

"We brought all the fan dryers we'll need!"

The two people who stood before her, both smiling broadly, were the magical toolmaker and mage from the Tailors' Guild who were in charge of making

zephyricloth. They were the same pair who had been secretly practicing the zephyricloth enchantment after work in an effort to catch up with Dahlia. Despite the fact that they were busy with manufacturing zephyricloth, neither had so much as hesitated to agree when Lucia and Forto requested that they modify the dryers.

The end result was what they called the “fan dryer”—a tool that, instead of warm air, produced a strong, cool breeze that automatically fluctuated in intensity to mimic waves. They had produced thirty units, a feat that was more than Lucia could have hoped for in such a short time. These fan dryers would be used to make the hem of the top layer flutter and sway. Lucia couldn’t wait to see it in action.

“Let me join you, please!”

“I would also like to watch.”

Lucia and Forto spoke up at the same time.

“Of course,” the guild’s magical toolmaker said with a smile.

A nearby man wearing work clothes walked over to them. “Excuse me, I’m the stagehand in charge of the fans. Do you mind if I join as well?”

“Yes, please do!”

As an expert on the opera house’s fans, he would surely be able to give them valuable guidance and input. Thus began the process of transforming the dress into the sea.

Several days later at the opera house, Cassandra laughed softly and said, “Even though my singing might not yet be, this costume is absolutely stellar.”

Her makeup had transformed her into the tempest queen—her eyebrows were darkened, her eyeliner was drawn on thick, and her eyes had been purposefully made to look as though they turned up at the corners. But up close, her kind face was still visible.

Today, the company was running through a full dress rehearsal to show what the real performance would look like. There were quite a few people in

attendance, including those involved in the performance and people from the Magical Garment Factory and the Tailors' Guild. Many of the spectators were focused more on the costumes and set rather than the contents of the opera, due to the unprecedented scale of the former.

Forto and Lucia saw Cassandra off before taking their seats in the front row.

"You look beautiful. I can't wait to hear you sing."

"I'm so excited!"

Cassandra, clad in her blue dress, took to the stage. Since she couldn't walk after adding the top layer of the dress, she was standing on a platform that was being pushed from behind by a stagehand. Lucia was relieved to see that from her spot in the audience, she couldn't tell that Cassandra was short nor that she was being moved on a platform.

The full dress rehearsal of *The Tempest Queen* began.

The opera began with the fateful encounter between the tempest queen, played by Cassandra, and the prince onboard the wrecked ship. Then came their terrifyingly earnest and mutual love and the promise to marry. The prince returned home, his parents tried to stop the marriage, and the retainers and the mermaids pleaded for each of them to end things—all of the singers filled the room with such magnificent voices that Lucia neglected to check out their costumes.

But the one who stood out the most among them all was Cassandra. Her voice was splendid, of course, but her aura on the stage was really something else. She fully conveyed her fierce yet earnest love for the prince as well as her power as a queen. By comparison, the prince almost faded into the background, though Lucia wasn't sure if that was because she was unfamiliar with the opera or because she was more attached to Cassandra.

In the final act, Cassandra was firmly secured to a support pillar on the large platform in the center of the stage. Then, the top layer of the dress—what those at the opera house referred to as a set piece—was hit on all sides by a blast of strong wind from the fan dryers as Cassandra sung her solo, marking the end of the opera's story.

The other day, they'd had a very rough time testing out the fan dryers onstage. They had secured Cassandra to a support pillar and had the fan dryers blowing air from behind her and under the top layer of her dress. The dryers that were blowing toward the audience did alternate in intensity, but having the wind blowing the dress in the same direction wouldn't have created a strong enough impression of surging waves.

To combat that, strings attached to the train of the dress held it back in spots, additional stitches had been sewn in to keep the wind from escaping, and the placement and angle of the fan dryers had been adjusted. It was a long process of trial and error.

When the magical toolmaker and mage were told that the effect was too simple and not wavelike enough, they rolled up their sleeves and made modifications to each and every dryer.

Since the fabric of the dress needed to swell and curve in a manner more reminiscent of waves, Lucia and Forto dived into the sea of skirts to add temporary stitches in the lining and then, after they were satisfied with the result, sewed in the final stitches. They repeated that process several times.

One of the stagehands brought up the fact that Cassandra's hair was flapping around unattractively, so they tried placing the ventilator at an angle that wouldn't hinder her singing, testing out different spots and levels of intensity. The magical toolmaker, mage, couturiers, and stagehands ordered each other around relentlessly—no, worked in *close collaboration* to refine the effect of the dress.

Now, all their effort was blossoming onstage.

In the center of the stage was the tempest queen, her long, black hair swaying in the sea breeze, her body adorned with pearls and fish scales. She had come to meet her lover, but her beloved prince did not descend from the land. His parents, his family's retainers, and even his friends had stopped him from coming.

The queen lamented miserably over his broken promise and briefly hung her head. But when she raised it again, on her face was the beautiful smile of an overwhelmingly powerful and proud woman. Her green eyes took on the dark

blue color of her dress—

“I, the tempest queen, will have you. I will show no hesitation or mercy.

I will engulf and wash away all, and take you, my beloved, away with me.”

The voice that spun those words sounded so sweet, it almost seemed to hold poison. The woman onstage wasn't Cassandra—she was the turbulent, beautiful tempest queen herself. The queen held out her arms, and the navy, azure, and white fabric swaying and fluttering from her wrists turned into a giant wave that threatened to drag people in.

The dress, dotted with countless silver sparkles, represented the surface of the sea reflecting the starry sky. That sea raged, engulfed everything, and sank it all to the bottom of the ocean.



The prince tried fruitlessly to escape being caught in the waves—there was no escape for him once he was captured by the tempest queen. The queen’s sonorous voice rang out even louder as the wind intensified and the sea grew violent and choppy. The waves nearly reached the audience, and then all sound except for the queen’s singing cut out, as if it had been swallowed up by those waves.

“At the bottom of the deep sea, my beloved, you will stay in my arms, for eternity...”

That last stanza was sung in a striking, high tone that gave Lucia goose bumps that lasted for a while. Even after the queen stopped singing, neither voices nor applause followed. The stagehands, cast, and audience members were still staring, captivated by the queen.

The fan dryers stopped blowing, and the hem of the wavelike dress gently fell to the floor. That was the signal that Cassandra had recovered her soul from the tempest queen. All at once, everyone shot to their feet, and deafening, thunderous applause and cheers filled the spacious opera house.

“Cassandra! You were wonderful!”

“That was amazing, Miss Lovino!”

After she finished singing, Cassandra took off the top layer of her dress and was quickly showered with praise from the other singers and the stagehands. From their voices and their expressions, she could tell they were not just flattering her.

Cassandra changed backstage, thanking her well-wishers, then headed to her dressing room. The lead part was given a private dressing room from the day of the full dress rehearsal to the last day of the official performance. This was her first time having her own dressing room.

When she opened the door, she saw three flower baskets in varying sizes laid out on the round table. One was from Fortunato, the Tailors’ guildmaster, one from her senior who had been meant to play the lead role, and one from the couturier who was supposed to have worked on her stage costume.

It felt a little early to be receiving flowers, considering she hadn't even done her first real performance. However, she had always dreamed of receiving a basket of flowers.

Cassandra had been born and raised on a small island far from the royal capital.

The waters nearby were inhabited by sirens, so fishermen would wear earplugs when going out to sea. Despite them taking that precaution, she'd heard occasional stories of fishermen being lost at sea after they were entranced by the sirens' songs. Sirens' songs were therefore detested on the island.

Her parents owned a small diner, where she and her older sister helped out from the time they were children. Cassandra always loved listening to and singing songs. She would listen attentively to the local bards and then try to mimic their songs. It made her happy when her family praised her singing. Eventually, customers at the diner started asking her to sing. For payment, the customer just ordered an extra meal, but Cassandra was just happy someone wanted her to sing.

"Cassandra, I think you could even be a singer in the capital," a sailor who'd come from the capital told her. She assumed he was just being nice, but his words ignited a longing in her heart.

Cassandra asked the bards who came to the diner how they practiced their singing, then decided to try it for herself. However, while she could sing in the diner, she couldn't sing loudly outside, for there were people in her neighborhood who were painfully reminded of sirens when they heard a woman singing.

Left with no other choice, Cassandra would run down to the seaside whenever she had the slightest bit of free time so her singing could be covered up by the sound of the waves. With the waves as her only audience, Cassandra sang loud and proud. It felt like breathing.

One day, when she was singing to the sea like she usually did, she heard another singing voice that wasn't her own. Shocked, she looked around to find

a man who was a little younger than her father singing while looking at her.

The man continued singing as he raised his pointer finger. Somehow, she knew he was telling her to resume. Cassandra did just that, and the man joined in at a different pitch. It was her first time singing in harmony with someone, but it felt right.

She listened to the man's singing as she tried to keep tempo and harmony with him—and before she knew it, her voice easily soared to reach even higher notes. It was fun, enthralling, and made her happy. So filled with happiness was she that she wished she could keep singing forever and ever.

They sang the same song four more times before Cassandra ran out of breath. The blond-haired, green-eyed man laughed gracefully.

“Seaside siren, you belong on an opera stage.”

How could this man, who'd never met her before, give voice to her own wild fantasy?

When he followed her back to the diner and introduced himself, she learned he was the manager of the capital's Royal Opera House. He offered to pay her tuition to study singing in the capital, but before she could respond, her family voiced vehement opposition. Her father and mother told her, “He says he's the manager, but he has no proof. He could be a swindler.” The man nodded in understanding, then left, saying he would return with a guarantor.

By dinnertime, the man still hadn't returned, and everyone at the diner was adamant they had been right about him being suspicious. That was when he appeared with the lord of the island. The diner had never been more silent than in that moment.

And so Cassandra left the island to move to the capital, where she began her vocal training. However, she couldn't read sheet music well, and she had no knowledge of the fundamentals of music. Moreover, having been raised on an island, she was ignorant of the affairs of the capital and had an unrefined appearance, which often led to her being laughed at behind her back.

“Why don't you let me adopt you, just as a formality? I get jealous hearing my friend always brag about his daughter,” the manager suggested. He must have

been worried about her.

Cassandra declined. He was already doing enough by paying her expensive tuition and lodging fees. Besides, she didn't care about what other people said. She was learning to identify notes, read music, and play instruments; she was able to listen to her teachers' singing; and she could sing as much as she wanted in the rehearsal space—she was having so much fun with all of that. She was immersed in music like a fish in water.

A few years later, Cassandra passed the exam to become an apprentice singer at the Royal Opera House. She'd made it there on her own ability, without a recommendation letter from the manager. There, she sang her heart out behind the stage, in minor roles and anything else she could get.

As time went on, she received more and more praise for her singing, but she still hadn't been given a major role. It was an unfortunate thing that one learned upon joining the opera—a singer's appearance was very important, and especially for a woman. Cassandra was short and plump, but if she lost weight, she wouldn't be able to maintain her volume and her stamina. And more than anything, her plain appearance was beyond helping.

Things like her own dressing room, colorful flower baskets, and the cheers of adoring fans were out of her reach. Nevertheless, she convinced herself that she would be happy just being able to sing for a living and threw her all into that.

Then, like a wyvern out of the azure, she was given this chance to play a leading role. The role was the tempest queen, a spirit taking the form of a peerless beauty and the wielder of such violent passion, born of her love for the prince, as would engulf his entire kingdom in a storm. Cassandra was at a loss as to how she would fulfill this role, which was further from herself than anything.

When she went to the Tailors' Guild to consult them on her costume, she'd chosen to wear a black dress to make herself look as much like a singer as she could. She sat, a bundle of nerves, before the attractive guildmaster and a female couturier with a youthful face.

"Um, excuse me, but did you play the flower fairy in *Tell Me, What is Love?*?" the couturier, whose name was Lucia, asked her before leaning forward and

loudly praising her performance.

As a singer, Cassandra was overjoyed to hear it.

Making the stage costume that those two had proposed proved to be a much bigger ordeal than what she'd had in mind. When Cassandra asked if the costume wouldn't be too flashy, Lucia had responded, "But you're the tempest queen, aren't you? If anything, don't you think you'd want to wear a sea that fills the entire stage?"

A sea that fills the entire stage. Those words reminded Cassandra of the island she'd grown up on. The calm, beautiful waves; the velvety surface of the water under the wide, starry sky; the violent, choppy waves during a storm—

If she could wear the sea, then maybe she could truly embody her role as the tempest queen.

Now, today, she was wearing the blue dress on the stage, playing the leading role. But could it really be called a dress? She'd seen many costumes onstage with long, trailing hems, but never anything that seemed to reach out and touch the audience. As she was marveling over the size and workings of the dress, the rehearsal began.

Cassandra sang with everything she had, the way she always did.

The glittering silver on top of navy and azure; the long, sweeping, white hem—once the fan dryers began blowing, a sea appeared onstage. Cassandra's voice grew in intensity with the blowing air, until finally, she transformed into a tempest that engulfed everything.

Winds severe enough to break a ship's mast, waves crashing hard enough to swallow the port, and tempests violent enough to submerge an island—Cassandra knew very well those storms that turned humans into small, weak creatures.

The tempest queen loved the prince with all her heart. Cassandra loved singing with all her heart. If what she loved were taken from her, she, too, might want to sink everything to the bottom of the sea. The tempest queen had always been within her—

Cassandra sang, fully embodying the queen.

Once she finished, the thunderous cheers and applause finally turned the tempest queen back into Cassandra.

“Ah...”

Lost in her memories, Cassandra was late in noticing the knock that had come at the door. She gave a hasty response, and the door opened, revealing a great big basket of flowers. Behind the basket, a man called out her name in the same voice she’d heard the first day they’d met.

“Cassandra, you were divine!”

The opera house manager—himself a singer of whom it was said that even sirens would fall silent to listen to his song—came into her room holding a flower basket that barely fit through the doorway. Again, it felt too early for flowers.

The manager hummed as placed the basket of flowers in seven colors on the floor. Even though he was merely humming, the melody was so lovely that she felt gripped by it. Her own singing still couldn’t hold a candle to the manager’s.

“Now I know it wasn’t a siren I met on the shore that day—it was the tempest queen!”

Despite her misgivings, it seemed she’d been able to become the tempest queen.

Cassandra vowed to refine her singing even more to pull the audience members to the bottom of the sea in the real performance. Then, someday, she would even pull in the manager, and prove herself as a full-fledged singer—

“Cassandra, you deserve to one day become the diva—no, the queen of this opera house.”

Once again, the man had given voice to her own wild fantasies. But no more doubt remained in her heart.

“Yes, I will make sure to live up to your expectations.”



“I couldn’t get a ticket for *The Tempest Queen*. The tickets have all been sold out for a while now, for its entire run...”

“I couldn’t get a single ticket either. Not even using my connections...”

In the workroom of the Magical Garment Factory, two factory workers were commiserating.

The latest opera playing at the Royal Opera House, *The Tempest Queen*, had been very well received from its opening day. The performance was lauded for its innovative set and costumes, and for pushing the boundaries of what an opera could be. However, rather than celebrating those reviews from the opera’s opening day, Lucia was sulking. She knew the dress was amazing—of that she was confident and proud.

Even so, most impressive of all were the vocal and theatrical performances by Cassandra and the rest of the cast. Those reviews should have praised *them* first and foremost.

When she complained about it to Zilo, he’d told her to wait a few days. Although his response had left her unsatisfied, she’d done as he said and waited a few days. Soon, the reviews had begun commenting on the crowds of people rushing to the opera house to see the tempest queen. Now the opera itself was finally getting the recognition it deserved. In fact, so many people were going to see it multiple times that tickets were impossible to get, hence why the factory staff were lamenting at the moment.

Lucia was in the middle of working when she was notified of an unexpected visitor. It was the tempest queen herself, Cassandra. Lucia rushed out of the workroom on her way to the reception room, worried she had come to discuss some damage to or problem with the costume or the fan dryers. The costume had the highest likelihood of suffering some damage, so Lucia asked Zilo, the head stitcher, to come with her.

“Has something happened, Miss Lovino?”

Cassandra was in the reception room wearing a scarlet dress. Its size and silhouette looked great on her, and the round collar and soft, puffy sleeves gave her a cute yet refined look. This outfit wrapped elegantly around her voluptuous figure, and it suited her much better than the black dress she wore the first day they met.

“I am sorry for not giving you advance notice of my arrival, Head Manager

Fano. Today is a rest day, so there's no show. I just came to bring you this, but then I was served tea..." Cassandra looked apologetic as she handed Lucia a white envelope with a red wax seal of a flower and a music note. "These are tickets for the final day of the show. I reserved a private box for you, so please bring a guest."

"Thank you! But I can't believe it's already the final day..."

Lucia thought of the tears that the factory workers who still hadn't gotten to see the show would surely cry.

Cassandra continued, "It has been decided there will be an additional run of performances, so we will need you again to make more adjustments. I hope I can count on you when the time comes."

"Of course!"

"Also, the audience requests an encore every night, so I wanted to ask whether, for the last day, it would be all right if I announced that you were the one who made my costume?"

Cassandra announcing that Lucia had been involved in the creation of her costume for an opera that was currently the talk of the city would be the best advertisement anyone could ask for. It was something Lucia would be extremely grateful for.

"I really appreciate it! Actually, do you mind saying that it was made by the Tailors' Guild?"

"Huh? Not that it was made by Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory?" Cassandra asked, her green eyes wide.

"I would appreciate that a lot too, but I just made the basic design. Mr. Forto and the factory staff gave their input throughout the process. The cutters and stitchers of the Tailors' Guild also had a hand in making it. The magical toolmakers of the guild also did a lot of work to modify the fans. So I'd be happy if you could say it was made by the Tailors' Guild."

Everyone at the Tailors' Guild should receive recognition for the success of the opera. They would all be lumped together as "the Tailors' Guild," but she knew they would each feel recognized. And most importantly, Lucia would get

what she wanted. As she was beaming with satisfaction, Cassandra smiled gently.

“Very well. I will do just that. You really are a humble person, Head Manager Fano.”

“Humble? No, that’s not it. This way, the Tailors’ Guild will get even more work and everyone will make a profit!” Lucia declared, imagining the gold coins pouring in. Cassandra laughed in a charming voice. Next to her, Zilo burst out laughing.

For quite a while, bright, cheerful voices resounded in the reception room of the Magical Garment Factory.

“I think this looks good, don’t you?”

“I think we should let it out another finger’s length or so.”

Night had fallen. In Forto’s office, he and Zilo were conversing under the light of two magical lanterns. They were having trouble reaching an agreement regarding the silhouette of the menswear they were in the process of sewing, which was currently draped inside out on a mannequin torso.

The dark navy blue three-piece suit’s slim fit would give the wearer a beautiful, trim look when standing. Being an autumn suit, it was made of thicker material, so Forto wanted to avoid adding any more bulk to it.

“As it is, if the client gains just a little weight, he won’t be able to wear the suit. Remember what his attendant stated in the request form? He had to go up one belt size this summer. We don’t want the vest and jacket to be too tight on him in the future, right? That starts to become an issue in your thirties.”

“I think he’ll get back in shape soon, but if it comes to it, we can suggest wearing a corset underneath. He’s still only thirty, after all.”

The client was a regular customer of the Tailors’ Guild. For this particular order, he had requested that his suit be enchanted with strong defensive magic, so Forto was taking the lead in designing it. He had taken into account the client’s figure and the comfort of the fit, made meticulous adjustments, and finally achieved what he thought was a stylish silhouette. He didn’t want to

yield.

“Or perhaps we can recommend he get some exercise instead?”

It was no easy task to tell someone to get in shape just for the sake of the outfit’s silhouette. And this was for a client to whom Forto definitely didn’t want to say that under any circumstances.

“Zilo, why don’t you suggest that yourself? I’m afraid I value my life too much.”

“Mr. Forto, I’ve already decided that I will die old and senile under the care of my beloved wife. I will have to pass on being frozen to death.”

The two couturiers laughed dryly as they spoke of life and death. It felt absurd. For now, they agreed to let out the jacket and vest, which were intended for a certain future marquis, by another half a finger’s length.

“By the way, it’s been brought to my attention that you are wanted back in the guild’s sewing department.”

This was the main reason Forto had asked Zilo to stay behind after work today. The head of the sewing department as well as several stitchers were hoping—no, pleading for Zilo to leave the Magical Garment Factory and return to the guild.

When they came to him, Forto had asked about the state of their work, and they had all replied in the same way. They weren’t short staffed, nor were they having trouble with performing difficult sewing, but they claimed that ever since Zilo left, they were having issues with their workflow.

Forto had pressed for more details, and they’d explained that they were getting behind on their work, which they’d never before had a problem with. Each delay in dyeing and cutting the fabric was taking a toll, and they were trying to compensate by pushing the schedule back. At the moment, they were managing to make do, but they had concerns for the future.

When Forto asked if Zilo was the one who had overseen the workflow as a whole and compensated for the delays, the department manager had finally acknowledged that was the case. Apparently, Zilo had gone above and beyond behind the scenes.

Next, the department manager had asked if Zilo could be given a managerial role so he could oversee the entire sewing department. Forto had been left with no choice but to check with the man himself, in order to improve the department's working conditions.

"Your many talents are missed, Zilo. I've been told that ever since you left, they haven't been able to keep up with their workflow. Would you be interested in taking on a managerial position there? I could make you the assistant head of the sewing department, which would come with a thirty percent pay increase."

"Is that an order, Mr. Forto?"

"No, it is simply a suggestion."

"In that case, I must decline," Zilo responded without the slightest hint of hesitation. Forto had been expecting this response.

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"I'd never want to leave—the Magical Garment Factory's manager is far too amusing. Ah, I've misspoken. I meant that I find the work I do at the Magical Garment Factory to be deeply meaningful."

He didn't misspeak at all. That was exactly what he wanted to say. Forto would make sure not to mention that to the department manager.

"The reason I can handle the workflow is simply because I've done it for so long, and communication is key to staying on top of the schedule. It's something that comes with practice. Anyone can do it—it doesn't have to be me. Workflows are easy to handle as long as you keep an eye on them."

It was precisely Zilo's experience and judgment that were so priceless. Even Forto still lacked those. But apparently, Zilo wanted the stitchers to gain their own experience.

"Then could I count on you to give the department manager some advice? I'll pay you for overtime, of course, and the budget will cover any food or drink you may have."

"I'd be happy to."

That should be good enough for now. Forto breathed a sigh of relief as he removed the pin cushion from his left wrist and rolled his sleeve back down.

“The stitchers will be disappointed that you won’t be returning.”

“I would reconsider...if the Magical Garment Factory’s head manager were replaced.”

Zilo’s amber red eyes flitted over to Forto’s desk, where there lay an opened letter. It was a recommendation of another head or assistant manager for the Magical Garment Factory, sent by someone in the same noble faction as Forto.

The young man recommended was the son of a viscount who had graduated with top marks from the magical toolmaking track in college. He had learned about various materials from other countries under the tutelage of a well-known magical toolmaker, and he was currently working on manufacturing and developing a wide range of magical tools at a famous workshop in the capital. On top of that, he was also well-versed in fabric and monster materials. He had many recommenders and guarantors, so it seemed people held him in high esteem. His family was also a fairly influential viscountcy.

However, the Magical Garment Factory was concerned, first and foremost, with clothes. Even though they made items that were related to magical tools, Forto had no intention of putting someone who knew nothing of clothing in the position of head or assistant manager.

“I have no plans to replace her.”

“I’m glad to hear that. By the way, Mr. Forto, there’s been some gossip about the Tailor’s Guild going around recently. I myself heard it from my wife, daughter, family barbershop, café, and tavern.”

Zilo had sharp ears, and so he was one of Forto’s sources of information. Zilo received his own information from a wide range of sources—his city guard wife, his daughter, his family barbershop, salon, eatery, café, and tavern. It was for that reason that Forto listened carefully to what Zilo had to say about rumors in the capital, trends, and popular fashion.

“People have been raving over the hottest new opera, *The Tempest Queen*, and especially the queen’s costume—the way it looks like a tempest dragging

the audience into the sea! Also, during the encore, the actress in the lead role announced that her superb costume was made by none other than the staff of the Tailors' Guild, whom she thanked from the bottom of her heart. The Tailors' Guild really is the peak of fashion!"

"What?"

"Viscount Fortunato Luini, the Tailors' guildmaster, has done it again! That's what people are saying."

"How did this happen...?" Forto asked, unable to keep his voice and expression composed.

"That wasn't your doing, Mr. Forto?"

"It was not. I thought I asked her to thank Lucia..."

"Ah, then the chief must've asked her to thank the Tailors' Guild a short while ago."

"...Zistavolo."

Zilo had to have known it was criminal not to report that to Forto, but despite Forto calling him by his full first name and glaring his way, the corners of Zilo's mouth turned up.

"I understand why you want to hurry, Mr. Forto, but isn't it better for our chief to take things step by step? Besides"—the smile vanished from his amber red eyes—"you're the one who has to stand out more than anyone, as guildmaster," Zilo concluded, dropping his formal register and speaking to Forto as he had on the first day he taught him how to sew.

Forto had asked for Zilo to teach him, to take him on as a teacher would an apprentice, without regard to nobility; otherwise, he would never have improved. Zilo had accepted. At the time, Forto had asked Zilo to caution him if he ever had concerns about his abilities, and it seemed that right now, he was doing just that.

I was being too hasty, I wasn't being mindful of everything else—establishing Lucia's position was important, but so was gaining recognition for the Tailors' Guild and for himself as its guildmaster. Perhaps those were the concerns he

should have taken into account first. He had only become guildmaster a few short years ago. Without continuous results, he might not be able to keep his post as guildmaster.

“Thank you for the warning, Zilo.”

“It’s no warning, just a small suggestion, Mr. Forto.”

“Let’s leave it at that, then. Nevertheless...I really can never predict what Lucia will do.”

He had assumed that Lucia would want to gain recognition worthy of the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, but she had turned the tables on him entirely. He’d never expected her to redirect that recognition toward him.

Moreover, in this short time, Zilo had already come to consider himself no more and no less than an employee of the Magical Garment Factory and Lucia’s subordinate. On top of that, he was making a comeback as Forto’s teacher. Nothing was going how he’d expected.

Forto let out a sigh, making Zilo smile for real this time.

“Mr. Forto, that’s impossible to do anyway. It’d be easier to guess what the weather is in Ehrlichia or win the jackpot twice than to predict what the chief will do.”

Forto heartily agreed, though he would never let Lucia hear that.

“It’s a shame, though I also appreciate that about her. I suppose it’s just how Lucia is.”

“That it is. She’s still young too, so it’s frightening to think how she’ll grow... Oh, who am I kidding. I’m excited to see it. I mean it, I want her to be the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory for as long as she wants.”

As he listened to Zilo, Forto took the recommendation letter from his desk and slipped it back into its envelope. He would have to write a rejection letter tomorrow.

“Agreed. No one’s a better fit for the Magical Garment Factory than Lucia.”

Grandmother's Red Dress

"You need to start thinking seriously about marriage soon, Dante."

Dante had gone to his family home first thing that morning, having received a message that they had an urgent matter to discuss. There, he'd found his mother and father in the study with a stack of papers describing prospective marriage partners in detail.

Dante's older brother was already married, as were his three older sisters. Dante had thought his parents would be happy with the heirs they would produce, but apparently they couldn't be satisfied until he was married off too.

"I am unable to give that consideration at the moment. My work keeps me very busy—"

"Yes, we've heard. You've transferred to the Magical Garment Factory and become its assistant manager, haven't you? Being in a managerial role puts you in an even better position for marriage. It's time to stop playing around and start acting like an adult."

Dante sighed. *"You're not an adult until you have a wife and children"*—he was fed up with his father's old-fashioned way of thinking. He knew it was useless to argue, so he was only giving vague responses. Then his mother chimed in.

"Dante, are you seeing anyone right now?"

"No," he responded bluntly.

He hadn't dated anyone for the past year. In fact, he'd expressly avoided doing so. It was starting to become a nuisance. Once someone found out he was a clothier at the Tailors' Guild, they would usually ask him for input on how to coordinate an outfit or advice about dress designs. If that was all they did, it was cute, but he also got requests to make outfits for free or at a discount, or to write a letter of introduction or recommendation to the Tailors' Guild for a relative.

He'd had tea with a young lady who'd seemed uninterested in clothes and hadn't asked him for those kinds of favors, but then she'd started asking him if he would ever change careers to something unrelated to clothes. That was when he'd realized she was only interested in forging a connection to his family, which was a viscountcy. Another time, he'd mentioned to a date that he not only made suits but also dresses, and she'd laughed and said, "How odd for a man!" then excused herself to leave right then and there.

Although he never wore them himself, Dante liked dresses. He found designing and sewing dresses to be very fulfilling work. Just over a year ago, a fashionable woman had happily listened to him speak passionately about his trade, only to break up with him via letter, saying she couldn't listen to him talking about clothes forever. A few months later, he'd heard on the grapevine that she had married a wealthy merchant.

Ever since then, he couldn't be bothered to explain things in a way that would make the other person understand, and the moment he felt they weren't clicking, he would put distance between them and let things fizzle out. His friends told him he was too detached, but it just didn't seem worth it.

Still, neither did he see the appeal in free love, the custom so prevalent in Ordine's capital, in which two people dated not only one another but multiple partners each. Thus, he was single.

"If you don't have a girlfriend, why don't you just try to meet with someone? Even if you don't end up dating, it's still a good opportunity to make a connection."

His mother had told one of his older sisters the same thing. She'd agreed, and in less than a year, she was married. He could see the same happening to himself if he wasn't careful. It was like he was just another product on an assembly line.

"I intend to continue working as a clothier; I have no plans to marry. Furthermore, I think it would be a waste of time for me to meet anyone, since I'd have nothing to offer their noble house. Also, my position as assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory comes with more responsibility. At the moment, I am just too busy—"

Dante kept his face pointed downward and rapidly blinked as hard as he could to make his eyes water. When he looked up again, he spoke sadly to his mother.

“Now that I’ve finally been trusted with this important role, it would pain me to cause any trouble for Mr. Fortunato.”

“Yes, I see. I suppose your hands are tied, considering the state of your career,” his mother said, accepting his response without question.

His father was glaring at him, but in Dante’s family, his mother had the final say in these matters. Moreover, his mother was an admirer of Fortunato Luini, and it seemed his sisters were too.

When Dante had decided to join the Tailors’ Guild, Forto had taken the trouble to come to his house and introduce himself. He was not the guildmaster at the time, but he’d shown up in a formal, black three-piece suit and politely introduced himself to the entire family. He’d even praised Dante’s mother and grandmother for their beauty, as well as his three older sisters, who happened to be present.

Next, he highly praised Dante’s skills as a couturier and expressed his sincere wish for Dante to join the Tailors’ Guild. This all happened after he’d already agreed to work at the guild, yet Forto was acting like he was trying hard to headhunt some powerful mage, which made Dante very uneasy—

“Of course, Mr. Luini. It would be an honor for my son to work with you.”

It was his mother who answered. His grandmother only smiled serenely. His sisters were acting as though they were watching an opera singer. It was a good thing their husbands weren’t there too.

And so Dante joined the Tailors’ Guild with the full support of his family, especially his mother.

His father, meanwhile, didn’t seem too partial to Forto. He coughed lightly and said, “We’re not saying it has to be right now. Once work slows down, then we can set you up with someone, or you can bring someone home. You can’t stay unmarried forever.”

“I will think about it,” Dante replied. “Ah, it seems it is time for me to go to

work.” *Good, I can escape for today.*

“I’m also about to leave. I’ll drop you off at the Magical Garment Factory. But first, go fix your tie. It’s loose.”

“Yes, father.”

Dante’s expression stiffened as he walked into the hallway.

The puffy canary yellow tie he was wearing that day was meant to be worn loose, but that was apparently unacceptable to his straitlaced father. He was probably better off wearing a stuffy navy or blue tie like his father and brother wore, but on top of being suffocating, it wasn’t Dante’s style. He figured he should probably just change his tie while he was here to avoid unnecessary drama, but doing so didn’t sit right with him.

As Dante was walking sluggishly down the hall, he heard a slightly husky voice call out his name.

“Oh, Dante. You came.”

“Grandmother... It’s good to see you.”

It was his grandmother, Filluna Cassini. Her ice green eyes were the same shade as Dante’s own, and her wavy, white hair was tied back in a bun. She wore a well-tailored dark navy dress; it fit her slender frame well but wasn’t especially attention-grabbing.

In the past, his grandmother used to wear gorgeously colorful dresses—vibrant blue and green, wine red and silver, and even patterned dresses. However, ever since Dante’s grandfather passed away a few years ago, she had worn only dresses in somber hues, like dark navy or dark gray. It could have also been something she decided to do in her old age, but at some point, he had become completely accustomed to seeing her this way.

“Are you staying for a while?” she asked him.

“No, I have to go to work now.”

“Ah, a pity. I wanted to have a word with you.”

“I’m sorry, maybe next time,” Dante responded, slight irritation seeping into his tone.

His grandmother was the one who'd raised him in place of his mother, who had been busy helping his father with his work. Dante suspected either his mother or father had asked Filluna to try to persuade him. The idea of even his grandmother urging him to get married or meet a prospective spouse depressed him. He wanted nothing more than to drop the topic for today.

"Could I borrow some of your time one of these days? I'd like to consult with you about clothes."

"You want to consult me...about clothes?"

He hadn't been expecting that. He was fairly certain Filluna already had a couturier of her own. There was a chance her approaching him like this was a mere pretense.

"Yes, I'd like to have a red dress made—there's someone I want to wear it for." Filluna said quietly. The femininity and bashfulness he picked up from her voice unsettled him deeply.

"Red isn't for people your age."

Shoot, now I've done it. It was too late to take back the rude comment that had already left his mouth. His grandmother widened her eyes slightly, but she didn't scold him.

"You may be right... Forgive me for bothering you during this busy time, Dante."

Wait, I never said I wouldn't help. Dante hastily tried to rephrase himself. "No, I meant to say, a more subdued color than red—"

"Dante, let's go. I'm going to be late to my meeting," his father cut in, interrupting his attempt to clarify himself.

His grandmother moved to the edge of the hallway and said, with the same smile she used to wear when seeing him off to school, "Have a good day, and take care."

"Ah, damn it..."

Dante pressed a hand to his forehead. He had just finished sewing some

zephyricloth onto a shirt when he realized he'd done a brilliant job of sewing it onto the wrong side, rendering it useless. *Now I have to redo it.* He'd sewn the entire thing without realizing it. His own stupidity amazed him.

No one else seemed to have noticed his profound mistake. He was working at a table in the corner of the room, after all, and everyone else was focused on their own tasks. He let out a sigh of relief.

As he was intent on pulling out the stitches, his green-haired manager walked up to him.

"Dante, could you come with me to the storage room for a second? I want to get some fabric."

"Sure thing, boss."

Lucia was short. Maybe for that reason, or maybe just because she liked them, she often wore high-heeled shoes. But she still had trouble reaching the top shelves in the fabric storage room even with those heels—and even when using a step stool. The other day, he had let out a silent scream when he saw her climb on the stool and then *jump* to reach some fabric on a higher shelf.

"Don't jump on a stool! *Always* ask someone taller to get it for you!" he'd squawked at her. Refusing her request right now was not an option.

The two of them left the room and, squinting against the sun pouring in through the windows, made their way to the storage room.

The windows of the storage room were shuttered in order to keep out the sun and preserve the fabric. When people accessed the room, they would light a magical lantern, and if they needed to see the colors of the fabrics better, they could slightly open a window.

Dante entered the dim room first, then lit the magical lantern.

"So, which fabric should I get for you, boss? Or do you want me to open the window so you can see the colors?" Dante asked, holding the stool in one hand as he stood in front of a shelf. Lucia briskly walked up to him, coming a bit too close for comfort.

"Did something happen, Dante?"

She was standing right in front of him, her dark blue eyes trained directly on him.

“No...not really?”

“You’ve been looking gloomy all day. You’ve looked like that before when you’re hungover, but even then, I’ve never seen you make a mistake like that.”

Apparently, Lucia *had* noticed him sew the zephyricloth to the wrong side of the shirt. *Boss really keeps a good eye on her employees.* Though this wasn’t the time to be admiring her for that.

“I just had something on my mind. It’s not a big deal...”

“Dante, if it’s something I can help with, I want you to talk to me about it. And if it’s something I can’t help with, then you should ask Mr. Forto or Zilo. Whatever it is, it’s not good to carry it around all on your own.”

“No, really, it’s not a big deal.”

“Then will you talk to me about it?”

Lucia looked at him with her clear, blue eyes. In the face of her fierce earnestness, Dante couldn’t say no.

“All right. Um, this morning, I was called to my parents’ house—”

Dante went on to summarize the events of that morning. He told her how he had gone to his family’s home at his parents’ request, how his grandmother had wanted to consult him about a red dress, and how, being in a hurry, he’d accidentally said, “Red isn’t for people your age.” He told her how he’d meant to recommend a different color for his grandmother but had been unable to do so because he had to accompany his father, with the result that he’d left for work without apologizing. He couldn’t, however, bring himself to tell Lucia how his parents’ pushing him to meet a potential marriage partner had soured his mood.

“Dante!” Lucia cried his name sharply the moment he finished speaking.

Without thinking, he straightened his back and responded, “Yes!” like a proper subordinate.

“That *is* a big deal! How could you, as a couturier, tell anyone they can’t wear

what they want, much less your own grandmother?! It's not for people her age? Fashion knows no age or gender!"

Lucia had never scolded him in this way before. Dante reflexively shrunk down and said, "Sorry..."

"I'm not the one who you should be apologizing to!"

Now he'd made her even madder. He knew she was right, and he felt deeply ashamed.

"Dante, go back right now and apologize."

He'd already been thinking of apologizing to his grandmother the next time he went to his family home. He hadn't expected Lucia to tell him to march over and apologize right this second.

"I'll go after work. It's the middle of the workday, and I don't want to inconvenience anyone."

"Leave right now! I'm more worried about having you do any work right now."

Dante couldn't very well continue working if Lucia, the head manager, was telling him to leave. Besides, it was probably *more* inconvenient to the factory for him to work while he was distracted like this. He nodded and said, "Okay. I'll go apologize now."

"Good. And don't forget your tape measure and notepad. Sometimes people don't know their sizes accurately as they get older."

"Huh?"

"Why're you acting so surprised? You're going to make it, aren't you? The red dress?"

Honestly, he wasn't sure how he'd even go about making a red dress suitable for his grandmother's age. Where was she even planning on wearing it? Those thoughts swirled in his mind as he started to give an evasive answer. "Oh, I mean, I need to ask her again—"

"Let's make it, Dante. Who better to make a grandmother's dress than her own couturier grandson!"

Dante glanced at Lucia. It sounded like she was going to assist him in making the dress. The glare of the magical lantern, reflected in her dark blue eyes, was dazzlingly bright.

“Yeah, let’s make it! I’ll go ask my grandmother for more details.”

Thus, Dante headed back to his family’s home for a second time. His irritation and misery from this morning gave way to excitement.

“It’s late...”

Dante returned to the Magical Garment Factory from his family’s house around an hour after the workday ended. There was still a light on in the workroom. Someone must have been working late—probably someone who’d had to pick up his slack.

When Dante entered the room, he saw the back of a dainty figure.

“I’m back, boss. I’ll take responsibility for making up for the delay I caused.”

“No need! Zilo kept us on track.”

It sounded like his share of the work was already done. Moreover, the workbenches had all been tidied up already.

“Huh? So where is he? Is no one else working overtime?”

“Zilo had a date with his wife, so he left right on time. No one’s working overtime today.”

“So why are you here alone?”

“Um, just because? I was planning on going home after sketching some designs...”

There was no design sketchbook on the desk. Dante realized from Lucia’s vague response that she had been worried about him. She’d been waiting for him, even without knowing whether he would return or not. The least he could do was tell her what happened. With that thought, he sat down in the chair at her left.

“I bowed to my grandmother at a ninety degree angle and properly

apologized to her. She tried to say I was right about a red dress being unsuitable for her age, so I disagreed wholeheartedly and told her I'd make her one, and I even took her measurements. Also, I told her I would cover the costs, as a present from her couturier grandson."

Dante decided not to mention that his grandmother had been smiling the entire time. It was a little embarrassing.

"Perfect! I'm glad you were able to patch things up."

"It's not like I'm going to fight with my grandmother. I know I'm a good-for-nothing son and grandson, but I'm not *that* bad," Dante replied defensively.

"You don't fight with your grandmother? I used to fight with mine sometimes."

"That's a surprise. You seem like the type who can settle things peacefully with words alone."

"My grandma was better at that than me. I could never beat her in an argument. Oh, and the same goes for sewing."

Lucia spoke about her grandmother in the past tense. It was possible she had already passed away.

"Was your grandmother a seamstress?"

"No, she made buttons. She crafted a lot of different styles of decorative buttons. But she was also good at sewing."

"Oh, you know, the guild probably made use of some of those buttons too. But I honestly can't imagine your button-maker grandmother being able to beat you in a verbal argument, boss," he said, expecting her to laugh and shoot back a *Dante, you big meanie!* But the response she gave was tinged with sadness and came with an awkward smile.

"Maybe 'verbal argument' isn't the right way to put it. I was really immature, so she taught me a lot. I get it now, but at the time, I always talked back to her and said I couldn't do the things she wanted me to do."

"Well, grandparents can be strict about etiquette, so they're always lecturing their grandchildren about stuff."

“Yeah, but since she was also sort of a mentor to me as a craftsperson, she was pretty direct.”

“Direct? You mean she was harsh?”

“For example, when I complained about an older coworker at my part-time laundry job making fun of me for being slow at ironing because I was short, she said something like this.” Lucia clapped her hands together and said, with a serious look on her face, ““Sulking over it is a waste of time! It’s true you’re short, so just get better at ironing. You can’t work alone, so you’ll always have coworkers you don’t get along with. Ignore their personalities and just see them for the quality of their work and their skills. Then, if you can, try to get better than them. If you can’t, run away from that job as fast as you can.””

“A sound argument. Your grandmother was quite the philosopher...”

She was like the advanced version of Lucia. Dante didn’t even think he could beat her in an argument.

“You’re right, but I was too down in the dumps at the time, so I got miffed at her. I just screamed, ‘I can’t do it!’ at her.”

“I’d have probably done the same.”

“But she always spoke the truth, even if it was hard to take. Now I feel like I should have listened to her a little more.”

“...She doesn’t tell you things anymore?”

“No, she passed away at the temple in the spring. The oranges I brought her that day were a little tart, so she told me, ‘Bring me sweeter ones tomorrow.’ Those were the last words she ever said to me. Funny, right?”

Lucia’s smile was strained. Dante followed up rapidly, “I can recommend you a good fruit stand. You can bring a basket of sweet oranges to her grave.”

“Thanks! That’d be great!” Lucia replied with a genuine smile.

Relieved, Dante looked back on his own actions and, after a pause, said, “I can relate. I was kind of upset with my parents this morning, so I unintentionally took it out on my grandmother.”

“Huh? Did something else happen?”

“Ah, yeah... My parents were being annoying, telling me to meet with a prospective marriage partner—even though I don’t want to.”

“Oh, I get it! My parents aren’t telling me to do that, but I’m getting loads of letters about it. And about adoption! All thanks to the Magical Garment Factory. It’s a real pain just writing refusal letters for all of those.”

Dante had heard that commoners were grateful for offers of marriage or adoption from nobles, but apparently they were nothing but a bother for Lucia.

“Is there no one who meets your standards, boss?”

“I don’t think I could be part of a noble family, and all these offers are only coming in because I’m the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. I won’t have much to offer once someone else takes my place. I don’t really want to form a connection that’s not likely to last.”

“Are you thinking of quitting the Magical Garment Factory soon?”

“I want to keep at it for as long as I can, but there are some complications that come with it. It’s a disadvantage that with me in charge, nobles don’t take the factory seriously, right? I think a manager from the nobility would be able to bring in more business. Besides, I want to own my own workshop and boutique one day.”

A young commoner woman owning her own workshop and boutique—it sounded infinitely difficult. But Lucia knew that already. She was aiming for that goal with her own skill, without the backing of a noble or a wealthy merchant. Dante had a feeling that if anyone could make that dream come true, it was her. That was unfortunate for Dante, though. It meant his workplace would become less fun.

“I don’t want you to quit, boss. Now that my work is finally interesting, I want to keep at it for a long time.”

“If that’s how you feel, then *you* should be the next head manager of the Magical Garment Factory,” Lucia said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Dante shook his head vehemently. “No thank you! Who’d want to take on an annoying job like that, right in the line of fire for criticism? It’s more fun secretly

doing whatever I like behind the manager's back."

"I knew you'd say that!"

Lucia cackled in a very unladylike way, and Dante couldn't help but laugh along with her. The two of them were alone in the factory at nightfall, but there was nothing sentimental or uneasy about it. There was nothing but laughter and talk of clothes between them. It was very comfortable.

"Dante, have you thought of a design for the dress already?"

"No, I was going to do that now. I...brought my sketchbook."

"Your sketchbook! Can I see it?"

Dante was hesitant to place his brown-cover sketchbook on the table. His designs lacked Forto's charm. And although Forto had complimented his designs and said they differed from his own merely by dint of a unique style, Dante honestly felt he needed to gather his courage before showing them to Lucia. On the other hand, it would be strange if he didn't show her now.

Dante slammed his sketchbook down on the workbench. "Okay, boss! Be merciless in your grading!"

"This isn't a test! Don't say that!"

He seemed to have touched a nerve. Lucia opened his sketchbook in any case.

"Wow... This is great..." she whispered when she looked at the very first page. It wasn't a design but a sketch of a mannequin.

Dante wasn't a fan of the standard thin charcoal pencils, which were wrapped in hard paper. He disliked having to peel back the paper as well as the sound the charcoal made against a page. So instead, he'd drawn his mannequin sketch and his designs directly on the paper in black ink.

Dante's heart jumped as he heard the rustling sound of Lucia turning the page. From the second page on, the sketchbook was filled with designs of dresses, gowns, and dressy pantsuits.

If pressed, Dante would have said that his designs were minimalist in decoration but made good use of colors and patterns and contained finely detailed lines. The puff of the sleeves, the draping, the cut—he wrote all of

those details in small letters on the page, which detracted from his designs. Nevertheless—or perhaps thanks to that—he had been acknowledged at the Tailors’ Guild for designing clothes that were comfortable and suitable for a wide range of ages and had thus been given opportunities to design dresses and suits for commoners.

Dante also enjoyed designing uniforms. Trying to make both functionality and functional beauty work together within fixed limitations was like working on a fun puzzle. That was why he happily accepted assignments to work on uniforms for commoners—for example, for students and restaurant workers—which couturiers of noble birth generally did not want to take on.

As a result, people would comment on his work behind his back, saying his designs were skilled but lacked glamour, or that he was a mediocre if useful couturier for commoners and the masses. But here was Lucia, carefully poring over every page of his sketchbook.

“They’re all pretty. They feel comforting in a way... I’m not sure how to put it...”

Dante wasn’t surprised by Lucia’s words. His designs must have been so banal that she was hard-pressed to find anything praiseworthy about them. The moment he was about to tell her she didn’t have to force herself to say something nice, she looked up.

“They’re pleasing to the eye and highlight the individual!”

“...Really?”

They’re pleasing to the eye and highlight the individual. No one had ever told him that before. He felt a tickle in his heart—then suddenly, he understood. Dante personally wanted to wear and design clothes that were not extravagantly decorated but simply made people look even more like themselves. *Clothes that express who you are, without having to overreach yourself*—he felt like his designs, which he had always considered to be incoherent, had suddenly come together in his own mind. It was a strange feeling, since they were, after all, his own designs.

“With all these lovely designs, I know you’ll be able to make a lovely dress!”

What sort of dress would Lucia design for his grandmother? The thought flashed through his mind, and he was hit with a very interesting idea.

“Boss, why don’t you help me out with the design and creation? I’ve spent a lot of time with my grandmother, so this project could use a fresh pair of eyes. I’ll pay you whether you actually help me sew it or not.”

“Of course I’ll help! As for payment, just give me another lesson on noble etiquette, please.”

“Got it!” Dante answered even as he wondered what the topic of the next lesson should be.

Lucia was getting better at speaking to nobles. She could hold her own if she needed to. There were only a few lessons he still needed to teach her: etiquette for banquets and balls, as well as a rundown of the different noble factions. Eventually, Lucia would be paying frequent visits to nobles’ mansions and even the castle, so it couldn’t hurt to go a little more in-depth about each family.

But when it came to insider information, Dante needed a refresher too. If possible, he also wanted the most up-to-date information. He’d been avoiding interacting with nobles since it was too much trouble, but the job of assistant manager also entailed supporting the head manager. It was only reasonable for him to do that much.

“Oh, here. Mr. Forto also ordered us ten design sketchbooks!” said Lucia. “The paper quality is amazing—they feel so smooth to draw on. I don’t want to waste them, so I was thinking we could use them for clean copies of designs.”

“You should make good use of those, boss. Also, that paper quality is different from what I’m used to. I prefer drawing with ink.”

“Well, Mr. Forto did say this was a business expense anyway...”

Dante was sure Forto ordered thirty custom-made sketchbooks at a time with a very specific paper quality. On the back of the sketchbooks Lucia was holding were Forto’s initials, so Dante suspected the guildmaster had personally purchased them—but for now, he decided it best not to say anything about that.

“All right, I’ll sketch some designs when I get home. Then, we can meet after

work tomorrow,” Lucia said.

“Slow down. There’s no rush.”

“Dante, in seven days, we’ll be getting the second delivery of powdered slime for the zephyricloth, remember?”

Lucia’s blue eyes started to tear up, and he could foresee just how busy the factory was about to get. She was right—they should nail down a basic design before then.

“Okay, boss, thanks for your help. I look forward to working with you starting tomorrow.”

And like that, the two of them decided to tack on personal overtime starting tomorrow.

The next evening, they were once again the only two people in the workroom, sitting side by side. Around the same time as yesterday, Dante went to a stall to buy some hot sandwiches, and Lucia procured them plenty of coffee. They ate and drank as they looked over each other’s designs.

“Dante, these second and fourth designs are really pretty, but aren’t they too long?”

“We can’t get rid of the length. My grandmother is over seventy.”

“Is that a nobility thing? Wouldn’t a longer dress make it harder to walk? Both my grandmas on my dad and mom’s side shortened the hems of their longer dresses once they were over sixty.”

“Huh? Maybe it *is* a nobility thing? I feel like I’ve seen other older women who... Actually, that woman from the earldom was always sitting down, and that other woman was outdoors, so I think she was wearing a shorter dress...”

“Ahh, so it also depends if you’re indoors or outdoors? Did you ask your grandmother where she plans to wear the dress?”

“...I am afraid I neglected to ask.”

“Why so formal all of a sudden?”

Dante laughed her off evasively. The day Dante went to apologize to his

grandmother, he'd felt so relieved seeing her familiar smile that he'd forgotten to ask. He couldn't believe he hadn't asked the essential questions, like where she was going to wear the dress. *And I call myself a clothier?*

"I like your first and fifth designs, boss. I think the lace and sideswept hem would look really nice."

Dante turned to look back at the first design. The dress had soft, lacey long sleeves and a loosely cinched high waist with a ribbon tied slackly in the back. The skirt was flared, with rich layering on the left side. All it needed was to be made with lightweight fabric and it would be easy to walk in without putting too much strain on the knees. He could envision the beautiful way the hem would sway in the breeze.

Dante looked at the second design in his sketchbook, the one Lucia had singled out as being particularly pretty, and sighed to himself. It was a sleek silk dress that was slightly loose-fitting yet still hugged the body. Despite being pleated for ease of movement, it wasn't very voluminous. It was a subdued dress that wasn't overly showy, appropriate for a woman his grandmother's age. Its length was balanced by the open décolletage, which would show off the triple-strand pearl necklace she always used to wear. Overall, it was an ensemble that was suitable for her age while recapturing her former style.

It was elegant and safe, but the more he thought about it, the less confident he became that this was the sort of red dress his grandmother currently wanted to wear.

"Your designs seem better, boss."

"You think so? You know her better than I do. I think that open décolletage is way more fabulous if she's going to wear a necklace. How's her back?"

"She isn't stooped, so I think your design with the ribbon would look nice on her."

"Hmm, it's hard to form a clear picture when I don't know what she looks like... If I can, I'd like to meet your grandmother."

Dante froze, then took a deep breath.

"Boss, listen... Telling a nobleman you want to meet his grandfather or

grandmother is like saying you want them to ascertain whether you are worthy of joining the family, or in other words, asking to get one step closer to your goal. Got it? Don't say it carelessly."

"Oh, really? I'll be careful! But jeez, nobles are nothing but trouble..."

"I won't deny that..."

What would happen if I carelessly let Lucia and grandmother meet? Dante's pen halted as the thought rose to mind. In order to have a dress made, one had to meet with a couturier. It wasn't like it was a special occasion or anything. He knew that, but for whatever reason, something inside him was giving him pause. *I must be sleep-deprived or something.*

"Anyway, red... What do you think about this shade?"

Dante had painted a swatch of blackish red ink on a separate page. When Lucia saw that, she tilted her head.

"Isn't it too dark? That's more of a reddish black than red. Some people look great in bright reds, even in their sixties and seventies."

"To be honest, I'm not even sure if red in general is a good color for my grandmother."

"Everyone looks good in red. There are so many different shades of red, after all. And even human blood is red. I'm sure there's a red that your grandmother likes *and* looks good on her. Let's go to the Tailors' Guild and take a look at a fabric sample book!"

"All right. But let's finish our hot sandwiches first. Our coffee is getting cold too."

"You're right, we need to fill ourselves up before the fight!"

What the heck does she intend to fight? Things seemed to be taking an odd turn, but Dante hastily finished up his dinner anyway.

At night, the Tailors' Guild was illuminated by lamplight. The few workers traversing the halls still exuded a slight sense of urgency. In all likelihood, the stitchers in the sewing department's workroom were working on a rush-order

dress or suit.

“Good evening, Head Manager Fano and Assistant Manager Cassini.”

Dante turned toward the voice that had called out to them to see the guild staff member who managed the fabric. He was carrying two large bolts.

“Good evening, Mr. Reinecke. Things are busy here, aren’t they?”

“Yes, a wedding dress needs to be altered for the day after tomorrow. They’ve requested a large amount of additional fabric.”

“Oof...” Dante groaned. Lucia looked at him in wonder. She must not have understood what that meant.

“What he means is not adding fabric for shirring but letting out the dress. By a lot.”

The moment he explained, Lucia’s face paled. The stitchers had to undo the carefully sewn wedding dress and add extra fabric to make it wider, which was a time-consuming process—though with two days to do it, Dante was sure the stitchers of the Tailors’ Guild would be able to meet that deadline.

The young man pushed up his glasses and explained, choosing his words carefully. “You see, the stress of the days leading up to the wedding can make some people lose their appetite. But, well, the reverse is also true.”

Some people ate less before their wedding, while others overate. In either case, the Tailors’ Guild could normally make adjustments to suit their needs.

However, in the past, there had been cases in which someone had failed to notify the guild far enough in advance of the need to alter a wedding dress, in the hopes that the wedding would be canceled. Still, if worse came to worst, the guild could just provide a rental dress, so cancellation never proved necessary.

It was unclear if this was a similar case, but when Dante thought about his own older sister and her arranged marriage to her husband, with whom she had grown insufferably close postwedding, he could only pray for the bride’s happiness.

“I wish them a happy life together...” Lucia whispered, expressing his own

thoughts aloud.

“C’mon, boss. Let’s go to the storage room.”

The fabric storeroom of the Tailors’ Guild was several times larger than the one at the Magical Garment Factory. Inside, the two of them each put on a pair of white gloves, then pulled a fabric sample book of red silk out from the shelf.

“There are seventy types of red silk in here. I’m sure there’s a color that’ll suit your grandmother!”

There was a myriad of different reds—deep crimson, vermilion, scarlet, madder, an orangish red, dark grayish red, and dark reds that were more somber.

“Normally, we couldn’t bring this out of the Tailors’ Guild, but we might be able to borrow it for half a day if we keep it at the Magical Garment Factory.”

“Then should we invite your grandmother to the factory? That way she can see where her grandson works too.”

“Like I could ever do something so embarrassing.”

“What’s embarrassing about it? Think of it as an opportunity to brag. You’re an amazing couturier, Dante.”

“Boss, watch what you say...”

Now he was embarrassed for a different reason. Lucia, meanwhile, just gave him a questioning look. She was a commoner. What she said wasn’t mere lip service but her honest opinion. That, however, was precisely why hearing her words made him happy—but also, even more so, embarrassed.

“Personally, I think I have a lot of room for improvement. I’d rather she see me once I’ve reached my peak,” he said with a straight face.

Lucia burst out laughing, then asked, “Dante, does your grandmother look like you?”

“It’s the other way around, isn’t it? People tell me I look like her. Her hair’s white, but our eyes are basically the same color.”

“Noted. Then a color that looks good on you would probably look good on her

too.”

Lucia picked up the sample book and draped a bright vermilion silk over his right shoulder. She’d done it with such force that her pale fingers grazed his throat, tickling him slightly.

“This could work!” she cried.

Dante was a single man of marriageable age. And the two of them were alone, at night, in this room, and close together. He hadn’t asked another guild staff member to accompany them, since they all seemed so busy. Dante was glad Lucia trusted him as her employee, but where was her sense of risk? *Actually, maybe it’s part of my job as assistant manager to be looking out for her*—Dante pressed his fingers to his head as his thoughts turned to nonsense. In front of him, a pair of blazing blue eyes were staring at him.

“Will this color wash out? Does it fade easily? How much does it cost?”

There was nothing heart-pounding about this situation. Absolutely nothing.

“It won’t wash out, but it’ll fade in the sun. It costs about as much as any other colored silk.”

“Then we should be able to use it. I still don’t know much about fabric, so let me know if there are any tricks I need to know about preparing it or anything!”

Dante agreed as he shifted the sample book from his shoulder. As Lucia was focused on comparing the other reds in the book, Dante looked at her profile and whispered quietly so she wouldn’t hear, “Seems like there’s still a lot I need to teach you, boss...”



Since it seemed Dante didn’t want the two of them to go to his house, Lucia had suggested he should invite his grandmother to the Magical Garment Factory. That would also give her a chance to tour her grandson’s workplace.

Despite his reluctance, Dante brought his grandmother, Filluna, two days later in the evening. She looked like an elegant noblewoman in her dark gray dress and matching low heels, but there was an air of sadness about her.

“Thank you for making time for me. I am Dante’s grandmother, Filluna

Cassini.”

“Thank you for coming. I owe a lot to Assistant Manager Dante. My name is Lucia Fano. I’m the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory.”

They exchanged greetings in the reception room before sitting across from each other on the sofas. Filluna regarded Lucia curiously with eyes the same green as Dante’s.

“In regard to your red dress, we were thinking of something like these.”

Dante spread out a few designs on the table—two of Lucia’s and two of his own.

“Oh, they’re all lovely. How can I choose?”

Filluna happily looked over the designs as she drank her tea. Lucia found herself captivated by Filluna’s refined movements, befitting a noblewoman, as she held her teacup in one hand and the designs in the other. Even the maid who’d prepared the tea looked unusually nervous.

“Perhaps...for a woman of my age, this is the best choice?” Filluna said after some time. In her hand was the design that exposed the least amount of skin. Next to Lucia, Dante glanced down, seeming satisfied.

It was a fine design for his grandmother, but something felt off about it.

“Excuse me, Madam Cassini! Could you please tell me which dress you’d like to wear most if you weren’t taking your age into account?”

Filluna had chosen one of Dante’s designs. If Lucia had just kept quiet, then they could have made her a dress based on her own grandson’s design. However, even though Filluna was smiling at her selection, she didn’t seem excited about it.

She examined Lucia, her ice green eyes seeming to look right through her. “Head Manager Fano, I’d like to ask you something, from one woman to another—do you think it odd for a woman my age to want to wear a red dress?”

“No, not at all! Not one bit!”

“That makes me feel better,” Filluna said with a soft smile. “But will it be

difficult to find a red that is acceptable for my age?”

“I stand by the notion that there’s a shade of red for everyone. It’s the color of human blood, after all. Different people look good in bright red, pale red, or orange and pinkish reds.”

“True, there are many reds to choose from.”

“Do you happen to have a preference?”

“Ah, let’s see... I’d like something to make me look healthy and energetic, but not something that makes it seem as though I’m trying hard to look young. Perhaps I’m not making sense.”

“Grandmother, are you planning to wear this dress outdoors?”

“Yes. Under the blue sky. I plan to wear it to see someone very dear to me.”

It sounded like she would be attending an event outdoors—maybe a tea party or a garden party. When it came to nobles’ clothing, there were strict rules surrounding the length of a dress and so on, so Lucia decided to leave the rest of the questioning to Dante.

“Then would you prefer something comfortable and easy to walk in?”

“Yes, I would. Nothing too heavy either... Before long, it will become difficult for me to walk up stairs in a heavy dress.”

“Is there anything else you would like to mention in terms of what you are looking for?”

“Let me think... Perhaps something that would show off a necklace? But nothing that shows too much cleavage.”

Lucia gestured to one of Dante’s designs. “What about a half off-the-shoulder dress, Madam Cassini? Something like that wouldn’t reveal too much of your chest, but it would show off your collarbone nicely.”

“Ah, yes. Also—I must be honest. I don’t think I’ll be able to wear a tight corset either.”

“We can wrap a firm lining around the waist and attach a ribbon in the back. I believe that should look natural without putting too much strain on you. If we

go with that option, this design of boss's would be good..."

As he spoke, Dante pointed to the ribbon on the back of one of Lucia's dress designs. He must have been thinking of incorporating elements from both of their designs.

"You good if we try combining these designs, boss?"

"You betcha! We talked about that yesterday too, didn't we? Oops, I mean, yes, we discussed that..."

Dante's familiarity had made Lucia adopt the same tone without thinking. It might have been fine for him to speak in that manner, being Filluna's grandson, but it certainly wasn't for Lucia. Speaking that way in front of a former viscount's wife was too rude.

"Please, forgive me for speaking discourteously."

"Grandmother, it's not boss's—I mean, Head Manager Lucia's fault. At work, I tend to speak that way with other clothiers at work."

"You two, please don't mind me. So, if we proceed with that idea, then in a dress like that, I just may be able to eat an extra serving."

"I very much hope that you will. I have heard that you haven't been eating well lately, grandmother."

"Although, while it's a lovely design, will it be difficult to make it so the skirt flares out widely?"

"We can make it do that. It will make it easier to walk in too. See, like this, we can sew pleats on the inside, so when you turn around, it'll open up like a flower..."

Dante started drawing a new design in his sketchbook. An off-the-shoulder, bright red dress made of soft, light fabric. At a glance, the skirt looked like a standard A-line that flared out slightly from the waist to the hem, but the interior pleats would make it billow out widely with a twirl. A large ribbon tied on the back replaced the need for a corset. The ribbon wasn't placed too high but instead hung relaxed for a comfortable, natural fit. Dante explained everything to Filluna as his pen moved across the page.

The woman's eyes lit up as she looked at the design and said brightly, "It looks wonderful. I hope you can make me look as fabulous as possible, Couturier Dante."

"It would be my honor, Madam Cassini."

Grandmother and grandson seemed to be having a lot of fun speaking to each other as though their relationship was simply that of a couturier to his client.

"Now, about the red fabric, these are all the options. We would like to suggest these four."

On the table, Dante laid out the color sample book and four relatively bright red fabrics. Next to those, he also placed a large mirror for Filluna to use. The fabrics he laid out were an eye-catching vermilion, a bright orangish red, a rich red reminiscent of roses, and a dark wine red.

After scrutinizing the four fabrics, Filluna turned to Lucia and asked, "Might you have a recommendation, Head Manager Fano?"

"Personally, I would recommend this color. It looked flattering on Assistant Manager Dante too."

"Boss, I'm not sure that's the best reason..." Dante protested at her side. But Dante and Filluna had the same eye color, similar facial features, and, moreover, a similar aura about them. The moment Lucia had seen Filluna in person, she'd been even more convinced it was the right color for her.

"Shall we try it?" Filluna asked.

At those words, Lucia picked up the fabric she'd recommended and held it up to Filluna's cheek and shoulder.

"I knew it!"

Even the small fabric sample brightened her complexion noticeably. Something that could bring out so much clarity would definitely look nice as a full-on dress. How could she not recommend it?

"It is quite a lively color, isn't it?" Filluna commented. "Do you think a dress in this color will look nice on me?"

"Yes, I absolutely think so! If we make the lining a light scarlet color, then

when the skirt billows out, it will look like a breathtaking flower.”

That had been the trend recently for dresses worn at dances, but what did Dante think about it? He’d been silent this entire time.

“Dante,” Lucia called his name softly, and he nodded.

“It’s a great color for you, grandmother.”

“My, Dante. Do you think that as my grandson or my couturier?”

“Both,” Dante responded, his expression serious as he made a few more quick additions to the design. In black ink, he decisively penned in notes to add more volume to the skirt and make the lining with lightweight, light pink fabric.

“We can reuse some old pattern paper, but first I’ll put in an order for this fabric and arrange for some stitchers to help. I’ll be right back, so keep my grandmother company for me, boss.”

“Sure thing.”

After Dante left the room, Filluna turned to face Lucia.

“I can’t even remember the last time I felt so excited about a dress.”

“It looks like Assistant Manager Dante can’t wait to make it either,” Lucia responded.

Filluna chuckled merrily. “Thank you, Head Manager Fano. I was you who chided Dante for thinking a red dress would be peculiar on me, after all.”

“Oh, um—I’m just doing my job. Besides, it’s not peculiar at all.”

Lucia was thrown off by the sudden change in topic. It sounded like Dante had told Filluna that she had gotten upset at him.

“I have had dozens of dresses made for me, but I must admit I am not overly familiar with the job of a couturier. I’m happy for Dante, since it’s a path he chose for himself, but it’s not something I can assist with or give him advice about. Of course, he is under the direction of Mr. Fortunato and other talented individuals, so I know I likely have no reason to worry, but...I feel I’ve fussed over him a bit too much.”

“Well, he is your grandson. Isn’t that only natural? My grandfather does the

same thing. Sometimes I think he still sees me as a ten-year-old.”

Eat more, slow down when drinking your tea, don't take too long getting dressed after a bath or you'll get cold, don't sew in the dark because it's bad for your eyes, don't stay up late—there were too many examples to count. Lucia decided not to mention that he was right about every one of his admonitions.

“He must love you dearly.”

“Yes, I would say so. I do argue with him sometimes, though.”

“Well, you are an adult, so it's only to be expected that you would assert your own opinion. But children certainly do grow up so quickly...” Filluna's green eyes narrowed, growing a shade darker than Dante's. “Head Manager Fano, if Dante is ever troubled by something, please offer him guidance. As a fellow couturier, or as his superior.”

“Of course, as long as it's something I can help with. But to be honest, I'm generally the one asking Assistant Manager Dante for advice or relying on him for help...”

The more she thought back on things, the more she realized just how much she, Dante's superior, leaned on him. And yet each and every time, he happily helped her. He really was a dependable assistant manager.

“No need to worry about that. That boy is much too strong for something like that to snap him in half,” Filluna said, her pride for her grandson showing on her face. Lucia couldn't help but smile. “Say, Head Manager Fano, would you mind calling me Fil? I'm sure it must be difficult to call me by the same last name as Dante.”

“Thank you! Then please call me Lucia.”

Filluna nodded, then continued.

“I truly must thank you, Lucia. It's beginning to seem possible that I'll be able to show myself off in the way I would like to the person I intend to wear this dress for.”

“I am glad to hear that. If you wouldn't mind, could I ask you about the person you want to wear the dress for? I want to try my best to meet your

expectations.”

The slightest stitch could change the entire impression of an outfit. If possible, Lucia wanted to ask for more details about what Filluna wanted as well as the other party’s preferences, in order to match them as closely as possible.

“Yes, I understand completely. I want to wear it for...”

Filluna leaned forward and whispered the person’s name. Hearing her next words, Lucia nodded deeply.



“Unworthy as I am, please allow me to escort you today.”

“Dante, I’ve never seen you look so handsome.”

With his black suit, black shoes, white gloves, and his hair combed back, Dante looked the picture of seriousness. He thought cynically how delighted his family would be if this were how he dressed all the time. Nevertheless, even at his age, he was still happy to hear his grandmother compliment his ensemble.

As for her dress, although it wasn’t an express order, they had completed it quickly. Perhaps all the dried seafood and sweets he’d brought every day to the stitchers who wanted to work overtime had really done the trick.

His grandmother wore a lightweight, long black coat on top of the recently finished red dress. Other than the bit of red peeking out from the bottom, it was an inconspicuous outfit. And reasonably so, considering where they were going.

“I want to wear this to visit the cemetery.”

When he heard his grandmother say that, he’d had to ask her to repeat herself. He’d quickly followed up by asking about her health, then secretly gone on to ask his parents as well, though he felt guilty about it. Fortunately, his grandmother was healthy, though she did experience some age-related knee pain. That was why today, he was determined to be extra careful as her escort. However, there was one thing he couldn’t shake from his mind.

“Grandmother, um, is it all right that you didn’t go to your usual couturier for the dress?”

His grandmother had another couturier whom she had gone to for many years. He had mostly retired from his atelier, but he continued accepting requests solely from Dante's grandmother. *Wouldn't he have wanted to make her red dress for her?* Dante couldn't help but think as a fellow clothier.

"He passed away last year from a cold. We'd known each other for thirty years. I wasn't able to find anyone from his atelier who was a good fit."

"If you'd told me sooner— Oh, but I suppose you were being considerate of my busy schedule."

"No, I just had so many dresses, I had no need for any more."

His grandmother responded with a slightly downcast gaze. It was a lie, the first one he'd ever known her to tell.

The carriage arrived at the capital's graveyard. After they descended the steps, Dante took his grandmother's hand, and they headed for the Cassini family gravesite in the nobles' section of the cemetery.

"Are you surprised to learn who I'm wearing this for, Dante?"

"...No. And I think it will make grandfather happy."

"The dress I wore for the first ball we attended after we got married was also red. I can't fit it in anymore, though. It's far too tight." His grandmother dropped her voice and recounted her memory as if speaking to herself. "I've worn dark clothing ever since he became bedridden. He told me, 'Fil, once I'm better, I'll have a dress made for you.' And I responded, 'I look forward to it, so please, get better as soon as you can.' I already knew at the time that he wouldn't be getting up again, and I—I made a promise I couldn't fulfill."

"But you are fulfilling it, right now."

Dante hardened his expression as best he could and held his grandmother up so she could walk without wobbling. He wasn't a weak child anymore. It was his duty here to support his grandmother with a smile.

"You're right. I'm able to come here today because of you, Dante. I was very sad for a long time after he passed, but I wanted to dress up so I could come

here and say I'm much better now."

As his grandmother spoke, she walked much slower than he remembered her to. He could clearly see the wrinkles on her face, and the age spots on her hands were visible through her lace gloves. As he walked through the graveyard at her side, Dante became more and more keenly aware of the signs of his grandmother aging. But in spite of having to take occasional breaks here and there, she continued walking slowly and gracefully.

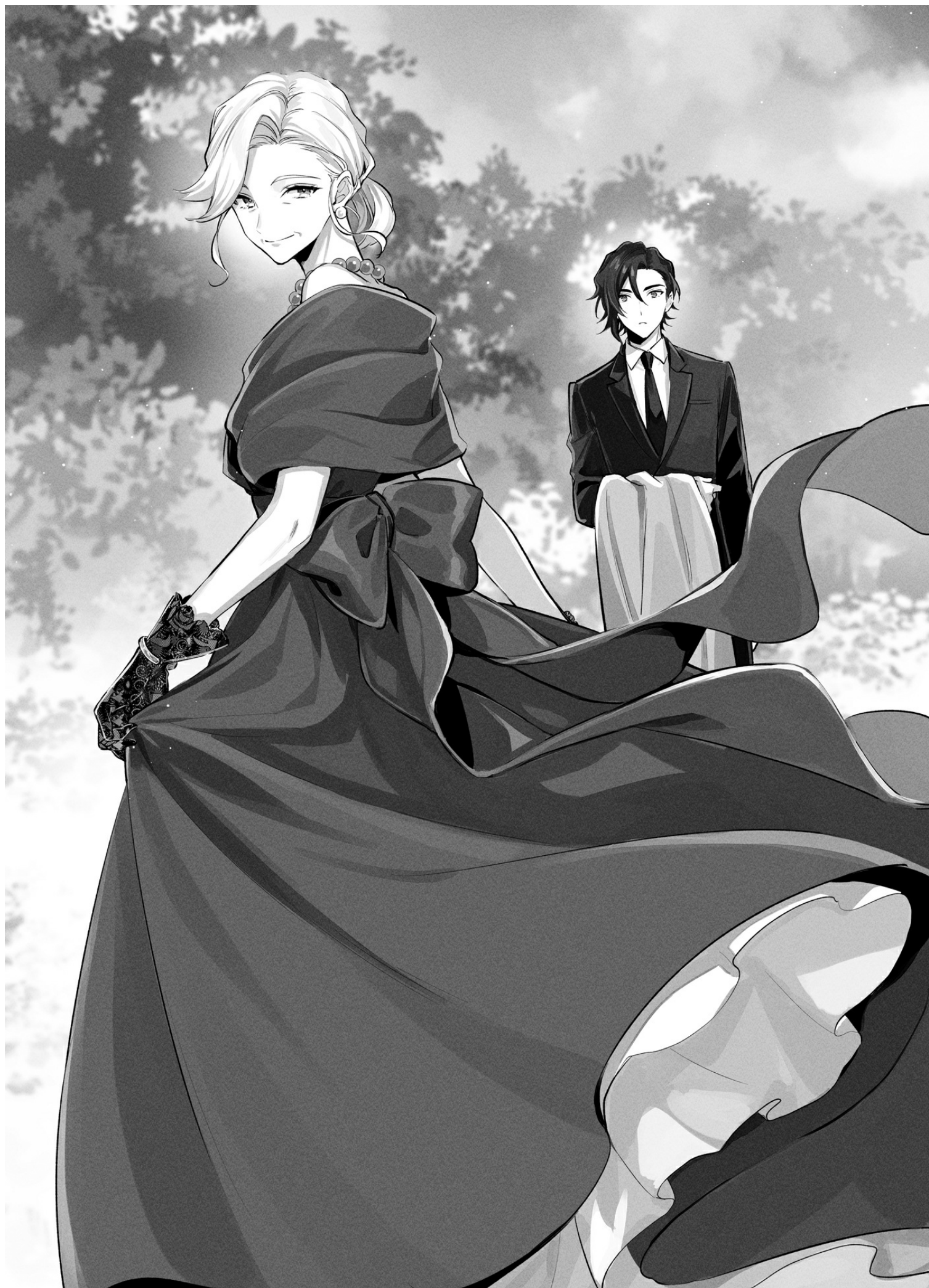
The gravesite seemed impossibly far away.

They finally arrived at a corner of the nobles' section of the graveyard, in front of the Cassini family's grave plot. There, his grandmother removed her coat and handed it to Dante. Then she changed out of her shoes into a pair of stunning red high-heeled shoes that she had brought with her. Around her neck, she wore a strand of dazzling large green jewels—a gift from Dante's grandfather.

Filluna walked on her own toward the grave. After saying a short prayer, either for his grandfather or other relatives, his grandmother stood up with a dignified air.

"Take a look, dear. Dante made this dress for me. He's become an excellent couturier," she said. Then she spun around in front of the grave as if dancing.

A red, large-petaled flower bloomed.



The hem of the dress flared elegantly and danced like a blossom caught on the wind. The light scarlet lining of the dress was visible for a moment, only to disappear again like a fleeting dream.

She was wearing heels and didn't have much footing, so she turned just that once. But her gorgeous dress was no lovelier than the charming smile she turned to the grave.

"It's rather nice, isn't it, dear?"

She's beautiful, Dante thought. If his grandfather were alive, he would surely take his grandmother's hand and praise her endlessly for her beauty.

"It won't be long before I'm there with you, so wait for me."

Those words startled Dante back to reality. *What's this all of a sudden? Please don't even joke about that.* Dante couldn't even form those thoughts into words.

When he was a child, he'd had siblings, parents, and healthy grandparents, and he'd thought things would stay that way forever. Until his grandfather died, he'd never even thought of the inevitability of death. In fact, even after his grandfather passed away, he'd given no thought to his grandmother dying as well.

No—perhaps he hadn't *wanted* to think about it. His grandmother, the one who had doted on him the most, in the place of his busy mother. She would always be healthy, she would always be there whenever he returned home—he wanted to believe that.

It was for that reason that he hadn't wanted to see her looking listless following his grandfather's passing. He was a selfish grandson to the core. Even now, he didn't want to think about it or discuss it—

Dante! He suddenly recalled a voice sharply calling his name. Those dark blue eyes had looked right through him as he'd been thinking about inconsequential things. A woman younger than him, dainty, dangerous in many ways, but boundlessly cheerful and strong-willed.

When he'd told her he'd be taking the next day off to escort his grandmother,

Lucia had responded in a very older sisterly way, “Okay, but when the person Madam Fil is wearing the dress for tomorrow can’t tell her that it looks good on her, make sure you tell her instead!”

When in the world did Lucia get the chance to ask grandmother who she wanted to wear the dress for? And since when did she get permission to call her “Fil”? There was so much he was confused about, but he hadn’t even gotten the chance to ask about it.

Seriously, boss. Do you know everything? There was no one else better suited for this duty than Dante himself. He steadied his breathing and composed his expression, then walked up next to his grandmother.

He faced his grandfather’s grave and spoke. “Grandfather, doesn’t grandmother look even lovelier than usual? No, lovelier than anything else? I still can’t let her go to the other side, so please, have a brandy and be patient. No one can tell you to limit your drinking anymore anyway.”

“Goodness, I wouldn’t want him to tell me *not* to come.”

“It’s okay to keep those who pass on first waiting for a while. Grandmother, have you ever thought about making a fresh start? You’re beautiful, so I’m sure you could make any man fall to his knees.”

“My, you certainly have found your voice, Dante,” his grandmother responded with a girlish giggle. Dante couldn’t help but smile along with her.

As their smiles faded, Dante noticed a slightly rotund man walking their way. He wore a matte, ink black suit, likely his mourning clothes. In his hands he held a bouquet of white lilies. His hair was white, so Dante figured he was probably around the same age as his own grandmother.

Probably another noble here to visit a nearby grave, Dante was thinking when the corners of the man’s mouth lifted up.

“Fil! How long has it been?”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Moreno! It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

The familiar way they addressed one another made Dante wonder if they had

been classmates in college. Judging by the way the man had abbreviated his grandmother's name, they must have been fairly close at that. His grandmother had also responded to him with a bright smile.

Dante took a half step back and bowed to the man. This was a graveyard. A young non-heir such as himself should wait until they finished greeting each other.

"Fil, that red dress looks lovely on you. You're as enchanting as ever—no, you're even more enchanting than before."

"Thank you. You've become quite dignified yourself. You look much more dependable now."

"I've also gotten taller, so now I can safely be your escort for a dance. Would you join me sometime?"

Dante's grandmother simply laughed graciously without giving an answer. "Oh, come now."

Dante was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable.

"And who might this gentleman be?" Moreno asked.

"This is my grandson."

Once his grandmother introduced him, he and Moreno exchanged greetings. Dante had heard of his family's name before, but he couldn't remember what they did, which made him realize just how insufficient his knowledge of nobility was these days.

"Your grandmother used to look after me in our school days."

According to Moreno, he and Dante's grandmother had been classmates when they'd studied civil service in college. Their desks had been right next to each other, so his grandmother would often explain material Moreno didn't understand.

"I used to have so much trouble with Ehrlichian grammar. I couldn't understand it at all. If it weren't for Fil, I wouldn't have been able to graduate."

The man was smiling congenially at him, but Dante didn't quite feel like forming a rapport with him.

“Are you visiting your family’s gravesite today, Moreno?” his grandmother asked.

“I am. Today is the anniversary of my wife’s death. She’s been gone fifteen years now.”

“Has it been that long? My condolences.”

“Same to you. May he rest in peace.”

Apparently, the man also knew of his grandfather’s passing. After a brief conversation, Moreno took his leave. “Enjoy your day,” and “Take care,” they said to each other. Those goodbyes rang unpleasantly in Dante’s ears. They didn’t have the finality of a farewell, but neither did they express the hope that the two would see each other again.

After watching the man leave, Dante decided to ask about something that had popped into his head.

“Grandmother, is there anything you’d like to have?”

As he waited for her answer, he wondered if there was anything he could give her, such as an accessory to go with her red dress. His grandmother turned to look back at his grandfather’s grave, the hem of her red dress fluttering in the breeze.

“Yes—I want my entire family, my children and my grandchildren, to live happy and healthy every day.”

That sounded more like a prayer than something she wanted. It wasn’t something Dante could give her.

He stared up into the autumn sky. It looked endlessly vast.

“Shall we go? I’ll have to ask for your help again, Dante.”

“It would be my pleasure, Madam Cassini,” Dante replied, trying hard to play the part of a gentleman.

His grandmother favored him with a radiant smile. “You’ve grown so much, Dante.”

“I have your milk cookies to thank for that, grandmother.”

When Dante was a child, even before he started primary school, he used to cry about being smaller than all his friends, so his grandmother would stuff him full of milk cookies. They must have had an effect; Dante was even taller than his older brother and father now.

“All that’s left for you to do is continuously strive to be a model gentleman.”

“I feel like I couldn’t be further away from that.”

A model gentleman—someone who strove to be strong, kind, and courteous in every situation. His grandfather had been respected by the entire family for living every day of his life that way. Was still respected now, in fact.

Dante thought of his grandfather, and his bright green eyes, which had been the same color as the jewels on his grandmother’s necklace, then sighed. There was no comparison between himself and his grandfather.

He wasn’t a knight or a mage but a clothier. He didn’t have the strength to be a knight, nor the magical power to be a mage, nor even the brains to be a civil servant. On top of that, he couldn’t get accustomed to the rigid way nobles lived and was unable to benefit his family. He was acting against his parents’ wishes and refusing to put down roots in the interest of his own career. He couldn’t blame his parents for trying to make him settle down by suggesting an arranged marriage. As he mused along those lines, the hand he was holding gripped his own tightly.

“Grandmother?”

She inspected him with her ice green eyes as if looking right through him. “Dante, you mustn’t let that girl get away,” she whispered with a tender smile.

Dante knew whom she meant without asking. Despite how friendly his grandmother seemed, she was still the widow of a former viscount. The only people she allowed to call her “Fil” were family and close friends. And if a commoner should receive that privilege, it would have to be someone she especially liked.

For a noble to allow her grandson’s friend to call her by that name could be taken to mean she approved of a relationship between them. He’d been relieved that Lucia hadn’t picked up on that.

Dante had to admit he'd enjoyed his and Lucia's loud conversations as they worked together to make his grandmother's dress. Enjoyed them so much, in fact, that he wanted them to make another dress together as soon as they could.

However, he wasn't the person who was closest to her. The one who had discovered Lucia, given her a role, protected her, and tenderly looked over page after page of her designs was the Tailors' guildmaster, Fortunato Luini. The man to whom Dante owed a great deal for scouting him after he failed out of college due to his poor reading skills and enrolled in clothing school late. He couldn't even count how many times Forto had helped him even after he joined the Tailors' Guild.

Dante recalled the way Forto and Lucia smiled at each other, then forced a smile of his own.

"She's just my boss, and I'm her subordinate. There's nothing going on between us."

All he'd done was spoken the truth, but for some reason, he heard his voice shake. He blamed it on the strong breeze blowing through the cemetery.



A few days later, Dante headed to his family's house with a pair of gloves that matched his grandmother's dress. Lucia had asked him to bring them to her, since his grandmother had tipped them generously.

They were a pair of light scarlet gloves made of thin, delicate fabric and magnificent lace. They would hide the spots on the back of his grandmother's hands as well as show off her lovely, slender fingers. Apparently, they'd been made by Lucia's grandfather. Dante was so impressed by his workmanship that he almost wanted to poach him to work exclusively for the Magical Garment Factory.

"What a lovely pair of gloves! Oh, I must give an even bigger tip."

"Grandmother, it would be better if you didn't. I can envision my boss ordering me to send you a pair of silk toe socks next."

"My, those would be nice too."

His grandmother smiled jovially. Today, she was wearing a vibrant blue dress. The moment Dante returned her smile, there came a knock at the door.

“Mother, flowers arrived for you.”

Surprisingly, it wasn't a maid who came to bring the flowers but Dante's father. He handed them gently to his mother, and she took the sizable bouquet into her arms.

“Dear me, these are beautiful.”

The bouquet held an assortment of red flowers—roses, lilies, and ranunculus—sprinkled with gold dust. Among nobles, giving red flowers often held the implication that the sender wanted to become close with the recipient. The gold dust meant that the sender was genuine in their feelings, and its striking color suggested it was real and not some cheap imitation gold dust.

Dante's father looked a bit uneasy. Dante coughed to fill the silence.

“You received a letter too.”

Dante's father produced a regal-looking white envelope with an illustration of wings. Once his grandmother caught sight of those wings, which held the meaning of “wanting to fly to you right away,” she let out a small “Oh my.”

She placed the bouquet on the table, and the maid opened the envelope with a letter opener. The name of the sender was written on the envelope. It was his grandmother's classmate from college whom they had run into at the graveyard the other day—Dante hadn't forgotten his name. He was the younger son of a viscount, he helped out with his family's affairs, and he had been single since his wife passed away.

“He's invited me to attend the opera with him. And he's asked that I wear my red dress. What shall I do?”

His grandmother didn't try to hide the letter, instead giving it to him and his father to read. Written in fine penmanship was praise for his grandmother's beauty followed by an invitation to attend the opera and have tea together. The tone of the letter was a bit lofty, and it made use of old-fashioned circumlocutions, but it read fairly sweet and was one step away from being mistaken for a love letter—actually, it could only be read as inviting a woman

he held dear out for a date.

Unsure how to respond, Dante looked at his father, who was looking back at him with similar ice green eyes. Dante found it even harder to speak. He panned his gaze to his grandmother's side, where he caught sight of the chair that no one sat in. How was he supposed to look at his grandfather's chair, which had been kept empty all this time? Should he apologize for telling his grandmother she should make a fresh start?

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to make a connection with his family? It could open up some good business opportunities, no?" His grandmother wore the very picture of a noblewoman's refined smile.

In response, Dante's father could only nod like a child. "Yes, it would."

It seemed that, to his grandmother, doing something to benefit the family was more important than the letter's flowery, sweet contents. Dante felt a little sympathetic for that old classmate of hers.

He shook that thought away—it was likely that the man had similar reasons for inviting his grandmother on a date. He was a youngster who couldn't gauge the balance of power between noble families, so he couldn't pass judgment. As the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory, perhaps he needed to spend even more time studying up on matters of this sort—

"Come to think of it, there are two young ladies in his family," mused Dante's grandmother. "Neither of them is engaged, and they are both reputable young women... Dante?"

The moment Dante stood up, his father and grandmother turned toward him. It was obvious by the look in their similarly colored eyes what they were about to propose next. *I need to leave before they get a chance to attack.*

"I've just remembered I have some urgent work to attend to," he said. "Please excuse me."

"Hee hee. Do your best, Dante."

His grandmother smiled as she pulled on the scarlet gloves. Her kind voice sounded exactly like it had when he was a child.

At the end of the day, he would always be his grandmother's darling grandson.

Protector and Protected

“There are a lot of couples here. Oh, matching outfits! Not their entire outfits, but I do like how they coordinated her blue skirt with his blue slacks.”

“And why are we, as siblings, walking through here holding hands...?”

Lucia heard her older brother Massimo’s gloomy voice perfectly well, but she decided not to pay him any mind. If she did, she’d probably be saying the same thing.

Today was Lucia’s day off, so she and her brother were in the Southern District to pick up some essentials for the family. Massimo was here as a bag carrier.

This particular street was lined with shops selling everything from daily essentials to trendy products, and there were also many couples on dates strolling here. The sky was unfortunately overcast, but since their plan was to return home with heavy bags, this was preferable to walking under the rays of the hot sun. In a way, it was the perfect weather for shopping.

“We’ll just hold hands on this street. It’s so crowded, it’ll be a pain if we get separated. What other choice do we have?”

For as far as she could see, the street was filled with people, people, and more people. With how short Lucia was, it would be difficult for Massimo to find her again if she were to get lost in the crowd. She was even shorter than usual today—since she knew they’d have a lot to carry, she’d put on a pair of low-heeled shoes. Therefore, she had no choice but to hold hands with her brother.

Incidentally, they had gotten separated while out shopping the time before last. Massimo had loudly called out her name, which had led to people in the surrounding crowd mistakenly thinking he was looking for a lost child. Some kind passersby had even helped him look for her, which had made it difficult for Lucia to find an opening to run over and rejoin her brother. She wanted to avoid

a repeat of that scenario at all costs.

“After we’re done shopping, I want to stop by a restaurant one street over. One of the stitchers told me it’s really good. How about we go there to get fried seafood dinner sets and slices of cake? We can bring dinner back for the family too.”

“All right... But it feels hollow...”

Massimo’s gaze was directed toward a shop selling affordable accessories. Happy couples were lined up waiting to get inside. The shop was selling matching leather bracelets, inscribed with the initials of one’s partner, which were currently in vogue in the capital. They weren’t the same as metal engagement bracelets, but they were popular among couples who had just started dating to express their commitment to each other.

That said, there were some stitchers in the Magical Garment Factory who wore those leather bracelets despite being single. They wore them not as fashion statements but as a way to signal to others that they weren’t currently looking for a partner. “They’re so convenient!” one had told her with a smile. *I guess that’s one way to use an accessory like that.*

“I know how you feel, but we’re together right now, aren’t we? If you want a girlfriend, then go out and find one. Speaking of, aren’t people coming to talk to you about arranged marriages?”

“It’s not me they’re interested in. I don’t feel right about meeting someone under those conditions...” Massimo said, his voice quiet. Lucia felt a twinge of guilt.

Most of those coming to Massimo were from merchant and clothesmaker families. Until this summer, her brother hadn’t received a single offer for a marriage interview. Lucia suspected the reason he was getting them now was because of her. What those families were seeking was a connection with Lucia Fano, as well as with the Tailors’ Guild and Magical Garment Factory—that would understandably feel hollow to him.

Lucia herself had also received some offers for marriage interviews and adoption, but she’d rejected every single one via Forto. Both brother and sister had lamented their lack of romantic encounters in the past, but something felt

off about having opportunities present themselves in this way. Lucia had a feeling she would have to continue rejecting people for a while.

“We’ve been talking about having a party with all the Magical Garment Factory’s staff and friends once things calm down. Why don’t you come too?”

Even setting aside her bias as his younger sister, Massimo wasn’t bad looking, and he had a job. He was a little timid at times, but he was a kind person. Lucia honestly found it a little strange that he didn’t already have a girlfriend despite all that.

“Thanks, but I don’t think someone from the Magical Garment Factory would be the right fit...”

“Are you not interested in people who work with clothes? What’s your type? Anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“A nice, levelheaded woman. I don’t really have a preference in looks, but I’m interested in someone who’d work at our family workshop. But that expectation alone would probably put an end to any potential romance before it even started.”

“Ah, I get it. Working with your husband or wife’s family can be hard.”

Apparently, Massimo laid his expectations on the table before even dating someone. Bringing up his family’s work from the outset must’ve made it hard for things to progress. It was certainly the honest thing to do, but it was also a lot to ask. If he married, he and his wife could rent a place in the neighborhood to live by themselves, but a family-run workshop meant working with each other for long hours. Supposedly, that could give rise to all kinds of trouble—which was probably true given that families who owned workshops were said to suffer a high rate of divorce.

“What if you brought in a new employee instead and did different work from your wife?”

“I guess that would be fine, but it’s always been a dream of mine... Working with my wife, I mean.”

This was Lucia’s first time hearing her brother’s dream. She was a little surprised.

“Wait, are you one of those needy romantics who has to be with his wife from sunrise to sunrise?”

“No! Sunrise to sunrise? Come on. I just want to be like mom and dad—”

Massimo stopped talking halfway through his sentence, then awkwardly scratched his cheek with his index finger.

“Oh, so you want to be like mom and dad?”

“Real funny, right? I don’t have any big dreams like you do.”

“We all have our own dreams. There’s no point comparing them.”

Lucia’s dream was to have a workshop where she made clothes of her own design and a shop to sell them in. It was a dream she was often told was impossible for a commoner, but now that she had been made manager of the Magical Garment Factory, it seemed suddenly more attainable. Perhaps after a few years of working in her role, she’d be able to rent a location for her workshop and boutique, even if they were small. It was for that dream that Lucia worked hard every day and tried her best to save money.

“I guess so... I thought for sure you’d laugh at me.”

“Why? What’s so funny about it? It’d be wonderful to be a married couple like mom and dad, and working with your family sounds great too.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I want to be able to keep making socks and gloves at the family workshop, maybe surpassing dad and grandpa in skill someday.”

“I think that’s an amazing dream to have. Though you have a super long way to go.”

“Yeah, at this point, I doubt I’ll surpass them even by the time I’m their age...” he said, half-sighing. Lucia let out a laugh, but she understood how he felt. The two of them had grown up watching their father’s accurate sewing and their grandfather’s detailed knitting—the idea of reaching their level seemed impossible. The same went for reaching the level of their mother’s embroidery.

That wasn’t all. Lucia and her brother couldn’t even match their skill when it came to fixing frayed seams or adjusting the machines. They were basically still fledglings in comparison.

“Yeah, we have a long way to go...”

“But, Lucia—you shouldn’t hesitate to go after your dream.”

“I am going after it, right now.”

“Well, and this is just hypothetical, but if you marry or get adopted into a noble family, then you won’t have to feel inferior at the Tailors’ Guild anymore. Plus, you’ll be able to wear luxurious, pretty dresses and make them too, right? You could probably have a workshop and store built just for you.”

“Oh, please. A workshop and a store built for me by someone else could just as quickly be taken away. Also, sure, there are times when nobles are given preferential treatment over commoners at the Tailors’ Guild, but I’ve never once felt inferior there. Mr. Forto and everyone at the factory are always looking out for me.”

She had certainly experienced some unpleasant moments, and she’d even endured some malicious gossip, claiming, for example, that she was Forto’s mistress or his secret half sister. And some people still criticized her commoner status like a joke that never got tired. But there wasn’t anything Lucia could do about that. There was bound to be envy over her position as head manager.

“And if I got married or adopted, I wouldn’t be able to go out for a stroll around town with you like this, right?”

“Y-Yeah...”

It was true, so why was he getting so embarrassed about it? Now he was making *her* embarrassed too. Their family got along working together. That was why she felt no desire to go to another family just because it would be more advantageous for her.

“Anyway, it’s time to shop!”

Lucia dragged her brother into their first stop.

They stopped in several stores to buy everything they needed: bathroom soap, a sponge that made the soap foam up, white towels, toothbrushes for the entire family, shoe polish powder, and a paste to repair a cracked flower vase.

Lucia's grandfather had broken his favorite razor, so they went to buy the same kind in the same shop he'd bought it from. They also bought the same type of razors for Massimo and their father with differently colored handles. With these new razors, hopefully her father would have fewer missed spots when shaving, and Massimo wouldn't suffer as much razor burn.

Lucia was able to buy her favorite rose-scented face cream at a discount, which she carried triumphantly in the bag swaying from her shoulder. Beside her, Massimo carried a large rucksack on his back.

They moved on to another street where there were no shops and few people. She had heard that just down this street was a small diner that served boxed meal sets. The plan was to finish off their shopping trip by buying fried seafood meals for their family.

"We bought everything we needed, right?"

"Right. All that's left is to get fried seafood for dinner."

"You sure like your fried seafood, huh? Oh, dad also said he wanted some fried yams— Hmm? It looks like I was given an extra copper coin in change. Probably from when we bought the razors. I'll go give it back."

"Okay. You can leave your rucksack here. I'll watch over it."

Lucia watched her brother leave. Her full bag was so heavy that the strap was digging into her shoulder a bit, so she set it down, and as she did, a figure came briskly striding up to her.

"Oh, hello. Aren't you Head Manager Fano?"

"I am. Pardon me, but who might you be?"

He had referred to her by her title, but she didn't recognize the man in the navy blue suit. Lucia had a knack for remembering the faces of people she had worked with even if she couldn't recall their names. Moreover, the two of them were in a street off the main road. It wasn't the sort of place a noble or wealthy merchant would go out of their way to walk down.

She instinctively wanted to put distance between them—the same feeling she got when a customer came to her to complain or ask for a discount. It felt even

more malicious than someone approaching her in anger.

“...is my name. I had a dress made by the Magical Garment Factory.”

The man had spoken his name so rapidly that she hadn’t been able to catch it.

The only person Lucia had made a dress for under the auspices of the factory was Dahlia. Every other client she’d made clothes for had been through the Tailors’ Guild. Which meant she had never met this man. Lucia took a half step back.

“Is that so? Thank you very much for choosing us for your clothing needs.”

He probably wants to pry into the Magical Garment Factory or ask to be introduced to Forto—if that was his aim, Lucia decided she would just try to get through the conversation without giving many details.

“The Magical Garment Factory must be very busy. Everyone must be working very hard.”

“We are fortunate to have staff who take joy in their work.”

“I trust Mr. Luini has been doing well?”

Even as she answered in the affirmative, something felt off. *It’s like he’s buying time with innocuous small talk*—suddenly, a carriage came to a stop behind the man.

“I would like to invite you to my home, Head Manager Fano. As a token of my gratitude.”

“Oh, no, I have plans today...”

Alarm bells rang in Lucia’s head. The moment she tried to walk away, the man grabbed her hand with shocking speed.

“Please, I insist.”

The man’s words were polite, but his grip on her hand was strong as he tried to pull her inside the carriage.

“Let go of me!”

Her mind was racing as she first wondered how long it would take her brother to come back, and then if it would be worse for him to get involved in this, so

her scream came a little late.

Before her very eyes, the man began to cover her mouth with his hand. *I'll bite his hand as hard as I can!* The moment she opened her mouth, someone behind her lifted her up.

"Pardon me. Head Manager Fano's schedule is fully booked for today," she heard a low, gravelly voice say by her ear. She turned her head to see it was Lotta, in everyday clothes, holding her in his arms.

The other man seemed to have fallen in front of his carriage. He was on his knees. Still holding Lucia in his arms, Lotta backed a few steps away from the carriage, but he made no move to run away.

"I merely wanted to invite her to my home. Her attendant is naturally invited as well—"

The man was smiling as he stood up, but his eyes had darkened. Two men as muscular as knights descended from the carriage and looked at Lotta as if sizing him up.

Oh no, now Lotta's getting mixed up in this.

Should she flee on her own? Should she ask Lotta to put her down and let her run away as fast as she could? Her mind was a jumbled mess of confusion as Lotta nimbly lifted her onto his left shoulder and walked briskly over to the carriage.

"Wha?"

She hadn't been this high up since her father had given her piggyback rides as a child. Her mind went blank. *There's no way Lotta's planning on boarding that carriage with me in tow, right?* His lack of explanation left her utterly bewildered. The other men in front of them must have been similarly bewildered. They were watching the two of them with vacant expressions.

"Thank you for the invitation. But it appears this carriage is broken down," Lotta said, Lucia still sitting on his left shoulder. He placed his foot on the bottom of the carriage's front wheel, grabbed the top of the wheel with his right hand, then slowly pulled up. The wheel broke apart easily.

“Hey...!”

The men stood stock-still as the carriage fell with a bang and the horses neighed loudly in alarm. After seeing the wheel torn spectacularly in two, Lucia decided she would take refuge from reality all the way up here. She felt very safe on top of Lotta’s shoulder at the moment.

“I believe a visit to your estate will be unfeasible considering the state of your carriage. Please go through Fortunato Luini, master of the Tailors’ Guild, to inquire about Head Manager Fano’s next availability.”

Along with Lotta’s quiet voice, a feeling of intense cold spread around them. The men’s faces paled and they froze in place. Lucia had experienced this sensation before, in the Order of Beast Hunters’ wing—intimidation. It was the peculiar and quite terrifying skill that sent a wave of hostility through one’s opponent. Thankfully, Lucia was fine, since the intimidation wasn’t directed toward herself.

With Lucia still on his shoulder, Lotta picked up the heavy rucksack and shoulder bag and started walking away at a quick pace. The men were too unsettled to even call out after them.

After moving to another alley, Lotta gently returned Lucia to the ground.

“I am terribly sorry. Although it was an emergency, I should not have touched you without permission—”

“It’s okay. Thank you for saving me!”

If Lotta hadn’t come to her rescue, that man would have abducted her. Who knew what would have happened to her? When she turned to look at Lotta, she was struck dumb. His black pupils were flat and long.



Lucia wondered if those inhuman eyes were the result of a blight. She had heard about it before. The condition was often seen among adventurers; it occurred when someone defeated a monster by crushing its core and thereby inherited the monster's magical power and certain characteristics.

The color of Lotta's pupils blended from gray to an intense black—their color and shape were so curious, Lucia couldn't help but stare at them.

"Ah, my apologies. Have my eyes not returned to normal yet?"

"Oh, now they have!" Lucia said as his pupils became circular again.

Lotta forced an awkward smile. "When I strengthen my body past a certain point, my pupils become horizontal. I am possessed by a bicorn."

"Ah, I see. Your eyes have such a beautiful gradient! Oh—so that was how you were able to break the carriage wheel. Your body strengthening magic is very impressive."

This time it was Lotta who stared wide-eyed at Lucia.

"Um, Head Manager Lucia... Does it not trouble you to speak with a blighted?"

"Huh? I thought you stopped using your intimidation already?"

"So you felt that as well...?"

"That was how you stopped those men in their tracks, right? Since I was on your shoulder, I was fine."

"It was very discourteous of me to put a lady on my shoulder."

"Not at all—I had a great view up there."

Lotta was silent for a moment, then placed a hand over his mouth to suppress a chuckle. Lucia was relieved he didn't offer another apology.

"Are you not working today, Lotta?"

"I, um, was following you...as a precaution."

"Do you mean as my bodyguard?"

"Yes. Per Lord Forto's orders. He was concerned something like this might

happen.”

As always, Forto was one step ahead. Lucia had just been enjoying her day off without a care in the world. She should have been more cautious. She should have just purchased the goods she needed and paid a fee to have everything delivered to the house. At the very least, she shouldn't have let herself get separated from her brother and left alone in a nearly empty alleyway. Even though she'd become the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, she had behaved like nothing had changed. A result of her naivety.

“Thank you so much. If you hadn't been watching over me, that man would have taken me to his estate,” Lucia said, but she knew that hadn't been the only possible danger.

He had most likely wanted to ask about what the Magical Garment Factory was working on now and what they planned to work on in the future, and he'd also probably wanted to drag her into his own faction. Who knew what sort of means he would have resorted to in order to make that happen? And if by some chance her existence as Lucia Fano had presented an obstacle for him, then at worst, there was the possibility he would have had her killed.

Lucia clenched her molars as a chill ran through her. She plastered a smile on her face and looked at Lotta.

“I'll be more careful next time! My brother is with me today. I need to go back to where he left me... Ah! Maybe that's a bad idea?”

“No, it's fine. I heard the sound of a horse galloping away just a moment ago. Your brother must be worried, so I will bring you back at once.”

The end of Lotta's sentence was drowned out by a familiar voice.

“Lucia! Lucia!”

“Oh! That's my brother!”

That was unmistakably her brother calling out for her. Accompanied by Lotta, Lucia ran in the direction of Massimo's voice. Massimo continued calling out for her as they ran toward one another—and for some reason, his voice grew higher pitched and gentler.

“He sounds like he’s looking for a lost kid...” Lucia mumbled.

The young man running at her side couldn’t stop himself from letting out a loud laugh.

Lucia returned home with her brother. Lotta had summoned a carriage from seemingly nowhere and escorted them home. Soon after, a delivery arrived: five servings of the fried seafood, cakes, and fried yams that they hadn’t been able to buy earlier. The sender’s name was Forto, but Lucia had a feeling that rounded penmanship belonged to Lotta.

Although it was early, the family decided to close their workshop for the day and have dinner all together. The Fanos had a rule that during mealtimes, they would avoid talking about any dark or difficult topics. As they placed the fried seafood on the table, Lucia only mentioned that something had happened while they were out but said they could talk about it after dinner.

Aren’t people supposed to lose their taste for food after a scary encounter? Lucia thought as she chewed on a fried shrimp. It was perfectly crispy and still hot. The scallops were big and juicy, and the tiny twice-fried fish were exquisite. The cakes were also a perfect balance of tart and sweet that was absolutely delicious.

Across the table, her father and mother were sharing fried fish, and her grandfather had sandwiched some fried squid between two slices of white bread. Lucia finished her dinner as she watched her family eat.

She heard a light belch, and when she looked next to her, she saw her brother had cleaned off his entire plate too. They met eyes, then chuckled. Apparently, neither sibling’s appetite had been impacted by that scary ordeal.

They had been sent more than enough fried yams for their family of five, so after dinner, they pecked away at the pile of them as they had tea. Once everyone was given a serving of tea, Lucia recounted what had happened earlier that day.

“Today, while we were out shopping, a stranger tried to force me into his carriage.”

Lucia's father choked on his tea.

"It happened while I went to return some extra change I was given—I'm really glad you're okay."

"He must have targeted you since you're cute... We can't let him get away with that. Who's the bastard?" her usually mild-mannered grandfather asked in a low voice.

"Hold on, Lucia, are you hurt? Did you bite him to get away?" her mother asked. She knew her daughter well. Lucia didn't want to say that the only reason she hadn't bitten him was because she'd been lifted up onto someone's shoulder before she'd had the chance to.

"I'm fine! A guard from the Tailors' Guild protected me. He told the other guy off, and that was that."

"From the sound of things, it wasn't some crime of opportunity, right?"

There was no point in lying to her father here. That much was clear to her. "Yeah, he called me Head Manager Fano, so he must know who I am..."

"Is the Magical Garment Factory involved in some dispute?"

"No, not as far as I know. But our products do have a wide market, so—"

It was hard for her to admit, but she couldn't remember any of the man's identifying features—nor could she bear to think about him. Her family members were watching her with a mixture of indignation and bewilderment. Lucia didn't want to see her family looking this way, but it was her fault that they were.

"That guard you mentioned, did he say he'd report it to the city guards?"

"No, he didn't say. He did say he would report it to Mr. Forto, though."

Lucia hadn't considered that until her father brought it up. She'd been thinking about so many other things that it hadn't even crossed her mind.

"I didn't think about it either," Massimo said. "Do you think I should go do that now, dad?"

"No, if the person who escorted you here didn't say anything, then the

Tailors' Guild might not want this to be made public."

That seemed entirely possible. Lotta could have stopped by the city guards' station. The fact that he had gone straight to Forto without doing so must have meant he'd judged that it was better not to. It had never even occurred to Lucia—the fear of the day started to creep back in.

"Lucia, it's okay for you to quit, you know," her grandfather stated in an unexpectedly cheery voice. "Even if you quit the Magical Garment Factory, the Fano Workshop will be fine. You can just come back to work here at home. You wouldn't have to worry about anything."

"Grandpa..."

Currently, the Fano Workshop was letting Lucia, the assistant manager, out on loan to the Tailors' Guild as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. The initial contract was for six months, and quitting before the contract ended could theoretically cause trouble for the Fano Workshop—although, knowing Forto, Lucia could say with certainty that that wouldn't happen.

"It's fine! I'll make sure not to go around alone anymore," she replied brightly as she clasped her hands tightly under the table.

Across the table, her father stared at her intently. "Lucia, does being head manager of the Magical Garment Factory really bring you happiness?"

"Huh?"

"What you want is to be is a couturier, right? Isn't it better to become one on your own rather than taking the risk of getting dragged into something even more dangerous as the head manager of the factory?"

"On my own...?"

"It might be hard to have a workshop and store on your own, but people are already requesting you by name, aren't they? Even if you can't get noble customers, you can earn a decent living making clothes for commoners," her mother said.

"She's right, Lucia. I'm worried something like today might happen again. It's safer if you work at home. You could even rent a place nearby."

Lucia couldn't give an immediate reply as her family members posed suggestion after suggestion. Yes, today had been frightening. And it was frightening to think that something similar might happen again.

If she quit the Magical Garment Factory, it would still be possible for her to work as a couturier. She now had more satisfied customers who would recommend her, and she knew she was capable of providing consultations. If those people wrote letters of introductions for her, then it would be possible for her to get work. However, her dream of having her own workshop and store would drift even further away.

But above all, if she prematurely abandoned her post as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, she would be inconveniencing all of her colleagues who worked there. As she thought about them, the image of each of their faces came to mind—their worried, exasperated, and happy faces.

She had already caused them all kinds of trouble, and as a powerless commoner, she'd inevitably cause them even more trouble in the future. Still, she didn't want to quit early and leave them in the lurch. After all, this was a job she had taken on as a couturier. She wanted to assume responsibility for the position she'd accepted and see it through to its conclusion.

If she didn't do that, she had no right to call herself the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory *or* the assistant manager of the Fano Workshop. And as a clothier, she wouldn't have the right to own a private workshop and store either.

Lucia made up her mind.

"I do want to make my own way as a clothier someday, but I don't think that time is now. I don't want to abandon the position I agreed to take on. I want to stay there until we reach a good resting point or until someone else is appointed head manager."

Concern remained etched on her family members' faces. She knew she would continue making them worry from here on, but still, she didn't want to change her decision.

"So, I'm staying on as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory."

Everyone stayed silent. Lucia's father fixed her with an intense stare. He had never looked at her that way before.

"Okay. You are the head manager there, after all."

He wasn't angry or resentful, and he was looking at her not as the father of a child he wanted to protect but as a fellow manager of a workshop. Lucia had a feeling he had much more he wanted to say as her father. And she knew the worry he felt for her was as deep as the ocean.

Nevertheless, she was the factory's head manager. She was no longer the temporary head manager who had taken on the job at Forto's directive and had become the official head manager almost as if swayed into the idea.

From here on, she was head manager by her own decision.



"She might be stronger than a kraken..."

Lotta was surprised by his own words. It was very unusual for him to say something like that, either to himself and to someone else. Lotta hated krakens. He hated the sea too. But the other day during the Magical Garment Factory party, at Lucia's urging, he tried eating kraken for the first time in his life.

"I was super scared of krakens when I was little!" Lucia had said from her seat beside him. He wholeheartedly agreed.

Their colossal bodies, too large to see all at once, the slimy substance they coated their prey in, their tentacles that stank of dead fish, and their glaring, black eyes—Lotta recalled all those details along with the frigid sea.

But Lucia had picked up the kraken skewer without hesitating and exclaimed, "Now, they're delicious!" before laughing brightly. *Even a terrifying kraken was nothing but a simple meal in her small hands*—Lotta thought. Then he'd felt a prickling sensation behind his eyes and had been unable to hold back his laughter. The kraken skewer Lucia had encouraged him to eat hadn't tasted better than lettuce, but it hadn't been bad.

Lotta hated krakens for a very simple reason: he had nearly been eaten by one.

Long ago, here in Ordine, there had been an organization that forced young children to eat monster cores to turn them into blighted so they could be sold to other countries. Most of the children died in the process, but among those who adapted, many received great magical power. The children with strong magic were sold for a high price.

Lotta was one of the children who survived his possession. The first thing he remembered from his childhood was being in a dark room where someone was always crying. The room always contained children, but their faces changed frequently.

The adults were mainly men, and if the children didn't do as they were told, they would be struck or whipped. It was the normal order of things, so the children simply obeyed the adults.

One day, the children were loaded like cargo on a ship to be delivered abroad. En route, the ship was attacked by a kraken. Lotta heard the sound of the ship walls breaking apart and the screams of adults and children alike before he was thrown into the cold sea. Not knowing how to swim, he clung for dear life to a wooden plank floating in the bitterly salty water.

The kraken's massive body was writhing in the water right next to him. It glared at Lotta with eyes bigger than his head. To his left and right, people were being ensnared by those fishy-smelling tentacles and submerged underwater, never to resurface.

Despite the people near him vanishing underwater, those tentacles never came for him. Lotta, who was possessed by a bicorn, had unconsciously been using concealment magic. It was only a long time after the fact that he realized that was how he had slipped the kraken's notice.

Eventually, he was fortunately saved by another ship and received treatment at the temple. Since Lotta had been blighted before he could walk, the temple had deemed it unwise to remove the possession for fear doing so would render him immobile.

Thus, still blighted, Lotta was given a regular education at a children's shelter. This new place was filled with things incomprehensible to him. He was pitied, he was cried over, he was avoided for being creepy. He had no idea how to

decide things for himself, since he had only ever done what he was told for his entire life. Conversing with others was also a struggle. But he was given three meals a day and he slept in a room where no one cried. He liked that.

His new home gave him the name Lotta, and at the suggestion of his caretakers, he decided to become a bodyguard. Although he didn't quite understand why himself, he was told he was well suited to the role. Bodyguards protected their employers. They stood before them and acted as their shields, simple as that. It was by simply doing those simple things that Lotta came to be called a capable guard.

His current employer was Forto. Under Forto's orders, Lotta acted as the bodyguard for the Magical Garment Factory's head manager, Lucia Fano, on her days off. During that time, Forto took care of paperwork at the Tailors' Guild. There, he had no need for a bodyguard.

For a while now, Lotta had been using concealment to watch over Lucia on her days off. She was cheerful and sunny around her friends and family, and even when she was going about on her own. Lotta wasn't sure if it was because Lucia was a commoner or if it was just her personality, but he found it fun to watch her.

Today, however, something very unpleasant had happened—men had appeared from nowhere and tried to take her away. After measuring their strength, Lotta had decided he would save Lucia himself and asked another guard to go after the men. His plan had been to break the arm of the man who had seized Lucia, tear her away from him, and get her to a safe distance.

That plan was disrupted when Lucia attempted to bite the man. Instead, Lotta picked her up and gave the man a light kick. He hadn't expected her to do something like that at all.

He wanted to deal with the men too, but Forto had ordered him to prioritize Lucia's safety, confirm whether he knew the assailants, and avoid spilling any blood as he possibly could, so instead, he merely used intimidation.

After putting some distance between the two of them and the men, he placed Lucia back down on the ground, and she looked at him wide-eyed. He could guess why. He had used somewhat powerful body strengthening magic to break

the carriage wheel. As a result, his pupils had become long and flat like a bicorn's. Almost everyone who had witnessed his pupils in that state had either frozen in shock, let out a scream, or silently moved away from him. There had been only one person who had smiled and said they'd looked pretty—

He'd braced himself for Lucia to similarly panic or start crying, but his concern proved to be unfounded. Lucia didn't scream, lash out, cry, or run away from him in fear. In fact, after peering into his eyes for some time, she smiled and said, "Your eyes are such a beautiful gradient!"

She had seen through his concealment, was unshaken by his blighted pupils, and had gotten him to eat kraken. Lucia might have been stronger than him. Perhaps even stronger than a kraken. Lotta couldn't help but believe that.

"I have returned."

The evening light streaming in from the window was changing from red to purple as Lotta entered the master's office of the Tailors' Guild. Forto looked up from the letter he was reading and turned his head slightly toward him.

Lucia was not working today. Forto had tasked guards to take turns watching over her just in case of emergency, but their reports were always brief and straightforward: she went out with her family, she went to a friend's house, and so on.

Hoping she was once again making good use of her day of rest, Forto turned his gaze to Lotta. The bodyguard's brows were deeply furrowed, an expression Forto didn't see on him often. Suddenly, he started speaking at a fast pace.

"My report is as follows. Agents of a certain family attempted to kidnap Head Manager Fano in a carriage. I believe it was not the head of the household who ordered this but another family member or a subordinate. I am currently in the process of investigating the house and the people involved, so I will be able to report on that shortly."

"Is Lucia okay?" Forto interrupted to ask.

Lotta gave a short nod. "Yes, Head Manager Fano is unharmed. I escorted her home and stationed a knight to keep watch. Also, she caught sight of my

horizontal pupils, so I explained to her that I am blighted.”

Lotta’s pupils changed when he used body strengthening magic, which meant the situation had been fairly dire. Forto put down his letter and interlaced his fingers.

“Were you hurt, Lotta?”

“No. I broke one of the carriage wheels to prevent the men from leaving.”

It would have been too difficult to apprehend the men while also protecting Lucia. It would have been another matter if Lotta could have rendered them incapable of leaving, but Forto had ordered Lotta to avoid a violent, bloody fight in front of Lucia.

In that case, the carriage the men had prepared to abduct Lucia was an important piece of evidence. That must have been why Lotta had broken the wheel. However, even though he had saved her, Lucia must have been frightened when she found out Lotta was blighted.

“I don’t believe Lucia has met very many blighted individuals. I will tell her she needn’t worry about you.”

“She wasn’t afraid of me. And she, um...said that my flat pupils were a beautiful gradient...”

“Did she now...?”

What was that pause for? Forto was happy to hear she hadn’t been scared, but he’d never heard of someone complimenting Lotta’s horizontal pupils. It surprised him, and he could clearly see Lotta was embarrassed.

“I’ll assign two bodyguards exclusively to Lucia. Two talented guards—I can’t part with you, Lotta, so I will ask Lady Altea for recommendations.”

“Are you sure about that, Lord Forto? Lady Altea is, well—”

The dowager duchess would certainly recommend capable bodyguard knights, and two of them would come close to the level of protection Lotta could offer alone—with the caveat that their price would be steep. Lotta had once been employed by Altea, as Forto was well aware.

“I have no other choice. Lucia is the head manager of the Magical Garment

Factory, to which the Tailors' Guild attaches great importance."

He'd find some way to fit it into the budget. If push came to shove, he'd hint at a delivery for the castle or the royal family and make up a story about some party wanting to pick a fight with the Tailors' Guild.

Sometimes people assumed the Tailors' Guild only made gorgeous dresses and sleek suits for nobles and dealt in clothing and fabric for commoners, but that wasn't all.

Garments enchanted with all types of defensive magic to be worn underneath armor and dresses; bedding and linen for the castle and temples; bandages and other medical supplies; sandbags and nets for public works projects, and other pouches for manufacturing industries and transportation—like a great spider web, they were connected to various industries. The Magical Garment Factory had been established as a way to further deepen the guild's influence in those areas.

There was no such thing as paying too much for bodyguards and safety management, and they would be needing both from here on. The higher-ups could accept that—no, they would *have* to accept it. It was Forto himself who had asked Lucia to be head manager of the factory, after all.

As he clenched his fists tightly, a quick rap came at the door.

A guild staffer entered and asked, "Pardon me. The manager of the Fano Workshop is here with an urgent request to meet with you. Are you available?"

He hadn't scheduled an appointment, nor had he given any forewarning of his coming. It was highly unusual for a commoner and the manager of a small workshop to call upon the Tailors' guildmaster so suddenly. Had he come here to tell Forto he was making his daughter quit the Magical Garment Factory because of the events of that day? And if so, how should Forto persuade him not to?

Forto straightened his posture and said, "Send him in, please."

Lucia's father, Rubert Fano, entered his office. They had met several times already, since the Fano Workshop often supplied the Tailors' Guild with gloves and socks. When Forto had gone to speak to Lucia about the toe socks, her

father had been so shocked that he'd collapsed to the floor. However, the man who entered the room now was like an entirely different person. He displayed no panic or fear. His eyes, filled with a hard light, were fixed straight at Forto. The guildmaster offered him a seat on the sofa, but Rubert stayed standing.

"I would like to offer my apologies for coming here with no notice and also express my appreciation to you for making time for me," Rubert said. "Lucia told me what happened today. I judged it too dangerous for my daughter to continue working as the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory and advised her to quit."

"What did Head Manager Lucia say?"

Although she'd had a bodyguard with her, he'd only appeared to save her after she had found herself in that dangerous situation. If Lucia herself wished to leave her post, Forto wouldn't be able to stop her. He waited for Rubert's next words.

"She said she didn't want to abandon the position she chose to undertake. She wants to stay on until things settle down or someone else is appointed manager. She said...she will continue being the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. That is what she decided."

"What she decided..."

He should have been happy to hear that, but Forto felt a pain in his chest as if he'd been stabbed with a needle. He had given Lucia—a young commoner woman with no magic, no power, and no status—a heavy responsibility because he could see she had talent.

So far, she'd seemed to have no trouble fulfilling her duties, but was that actually true? The slew of offers for marriage and adoption, the envy of which she was now the target, all those heartless rumors...

Wasn't that too much for a commoner like Lucia? How much was she exerting herself without his awareness? How much strain was this putting on the Fanos themselves? How much were they worrying about Lucia?

And this time, thanks to the Tailors' Guild, Lucia had been put in harm's way. And yet here was Rubert, who hadn't said a word about making or wanting to

make his daughter quit. He had merely told him it was Lucia's decision to stay. But just how firm in her resolve was she?

The man looked at him with eyes the same dark blue as Lucia's.

"I implore you, Mr. Luini, please protect my daughter," the man said with a firm, unwavering voice. Forto rose from his chair. Before he knew it, he'd placed his right hand over his left shoulder—a knight's salute.

He spoke with clear intention and determination. "Manager Fano, I swear on my name as Fortunato Luini, guildmaster of the Tailors', to protect Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory."

An Attendant's Uniform and Mr. Sunset

"This is a uniform enchanted by the magical toolmakers of the Tailors' Guild with durability and resistance to heat and stabbing. It has one of our guild's five most powerful enchantments. Oh, but keep in mind this is confidential, please."

"I will!"

Lucia nodded energetically as she listened to Forto's explanation while Dante was standing rooted to the spot by Forto's side. The three of them were in Forto's office at the Tailors' Guild. Spread flat on the low table was an exotic-looking attendant's uniform.

Instead of the normal black suit that was common for attendants, this one had a standing collar that completely obscured the shirt worn underneath. The long jacket fell past the waist and looked quite elegant. The trousers were a bit slim-fitted and were also enchanted with powerful magic. The embroidery around the neck and the seams was matte purple but appeared lilac in certain light. Even just laid out on the table, the uniform looked like a sophisticated piece.

"The fabric is capable of stopping the point of an iron sword, so fatal wounds shouldn't be much of a concern. The entire outfit has been enchanted without any gaps, so it will be like wearing a suit of armor."

"That's amazing!"

This was the level of excellence that the magical toolmakers of the Tailors' Guild were capable of. It was a shame Dahlia couldn't see it.

Wearing a pair of white gloves, Forto turned over the uniform to show the back. Lucia also pulled on a pair of gloves so she could hold the sleeves.

"Oh, the left and right sleeves are pretty different from each other," she remarked.

"Yes. The client is also a bodyguard and wields a sword."

The right sleeve was a bit roomier, suggesting that the attendant had a muscular right shoulder and arm, or that they wielded a heavy sword. Lucia didn't know much about knights or weapons, but even she could see just how well designed this uniform was. Even though the left and right sides were sized differently, darts and hidden seams were sewn in to make them look as though they were the same size. The fine uniformed lines were superb enough to be decorative in their own right.

"This stitching is incredible..."

"That was done by Zilo's teacher, the oldest stitcher in the Tailors' Guild, who temporarily retired to look after a grandchild but then begged tearfully to come back."

It was obvious that the stitcher was wonderfully talented. Lucia would love for them to teach her sometime, or even just allow her to sit next to them and watch them work.

"The last time I saw them in the hallway, they said, 'Bring Zilo back! I'm quitting this year for sure!' They told me to tell you, Mr. Forto," Dante said.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Now—our very experienced stitcher has done a lot for us, so shall we present them with some winter fabric for their grandchild? Something high-quality, made with baphomet wool."

Forto spoke of bribing them so nonchalantly, but it was understandable that he didn't want to lose such a skilled stitcher.

"Mr. Forto, is the lining of this uniform also enchanted?"

"Yes, it is, but the reverse side contains some designations..."

"Ah, I'll be careful not to open the front so I don't see those. I've heard that magic circles and the like can't be seen by anyone other than those involved in making them."

Lucia had heard that magic circles specified by the various noble families were drawn on the lining of these types of uniforms by the magical toolmakers and mages of the Tailors' Guild. Magic circles could be copied. Zilo had told Lucia that in order to prevent the circles from being disseminated to outsiders, the makers of the uniform needed to sign a confidentiality contract and were

generally the only ones to see the circles.

The placement and shape of the pockets were likewise not to be disclosed. Apparently Zilo had once sewn thirty interior pockets on a uniform he'd worked on, which were to be weighed down by the lipsticks, face powders, and lotions of the attendant's employer.

As a matter of custom, noblewomen never allowed their makeup to become untidy, but they were also obliged to maintain the illusion that they never had to reapply it. That sounded immensely difficult for both the noblewoman, who had to be immaculately beautiful at all times, and for her attendant.

"This is the original fabric used for this uniform, and I also have reference documents with more details. Would you like to read them?"

"Yes, please!"

The sample Forto placed on the table was made of high-quality monster thread that had a peculiar slippery texture. The tight weave made it seem like a difficult material to sew neatly.

Such threads were often procured from monsters like baphomets, monster silkworms, and large spiders. They were very delicate materials whose quality depended not just on the type of monster but also its habitat.

Lucia pored over the explanatory materials Forto handed her. The fabric of this winter uniform was apparently made of materials harvested from highland baphomets and monster silkworms. As she read through the description of the thread's properties, she tried to hand Dante the pages she'd already read.

"I already know all that, boss. I'm going to go on ahead to the first floor for fabric inspection and write up the receipts for them. The guild's busy today, so it'll take some time."

"Okay. Thanks, Dante," Lucia said, deciding to take him up on his offer.

Then she looked back down at the documents. The more she read about monster materials, the more she realized how much she had yet to learn.

"Mr. Forto, I understand how the baphomets raised up north produce wool that's resistant to cold, but why is the silk produced by monster silkworms on

the seaside so strong?”

“It’s unclear, but some say it might have something to do with the climate, perhaps the sea breeze. Furthermore, the green mulberry trees that they eat are grown nearby, so that may contribute as well. They have only been bred for a few years, so we will learn more as time goes on.”

“I hope they find out soon. With better breeding grounds and food, maybe they’ll produce a warmer, stronger silk...”

“Indeed. Enchantments have their limitations, so having better materials to start with will open up more possibilities for processing them. Be they from slimes or unicorns, many types of monster materials will assume even greater importance.”

Lucia nodded in agreement. Then she realized something. She had learned a lot about monster materials from her friend Dahlia’s many passionate explanations. Monster materials were practically treasure to magical toolmakers, but Lucia was surprised at how valuable they were to herself too. *Maybe someday, I’ll even come to think creepy slimes are cute.* Though that was most likely very far in the future.

“Apparently in Iſrana, they have looms that incorporate branches from the World Tree.”

“I’d give anything to see that! What effect do the branches have? Do they help people weave faster?”

“The weavers don’t get tired as they work, and they become so absorbed in their task that they need to be pulled away from the machines after a set amount of time.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing...?”

“But doesn’t the thought of being able to concentrate for that long make you want to try it at least once?”

“It does!”

Lucia couldn’t lie. Plus, with an effect like that, she wished those branches could be used to make knitting machines too.

“Ah, I got distracted by our conversation. Lucia, the client will be picking up the uniform soon. Unfortunately, you won’t be able to take those documents with you, so would you like to read them again after work?”

“I would appreciate that very much.”

The documents had “Confidential” stamped on them in red letters, so Lucia couldn’t take notes on them, and she could only remember so much from just reading over them quickly. If Forto was giving her the opportunity to read over them one more time, she wasn’t going to refuse.

“In that case, I will also prepare some of the new fabrics that are coming in today, and some pastries too,” Forto said with a smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Forto!” Lucia replied enthusiastically. Forto knew exactly what bait to use to motivate his employees, and Lucia took it every time. And so, looking forward to the end of the workday, she left the office in high spirits.

Outside the large window in the hallway, the sun shone radiantly in the clear blue sky. *Tomorrow should be nice too, so maybe I’ll wear my new aqua blue dress*, Lucia thought as she looked to the end of the hall, where she saw a man was coming up the staircase.

“Ah...”

For a moment, she couldn’t look away. He had rust-colored hair, light brown skin, and bright, almond-shaped eyes. He was slightly shorter than Forto, but his neck and shoulders were robust, giving him the impression of a knight. The man was wearing an attendant’s uniform similar to the one she had just been examining.

The man’s eyes naturally gravitated toward her. His face and his presence reminded her of someone.

Mr. Sunset—that was what Lucia had called the boy. She had a feeling he would be about this man’s age now.

But even though she had some confidence in her own memory, she had met the boy when she was a young child. Besides, Mr. Sunset’s hair and eyes had been vibrant red. Their resemblance was likely just a coincidence.

Lucia was wondering if she should say something to him, or if that would be rude, when her voice came out on its own. “Thank you for visiting the Tailors’ Guild. My name is Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory.”

It was inconsiderate to introduce oneself out of the blue to a noble, but this was the Tailors’ Guild, on the floor of the guildmaster’s office, and she herself was the manager of the Magical Garment Factory. It should be completely reasonable to give a professional greeting here. Still, Lucia’s voice was shrill with nerves.

The man stopped, his rust-colored eyes narrowing slightly. *Is he squinting against the bright sun?*

“Thank you for the cordial greeting. I am Jonas Goodwin, an attendant of the Scalfarotto family,” he said. His face was impassive in the manner typical of attendants, but he didn’t come across as cold.

Lucia peered into his rust-colored eyes, impelled by the need for confirmation. “Pardon, but have we met somewhere before?”

Although he seemed similar, the boy from her memories had bright red hair and eyes, not rust like Jonas’s.

Jonas gave a noblelike response in a low, smooth voice. “I don’t believe I would forget meeting such a lovely woman as yourself.” Lucia found herself nearly taken in by his words, then started. *Have we met somewhere before?* meant *I am interested in you*, and according to Dante, it was a standard pickup line among nobles. Lucia might have just caused an outrageous misunderstanding.

Her head spinning in confusion, Lucia thought of another possibility.

“Um, excuse me for asking, but do you happen to have any brothers, Mr. Goodwin?”

“Yes, I have an elder brother. We have different mothers, so we do not look much alike. He has light, mouse brown hair.”

“I see...”

Mouse brown was an ash brown with golden-auburn undertones. Not red.

Their resemblance really was just a coincidence.

When she took a better look at him, she could see that this man named Jonas had a sterner face than the boy she knew. Her memory dated back to before she'd even entered primary school. Of course it was unreliable.

"Do you have some business with my brother?" the man asked quietly, bringing Lucia back to the situation at hand. Whether a noble would inherit a peerage or not had a great impact on their future position and marriage, meaning asking whether Jonas had any brothers could be taken as an inappropriate question.

But neither could she very well say, "I spoke to you because I thought you might be Mr. Sunset, a boy whose name I don't know and whom I met in a back alley when I was a child. Then I thought he might be your older or younger brother." Not only would that be rude, it would accomplish nothing except to baffle him.

Lucia bowed her head deeply in apology. "Please forgive me! You look very similar to someone I met a long time ago to whom I am very indebted... I am very sorry for speaking so rudely."

"I see. What an honor," Jonas replied, a very gentlemanly response. His manners toward her were immaculate despite her two discourteous blunders. She felt immensely guilty.

She finally recovered her couturier self. She straightened her back and responded, keeping her voice steady, "Please excuse me. Guildmaster Luini is in his office. Shall I escort you there?"

"That won't be necessary. I have an appointment with him today."

As she had thought, that attendant's uniform was for Jonas. Considering the uniform's strong enchantment and the fact that it was for both an attendant and a bodyguard, Jonas's job must be considerably difficult. As a clothier, Lucia hoped his new uniform was to his satisfaction and that it would serve to protect him.

"Very well. Then I hope you are able to find clothing that suits your needs here at the Tailors' Guild."

“Thank you. Goodbye, then.”

They passed by each other as they said their parting words. The moment they were right beside each other, Jonas gave her a small smile and said, “That outfit suits you very well, Ms. Fano.”

His smile and voice were strikingly similar to Mr. Sunset’s.

The distance between them lengthened before Lucia could respond. The sun streaming in through the window was so bright, it stung her eyes.

“Wait...what?”

Lucia kept walking until she reached the staircase landing, then thought back on the conversation she’d just had. Why had Jonas offered up that information about his brother’s hair color when she hadn’t even asked? Had he guessed right away that she was looking for someone? That sort of keen perception was necessary for an attendant, but still—

Question after question nagged at her mind, but she didn’t think it was a good idea to walk back down the hallway to the guildmaster’s office to talk to Jonas. Even if by some chance he was Mr. Sunset, that didn’t mean he remembered Lucia. No, even if he did remember her, the fact that he hadn’t said so meant he had chosen not to form a connection with her. She didn’t want to cause him any trouble.

No amount of thinking would yield an answer. She decided to stop worrying about it.

It was because she had met Mr. Sunset that day that she was where she was today. Never would she forget her gratitude toward him.

Even if it was just something about him, that man from earlier certainly resembled Mr. Sunset, but maybe it was just her desire to see him again that made her think so.

To this day, Lucia still didn’t know Mr. Sunset’s name. She regretted that fact deeply.

As she walked down the stairs, Lucia mumbled quietly, “Mr. Jonas Goodwin, you certainly look like Mr. Sunset...”

Extra Story: The Nemophila and the Bodyguard

Good grief, there really is no predicting things, Jonas muttered internally as he slipped a copper-colored bracelet onto his right wrist.

Jonas had been born the second son of Viscount Goodwin in the Kingdom of Ordine. His family dealt in arms for the royal knights, so he was familiar with swords, lances, and bows from a young age. To his younger self, those weapons had always seemed extraordinary.

However, what he admired more than the weapons were the knights who wielded them. Knights, who brandished their swords up high as they fought and handled their spears in such a way that it seemed as though they could even cut through wind—but despite his fascination, Jonas lacked the talent to take that path.

His magic was only grade six, which was low for a noble. He could cast body strengthening magic, but even if he used it to his full capacity, he still wouldn't be on par with his family's knights, nor could he use offensive magic like a mage. Becoming a knight, much less being able to easily swing a longsword like his father or brother, seemed like a distant dream.

"Mr. Jonas, you look so much like your mother," a guest would occasionally say to him with a smile or a vague expression. As a child, he'd thought nothing of it and simply smiled and agreed. But gradually, he came to understand the true meaning behind their words.

Jonas and his older brother had different mothers. Jonas's mother, who was his father's second wife, was from Išrana, a faraway nation separated from Ordine by another country. There, his mother had been a dancer until she was given to Jonas's father as a slave. Jonas had inherited his mother's brown skin, one shade lighter. What he *hadn't* inherited was his father's high-grade magic power and fire magic.

His foreign mother, his unusual social standing, his strange appearance, his lack of magic—all were reasons that others distanced themselves from Jonas.

Though it was rare that he was openly criticized or ridiculed, he clearly felt that insurmountable distance. No matter how much he yearned for it, he could never become a knight. There was no changing his lineage or his appearance.

In order to protect his mother from ridicule and avoid bringing shame upon the Viscountcy Goodwin, Jonas devoted himself to his studies and earned good grades by dint of effort rather than genius. Since weapons were his family's livelihood, he also studied their use as well as chivalry—though even that reasoning was a stretch; it was just an attempt to hold on to the dream he refused to part with.

Even with his low magic, Jonas knew he could become a public servant or government official, and if not, he could always take the interpreter route. It was then, when he was contemplating his future, that he was approached by the eldest son of the Scalfarotto family, Guido. Scouted by a close friend—a nice sentiment, but he knew Guido must have also had some sympathy for him and his family situation.

But even knowing that, Guido had told him he could be both his bodyguard and attendant. There was no point in a bodyguard who was weaker than his master. Jonas decided on one thing: should dire circumstances arise, he would become a barrier to protect Guido.

As Guido's attendant, Jonas lived at the Scalfarottos' estate, where he entreated the guards to train him in using swords and lances. Eventually, they let him join in on their training sessions.

For some reason, Guido also occasionally joined in on the intense training, asserting that it was a way for him to keep up with his physical fitness. Guido had high magic, as well as much stronger body strengthening magic and abilities than Jonas. When they crossed swords, Jonas's hands were left numb, and he stood no chance against his master when he used magic. Even though Jonas was Guido's attendant, he would likely never in his life be able to serve as his bodyguard. As time went on, that reality started to eat away at his dream.

Then, ten years ago, his dream suddenly came true. Jonas was possessed by a fire dragon. It wasn't as though he'd had any desire to be blighted; it was just something that happened. However, as a result, he obtained the high-grade

magic, body strengthening magic, and offensive fire magic he had always longed for.

His blight did, however, come with drawbacks: some people feared and avoided him, his sense of taste changed, and the right side of his body felt chilled during wintertime.

His fiancée of several years had been horrified by the densely packed scales on his right arm. The day she came to visit him, she'd recoiled and tearfully yet promptly ended their engagement.

Jonas did not blame her. Even in the Scalfarottos' estate, upon first seeing Jonas's arm, the maids had lurched back in shock, the male attendants had frozen stiff, and the knights, despite all their skill and valor, had momentarily raised their guard. It was simply to be expected.

Soon after, the Goodwin family, the Scalfarotto family, and his master Guido suggested he have his blight removed, but Jonas obstinately refused. For his entire life, Jonas had accepted that he would always be an attendant, never a full-fledged bodyguard. Nothing more fortunate had ever happened to him.

Jonas opened the excessively large closet in his room to look at the full-length mirror on the back of the door. Reflected in the glass was a man with rust-colored hair and eyes and light brown skin. In the past, he had always hated his appearance, but now he didn't mind it so much.

He'd had the same hair, eye, and skin color his entire life, but now some people were trying to claim he looked that way because of his fire dragon blight. It was as if they had never acknowledged his existence before now. How laughable.

"I still have some spare shirts..."

Inside his closet, lined with white shirts and attendant uniforms all in the same style, Jonas checked the clothes he had for spring and fall weather. The white shirts he wore under his uniform were made of a starchy material derived from monster thread. He had several varieties of differing heaviness for each season. It was about time for him to switch from summer to autumn wear.

In the past, due to how many shirts he had, he'd carelessly run out of summer shirts. He'd then randomly picked from the spring and autumn shirts, thinking they were basically the same, and had mistakenly put on a winter shirt. As a result, he'd felt like a dried-up lizard standing out in the heat. He'd learned a hard lesson that day, and ever since, he made a habit of checking the shirts he had in his closet from time to time.

In the Scalfarotto household, it was the job of the maids and servants to change out the clothes for the season and check the quantity of clothing items. Jonas, under the rationale that he himself was an attendant, managed his own clothes. Whenever someone pointed out that he was busy and should leave that task to someone else, Jonas responded jokingly that he was hiding a dead body in his closet.

Naturally, that wasn't the real reason. Most of Jonas's current clothing was custom-made and had unique features. Each article was enchanted with magic and had several secret pockets for concealed weapons. He didn't want that to be known even among the staff of the Scalfarotto estate. Jonas had resolved to trust the staff of the estate, but ever since the day he became a blighted, he'd made a habit of considering the worst-case scenarios. That was the fault not of the fire dragon but of his own human nature.

Jonas slipped his arms through the sleeves of his white shirt, and it felt as comfortable on him as if it were his own skin. As he adjusted his cuffs, he suddenly recalled the white cotton shirts he used to wear.

Soon after his possession, he'd finally returned to this room and tried to put on one of his usual shirts. But when he tried to stick his right arm through the sleeve, it got stuck on his scales. At the time, he hadn't yet learned how to flatten his scales.

He forced his arm through unthinkingly and tore the sleeve to shreds, getting scraps of torn cloth meshed in his scales. As he was plucking out the fragments, Guido arrived at his door; he blamed himself for Jonas's blight and was terribly concerned for him. Jonas didn't want his master to see him in this state. He stuffed his torn shirt back into his closet and hurriedly tried to put on another shirt. Again, it got stuck on his scales—he ground his teeth even harder than the first time.

In the end, he was forced to wrap a shirt around his right arm and put on a second, sleeveless shirt before telling his master to enter despite his indecent state.

As Jonas had expected him to, Guido looked at him with deeply furrowed brows. “Jonas... Do your regular shirts not fit you anymore?”

“That seems to be the case,” Jonas replied with feigned indifference, but being his friend as well as his master, Guido saw right through him. He wordlessly tugged on the white shirt wrapped around Jonas’s right arm.

“Ah, you have scales now, so...”

“Yes, my scales make it so...”

Wearing a shirt was difficult now that he had scales. Jonas thought they had been thinking along the same lines. However, Guido seemed to have come to a different conclusion: that Jonas’s scales made it immediately obvious that he was blighted, which meant people would avoid him. Exactly how Jonas’s own fiancée had.

Guido decided it would be better if Jonas’s scales weren’t visible, so he commissioned an illusionment bracelet from magical toolmakers connected with the Scalfarottos. It was a bracelet that would make Jonas’s right arm look as it used to, though his scales would remain unaltered.

With that bracelet, Jonas was able to go about his day without having to worry about people’s stares. While he was grateful for it, the more he looked at the bracelet, the more his eyes narrowed. He’d been told that the bracelet was made of a precious metal called crimson gold and other rare materials such as fairy glass. On top of that, it had also been densely enchanted with defensive magic to prevent poison, confusion, and other maladies.

Magical tools enchanted with two or three layers of magic were exorbitantly expensive. Despite Jonas repeatedly asking how much it cost, Guido never disclosed the amount. The fact that he never did so even when he was properly drunk only confirmed to Jonas that it had been considerably expensive.

By the time Jonas’s illusionment bracelet was finished, he’d heard that his former fiancée already had plenty of new suitors. He didn’t have much to say

about that. Jonas himself had received a marriage proposal from another house, but he'd declined. His blight and his scales had become a handy excuse.

As time went on, Jonas started wearing shirts that were two sizes too big, since shirts that were only one size too big still got stuck on his scales frequently. He'd thought he'd be able to solve the problem by sewing the sleeves of these larger shirts up to his shoulders to shorten them, and then wear a jacket on top, but that only made it uncomfortable and irritating every time he swung a sword. With uneven shoulders, his jacket didn't fit properly on top of his shirt, and the extra fabric around his left arm became a hindrance at his elbow. Above all, after swinging a sword and bringing his arm back down, his scales would occasionally still get caught on his shirt, which disrupted his concentration.

Jonas had never given clothing much thought until then. He'd never thought it would impact him this much. As he continued pondering whether there was some tailor from whom a blighted might order custom-made clothes, or whether some other solution might be feasible, Guido eventually realized what was going on.

Then, one day, he summoned a couturier to the estate.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Fortunato Luini."

The couturier was a tall, handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes. Jonas was marveling at how aptly the man's exquisite appearance matched his job title when he was presented with a bundle of sketched designs. The hands holding the sketches were covered in calluses from using a sword, suggesting he was also a knight.

Jonas understood why Guido had called this man. When Fortunato removed Jonas's illusionment bracelet, his expression didn't change one bit at the sight of his red-scaled arm. After taking measurements for a standard uniform, he had Jonas hold up a sword so he could take detailed measurements of his arms and shoulders.

Once he was done with that, he asked with a straight face, "Mr. Goodwin, do you have a tail?"

"A tail?" Jonas sputtered. Guido, who was also in the room, had to strain

himself to suppress a laugh.

Jonas thought the man might've been joking, but apparently, scales were not the only potential change that possession could make to one's appearance; the shapes of one's pupils or ears could change, patterns could appear on one's body, and one could grow fur or sprout a tail.

Fortunato explained that in addition to clothing, one could also disguise one's blight with makeup and magical tools. As surprising as it was, perhaps Jonas had many colleagues in the capital who were blighted.

Jonas responded flatly that he didn't have a tail. It was the truth, after all.

"What specific concerns do you have about your shirts?" Fortunato asked.

"The fabric often gets caught in the scales near my wrist and around my elbow. Also, it gets caught when I swing a sword downward."

Fortunato was jotting down notes. "I see. So it impedes your movement," he said, as if it were as common a problem as any other. The man must have been quite familiar with blighted individuals already.

"On another note, are you able to raise and flatten your scales at will? I would like to measure the difference in height between those states too."

At that time, Jonas still wasn't able to control his scales, so he was at a bit of a loss. Nonetheless, the effort and time it took to inspect his scales' range of motion and record those measurements turned out to have been worth it.

Some time later, Guido cheerfully handed Jonas a silver magically sealed box.

"I had it made in a design that I thought would look good on you, Jonas."

Inside the box was an attendant's uniform. It wasn't the standard suit type he normally wore but one that looked slightly foreign. The long jacket had a standing collar with buttons that fastened all the way up to the neck, removing the need for a tie. It was paired with slim-fitted trousers of the same color.

The attendants of each family had their own distinct style of uniforms, so this wouldn't stand out as too different. However, when he touched the fabric, he could plainly feel the powerful magic coursing through it. He furrowed his brows.

“I had them make it more durable,” his master said, his smile wide and his blue eyes bright. Jonas’s head ached terribly. Just how powerful was this enchantment? And how much had Guido spent on it? He’d already paid for the illusionment bracelet. All those questions weighed on Jonas’s mind, but he pushed them aside for now.

Despite that, his questions seemed to have shown on his face. His master didn’t drop his smile as he said, “It’s an attendant’s uniform *and* a bodyguard’s uniform. What else do you expect?”

That smile of his was infectious. Jonas nearly smiled himself. He managed to keep his face composed as he said, “Thank you.”

At Guido’s encouragement, Jonas tried on the jacket immediately. He was surprised by how stretchy the material was. Not a single one of his scales caught on the fabric, and when he swung his arm, the jacket didn’t snag at his elbow or slide off his shoulder. Moreover, even though the left and right sleeves of the jacket were different sizes, they looked the same when he was wearing them.

This new uniform became Jonas’s favorite.

When he ordered changes of clothes and uniforms for each season, Fortunato asked him more questions. Through that questioning, the couturier was able to meet his requests to reinforce the uniform at the knees and elbows, and also to make it stain resistant. With all these gradual upgrades, his current uniform had to be as expensive as a noblewoman’s dress.

His clothes had been covered in blood and dirt, torn by blades, and burned by flames. But never once did harm come to Guido behind him.

Before he knew it, Jonas had come to consider this attendant’s uniform as his suit of armor.



“I will be going to the Tailors’ Guild today,” Jonas announced in Guido’s office at the Scalfarottos’ estate.

“Ah, is your new uniform ready? Take your time,” Guido replied cheerily.

A message had come from the Tailors’ Guild notifying him that his spare

uniform was ready, so he needed to go to pick it up. Jonas personally went to pick up the uniform every time. He couldn't leave it to someone else, since he needed to try it on and give his feedback. Moreover, he wanted to hear the detailed explanation of the enchantments and their effects for himself.

The one in charge of making his attendant's uniform was the same man as always: Fortunato Luini, now the guildmaster. Jonas knew he was a talented couturier, but he was surprised he had risen to the rank of guildmaster of the Tailors' at such a young age.

He had taken the lead in making Jonas's attendant's uniform from the very beginning, and he was quite familiar with the way a knight moved. He stood fearlessly at Jonas's side as he—a blighted—tried moving and using magic in his uniform. He had a certain degree of association with the Scalfarottos, and being a viscount himself, he took confidentiality seriously. Fortunato's reservation fee and couturier's tip were a bit expensive, but no one was a better fit for the job. Guido had also recommended him, so Jonas had never even considered replacing him with someone else.

Jonas went to the Central District by himself, where the Tailors' Guild was bustling with even more people than usual. There was a crowd of people around the reception desk. He was forced to wait for a bit, after which the clerk explained the situation.

"Apologies for the delay. A shipment of fabric just came in from Iŝrana—the ship was believed to have been sunk by a monster, so most of our staff is working on sorting and taking care of that."

That was only understandable. It was no wonder that the entirety of the Tailors' Guild was brimming with excitement. The receptionist continued by asking him to wait for a guide to show him the way, but Jonas shook his head.

"I am sure everyone is busy today, so I do not require a guide. It's almost time for my appointment, so I will go to Mr. Fortunato's office by myself."

All of the uniforms for the Scalfarottos' servants were ordered through the Tailors' Guild, and Jonas often came here himself, so he had some sway here.

After the clerk apologized to him twice, Jonas headed for the guildmaster's

office. He climbed several steps to reach the floor where the guildmaster's office was, then stepped into the hallway. When he looked up, he saw a flash of sunlight by the window.

"Ah..." said a quiet voice. It came from a young lady with lustrous, swaying green hair, dressed in a stylish outfit.

When she looked at him with her wide-open, dark blue eyes, Jonas had to fight to keep his expression composed.

The nemophila girl—the memories of his youth came rushing back vividly. The girl who had so poetically called him Mr. Sunset. He could see the traces of that little girl in this woman's face. She looked at him, her flower pink lips forming a smile.

"Thank you for visiting the Tailors' Guild. My name is Lucia Fano, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory."

After hearing her give her name, Jonas had to collect himself before he gave her his own. Frankly, her name and position had shocked him. She was the close friend of Dahlia Rossetti, who was herself close with Volfred, the fourth son of the Scalfarotto family. Not only that, but Lucia Fano was the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, an establishment that was rising to fame alongside the Rossetti Trading Company.

How could it be that that little girl had grown up to be her? There really was no predicting things.

Considering her position, he put himself momentarily on guard, but it seemed Lucia had called out to him because she, too, remembered that day. Her nervousness and the way she was choosing her words carefully made it clear she was trying to confirm whether Jonas was "Mr. Sunset." She even asked a question that was risky among nobles, but he trusted Fortunato would educate her on that. As he was thinking about that, he suddenly realized something.

The day they had met, there had been a spectacular sunset. His hair and eyes must have looked red to that little girl. Jonas's hair and eyes had always been a faded rust color, not the burning red of a sunset.

He found it heartwarming to know she remembered him and that day, but

considering their positions, he had no intention of revealing that he was Mr. Sunset. There was no benefit in forming a connection here, either for himself or for her.

In fact, he had heard that she was under the protection of Fortunato, the Tailors' guildmaster. The fact that, even before her recent ascendance, she had known Jonas—a blighted and an attendant to the Scalfarotto family—could be twisted against her.

The two of them likely wouldn't have any contact with each other in the future. It was better to keep that childhood memory a thing of the past, so Jonas, deciding that was for the best, pretended not to recognize her. However, he realized she might think his brother was Mr. Sunset, so on the off chance she would try contact with him, he made sure to tell her that his brother didn't resemble him in eye or hair color.

Lucia looked a little disappointed, but she didn't press any further.

All he needed to do now was give a standard farewell, and they would likely never have a chance to speak again. That was why, as they passed each other, Jonas said to her, "That outfit suits you very well, Ms. Fano."

They were words not of flattery or praise but of celebration.

Her eyes lit up as if they were reflecting the sky. Satisfied, Jonas kept walking.

Over a decade had passed since the day they first met.

The two of them, both children at the time, had met by chance in a back alleyway. The little girl had been crying over someone calling her a dayflower. She said her green hair and blue eyes made her too plain to wear cute dresses, and that it was just preposterous.

Jonas himself had been anguishing over his skin and hair color, struggling with his lack of magic and strength, lamenting his unattainable dream of becoming a knight, and when he'd received a letter from his mother from abroad, he couldn't hold back his tears anymore.

Jonas remembered that day clearly—the day they had wiped away their tears side by side. Did the woman remember giving his weeping child self an

embroidered handkerchief? While he wished she would forget that part, that blue embroidered handkerchief was still stowed away inside his closet.

That green-haired little girl had been adorable even back then, and though she had been crying over her own pain, she'd shown kindness and concern for Jonas. Anyone who looked down on a girl like that, he thought to be a poor judge of character, and cruel to boot.

He saw himself in that girl who'd spoken about things being preposterous. Jonas's light brown skin wasn't often seen in Ordine, but it was also different from the dark brown that was common in Iřrana. His father was a member of Ordine nobility, but his mother was a former slave from Iřrana. He often had to endure looks of curiosity, pity, and contempt from others.

His powerlessness, his lineage, and his appearance were all preposterous—he and Lucia were one and the same that day.

Jonas had realized something the day they spoke. The world was preposterous. That would never change. But there was no need for them to go where others directed, nor to conform to others' ideas of them. Both Lucia and himself should follow whatever paths they saw fit.

Jonas had hoped that by devoting himself as much as he could to the things he was able to do, he would one day become the person he wanted to be.

Perhaps that wish had come true. On this very day, Lucia wore a dress that was beautifully flattering on her, and Jonas wore a uniform that could be called as strong as a suit of armor. He decided to celebrate—silently, in his own heart—the fact that they had met like this in their respective outfits.

And although much time had passed, he had finally learned the name of that little girl—no, that young woman.

Lucia—her name, meaning “light,” fit her perfectly.

“Do you really think I’m like a nemophila? Do you really think I’d look good in lace and ribbon?” that little girl had asked, her blue eyes filled with anxiety and

hope.

Jonas had told her he would be her guarantor of that fact, and he was glad that he had. Her green hair was much glossier and her blue eyes far brighter than they had been back then.

Her fair visage had lost its childish innocence in favor of refined elegance. Wearing a dress of lace and ribbons that looked stunning on her, she stood tall under the rays of the sun.

As Jonas walked down the hallway without looking back, the corners of his mouth turned up. "I'd say the nemophila has bloomed beautifully...Lucia Fano."



Lucia and the Loom

Weaving Her Way to Happiness

2

Hisaya Amagishi

Illustrator: Esora Amaichi

Character Designs: Kei



Filluna

Dahlia

Lucia

Forto

Dante





Lotta


Zilo

Hestia

"You two look...
incredibly...
magnificently...
fabulous!"

"What do
you think,
Lucia?"

"Like you
suggested, boss,
we swapped
our choice of
shoe color and
coordinated them
with clothing we
had on hand."

A young woman with short, spiky red hair and red eyes, wearing a white V-neck top. She has a small flower accessory in her hair and a surprised expression. The background shows a cityscape at night with lights and a blue sky.

"I wanted to
make myself look
nice for you when
I saw you off."

Rebecca

A young woman with long, straight black hair and green eyes, wearing a black lace dress. She is sitting on a dark red tufted sofa, looking down with a sad expression. The background is a simple indoor setting with a window.

"I'm meant
to play the evil
queen, but I'm
short and plump,
so I won't look
very impressive
onstage."

Cassandra



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Lucia and the Loom: Weaving Her Way to Happiness Volume 2

by Hisaya Amagishi

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