



A★CozyLife in the★ Woods with the★ White★Witch

author: **MOJIKAKIYA**

illustrator: **syow**

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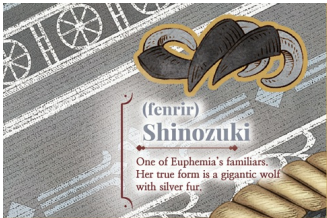
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“L-Lemme
introduce
myself.
Name’s
Senynoma,
and I’m a
cyclops. I ain’t
all that, but I
run a private
atelier as a
craftsman.”

(cyclops)
Senyoma

A fiend adept at
construction and
smithing. She was called
over by Euphemia to
help build an oven.

A★Cozy Life
in the★
Woods
with the★
White★Witch



(fenrir)
Shinozuki

One of Euphemia's familiars. Her true form is a gigantic wolf with silver fur.



(ex-adventurer)
Tori

After getting fired from his clan, the Muddy Four-Horns, he was found by the White Witch and ended up working at her home.



(phoenix)
Subaru

One of Euphemia's familiars. Her true form is a monstrous bird that lords over flames.



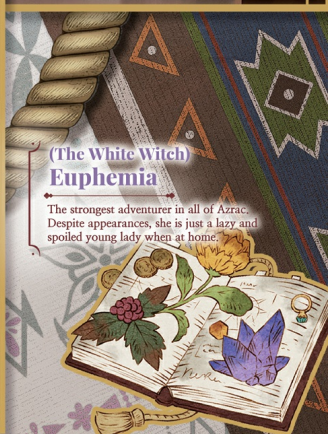
(archlich)
Cecilia

One of Euphemia's familiars. She is a sage of the underworld adept at wielding various forms of magic (including necromancy).



(The White Witch)
Euphemia

The strongest adventurer in all of Azrac. Despite appearances, she is just a lazy and spoiled young lady when at home.





“We’ll move out
once the dragons
have calmed down.
After we deliver the
report for this job,
let’s go around
Azrac and gather
info. We’ll smoke
out that phoenix
tamer.”

(Commander of the Order of
the Dragon’s Purifying Light)
Robin

A dragoon able to tame and
command dragons. Despite being
a newcomer to Azrac, she plans
to take the spot of the strongest
in the entire city.

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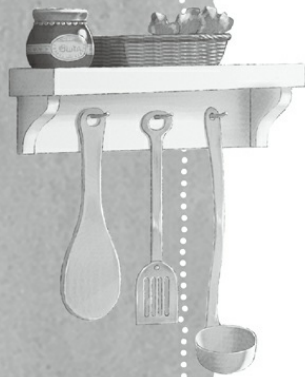


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1. Autumn's End, Winter's Start

The heat of summer had long passed, and autumn was nearing its end. Winter was now knocking on everyone's doorstep. The winds had become cold, biting any exposed skin with a stinging chill, and the leaves were fully fallen, leaving the branches of the trees bare. The skies were the same as always, though they felt higher up than usual. Each breath in the morning plumed white from the cold.

Despite the struggle of rousing himself from the thick blankets he'd buried himself under, Tori still woke early in the morning to light the fireplace, inspect the crops in the garden, feed the birds, and prepare breakfast. This had been his daily routine for a while, and waking up early had become second nature to him.

Euphemia the White Witch and her three familiars were still asleep, but Tori didn't wake them; he would wait until they got up on their own. Inside their cozy, warm bedroom was a huge bed, where the four of them were huddled together. Euphemia hated sleeping with any clothes on, and since Shinozuki the fenrir and Subaru the phoenix didn't wear any at all in their regular forms, the two of them disliked sleeping clothed as well. The archlich Cecilia *did* wear nightwear, but it was a thin and translucent piece of clothing, which only served to emphasize her voluptuous body. In some ways, it might have been more erotic than being completely naked.

In any case, that was why Tori refused to disturb their sleep. Instead, he prepared breakfast in anticipation of them waking up. A tasty aroma began to fill the house. Around this time, the four of them would usually start to leave the bedroom, rubbing their bleary eyes and plopping down on the couch or at the dining table. Tori would then wait until they were awake enough to eat.

Today's breakfast was a stew made of dried fish and vegetables, freshly baked bread from dough he'd left to rest the previous night, some sausages, and a large omelet to share—all ready to eat on the dining table.

“Euphie, put on an extra layer of clothes,” Tori barked.

“Ugh...” Euphie moped.

“Tori, there’s too little meat here. So shabby!” Shinozuki complained.

“Okay, so you’re skipping breakfast today?”

“Of course not!”

“Hey, big bro, I want more omelet!” Subaru exclaimed.

“Subaru, don’t you feel even a tiny ounce of hesitation eating those eggs?”
Tori asked.

“Huh? Not really,” she answered curtly.

“Tori dear, more stew, please! Pass me the salt too,” Cecilia requested.

“Okay, okay. Cecilia, eat your carrots.”

“Waah, meanie!” she wailed.

“Tori, more bread, please. Put lots of butter on it,” Euphemia ordered.

“Gotcha. Anyone want more jam?”

“Me! Me!”

It was already bright outside when they’d all finished eating breakfast.
Another day had begun.

Tori threw fresh firewood into the fireplace to revive the dying embers inside. The winter cold meant more frequent use of the fireplace, but it also meant they were eating up a lot more firewood. Euphemia’s magic helped in keeping the house at a toasty temperature, but they still needed the warmth of the fire, especially at night when it was the coldest. During these months, the fire in the parlor was kept lit throughout the day.

Tori then finished washing the dishes, swept the floor, picked up discarded clothes, and did the laundry. He fixed the bandanna on his head and carried the basket of freshly washed laundry from the bathroom to the line outside.

Out in the yard, the birds were pecking at the ground. They were scratching with their claws, trying to dig up seeds and bugs in the soil. The birds that had

once fit in the palm of Tori's hand were now full-sized chickens and ducks. Their high-pitched chirping had changed into the quacks and crows of adult birds.

The vegetables Tori had grown for the summer were now gone and replaced with the seedlings of winter crops. The root vegetables had started growing leaves, while the leaves of the cole crops were still expanding and had yet to form heads. The smaller carrots and turnips that Tori thinned out could still be used in stews, while the leaves could be fed to the birds. There was no end to Tori's workload.

"How's this look?" Shinozuki, in her fenrir form, asked Tori. She had been digging a big hole in the garden with her front paws.

Tori inspected the depth of the pit and nodded. "Looks good. Thanks, Shino," he said.

"Gah ha ha! I'm a mighty fenrir warrior, after all! You better gimme more meat for lunch later!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Fenrir? More like a pet dog, Tori thought.

Euphemia, who had been sitting atop the fence that surrounded the yard, hopped down from her seat and walked over.

"Want me to get it started?" she offered.

"Yeah, please do," Tori replied.

Euphemia waved her staff before stabbing it into the center of the hole that Shinozuki had dug. Then she muttered a short chant. Her staff began shining, and strange, ephemeral symbols floated around it. Shortly after, the ground rumbled. The rumbling was loudest around the staff, and before long, water spouted out of the ground.



“Whoa, water really *did* come out. Amazing!” Tori exclaimed.

“Heh heh.” Euphemia had a smug expression on her face.

It had been over half a year since Tori had been employed at Euphemia the White Witch’s household. Tori had gotten over his lingering regrets over his time at his old clan, the Muddy Four-Horns, and had adapted to his new life. Other than the usual household chores, he now had time to take care of other things around the house.

Tori’s current project was building a pond in the garden. Now that he had finished repairing the henhouse and the ducks were fully grown, he wanted a place for them to frolic.

Euphemia’s house was situated in a slightly elevated area. There was a river downhill, but it took a while to get there, and it would be troublesome if the ducks were to get swept away by the current. Instead, Tori decided to dig a pond near the garden and make the water flow toward the river. He asked Euphemia to find underground springs with her magic, and requested the assistance of Shinozuki’s paws to dig the hole and the waterway.

The ducks immediately started splashing around the muddy water. Despite the approaching winter, they paid no heed to the cold as they pecked at the water with their bills and flapped their wings about.

“I’m hungry,” Euphemia muttered. Tori looked up at the sky and saw that the sun was almost at its zenith. He adjusted the bandanna on his head.

“I’ll get started on lunch,” Tori announced. He went into the kitchen. Back in the summertime, the room had been so hot that he would immediately sweat, but in this season, the temperature was just about right. He welcomed the heat, especially after having been out in the chilly weather outside.

Tori wiped the sweat from his forehead and started chopping and crushing some boiled greens. Once they were sufficiently mashed, he poured in some water and used the mixture to make a pale green dough. He would have to let it sit for a while before cutting and shaping it.

The residents of the underworld in this household were meat lovers. If Tori served the vegetables as they were, they would often leave them untouched, so

he had to get creative with the way he prepared them. He felt like a mother dealing with a houseful of picky eaters.

Euphemia, who had been idling in the parlor, poked her head into the kitchen. "Is it ready yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," Tori replied.

"Smells nice."

"Can you set the table?"

"Okay."

Tori could hear water running in the bathroom. Shinozuki seemed to be relaxing in the tub after washing up from digging the hole for the pond. Meanwhile, Subaru was wiggling around on the couch and Cecilia had locked herself inside Euphemia's workshop, seemingly busy with some task.

Tori finished cooking the noodles and mixed in the sauce he'd prepared for them. He served it along with grilled meat and more veggies, then handed the plates over to Euphemia.

"Take these to the table," he instructed.

"Okay." She nodded.

"Uhh, is it lunchtime yet?" Subaru stood up from the couch.

"Come on, you lazy bird. Help us out and carry the plates."

"Oh-kay."

When it came to food, these denizens of the underworld would listen to anything Tori had to say. For everything else, they always had some complaint, though they would grumble and give in whenever Tori baited them with food.

Tori poked his head into the bedroom and yelled, "Cecilia! Lunch!" He heard Cecilia yell back, "Okay!" from the depths of the workshop.

Tori went back to the dining room. Euphemia was already seated and staring at the food on the table.

"Oh yeah, I noticed you haven't been working recently," Tori remarked.

“Yeah. I haven’t been getting piles of requests like before. Ever since we trained the Cerulean Dagger, they’ve been taking care of most of the quests in town. They haven’t been sending me as many jobs lately,” Euphemia replied.

“Really? Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. I’m still getting orders for potions. And I like it when I don’t have anything to do.”

Euphemia wiped some tomato sauce from the edge of her plate and licked it. “Tasty,” she said.

“Hey, don’t play with your food!”

“I’m taste-testing it.”

“Jeez. Oh, if you don’t have any jobs, why aren’t Shino, Subaru, and Cecilia going back home? Are they gonna be okay?”

“They’ll be fine. Also, I’m having Cecilia help out with something.”

“Huh. Yeah, what’s she doing in your workshop, anyway?” Tori asked.

“Developing a spell,” Euphemia answered.

“Aha.” *That is pretty witchlike of them*, Tori thought.

“Whew, now *that* was refreshing. And now I’m starving! Whoa, what weird-colored noodles.” Shinozuki came out of the bathroom, skin still damp with water and vapor. Tori had scolded her multiple times about coming out of the bath in the nude, so she now had a towel wrapped around her up to her bust. Though she’d started to be more conscious of how she dressed, she was still lacking in shame or modesty, so Tori couldn’t let his guard down. He often thought about how desensitized he’d already become to seeing the naked female form.

Cecilia had finally come out of the workshop, so it was officially time to eat. Lunch was vegetable pasta and tomato sauce, grilled meat, and salad, with soup on the side.

“Tori, bread, please,” Euphemia requested.

“Here you go,” Tori obliged.

“I want more cheese!” Subaru yelled.

“Okay, okay.”

“Tori dear, do we have anything spicy?” Cecilia asked.

“Here you go. Careful with adding too much,” Tori warned.

“Your food’s tasty as always, Tori!” Shinozuki exclaimed. “If you ain’t gonna eat that, I’ll take it.”

“That’s *mine*! Damn it... Oh crap, I gotta buy groceries or we’ll run out,” Tori remembered. Lately, the three familiars hadn’t been going out on jobs, so the food consumption in the household had gone way up.

“I’ll take you there!” Subaru raised her hand to volunteer. “It’s been so boring lately!”

“If you’re so bored, you should just go back to the underworld.”

“Don’t wanna! Why are you being so mean to me?” Subaru started banging on her plate with the fork in her hand.

Shinozuki stuffed a chunk of meat into her mouth. “Wefh hafh ho hofh hah hoo—mmph!”

“Swallow your food before talking,” Tori scolded her.

Shinozuki gulped down the huge bite. “We’ll have to go back soon anyway. Ethelbert’s being very annoying about it.”

“Oh, right. That hard-ass.” Subaru shook her head in exasperation.

“That your superior or something?” Tori wondered.

“Yeah, more or less. A really annoying one too,” Shinozuki grumbled. She had just finished clearing all the meat from her plate and patted her belly in satisfaction. “Phew, that was a meal! I’m full!”

“As always, I’m impressed by how quickly you eat,” Tori muttered. Out of everyone in this household, Shinozuki had always been the fastest to finish her food. True to her nature, she would always wolf down her meals. In Tori’s mind, he had her pegged as a giant dog who ate a lot. Sometimes, he would forget that she was a fenrir.

“Are you going shopping after lunch?” Euphemia asked. Her lips were stained red from the tomato sauce. Tori looked exasperated as he wiped her mouth with a towel.

“That’s the plan,” Tori replied. “But it sure would be nice if I could get to the city more easily. It’s getting annoying having to ask one of you guys to take me there every time I want to buy something.”

Cecilia jolted up as if she’d suddenly recalled something.

“That’s right! We were just talking about that,” she said.

“About what?”

“Euphie and I have been researching transportation devices so you can go to the city on your own,” Cecilia explained.

“Huh.” *That would be really nice*, Tori thought. Lately, he’d been realizing just how bothersome it was to ask for help every time they needed groceries. It took both time and effort to arrange the trips, especially whenever he realized he’d forgotten to pick something up. If he had a simpler way to get to the city, he would have an easier time going out to buy supplies, and they could even eat out every once in a while.

Ever since quitting his adventurer job and starting work at Euphemia’s house, Tori had immersed himself even more in cooking, a task he already enjoyed. At first, it was only Euphemia, but her familiars also praised his cooking day by day, which made him feel that it was a task worth doing.

I didn’t get any compliments on my cooking before I got fired, Tori recalled. Before the Muddy Four-Horns disbanded, they had all been swamped with work, and his friends were also burdened with their personal issues. They’d had no time to appreciate his cooking back then. Tori remembered just how restless they’d been. Recently, Andrea and the others had visited him at Euphemia’s house. The three of them had laughed off those busy days with Tori, and they had also finally gotten to enjoy his meals.

However, Tori had to prepare three meals a day every day. He was running out of fresh ideas on what to make. While he tried to spice things up every now and then, he had his limits, as he wasn’t a chef or cook by trade. Because of

that, Tori had been thinking of going out for food as part of his research.

“So that’s the magic you’ve been researching lately?” Tori asked.

“Yeah.” Euphemia nodded as she chewed. Once again, her lips were red with sauce and Tori cleaned her up with the towel.

“You’re such a handful,” he muttered. Euphemia squirmed around. “At least calm down while you’re eating. So, will this transportation device thing really happen?”

“We’ve already worked out the theoretical design. All that’s left is some minor adjustments. Then we’d have to gather all the materials to build it...” Cecilia casually explained. Tori was completely clueless when it came to magic, but he could tell that what they were trying to do was pretty high-level.

They’re amazing, Tori thought. While all of them had several lousy aspects to their personalities, they were all first-rate when it came to their specialties. Between the archlich, also known as a sage of the underworld, and her master, the White Witch, no spell would remain undiscovered.

Once they’d finished eating and Tori started to clean up, Euphemia suddenly clung to him from behind.

“What is it?” Tori asked.

“Mmm...”

“It’s hard to work with you hanging off me, so let go.”

Euphemia buried her face in Tori’s back before relenting and heading to the bedroom, presumably to take a nap. Tori let out a sigh. Euphemia would often ask for affection out of nowhere, so he had to be aware of her at all times. The sensation of her against his back lingered for a while.

Finally, it was time for him to head out. Subaru was waiting outside in her phoenix form. Her wings were outstretched, as if she were relaxing her muscles.

“Whew, that feels so nice! Okay, let’s go! Come on, climb up! Hurry, hurry!” Subaru urged Tori.

“Can you crouch a bit? I can’t reach.”

Once Tori was settled on her back, Subaru flew up high. She flapped her wings to accelerate and headed straight toward Azrac. Tori had to cling to her back and had no time to look around. He'd rather not get blown off by the wind and plummet headfirst to his death.

While Euphemia and Cecilia's transportation spell would theoretically take him straight to Azrac in an instant, traveling on Subaru took approximately an hour. Despite the physical method taking more time, it was still plenty fast.

Subaru's back was warm, owing to her phoenix form, which shielded Tori from the bitter winter winds. Even as Subaru was traveling through the sky at blinding speeds, he could avoid freezing to death.

As always, they landed at the city outskirts and Subaru transformed back into her human form before the two of them entered the city proper. The city was as lively as ever, with bustling crowds coming and going through the streets.

"Whatcha gonna buy?" Subaru asked.

"Groceries, mostly. We should still have some grains in stock, so I guess we're buying meat," Tori answered.

"Meat!" Subaru flailed her arms excitedly. Tori suddenly wondered if phoenixes were birds of prey.

Tori had been able to harvest leafy vegetables and root crops from the garden during the summer, which greatly reduced the ingredients he had to buy. However, he still shopped at the market to supplement their stock. After all, he had four very voracious mouths to feed.

Subaru was scarfing down a pastry as her eyes darted all over the place. Tori had to be careful not to lose her in the crowd.

"Stop getting distracted. You'll get lost," he scolded her.

"Why don't *you* face forward while walking?" Subaru retorted.

"I would if *you* stopped going in weird directions!"

By the time they were finished shopping, the two of them were both loaded up with the groceries split between them. They had bought large cuts of meat, both raw and smoked, as well as fish, both salted and dried. Subaru couldn't

just transform into a phoenix in the middle of the city, so they had to walk slowly all the way back to the outskirts. It was a struggle for Tori to make his way through the crowds while carrying so much. Despite that, Subaru was bouncing up and down excitedly at every little thing she spotted.

“Tori, I want snacks! Get me some pastries!” Subaru yelled.

“Shut up! I can’t carry any more! And that’s the same thing you ate earlier!”

“I’m bringing some home for everyone! Hey mister, I want that! Gimme three bags! The money’s with my big bro over there!”

“Damn it!”

By the time they were ready to head home, Tori was utterly drained, while Subaru was still raring to go. They were at the city outskirts. Subaru was in her phoenix form, flapping her wings up and down.

“Snacks! Snacks! Snacks!” she chanted excitedly.

“Shut up and lemme on already,” Tori grumbled.

“Huh? What’s with your attitude? I’m gonna roast you!”

“Well come on, go for it! Who’s gonna make your food, then, huh?”

“Ugh... Fine, hurry up and get on already!”

Tori climbed onto Subaru’s back. The plumage on a phoenix’s back was soft, and riding one required Tori to crouch to avoid getting blasted by the winds. Even though Subaru’s body was warm and toasty, he didn’t want to get a face full of icy air. Tori held on to Subaru tightly while also trying to keep their cargo secure.

“Let’s go!” Subaru yelled. She flapped her wings and soared into the sky. The high winds made a mess of Tori’s hair. Subaru seemed eager to get home, perhaps because of the snacks she bought, as she was flying much faster than she had on their way to the city. Tori was holding on for dear life and had no time to look at his surroundings.

When they finally arrived home, Tori was exhausted and his head was spinning.

“Subaru... Don’t just blast through the sky like that while we’re carrying so many things. I thought our groceries were gonna get blown off,” Tori grumbled.

“But they didn’t, did they? It’s fine, then! Now gimme the snacks!”

“Wait until we’ve finished unpacking!”

Tori hauled the groceries into the kitchen. Once finished, he sighed in exasperation. No matter who accompanied him to the city, their trips always ended in a huge fuss. It would save him a lot of trouble if he had that magic transportation device around.

Shinozuki’s eyes sparkled upon spotting one of the huge hunks of meat they’d brought back. “What a splendid chunk of meat! That all for me?”

“It’s for *everyone*. Shino, maybe you should go out hunting for meat one of these days,” Tori suggested.

“I wouldn’t mind, but I can’t cut it up for you or anything. Can ya do all that?”

“I could...though I haven’t done it in a while.” During his adventuring days, Tori had experienced slaughtering animals for food many times, but it had been a long time since he’d prepared meat that way. He couldn’t say whether he could perform it on the spot at a reasonable speed anymore. Still, if Shinozuki were to hunt in her fenrir form, she would surely bring back the whole carcass without draining its blood or skinning it. By the time she got home, the corpse would be soaked in blood and stink up the whole place. The meat would also taste off even when cooked, which would ruin any meals he made with it.

“I suppose I *could* accompany you on hunting trips...”

“Huh? But I want to have food ready on the table when I’m back,” Shinozuki complained.

Oh, right. Tori realized that no one would be doing the chores if he were gone all day.

Despite that, getting a whole animal’s worth of meat was an appealing thought. If he could at least exsanguinate the carcass on the spot, he could do the rest of the butchering at home. It started to sound like a realistic idea. If he could strike a balance between the household chores and hunting trips, they

could save a lot on food expenses, and he could let Shinozuki unleash her pent-up energy.

He set these ideas aside to mull over later. He had other tasks to do now, such as starting tonight's dinner. And before that, he needed to get the water heated for the bath. Tori was lost in thought as he started stuffing the groceries into the fridge.

2. A Short Stay at Home

The days had grown shorter, and the air much colder. The surroundings looked much more bleak and barren after the autumn leaves had been scattered away by the frigid winds. Winter had truly begun.

Even as Tori kept up with the household chores and took care of the crops and birds, he'd also made time to clean up more outside the house. He had been busy clearing out the weeds, shrubs, and tangled vines that had been left to grow, as well as cleaning out the broken pots and bricks that had been buried under the overgrowth. The yard was now much wider. Among the items he had uncovered were chairs and tables that were now degraded from years of disuse. The previous owners might have used these to enjoy tea in the garden.

The overgrowth had also disguised apple and lemon trees in the yard. They were in a poor state from being buried under the weeds, but they hadn't fully withered. Tori shaved off the moss and mold that had grown on the branches, and used the bird droppings and weed cuttings to fertilize the soil around the roots. The trees appeared to be quite old, but they seemed like they could bear fruit again if they were tended to.

Weeds grew more slowly with the onset of winter, which made it easier to work in the yard. It also meant Tori didn't have to get drenched in sweat whenever he built a fire outside. The heat felt quite comfortable, even.

Tori dug out a sweet potato he'd buried in the coals of the bonfire and split it open. Steam wafted up from the golden flesh inside. He spread butter over it and took a bite. The saltiness of the butter and the sweetness of the potato formed a harmony of flavors in his mouth.

"Ahh, what a relaxing day," Tori sighed peacefully. Euphemia and her familiars were out on a job for the first time in a while, which meant he didn't need to agonize over meals today. He felt satisfied with enjoying a baked potato and a cup of tea. Before this, Shinozuki, Subaru, and Cecilia had returned to the underworld for a short time, but Euphemia then called them back to help out

with her current job. The three familiars had happily remarked that they now wouldn't have to go back to the underworld for a while.

Is the underworld really that boring? Tori couldn't help but wonder.

The chickens were going about their usual business, clawing at the ground and pecking at bugs. Meanwhile, the ducks were waddling about the pondside. The pond's water was now clear. Eventually, fish might even traverse the waterway from the river and end up here. If not, Tori considered catching some and releasing them into the pond. Having a place to raise fish would be another nice amenity.

Euphemia and her familiars were out hunting monsters. The Cerulean Dagger clan, thanks to their training under the White Witch, had been taking care of such requests for a while, so Euphemia hadn't been getting any jobs recently. This time, however, it seemed their mark was a big one, so they asked for Euphemia's help. Shinozuki and Subaru seemed excited about getting to go wild for the first time in a while.

Tori had no idea if Euphemia and the others would be able to return home that night, so he had to make sure it would be fine even if they came home tomorrow morning. Since he didn't need to make a big lunch today, he could focus his efforts on preparing dinner later that night, which Tori much preferred. Preparing three big meals a day was always a huge drain on Tori when it came to his workload.

Tori walked around the garden while taking bites of his sweet potato and sipping some hot tea. The grounds that had once been overrun with weeds and vines when he first arrived were now clean and orderly. Over the winter, he planned to clean them up even more and plant tree seeds. He wanted to have more citrus trees around, and he also wanted to grow some berries for making jams and preserves.

As Tori let his imagination run, fantasizing about the future, he started to wonder why he'd even wanted to become an adventurer in the first place. Was it the folly of youth? Though, at this point, the answer hardly mattered.

After dousing the fire outside, Tori went back into the house. He checked up on the meat he had been marinating in oil and fragrant herbs. It had soaked up

much of the marinade already. He'd used a weaker flavor so he could leave it marinating until tomorrow, but if they ended up needing to cook it this evening, he'd only need to add more spices.

Tidying up the house no longer took up a significant amount of Tori's time. Whenever Euphemia left her clothes and books scattered about, Tori would immediately pick up after her, so the house remained free of clutter. He would sweep cobwebs from the ceiling whenever he saw them, and cleaning the floor was part of his daily routine. Dust and dirt would never again settle on Euphemia's house.

Tori swept through the parlor and cleared the hearth of dust and soot. Then he went outside to split some firewood. Winter meant they couldn't afford to let the house run out of fuel. During the summer, the wood was mostly used for cooking and heating the bath, but now they needed it to keep the house warm as well. Even now, the fireplace in the parlor remained lit. Thus, Tori added walking around the forest to gather dry trees and branches for firewood to his daily routine. He would take his haul to the yard to chop it into more manageable pieces, and afterward, he would shelve them in the shed out back.

"Heave-ho!" Tori grunted as he swung the axe down and split a log in two. It was satisfying to see a log split with one swing, but it wasn't always that easy. Nodes and stubs on the branches could stop the blade, and it was exhausting to have to swing it over and over. Plus, whenever the blade got stuck, he needed to use a wedge and hammer to get it free, which was also quite tiresome.

Despite all that, splitting firewood was a mesmerizing task. At some point, the pile of wood had become a big mound. Chopping wood in the summer was grueling, but in the winter, it felt good and refreshing. Tori found it quite satisfying to see the pile of logs grow bigger and bigger.

The sun was almost setting, and there was no sign of Euphemia and the others returning home.

"Looks like they're not coming back tonight," Tori murmured to himself. Though he didn't spend that much time cooking today, splitting firewood took a lot of his energy and made him feel like he'd gotten a real workout. Household chores were also physically taxing, but swinging an axe repeatedly was a

straightforward way to get fatigued.

Tori took a long soak in the bath, had a quick dinner, and slept in his bed in the corner of the parlor.

It was shockingly quiet without the other four residents. Tori was even somewhat lonely without them, but it was also nice and relaxing without so much fuss around the house. That night, he slept like a log.

The next morning, Tori felt like his bed had become cramped. Or rather, like there was a heavy weight on top of him. He groped around and felt a soft sensation, and when he blearily opened his eyes, he caught a glimpse of white hair.

“Huh?!” Tori flung back the covers and saw that Euphemia had sneaked into his bed, her head resting firmly on his chest as she mumbled in her sleep. It also appeared that Tori had unconsciously wrapped his arm around her while he was sleeping. The soft sensation he’d felt was her smooth, warm skin. Euphemia was, of course, completely naked, as she was whenever she went to bed.

“Euphemia, wake up! Hey!”

“Mmm...” Euphemia shifted her weight and looked at Tori with a groggy gaze. Then she curled up and snuggled her face against his chest, and tried to cover herself back up with the blanket.

“Don’t go back to sleep!” Tori yelled. He pushed Euphemia off himself. She rolled over onto her side, then curled up under the covers. Tori crawled out of his bed and found Euphemia’s clothes scattered on the floor.

Tori was now fully awake. He rubbed the remaining drowsiness from his eyes. Euphemia had taken Tori’s place in his bed, her eyes closed. She seemed to have made herself comfortable.

“When did you get back home?” Tori mumbled.

Euphemia opened one of her eyes and looked at Tori. “Late last night. I ate dinner too.”

“You could’ve woken me up...”

“I don’t see your sleeping face very often.”

Usually, Tori was awake past the time Euphemia and the others went to bed, and he would also be the first out of all of them to wake up. Tori's sleeping face might be a rare sight, but having a naked woman sneak under the covers to sleep next to him was bad for his heart.

"That's no excuse to sneak into my bed..."

Beside the still-rumpled Tori, Euphemia buried her face into the pillow. "Smells like Tori..." she muttered.

Tori felt that Euphemia was a bit too scatterbrained to actually try and seduce him, but it also didn't feel like she was teasing him either. While he was aware of her affection, her actions were often too unpredictable. He understood that she was serious—and Tori wasn't entirely unwilling to reciprocate her advances—but in his twenty-five years, he had been a stranger to romance and romantic relationships. The thought made him feel abashed. Moreover, he felt comfortable with the current distance between them. He was hesitant to cross the line, partly because he was afraid of destroying the relationship they already had.

My younger, adventurer self wasn't a huge fan of things like stability and comfort either... Tori mused. It was only as he'd focused more and more on filling a supporting role for his clan that his mindset had started to turn toward stability and safety. Now, if taken positively, he could be called careful and cautious, but on the other hand, he was indecisive and reluctant. In other words, he was a chicken.

Tori, exasperated by the morning's events, turned away from the bed and went to revive the smoldering coals in the fireplace with fresh firewood. He filled the cauldron hanging over it with water and threw in dried meat and mushrooms, herbs, potatoes, and other root vegetables.

When Tori went outside, he was greeted by the comfortable chill of the morning air. He washed his face and gargled with water from the well. Next, he let the squawking chickens and ducks out of the henhouse, and threw bits of plants and grain into the enclosure and replaced the water. He walked around the garden and harvested vegetables that looked ready. Some frost had settled on the yard; when he brushed against the leaves of a few crops, icy crystals fell

to the ground.

Tori returned to the house and saw that Euphemia was still asleep. He didn't know what time she'd gotten home last night. He marveled at how soundly she slept and gazed at her sleeping face, then shook his head. He picked up her fallen clothes and threw them into the laundry basket.

Tori fed the fireplace once again before heading into the kitchen, where he lit the stove and got started on breakfast. He took out the meat that had been marinating since last night. By now, the soup in the cauldron was simmering nicely and the vegetables had softened quite well. He mixed in tomato stock, salt, and more herbs for flavoring, then added in leafy vegetables to be cooked by the remaining heat.

Shinozuki woke up just as Tori started roasting the meat. As a fenrir, her nose was more sensitive than most; as such, she was also the most receptive to the smell of food being cooked.

"Smells like grilled meat," she said.

"Glad to see your nose is working," Tori snarked as he turned the meat over.

"Ya sure were out cold last night."

"Oh, right. You guys could've woken me up."

"We tried to, but Euphie stopped us."

"Oh, I see." Tori had expected as much. He placed the meat onto a plate and gave it to Shinozuki. "Take this to the dining table. You better not snack on it," he warned.

"A proud fenrir would never do such a thing!" Shinozuki protested. *You liar*, Tori silently retorted.

In Shinozuki's place, Subaru entered the kitchen. She seemed to still be sleepy as she hobbled into the room. She poked at Tori. "I'm hungry," she mumbled.

"Wait just a bit," Tori said. "Subaru, take these to the table. I'll be done soon."

"Okaaay."

Next, Tori sprayed mist over stale bread and grilled it on a pan to make it

easier to eat. As the bread was toasting, Cecilia wrapped her arms around him, her voluminous breasts pressing against his back.

“Morning, Tori dear!” she greeted him.

“Hey! Quit it!” Tori shouted.

“Heh heh heh. You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“You really think I’d be embarrassed by you at this point? The bread’s going to burn! Get away from me!”

“Aww, you’ve gotten even more resistant to my charms. What a sad day for your big sister!”

“Yeah, yeah. Here, take the toast to the dining table,” Tori commanded.

“Okaaay.”

Preparations had been hectic, but the group finally started breakfast. All of them still had bedhead and groggy expressions on their faces. None of these women bothered to groom themselves while at home—with the exception of Cecilia, that was.

“Where’d you guys get dinner last night?” Tori asked.

“In Azrac. There was a place that was open all night,” Euphemia answered as she nibbled on a piece of toast with butter spread on it.

Shinozuki grabbed a chunk of meat with her fingers. “They had big servings, but the food sucked! Your cooking is much better, Tori!”

“R-Really now.” Tori sipped some of his soup to hide his embarrassment.

Once they finished breakfast, Tori washed the dishes, then took the laundry basket to the bathroom. He washed the clothes with soap and lukewarm water from the previous night before rinsing them with water from the well. Doing the laundry this way let Tori prevent his fingers from freezing even during the coldest winter days.

Today’s weather was cloudy, and it didn’t seem that the clothes would dry quickly if hung outside. Tori decided to dry them by the fireplace instead. As he was hanging the laundry, Euphemia, who had put on some light loungewear

and was lazing around on the couch, suddenly announced to her familiars, “We’ll be going into a dungeon tomorrow. I want to find a magic artifact or ore that can be a catalyst for the transportation device we’re making.”

“Sounds good to me,” Shinozuki said. “Food tastes better after gettin’ some exercise.”

“Which dungeon are we going to?” Subaru asked.

“Aldebaran, the Ruined City,” Euphemia replied.

The Ruined City was a very difficult dungeon, on the same level as the Seven Spires and the Great Labyrinth. Even platinum-ranked clans needed much preparation to even enter such a challenging location, but Euphemia didn’t seem to have made any special preparations. She would only put on clothes, grab her staff, and transform. It was as if she were merely going out on a quick, casual excursion.

“Are dungeons on the surface any more dangerous than the underworld?” Tori wondered.

“The underworld’s overflowing with monsters. There’s also a lot of dangerous plants,” Euphemia replied.

“There’s also a buncha monsters that’re only on the surface,” Shinozuki added as she flopped back against the couch. “Can’t tell which is more dangerous, but the underworld has a lotta really violent ones.”

Subaru, who was seated next to Shinozuki, nodded in agreement. “But none of those are a challenge,” she boasted. “Though a dragon might put up a good fight.”

“The underworld is teeming with mana, so the monsters down there can get pretty strong. But it doesn’t really make a difference,” Cecilia said matter-of-factly.

There’s really no difference between the underworld and the surface to these guys, Tori realized. No matter which had stronger monsters, it was all the same in the end since they could just beat them up. At their level, they were unable to see the difference. He shook his head in resignation.

"If they have work tomorrow, I should do my grocery shopping today while I can," Tori muttered to himself.

For the time being, whenever Euphemia and the others went out on a job, Tori was still unable to go to the city. Once the transportation device was available, he would be able to go to Azrac even while they were away. That would already be quite convenient in itself, but it would also make a difference to him to have the freedom to go out whenever he pleased.

I should get some tree saplings while I'm at it. Tori was thinking of what to do next while sipping some tea, when he noticed that Euphemia was staring at him intently.

"What is it?" Tori asked.

"Um..." she started.

"Yeah?"

"I wanna go shopping with you."

"Huh? Do you want to buy something?"

"I want to buy clothes for the winter."

"Sure... Actually, wait, do you even need me for that? Do you just want someone to carry your stuff?"

"I wanna get clothes you think are cute," she said while looking at him with puppy-dog eyes. It was quite wily and charming of her, but knowing her personality, he knew she wasn't really doing it on purpose. Regardless, it was very cute of her.

Goddamn it. Calm down, Tori. Keep your cool...

"Hey, Tori, you're about to spill that." Shinozuki's warning snapped Tori out of his daze, and the tea sloshed from his cup. Subaru and Cecilia giggled as they watched him flail about.

3. A Silly Date

Even when they'd arrived in the city, Tori and Euphemia didn't head directly to the store they had in mind. They had a quick meal and some tea at a café, then walked around the city some before finally going into a clothing shop.

Azrac was close to monster-infested lands, but despite that, it attracted a lot of traffic. Many rare materials could be harvested from nearby dungeons and monster nests, which then entered the city's lively trade network. Because of this, goods flowed into the city from regions near and far. Clothes were among these goods, and stores stocked a variety of garments that differed not only in material and design but also in price, ranging from cheap to luxurious.

The two of them entered the shop that had caught their eye, and Euphemia started trying on various outfits. The store attendants were very helpful and excited, perhaps because they had the perfect model. They brought out one outfit after another, making Euphemia put on each one like a dress-up doll.

"Beautiful, miss! You look very adorable! Would you like to try this combination next?"

"What do you think?" Euphemia turned toward Tori.

"L-Looks great! I-I think," he replied nervously.

"Do I look cute?"

"Y-Yeah, very cute!"

"Heh heh." Euphemia had a wide grin on her face. She shut the curtain of the dressing room to change into the next set of clothes. Tori scratched his cheek. His face felt flushed out of embarrassment. The attendants all had warm smiles, looking over at him.

"What a pretty girlfriend you have! She looks beautiful in any outfit we recommend!" an attendant exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha...hah..." Tori laughed awkwardly. *She's not my girlfriend, though*, he

almost clarified, but he figured it would attract more questions, so he let it slide.

Euphemia really was beautiful. She was incredibly cute, and she looked great in anything she wore. But she was so pretty that it made Tori nervous to be accompanying her. He knew in his head that she was the same Euphemia he saw every day at home, but Tori was realizing once more that a simple change of clothes could make her look gorgeous. His heart raced just from looking at her.

Euphemia was shopping for winter clothes, so most of them were thick and fluffy, but each outfit suited her regardless. Both skirts and pants looked great on her. Even when she put on huge coats with mufflers, they only served to make her look cuter by making her look like a small, fluffy creature.

Even when Euphemia would ask Tori which outfits he preferred, he found it very difficult to put a ranking on them. As a result, the mound of clothes in Euphemia's "yes" pile grew bigger and bigger, and so did the pile Tori would have to carry home.

"You sure bought a whole bunch," Tori grumbled at the end.

"Yeah. You said that they all suited me," Euphemia said.

"Hey, don't blame me for— Wait, this *is* my fault." Indeed, Tori's predicament would have been averted had he been more decisive. Euphemia wouldn't have said no to Tori's picks. He was now reaping the fruits of his indecisiveness. He shook his head in exasperation at himself. Still, it was true that all the clothes suited her.

Due to how much they'd bought, it didn't look like Tori would be able to do any more shopping. Unlike the way he treated Euphemia's familiars, he wouldn't feel right making Euphemia carry her own bags. Tori's plan to buy groceries had gone up in smoke, so he had no choice but to come up with something to make out of what they had back home. He had already prepared lunch for the familiars waiting at the house, so he only needed to think about dinner.

Tori's brow furrowed as he started brainstorming. *Euphemia and the others are going to a dungeon tomorrow, so I should make...*

“Your face is all wrinkly.” Euphemia poked at Tori’s eyebrows.

“Well, I’m *thinking*. Of course my face would get wrinkly,” he said.

“What’re you thinking of? Me?”

“No... Well, yes. In a way?”

“That makes me happy. Let’s get married.”

“Ha ha. You should stop slipping that in so casually. Look, I’m thinking of what to make for dinner. Don’t bother me.”

Euphemia pouted and hit Tori’s shoulder with a light punch.

“Oh, Tori!”

A voice called out. When Tori turned around, he found Suzanna, the twinblade of the Cerulean Dagger, carrying a bag of groceries.

“Hey Suzanna. It’s been a while,” Tori said. “You’re out shopping?”

“Yeah. The whole clan’s on break today and tomorrow. Gotta get some rest or we can’t do our jobs. Euphie, nice to see you! It’s been a while. How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing great. You look like you’re doing well,” Euphemia said as she hid behind Tori, peeking out only her face.

Suzanna giggled and pumped her fist. “I’m full of energy today! Are you guys on a date?”

“Yeah, we are,” Euphemia replied.

“No we’re not! We’re here to buy your winter clothes!” Tori protested.

Suzanna looked incredulous. “Tori, that’s called a date. Well, whatever.”

It had been a while since Tori had seen Suzanna. To be exact, the last time he’d seen her was when she’d come to Euphemia’s house after defeating Renard.

“How are Andrea and Jean doing?” he asked.

“Andrea’s the same as always. Jean quit being an adventurer. He went back to his homeland and became the chief royal spellcaster! Isn’t that amazing?!”

“W-Wow, seriously?”

Jean originally became an adventurer to fulfill his promise to his master. Now that he had accomplished that, it seemed he'd decided to return to his country. Becoming chief royal spellcaster was a huge accomplishment.

“How about you guys at the Cerulean Dagger? Busy as always?”

“Yup. We've managed to keep our spot as the top clan, but business has been booming in Azrac lately. More new dungeons are being discovered, so powerful clans from other areas have been moving in and out of the city. We can't be caught off guard now, can we!”

“Really? So there are more adventurers now?”

“Yeah, more platinum-rank clans too.”

“Wow, I didn't know all that.” Tori turned to Euphemia. “Hey Euphie, aren't you gonna get left behind if you don't take any more work?”

“You think so?” Euphemia had a quizzical look on her face. She didn't seem concerned at all.

Suzanna giggled. “Nah, no matter what adventurers come into the city, I don't think they'll be able to knock Euphie off the top spot! Speaking of which, how's the gang? Are Shino, Subaru, and Cecilia doing okay?”

“They are. Actually, can you even imagine the three of them *not* doing well?” Tori quipped.

“Ha ha, you got me there! That's great to hear, though.”

“Is your brother doing well?” Euphemia asked as she fidgeted around.

“Cyril? Yeah, he's all healthy thanks to you! He doesn't have that much stamina yet after being bedridden, but he's very good with his hands. Lately he's gotten work as a tailor at home,” Suzanna answered.

“Wow, that's great,” Tori said.

“But sometimes, he says some strange things. He'll also stare into space and talk to no one in particular. Oh, but it's not *all* the time, you know?”

“Huh. Well, it shouldn't be a problem if he doesn't feel sick, right?”

“I’ll take a look at him soon,” Euphie said.

Surprised, Tori turned to Euphemia. “That’s unusual. I thought you weren’t interested in socializing.”

“There’s something I want to check up on.”

Suzanna let out a hearty laugh. “Okay then! I feel relieved knowing you’re gonna be the one taking a look at him. Feel free to drop by anytime, okay?”

“Wait, didn’t you say you guys were busy at the Cerulean Dagger? We’ll match our schedule with yours,” Tori cut in.

“Ha ha, right, right! Okay, just tell the guild when you guys will be dropping by.”

After catching up with Suzanna, Tori and Euphemia headed back home. It was now sunset. Shinozuki and Subaru were lounging around on the couch, and when they saw that Tori and Euphemia had returned, they raised their hands to greet them.

“Oh, you guys are back,” Shinozuki said.

“Welcome back... I’m hungry,” Subaru complained.

“Something smells burnt,” Tori remarked.

“About that. We felt that lunch wasn’t enough, so we thought we’d try making something for ourselves. And we failed spectacularly!” Shinozuki cackled.

Tori sighed. “I take my eyes off you two for one day...”

A blackened chunk of meat was sitting on the kitchen counter. Tori sighed even deeper when he realized they’d used up an entire cut. Still, it looked like they had only burned the outside from setting the fire too high. There should still be edible portions if he just cut away the charred bits. That wouldn’t have been possible if they’d tried to slice it first, so there was a silver lining amid this cooking disaster, at least. Tori started carving off the charred portions of meat to salvage what was left of the cut.

The remaining pieces were a bit too small to roast as they were, so Tori sautéed them with diced vegetables and mushrooms before simmering them in

wine and water. He rolled out some dough he'd made ahead of time and pressed it into a pie pan, poured in the filling, covered it with another layer of dough, and put it in the oven.

Tori went to the bathroom to heat the bathwater, then returned to the kitchen. He sprinkled salt over a fish before grilling it over a wire rack. He also started preparing some soup in the meantime.

Euphemia seemed to be tired from walking all over town and was lazing around on the couch. She laid out the clothes she had bought around her, and the familiars gathered around them excitedly.

"Oh my, this one looks adorable!" Cecilia exclaimed.

"Really? Looks hard to move in. Don't like that one," Shinozuki disagreed.

"Shino, doesn't this hat look like it's made of your fur? It's so fluffy!" Subaru said.



“My fur’s fluffier than that!”

“Oh, if we brush you and get a bunch of your fur, we might be able to sell it for a high price.”

“Huh? I bet my feathers would sell higher than Shino’s fur!”

“Heh heh, alchemists would sell an arm and a leg just to get fenrir fur and phoenix feathers,” Cecilia giggled.

“Hey, it’s dinnertime! Help me out here!”

“Okaaay,” the three familiars shouted back in unison.

After making it through another tumultuous dinner, Tori got to washing the tableware, cleaning the rooms, and preparing the next day’s meals while the girls took their turns in the bath. He prepared more dough to store for later use, and soaked dried mushrooms and vegetables in water.

Once he’d finished wiping the utensils dry and putting them away, Tori found Euphemia sitting on the couch, her eyes closed. She was wearing a thin camisole and had a towel draped over her shoulders.

“Euphie, you should put on more clothes or you’ll catch a cold,” Tori chided her.

“I’m sleepy...” she mumbled. She peeked one eye open at Tori and patted the space on the couch beside her. She seemed to be beckoning him to take a seat. Tori looked reluctant, but he obliged her request. When he did, she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes again.

“Huh? Are you going to sleep?” he asked.

“Yeah...” Euphemia mumbled as she leaned her weight against him. He adjusted his posture to accommodate her better. The feeling of her still-damp hair felt warm and comfortable on his bare arm, and the smell of her shampoo tickled his nose.

“Wait, wait. You shouldn’t be sleeping here.”

“Mmph.” Before her head could completely slip off Tori’s shoulder, Euphemia moved down and settled her head on his lap instead. She glanced up at his face.

“Can I stay like this a bit longer?” she asked.

“Mmm...” Tori looked embarrassed and started scratching his cheek.

Shinozuki and Subaru were making a ruckus in the bathroom. The two of them made it a habit to play around whenever it was their turn in the bath. Meanwhile, Cecilia had been the first to bathe today, and she was now in the dining room in her nightdress, sipping tea while reading a book.

Euphemia looked relaxed, eyes closed as she lay on Tori’s lap.

“Can you turn your head to the side? I’m gonna clean your ear,” Tori said.

“Okay.”

Tori stretched out to grab the ear pick. He brushed Euphemia’s hair back to access her ear. She had just gotten out of the bath, so her skin was flushed slightly pink. When Tori inserted the pick into her ear, she let out a small yelp and squirmed a bit.

“Don’t move around. You’re making this harder than it should be.”

“Mmmh... Be more gentle.”

“Did it hurt?”

“A bit.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m fine... Ahnn... That feels good... Haah, nngh...”

Euphemia let out suggestive noises each time the ear pick hit the walls of her ear. Tori quickly found himself struggling to keep his cool.

Meanwhile, Cecilia was grinning at the two.

“My, how shocking. I thought you two were going at it,” she said.

“Going at—” Tori caught himself and cut his own retort short to concentrate on the task of cleaning Euphemia’s ear.

“Tori dear, could you do that for your big sis next?” Cecilia requested.

“Only if you promise to stay still,” he replied.

“Of course I will! Do I look like I’d thrash about?”

“That’s not what I meant... Ah, whatever.”

By the time Tori had finished cleaning both of Euphemia’s ears and wiping off the ear pick, Shinozuki and Subaru had come out of the bathroom.

“Phew, that hit the spot! What’re y’all doin’ over there?” Shinozuki said.

“Euphie, you’re gonna sleep here? Isn’t it gonna be hard sleeping on Tori’s lap?” Subaru asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Euphemia replied.

“No, it’s *not* fine! Sleep on your bed, dammit!” Tori complained.

“Let’s sleep together. Like this morning.”

“No way. I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Why not?” Euphemia pressed him.

“I won’t be able to relax. You know...because of stuff.”

It’s because you’re so soft and you smell nice... was the real answer, but Tori couldn’t say that. Euphemia pouted and puffed up her cheeks, then rolled and buried her face in Tori’s stomach.

Cecilia tapped Tori’s shoulder from behind. “Tori dear, it’s my turn, remember?”

“Huh? Oh, right, the ear picking.”

“Yes, yes. Euphie dear, trade places with me,” Cecilia urged.

“No.” Euphemia refused to budge from Tori’s lap.

“Come on, it’s my turn! Euphie, it’s not fair that you get him all to yourself!”

“It’s not unfair. Tori is mine.”

“You meanie! I’m gonna tickle you if you don’t budge.” Cecilia grinned as she reached toward Euphemia’s sides. Euphemia, for her part, clung on to Tori tighter to resist the tickling.

“Quit it, you dumbasses! Stop horsing around!” Tori, caught in the cross fire between Cecilia and Euphemia, was the biggest victim of their hijinks. While he struggled between Euphemia clinging to him and Cecilia assaulting her with

tickles, Subaru jumped into the fray, apparently because it looked like they were all having fun. It was now pure chaos in the parlor.

“Take this, and that! How’s that? Ready to admit I’m the strongest now?” Subaru yelled.

“Stop it! This is not the time!” Tori raised his voice.

“Ahhh! Tori dear, where do you think you’re touching?” Cecilia purred.

“It was an accident!”

After wrangling with the chaos, Tori managed to herd the three of them into the bedroom, then breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, the residents of this house managed to trouble him with some kind of ruckus every single day.

Shinozuki, who hadn’t taken part in the commotion, was now lounging on the couch. It seemed she’d missed her chance to enter the bedroom. She was still wearing the same thin shirt she put on after her bath.

“Whatcha up to, Shino?” Tori asked.

“Can’t you see? I’m lazin’ around,” Shino replied.

“If you’re gonna sleep, you should do it on a bed. You’ll catch a cold.”

“Fenrirs don’t catch colds.”

“So, are you gonna sleep there?”

“Maybe. I’m so full, and thinking’s such a pain.” Shinozuki turned over and stretched her long limbs.

“Aren’t you guys going to a dungeon tomorrow? You’ll feel groggy if you don’t get some sleep,” Tori warned.

“Yeah, yeah. You know, you’re more annoying than my mother,” Shinozuki complained and stood up from the couch.

Mother, huh? I guess Shino and the others have parents too.

It was an obvious fact, but all living things had parents, including Shinozuki, Subaru, Cecilia, and Euphemia. If Tori were to marry Euphemia, he would have to come face-to-face with her parents someday. He would also have to talk to them. He was especially terrified at the thought of having to meet her father,

who was supposedly a high-ranking fiend.

Tori shook his head. In any case, it was not yet the time to worry about such things.

When Tori snapped out of his thoughts, he saw that Shinozuki had made herself comfortable in his bed.

“Hey, that’s *my* bed,” Tori said.

“*You* were the one who told me to sleep on a bed,” Shinozuki retorted.

“I meant that you should sleep in *your* bed!”

“Leave me alone! Besides, Subaru’s a horrible sleeper. Can’t sleep with her around,” Shinozuki spat out before burying her face into a pillow.

“So where am I supposed to sleep now?” Tori complained.

“How ’bout you sleep beside me? I can even hug you. Everyone says my fur’s soft and fluffy.”

“That’s only when you’re a dog.”

“I ain’t no dog! I’m a *fenrir*!” Shinozuki yelled. Tori’s respect for her as a member of the fenrir race had long since hit rock bottom, but Shinozuki still got upset whenever she got referred to as a dog. He could understand her being mad, but Tori also wished she would act in ways more befitting of the respect she thought she deserved.

Shinozuki, still sulking, turned her back to Tori and curled up on his bed. She had no plans to move. Tori could only sigh and shrug. He took out an extra blanket and laid it over the couch before heating up the remaining water in the bathroom for his bath.

4. The Transportation Device

As the season went deeper and deeper into winter, the clouds above grew dark and thick, and snow started falling more frequently. Powdery snow had covered the whole ground, while icicles hung from the house's roof. Winter was now in full force.

Euphemia had just returned from their excursion to the ruined city of Aldebaran, but she immediately went to work on the transportation device. It was work that demanded immense concentration, which led to both her and Cecilia locking themselves in the workshop for hours at a time. She looked haggard whenever she emerged for food. Whether Tori was cooking, cleaning up after meals, or sweeping the floor, Euphemia would also ask to be cuddled or get head pats from him. Even now as he was washing the dishes, she was hugging him from behind, her face buried in his back. Tori felt ticklish whenever Euphemia's breaths reached his skin through his clothes.

"Hey, Euphie?" Tori started.

"Mmm..."

"It's a bit hard to wash the dishes while you're doing that."

"Hmm..."

"Yeah?"

"Snuggle."

Euphemia refused to let go. Tori gave up on convincing her and reached for the next dirty plate.

According to her, it wasn't that complicated to cast a transportation spell on the spot, but creating a device with the spell incorporated into it used up a lot of her energy. And if she messed up, it was Tori who would be obliterated. He was the one who'd begged Euphemia to take her time and make the device as safe as possible, so he figured he should indulge her whenever she asked for affection. Tori couldn't say for sure, but it seemed to improve her mood and

increase her motivation.

It was during this time that the weather grew colder, and more snow fell with each passing day. A sheet of ice formed over the pond in the yard, and snow also piled up on top of that, so they had to be careful walking around the area. The snow was never-ending, and as a result, most of Tori's work was reduced to gathering, splitting, and stocking firewood. And even then, the snow was a major hindrance.

Tori had, of course, foreseen this situation. He'd already started stocking up on firewood by the end of summer and throughout autumn, so it was likely that they had enough to last till spring. However, whenever they started running out of fuel inside the house, he had to bring more in from the shed outside, which was a real inconvenience when he had to trudge through the snow.

Outside, Shinozuki was in her fenrir form, running around and enjoying herself. Tori watched her from the window.

"Ugh, getting more firewood is gonna be a pain," he muttered to himself.

"How come?" Subaru asked.

"Because of all this snow. The path to the shed's completely buried, and there's no point in shoveling it because it never stops!"

"Huh. Pathetic and whiny as always, big bro!"

"Quiet, you. You can taunt me when you've learned how to do chores around the house!"

"Snow, huh?" Subaru stood up and approached the windowsill. "Want me to melt it all for you?" she offered.

"Huh? Oh, right, you're a phoenix," Tori recalled.

"You forgot?! Big bro, you big dummy!" Subaru pouted and started playfully hitting Tori with her fists. Then, she put on a coat and went outside. Shortly after, she transformed into her phoenix form. Her fiery wings cast a crimson glow on the white clouds above.

"I don't remember your wings being this hot," Tori commented.

"Heh heh. I turn down the heat when I have someone riding on my back!"

Subaru bragged. “Okay, so what do you need me to do?”

“Uhh, I want you to clear a path from here up to the shed door. Don’t burn down the house, okay?”

“Okaaay.”

Subaru gave a small flap of her wings, which resulted in a hot breeze. Soon enough, the snow gave way to the muddy ground underneath. The heat from Subaru’s wings melted the snowflakes falling from the sky before they even hit the ground, and the icicles hanging from the roof started dripping. Tori then heard a strange noise coming from the thick layer of snow on the roof.

“Subaru, watch out! The snow on the roof is about to slide off!” Tori yelled.

“Huh?”

Tori’s warning came too late—a mound of snow came tumbling down from the roof and onto Subaru.

“Gueh?!”

“A-Are you okay?” Tori asked.

“Tell me these things sooner!” Subaru yelled back, angrily flapping her wings. The snow slid off her body and melted, and the resulting water crackled and popped on the ground as it boiled off into vapor. She seemed to be just fine. Subaru might have been a gigantic legendary beast from the underworld, but even she wasn’t immune to being ambushed by an avalanche.

The ground was wet and muddy, but it was now much easier to walk on compared to when it was covered with snow. Now that the path had been cleared, Tori used this chance to walk back and forth carrying firewood to refill the stock in the house.

Subaru, still in her phoenix form, met up with Shinozuki in her fenrir form, and the two of them started playing around in the snow. The two legendary beasts frolicking about was truly a sight to behold.

“Those two have way too much energy...” Tori muttered as he stared at the beasts romping around.

“My, it sure is lively out here,” Cecilia remarked, having just emerged from

the workshop.

“Sure is. Beats them getting rowdy inside the house, though,” Tori replied.
“How’s Euphie?”

“She’s taking a nap. She’s almost done building the device, so I hope you like it, dear.”

“Wow, that’s great to hear! I’ll treat her to some tea later.”

“Oho! I’ll leave her to you, then. I’ll be playing around with these two.”

Cecilia stretched out both her arms and twitched her fingers like a marionettist. Then, a mound of snow started growing from the ground, and a huge snow golem emerged from the pile. The golem swung its massive arms and attacked the two legendary beasts. The two beasts, meanwhile, didn’t flinch and even gladly welcomed the golem’s attack with counterattacks of their own. A battle of monsters had commenced in the yard.

“Wah ha ha! Hey Cecilia, don’tcha have anythin’ stronger up your sleeve? This one’s too floppy!” Shinozuki yelled.

“Yeah! I’ll melt this guy with my flames in one go!” Subaru added.

“Okay, okay. Give me a bit,” Cecilia replied.

“Can’t you guys do this somewhere far from here?” Tori complained, worried that their roughhousing would damage the crops in the garden. As he stood watching in the house’s doorway, he suddenly felt something soft on his back. Euphemia started rubbing her face against him.

“Weren’t you supposed to be taking a nap?” Tori asked.

“Mm...” Euphemia mumbled. Lately, that was all she could seem to muster as a reply to anything he said. It seemed her work demanded so much focus that her vocabulary had taken a hit. Tori sighed and obliged her wordless request for affection.

A few days later, the transportation device was finally ready. It appeared to be a small pendant. A number of magicstones were embedded in a metallic frame, and a delicate pattern was engraved into each one. Tori couldn’t help but take a closer look at the craftsmanship required to make such an item.

“This is so refined... Euphie, you really made this?” Tori asked.

“Yeah.” Euphemia nodded. Her expression was the same as always, but now that she was freed from the task she had been pouring herself into, she looked somewhat refreshed, and there was more color in her voice than before.

Euphemia placed her chin on Tori’s shoulder and took a peek at the pendant.

“Cecilia handled the design for the metal frame. We worked together on engraving the magicstones, and I was the one who incorporated the transportation magic into each one,” she explained, then proudly snuggled her nose against Tori’s ear. “You’re sweating. Why?” Euphemia wondered.

“I-I was just in the kitchen earlier. Hey, don’t put your face too close. It tickles.” Tori twisted away to avoid the ticklish feeling, but also partly because he was too conscious of her scent and her softness. “S-So how do I use this thing?”

Euphemia started explaining how the device worked. “First, you need to wear it around your neck.”

Tori stood and slipped the chain over his head.

“Then you need to grip it with your hand,” she continued.

“Like this?” Tori tightened his fist around the pendant’s jewel. He could feel the device emitting a slight heat against his palm. “Okay... And then?”

“You have to pour mana into it like when you’re activating a magical artifact, Tori dear,” Cecilia answered.

Tori furrowed his brow as he tried to recall the last time he’d used a magical artifact, back when he was an adventurer.

Um, let’s see... I need to focus my mind on the item I’m activating, then visualize my energy flowing into it...

Tori felt the pendant growing hotter against his palm. Suddenly, a glowing magic circle appeared underneath his feet. At the same time, he felt a force pull him away, and his surroundings started spinning around him. The sight of bare trees, snow, and sky blurred together into a spiraling slurry of black and white. The sensation of the ground beneath him vanished, and he felt like he was

zipping through the sky.

“Whoa?!”

Before he knew it, Tori had landed in a back alley. Snow was falling from the pearlescent sky, carried by the wind blowing past his face. He could hear the busy sounds of a nearby street. A ball of snow fell from the roof above him and landed on his head, and each breath from his mouth turned into a white puff.

“A-Azrac? Wh-Whoa, i-it’s cold out here!” Tori stammered as he hugged himself with both arms. He had flown straight from inside Euphemia’s house, so he wasn’t wearing any jacket or overcoat—just his usual shirt, apron, and the bandanna on his head. On top of that, he had been in the middle of cooking a meal in the kitchen, sweating and bathing in the heat of the stove, so the sudden blast of cold air from the outside world was a real shock to his system. Worse still, the winds were swift and biting.

“I-I-I’m g-g-gonna f-freeze to d-death out h-here! H-How d-do I g-get home a-again?” The freezing cold made it difficult for Tori to think coherently. He gripped the pendant tightly in his fist and repeated the thought in his head—*home, home, home!*

Once again, the world around him spiraled and he felt a force tug at his entire being. Moments later, he was back inside the warm house, surrounded by the inquisitive faces of Euphemia and her familiars.

“Welcome back,” Euphemia greeted.

“C-C-C-Cold!” Tori chattered, immediately huddling up in front of the fireplace.

Euphemia draped herself over Tori’s back. “Feels cold,” she muttered.

“W-Well yeah, obviously! Y-You didn’t tell me it’d be so sudden!” Tori blurted out.

“We didn’t expect you’d do it on the spot right after being taught how. Tori dear, you’re so impatient!” Cecilia said, laughing.

Wait, was this my fault? Tori wondered as he extended his hands toward the fire to warm them.

Euphemia wrapped her arms around Tori from behind. She leaned her weight on him suddenly, causing the two of them to keel forward.

“Whoaaa!” Tori yelled as he nearly toppled over.

“I’ll warm you up,” Euphemia muttered.

“W-Wait, don’t push! We’ll go into the fire!” Tori hurriedly shifted his weight, causing Euphemia to tumble and fall flat on her back.

“Mew,” Euphemia yelped softly.

“S-Sorry about that. You okay?” Tori asked.

“Yeah.” Euphemia held out both of her arms. Tori sighed and helped her up. She looked satisfied as she wrapped her arms around him and rubbed his back.

“Do you understand how to use it now?” she asked him.

“Yeah, more or less. But what happens if there’s someone or something in the spot I’m landing in?” Tori asked in return. It would cause huge problems if he ran right into a merchant or their wares, or landed smack-dab inside a wall when getting transported. And it might cause a commotion if a person suddenly appeared out of thin air.

Euphemia puffed up and proudly raised her chin. “No problem. The device automatically scans your landing location and adjusts the coordinates accordingly.”

“It was a lot of work getting those adjustments right, you know?” Cecilia added. “But the calculations are pretty precise, and it looks like the perception filter works too. That’s a relief.”

Tori didn’t understand the exact theory behind it, but it looked like the device prevented him from hitting people or objects at his selected destination. Even if he got spotted, it seemed that Euphemia and Cecilia had incorporated some sort of illusion spell to make sure it wouldn’t look unnatural from an outsider’s point of view. Euphemia appeared to have thought of everything and worked hard in formulating the spells for the pendant.

In any case, Tori felt relieved that he wouldn’t randomly explode while using the device.

“So this means I can go to Azrac anytime I want, right?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. But let’s still go together sometimes, okay?” Euphemia said while still clinging to him.

“Okay, okay.” Tori let out a wry laugh as he patted her back.

“Tori dear, don’t go into any naughty stores in the city on your own, okay? If you’re feeling wound up, your big sister will take care of that for you!” Cecilia teased Tori, rubbing her massive breasts against him.

Tori sighed. “I’m not going into any of those stores.” He turned to Euphemia. “What?”

“I’ll take care of that for you. Not Cecilia. You can have me anytime, okay?” she said.

“Stop it! Don’t say weird stuff like that!” Tori retorted and poked Euphemia repeatedly. *I can’t believe how frank she is!*

Euphemia pouted as she clung to him once more.

The sun had set, and they were finished eating dinner. It was now that time of night where a lazy air would settle over the house. Outside, the snow had started to fall again. The lights in the parlor were bright, and the only thing visible in the windows was their own reflection. You would have to press your face against the glass and strain your eyes to see anything outside.

“Is there something out there?” Tori asked Euphemia, who had been staring out the window.

“Just the snow,” Euphemia turned to answer him.

“Yeah... Looks like it’s coming down again. Guess I’ll have to do more shoveling tomorrow,” Tori muttered as he stoked the fire. Euphemia smiled when she noticed the flames reflecting off the transportation device hanging from Tori’s neck.

Euphemia’s magic kept the house warm and comfortable at all times, but the snow piling up outside made it feel colder than it actually was. Having the fireplace lit was a great source of comfort for them all.

Euphemia let out a big yawn and sat on the cushions arranged in front of the hearth. It was an ideal place to space out and watch the fire, and Euphemia was spending a lot of time doing just that throughout the winter. Meanwhile, Cecilia was reading a book, and Shinozaki and Subaru were playing around on the couch.

Euphemia hugged her knees and continued staring at the fire. She couldn't stay in just one position.

Winter nights felt a lot more quiet than the other seasons. Before, when she'd had the house to herself, she'd often been lonely and anxious at night, much unlike her usual, laid-back self. Now, her familiars made the house more lively, and Tori was also here. All the loneliness she had felt before was now completely gone.

Euphemia peeked into the kitchen. She heard the clangs of tools and utensils inside. Tori appeared to be busy with something.

"Boo..." Euphemia pouted. She figured he was probably preparing tomorrow's breakfast, but she wanted him to stop working so much and sit beside her for once.

The noises in the kitchen finally stopped. Tori wiped his hands and stepped back into the parlor.

"Tori," Euphemia called out to him.

"Hmm?"

She patted the cushion beside her.

"What is it? Want me to sit with you?" Tori asked.

"Yeah!" She nodded.

Tori removed his apron and sat down beside Euphemia. She then leaned her head against his shoulder. In response, he shifted his weight a bit.

"Don't move," Euphemia said.

"It tickles," Tori complained.

"Put up with it."

“Okay, okay.” Tori couldn’t help but give an awkward smile as he patted Euphemia’s head.

“Heh heh.” Euphemia rubbed her head against Tori’s shoulder. It was the middle of winter, but he smelled slightly of sweat, likely because he’d been so active throughout the day.

Tori was somewhat of an indecisive man, but Euphemia loved him nonetheless. She saw his awkwardness and clumsiness as part of his personality. And despite all that, he would still indulge her requests to be pampered, which made her very happy.

I love winter. It’s not too hot at all when I cuddle him, Euphemia thought. She felt warm and comfortable snuggling up against Tori’s body.

Euphemia had asked him three times to sleep next to her, but that was the only request that he absolutely refused to fulfill. When she had the chance to sneak into his bed and sleep next to him, it made her very happy. Safe and comforted, even.

Euphemia continued to be pampered by Tori like a cat. She rolled over on his lap and gave him puppy-dog eyes as she asked him again.

“Let’s sleep together.”

“I said no,” Tori denied her once more.

“Why not?”

Tori furrowed his brow. He seemed vexed about answering.

“I mean...you sleep without any clothes on,” he said.

“And you don’t like that?” Euphemia asked.

“Well... I feel conscious of it. Like, a lot. There’s no way I could sleep like that.”

Tori looked embarrassed as he answered her, averting his gaze out of shame.

Euphemia yawned. *Is that really how he feels?* she wondered. Was sleeping together something they should only do once they were married? In that case, she couldn’t wait till the two of them tied the knot.

5. A Request for Potions

The heavy snowfall gradually waned day by day until the weather grew warm again. The snow in the yard had started to melt, exposing the ground underneath, and the chickens and ducks that had stayed in the henhouse all winter were once again happily scratching and pecking at the ground outside. The yard was soft and muddy, dirtying their shoes whenever they stepped on the damp earth.

Tori looked around as he walked through the garden, harvesting whatever leafy crops had popped up through the snow. He felt that it was time to finally plant the fruit tree seedlings. Unlike the other crops in the garden, a tree would stay in the same spot for years to come, so he had to choose its location carefully. If he treated them like a regular crop, they would cause spacing issues in the yard once they were fully grown.

The pond had swelled a lot with the melting snow, and the extra water traveled through the waterway and down into the river. There were ice sheets floating on top of the pond, but the ducks cared little as they paddled around, happily stretching out their wings.

The same trees that had lost their leaves over the autumn and winter were starting to sprout buds and flowers, and the early morning chill had finally started to lose its bite. The bracing cold had been a thorn in Tori's side whenever he woke up and went to the well outside to fetch water.

Soon enough, the snow was completely melted, and only the distant mountaintops had traces of white left. Tufts of grass sprouted from the ground, returning the color of life to the once-bleak landscape. The clear weather continued for a few more days, and soon the muddy ground had also dried up and returned to its firm, solid state.

It was already spring when Tori started drying the laundry under the clear morning skies again. The rays of the sun felt warm on his skin, and the breeze was back to being refreshing instead of bitter.

Euphemia was dozing on a blanket spread out on the ground next to the laundry swaying in the wind. She had asked Subaru to dry the ground with her flames before placing the blanket. On top of that, she also had a cushion and bath towel with her. She looked happy as she sunbathed.

Next to Euphemia, Cecilia was sitting on a chair, reading a book. Meanwhile, Subaru was in her phoenix form flying around the roof, and Shinozuki was lazing around in her fenrir form. It was a lazy day for the entire household.

Tori had just finished hanging the laundry. As he carried the empty basket back inside, thinking on what to prepare for lunch, a black bird landed near Euphemia's head, holding a letter in its beak. It was one of Euphemia's familiars.

Euphemia opened her eyes, sat up, and let out a big yawn.

"Oh, do we have a job?" Cecilia asked. Euphemia unfurled the letter and yawned again. She slowly got to her feet.

"We do. They want us to make potions. It's an urgent request," Euphemia said.

"When is it due?"

"In three days. They want pills and antiseptics. They need at least twenty of each or they won't have enough."

"That's pretty sudden," Shinozuki said. She was lying on the ground with her belly up.

"It says here that the deadline is one month, but they're offering a bigger reward if we can deliver it in three days. So we should get it done as soon as possible. Cecilia, help me check our stock of ingredients."

"Okaaaay. Heh heh. We've been so lax lately, so this is getting me all fired up!" Cecilia said.

"Shino and Subaru, wait here. We'll head out once we know what we're missing," Euphemia ordered.

"Kay."

"Gotcha."

“You’re all so busy all of a sudden. Should I even make lunch for you guys?”
Tori asked.

Euphemia nodded. “We’ll eat lunch...then probably head out immediately after.”

“Really? Do you think you’ll be back within the day?”

“Depends on what materials we need,” said Euphemia before she and Cecilia went inside the house. They headed for the workshop to check their supply stocks.

Tori put away the laundry basket and went inside as well. He had to prepare lunch, and if Euphemia and the others would be out until the evening, he also wanted to give them some light snacks for their journey.

Thanks to the transportation device, Tori was now able to go out and buy groceries without much trouble, so they had a huge stock of food. He had also bought a huge amount of bread. Before, he’d had to be frugal with the ingredients he had on hand before his next grocery trip, but now he could just buy more whenever he wanted. It was a massive improvement in his quality of life.

Tori split a bread roll in half, placed grilled meat and boiled veggies along with some spices on one half, and covered it with the other. He made several of these and placed them in a basket. Next, he made the usual noodles from the dough he’d prepared earlier this morning, and mixed them with salted fish and a sauce made from boiled roots. He whipped up a soup of meat and beans, and served it with bread.

Soon at the dining table, Euphemia was checking her inventory of ingredients, slurping noodles while looking at a sheet of paper spread over the table.

“We have pretty much all the herbs we need. But we’re a bit low on monster parts, so we’ll have to hunt some,” Euphemia said.

“Shino and Subaru aren’t very good at handling venomous insects... Looks like I’ll have to handle these,” Cecilia volunteered.

“Then I’ll take care of the bamboo carrier and whitescale,” Shinozuki said.

“That leaves the stinging balloon to me. It flies around, so it should be a good match for me,” Subaru said.

The bamboo carrier was a huge, four-legged monster that looked like a cross between a boar and a hippopotamus. Its back was covered with tough and hardy skin from the head down, and as it aged, it cultivated a thick layer of moss, bugs, and mushrooms on its back, which was the source of its name. The mushrooms it grew were known to be quite potent and, thus, valuable.

The whitescale was a subspecies of dragon that, true to its name, bore white scales. If spotted anywhere near a human settlement, it was instantly seen as a priority target to kill—a result of its violent and dangerous nature. Even when slain, its heart had enough strength to continue beating for an entire day. Its blood was known to have vitality-boosting properties.

The stinging balloon looked like a gigantic, translucent jellyfish that floated in the sky. A number of tentacles extended down from its main body, each of which contained venomous stingers that would paralyze a person’s entire body with a single touch. The slime coating the bell of the creature had medicinal properties. When reduced, it was very effective in stopping bleeding, and it also acted as a potent catalyst when formulating medicines.

Each of these monsters could only be found deep within remote and dangerous areas, and even platinum-ranked clans would need much preparation and planning to tackle any one of them. Of course, such measures were unnecessary for Euphemia and her familiars.

After having a quick and busy lunch, Euphemia and the others prepared to head out.

“Refining the materials will take an entire day. Synthesizing the potions will take another. That’s why we have to gather all the materials by tonight,” Euphemia said.

Shinozuki, in her fenrir form, snorted. “Easy-peasy. Let’s head out.”

“Looks like we gotta go deep inside the monsters’ nests and split up to search,” Subaru suggested.

“Yeah. It would be nice if we could find our marks quickly, though,” Cecilia

said.

“Euphie, take this.” Tori handed a basket to Euphemia right as she was about to transform. She looked at the basket.

“What’s this?” Euphemia asked.

“You guys might not be able to get back home tonight, right? I packed some snacks you can eat when you get hungry,” Tori explained.

“Oooh. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it,” Euphemia said and hugged Tori, who responded by patting her back. “I’ll leave the house to you, then.”

“You got it. Be careful, okay? Don’t overdo it,” Tori said.

“Yeah.”

Euphemia carried the basket over to her familiars, who all looked visibly elated when they learned about the snacks.

Tori let out a sigh of relief upon seeing them off. A few clouds had formed across the previously clear sky, and the shadows on the ground had started to lengthen. It didn’t look like it was going to rain imminently, but he might have to take the laundry inside before long.

The city of Azrac was as busy as ever as the season rolled into early spring. Merchants, artisans, and adventurers passed through the city at a pace that rivaled that of the biggest urban centers. Even though the number of adventurers in the city grew day by day, there was already a surplus of dungeons and monster nests in the area, so there was never a shortage of jobs. In fact, another large dungeon had just been discovered recently, and the adventurers’ guild was busy round the clock managing this adventurer boom.

The two biggest names in the Azrac Guild were the White Witch and the Cerulean Dagger. The former was a solo adventurer and the latter a clan. Both were said to be the cream of the crop among all adventurers, but the members of the Cerulean Dagger all insisted that there was no way they could beat the White Witch. In fact, they had received direct training from her and her familiars, and had gained skill and experience in leaps and bounds.

Though the Cerulean Dagger held the great achievement of defeating the great demon Renard, they did not let it get to their heads and kept on taking new requests day after day. Their passion and effort let them keep the spot of Azrac's number one clan. However, now that they had gotten used to their immovable spot at the top, the members couldn't deny that a sort of lull had settled within their ranks. Their sense of urgency had dulled as a result.

Andrea, the leader of the Cerulean Dagger, was staring at the bulletin board for jobs at the guild's reception hall.

"Andrea, what do you think? These quests should be appropriate for a platinum-ranked clan," the young receptionist at the counter—a recent hire—pitched to him.

"Let's see... Can I have the details for this, and this one? I'll take them and discuss with my clanmates," Andrea said.

"Okay, I'll bring them to you in a bit. Oh, it's a shame that Jean's no longer with you guys, though."

Andrea smiled. "He already fulfilled his goal, after all. I think he wants to offer his services to his country next."

"What a noble goal. But it's amazing that the Cerulean Dagger's forces haven't waned at all even with his resignation. I'm impressed!" the receptionist exclaimed.

Andrea smiled awkwardly. "Well, there are more adventurers these days. I feel like we have to work harder or we'll get overtaken. Still, there's been a lack of motivation at the clan lately."

"No way! I don't think a clan more skilled than the Cerulean Dagger will be showing up anytime soon. That's why you all have the full support of the guild! Oh, but we certainly wouldn't complain if there were an increase in capable clans out there."

The receptionist lowered her voice then and leaned in closer to Andrea. "Um, I've only heard rumors of this, but is it true that one of your old friends is working with the White Witch?"

Andrea's eyes widened in surprise. "It's true, but where'd you hear that?" he

asked.

“Not from anyone in particular, but it’s a rumor that’s been going around. They’ve been saying he’s been cleaning up monster lairs, or that the White Witch and her comrades put their full trust in him... But also despite that, he wasn’t considered for the Cerulean Dagger because of his low combat ability.”

“Well, *Tori is* a good friend, and I do owe him a lot. It’s also true that he works for the White Witch and is enjoying his life there,” Andrea replied.

“Wow, so it’s all true, then! I heard Manager Arpent got yelled at by the guildmaster for that!”

“Oh, yeah...”

When the clans were unified, Arpent became the manager of the Cerulean Dagger, and now he handled tasks such as the management of information, accounting, human resources, job negotiations, and other miscellaneous administrative tasks. He was also the one who’d made the decision to fire *Tori* from the clan, and subsequently got an earful from the guildmaster for having “no eye for talent.”

Andrea let out an awkward laugh. “Arpent did nothing wrong. Just looking at the data, *Tori* really didn’t have the skills or accomplishments to join the Cerulean Dagger. In fact, we all agreed he wasn’t a good fit for the clan.”

“No way! But the White Witch...”

“Well, there’s a lot going on between them. But now, both we and *Tori* have come to terms with how things ended.”

“Um, by any chance, do you think *Tori* has any desire to come back to the Cerulean Dagger?” the receptionist asked.

“Probably not. I think he really likes his current job, after all,” Andrea answered.

“I see. That’s too bad...”

Andrea laughed and bid the receptionist goodbye. However, just as he turned to leave, someone bumped against Andrea’s shoulder with the clear intent of doing so.

“And just who are you?” Andrea asked.

Standing before Andrea was a group of adventurers. At the head of the group was a beautiful man with long, bright, golden hair. Behind him stood a large man with his face completely concealed by a helm, and farther back was a group of lightly armored adventurers.

“Oh dear, how rude of me! You must be Andrea of the Cerulean Dagger, correct?” The golden-haired man spoke in a friendly, cheerful tone, but one could easily sense the mocking intent behind it.

“Indeed I am,” Andrea replied.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. We are the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light. Our base of operations used to be in Serisevunia, but we shall be transferring to Azrac. I am the vice commander, Kristoff.”

The man called Kristoff pompously introduced himself and his clan. His theatrical behavior was a good match for his handsome face and tall stature.

The Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light was a platinum-ranked clan that had made a name for itself in a different region. They were a group of dragoons that commanded flying dragons, which had led to their fame as specialists in aerial combat. They wielded bows and spears as their main weapons, assaulting their targets from above while flying on their draconic mounts.

Andrea dusted off his shoulder with his hand. “I have heard the name. To think that such a famous clan had such ill-mannered and boorish folks in their ranks.”

“Oh, but I would think the Cerulean Dagger, the strongest clan in Azrac, would immediately sense our presence! It would seem the so-called strongest clan was much weaker than I thought. My apologies! Did it hurt?”

“Sure did.” Andrea offered Kristoff a handshake. “Shall we get back on the right foot?”

When Kristoff took his hand, Andrea tightened his grip, twisted Kristoff’s arm, and pushed the vice commander up with his shoulder. Kristoff flew up in the air, spinning around before landing.

Andrea snickered. “What’s wrong? This isn’t the place to debut your circus act.”

The members of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light suddenly drew their weapons.

The receptionist panicked. “Please restrain yourselves! We forbid any brawls between adventurers! We will have to confiscate your licenses!”

The members of the Order stood down. Andrea waved his hand to clear the air. “Don’t worry, we’re just messing around.”

Kristoff, who had just been sent flying, still managed to stick a semigraceful landing. He placed his hand on his forehead and shook his head. It would seem that his flight had made him dizzy. His footing was a bit uneven.

“N-Now you’ve done it. But you better not let it go to your head just because you’ve bested me. Commander!”

Kristoff called out, but there was only silence. Both he and Andrea looked confused.

“Commander?” Kristoff repeated. “Oh, not again!”

Andrea hadn’t noticed earlier, but there was a little girl, perhaps around ten years old, listing gently back and forth in the shadows. Her head barely came up to Kristoff’s waist. She wore a hood, and her black hair was tied in neat pigtails that drooped over her shoulders. She also held a bow in her hand.

Kristoff grabbed the girl’s shoulders and shook her. “Commander, commander! Please wake up! Our members are in danger!”

“Mmm...” The little girl opened her eyes and yawned. “What is it?”

“It’s the Azrac clan, the Cerulean Dagger! Weren’t you going to be number one? This is not the time to be sleeping!” Kristoff yelled as he tapped her head lightly. The little girl mumbled and rubbed her eyes, then turned her purple eyes to Andrea. She gave a small bow.



“Heya. Name’s Robin.”

“I’m Andrea. You’re the commander of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light?”

“Yup. Nice to meet ya,” Robin said and extended her hand for a handshake.

Okay, now how will you respond? Andrea returned the handshake. Suddenly, his vision spun. Before he realized it, he had been thrown. His body managed to respond on instinct, twisting so that he landed on two feet instead of his back.

Robin whistled, seemingly awed. “Impressive,” she said.

“Unfortunately, I’ve been trained by a superhuman. Aiki, huh? I’m impressed.” Andrea let out a small laugh as he rolled his shoulders.

Robin looked surprised. “You know about it?”

“I was never able to put it into practice, but I’ve learned it before. You seem to be great at manipulating mana.”

Aiki was a martial arts technique involving the use of mana to subdue the opponent. Andrea was a bulky, muscular man, but he’d been easily tossed by Robin, who had the stature of a ten-year-old girl, by the use of this technique.

“In any case, we’ll be takin’ the top here in Azrac, so you better prepare yourselves,” Robin taunted.

“You’re welcome to try and take us down, though I doubt you’ll get very far,” Andrea replied.

Kristoff cackled. “What, trying to put up a front? Ha ha ha! It seems the great Cerulean Dagger was just a bunch of weaklings! With rivals like you guys, we’ll be taking the top spot in no time! Wah ha ha ha! Ga hah hah—guh, koff, koff!”

“Vice commander!”

“Vice commander, are you okay?!”

Robin kept her gaze on Andrea, ignoring Kristoff who sounded like he was dying from choking on his own laughter. She narrowed her eyes. “You’re the leader of the Cerulean Dagger, right? Anyone else here who’s stronger?”

“Despite what you may have heard, we’re not the strongest adventurers in

Azrac. I doubt you guys could even hold a candle to the White Witch,” Andrea answered.

Robin looked dissatisfied. “It doesn’t matter who we have to face. Come on, everyone. We’re movin’ out,” she announced before turning to leave. The rest of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light followed after her.

Andrea brushed the dust off his clothes. The guild receptionist looked worried and called out after him. “Um, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Sorry about causing a commotion,” he said.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry for not being able to stop it.”

“It’s fine. Adventurers don’t count barefisted brawls as fights.”

Andrea glanced at the job details she’d given him to confirm the paper wasn’t damaged before stuffing it in his pocket. “Are those guys new around here?” he asked.

“They are. I don’t think they’ve been here for ten days, even. But they’re definitely a platinum-ranked clan from Serisevunia. They’re already making a name for themselves as a highly skilled clan that can be counted among the top clans in Azrac.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad we finally have some worthy rivals, then,” said Andrea.

The guild receptionist looked concerned. “But... But if they manage to surpass your clan in achievements, the guild might decide to change who they’re backing. We already have a lot of famous clans from other regions coming to Azrac as it is.”

Other than the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light, several more platinum-ranked clans from different regions had been transferring to Azrac recently. Most hadn’t been in town long enough to make their names known yet, but many of those clans were just as capable as the Cerulean Dagger.

Andrea laughed. “Well, we’ll deal with that when the time comes. If we’re losing to them in skill, then we have no excuse. Though we don’t plan on losing to any of them, of course.”

“I see... But it’s true that the guild has high hopes for the other clans as well,

especially the Order of the Dragon's Purifying Light. They've already been taking on very difficult requests as of late, and they've succeeded in setting the standard for what to expect of the newcomer clans," the receptionist explained.

The Order's flying dragons were not only effective in battle, but they also functioned as convenient modes of transportation. Azrac was located in the hinterlands, so exploring the nearby areas was not easy. There were often no roads to where the adventurers were going, and being able to travel by carriage wasn't a given. Some places could take several days to reach by foot, and then after doing the job, they had to make the return trip as well. Such travels were a massive burden. This was the main reason large-scale expeditions and major raids around Azrac were infrequent, despite the plethora of dungeons and monster nests around the area.

However, with their dragons, the Order could travel from place to place in an instant. They could slash their travel times and save their energy, which allowed them to take on difficult requests one after the other.

Andrea merely shrugged. "Hmm, oh well. It's not a bad thing to have more capable adventurers here in Azrac."

"That's true, but..." The receptionist still looked uneasy. She seemed to be a big fan of the Cerulean Dagger.

Andrea laughed. "Don't worry about it too much. In any case, whatever happens, the White Witch will still be the strongest in all of Azrac," he said as he left the guild.

The streets outside were all a chatter; it appeared that the Order of the Dragon's Purifying Light had just left on their flying dragons. Andrea watched them vanish into the distance as he muttered, "There's no way they'll take the top spot while Euphemia and the others are here."

6. Delivery Deadline

“Is this thing safe for me to touch?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. Just cut it up and boil it in the cauldron,” Euphemia instructed. She and Cecilia took a number of bottles with them into the workshop. Tori, meanwhile, remained in the yard and proceeded to start slicing up the dead stinging balloon on a table. He treated the task with much caution—the creature’s carcass was wet and slimy, and could easily cause the knife to slip.

Beside him, a cauldron was boiling on top of a bonfire. Tori was to toss the sliced stinging balloon inside and melt it down. The liquefied pieces would then be transferred into bottles to be used as a synthesizing agent.

“Gah! Doing this with human hands is impossible!” Shinozuki griped. She had been forced to help Tori out while in human form. Because of the slippery fluid, she struggled with wielding the knife in her hand. The blade kept slipping, splashing bodily fluids all over. Her clothes were now soaked, making them stick to her skin and emphasizing her well-proportioned figure.

“Aha ha ha! Shino, hang in there!” Subaru shouted from up in the sky as she soared around in her phoenix form. There were mushrooms harvested from the bamboo carriers spread out on wire racks, and she had been blasting them with hot air to dry them out. Once dried, they could then be boiled. Sun-drying would take too long, so Subaru had been assigned the task.

“I betcha can’t even hold a knife properly!” Shinozuki snorted.

“I’m a phoenix, so no need to know how to use one!” Subaru retorted.

“Shaddup! I’ll have ya know I’m a proud fenrir!”

“Enough of that! Shino, keep your hands moving or we won’t make the deadline! We still gotta break open those yuwasug seeds and extract their flesh!” Tori barked, clearly irritated. He threw the monster slices into the cauldron.

They were making a wound ointment by melting down the stinging balloon

flesh and mixing it with other ingredients. The resulting ointment could then be spread over wounds to seal them, preventing further bleeding and dulling the pain. The medicinal properties in the mixture would then soak into the wound, greatly speeding up the healing process.

I remember using the same kind of ointment back when I was an adventurer, Tori recalled. The synthesis of medicines was outside of Tori's field of knowledge, and he had never once thought about what went into making those items.

Today, the residents of Euphemia's household were spending the entire day preparing the ingredients. Tori, Shinozuki, and Subaru were entrusted with sorting out good materials and various other tasks such as boiling ingredients. Euphemia and Cecilia, meanwhile, would be handling the more difficult processes, such as distillation and high-level synthesis. The whole procedure was complex, and they had to divide the tasks to keep things moving.

"Euphie, here's the yuwasug seed flesh— Whoa, what is all this?"

Tori, who had been carrying a sieve filled with materials that had finished processing, went across the house to the bedroom and entered Euphemia's workshop for the first time. He was stunned at the sight of rows and rows of bottles lined up on the wall, along with various strange tools. On the other side of the room, there was a fireplace, and inside hung a giant cauldron with an exhaust pipe above it. Despite the cauldron bubbling and producing hefty amounts of steam, Tori had never seen a chimney jutting out of the roof over this area of the house, and he had never once seen Euphemia or Cecilia bring firewood inside. There must have been some kind of trick in the structure.

"Leave them over there," Euphemia ordered while tinkering with what seemed to be a distillation device. She was normally such an airhead, but today she seemed rather adept and efficient.

Cecilia was studying a flask in her hand, measuring the liquid inside and taking notes. She seemed to be deeply focused on her task.

Tori left the materials on the designated spot. "Um, do you want anything for lunch?" he asked reluctantly.

"Something simple, please," Euphemia replied.

“G-Gotcha.”

Euphemia’s expression was serious and determined—a far cry from her usual floaty self. Tori felt a flutter in his chest at having seen this unusual side of her.

Guess I should make some stuffed bread, Tori thought.

By the next day, the preparations for the ingredients were finished and it was time to start synthesizing the potions. At this stage, there was nothing left for Tori to help out with, so he left the rest to Euphemia and Cecilia in the workshop and got to cleaning up the mess left behind in the yard and parlor from all their work the day before. In the end, it wasn’t much different from his usual cleanups. Shinozuki and Subaru were the same as always—they horsed around outside or lazed on the couch.

Finally, Euphemia and Cecilia had finished the syntheses and managed to produce the required amounts on the morning of the deadline. Euphemia looked utterly exhausted. She had used much of her brainpower ensuring the measurements were correct—the smallest deviation could cause drastic changes to the resulting potion’s effects. From gathering the materials to finishing the last stages of the medicines, Euphemia had spent the whole process working, with few breaks in between. She looked fatigued from the lack of sleep, on top of having eaten little during that time.

“You did a great job. You okay?” Tori asked.

Euphemia let out a deep sigh and sank into the couch cushions. “I’m exhausted,” she said.

“I’ll bet. Want something sweet? I could pour you some hot milk,” Tori offered.

She shook her head and reached her arms out to him.

“Ahh, okay, okay.”

Tori stooped down and embraced Euphemia. Through the lingering smell of medicine and processed ingredients, he could smell her usual sweet scent. He gently patted her back, and she seemed happy with the gesture. She fidgeted for a bit, then fell quiet.

“Euphie?”

No response. Tori carefully extricated himself from her arms and saw that she had fallen asleep. He laid her down on the couch to let her rest. Euphemia always insisted that she couldn't sleep with clothes on, but it seemed her fatigue had won over this time around.

“Wait, but she still has a deadline to meet, right?” Tori wondered. He looked at the box filled with potion bottles. “These still have to be delivered, don't they?”

“That's right, dear,” Cecilia said. She was seated at the dining table, enjoying a cup of after-meal tea. Though she was an archlich, she wasn't spared from the effects of fatigue showing on her face. Like Euphemia, she had also spent several sleepless nights focusing on the task at hand.

Tori was hesitant to wake Euphemia. Part of him felt that she should see her work through to the end, especially since she was usually quite lazy. However, whenever he saw Euphemia's sleeping face, Tori couldn't help but think he should let her be.

“Guess I'll do it. They shouldn't mind a representative bringing the items as long as it gets to them, right?”

Tori might have been deadweight as an adventurer, but his time under a platinum-rank clan had given him a solid grasp of how the guild operated. Of course, he also knew the procedures for delivering requested items. An unidentified man bringing in a box of rare, expensive medicines would be questionable, but Tori was an ex-adventurer. He still had connections to staff within the guild. It was unlikely for him to encounter any trouble.

Tori planned to head to the guild right after finishing his cleanup. Suddenly, he heard a rustling sound coming from the couch. When he turned his gaze, Euphemia had started to take off her clothes in her sleep.

“Whoa!” Tori panicked and rushed to cover her with a blanket from his own bed. Euphemia dropped her clothes out from under the blanket before curling up and going still again. It would seem she hadn't woken up at all. Her peaceful nap continued, with some occasional mumbles.

She's back to her normal self... Tori thought. He wasn't sure whether this was good or bad.

After cleaning up the parlor, Tori took the box of medicines and went outside. The weather was nice and sunny, and Shinozuki and Subaru were playing around in their legendary beast forms. The spring sun was in full force. Flower buds had started sprouting in the garden, springing up from fresh roots and leaves. Soon enough, the flowers would give way to vegetables and be harvested to grace the household's dining table.

"You goin' out?" Shinozuki asked. She and Subaru noticed Tori and approached him.

"Gotta deliver these medicines. Euphie fell asleep," he replied.

"I'm coming with you! It's so boring here when you go out on your own!" Subaru complained and flapped her wings.

"Yeah, we'll tag along. Havin' food while we're there sounds great!" Shinozuki said as she returned to human form.

There was no reason for Tori to say no, and it would be strange if he told them off. He warned them to behave before he and Shinozuki climbed on Subaru's back.

It was the first time in a while that Tori had traveled to Azrac without using the transportation device. Traveling with the device only took an instant, while flying on Subaru took approximately an hour. The three of them landed at the city outskirts and headed into the city proper. Shinozuki and Subaru grew excited upon seeing the various stalls lining the streets.

"Skewers! Hey, can I have one?" Shinozuki asked.

"I want that meat bun over there!" Subaru pointed at a stall.

"*After* we go to the guild!" Tori yelled. The two of them weren't behaving at all. The three of them squabbled with each other until they arrived at the guildhall.

Tori was impressed at the number of people going in and out of the building. He had heard that the population of adventurers in the city had increased, but

it was his first time seeing it for himself. It was a lot more lively compared to when Euphemia first found him, and Tori was sure it wasn't just because it had been a while since he'd been here. And it was even more busy inside the building.

"So noisy in here," Shinozuki grumbled.

"Hey, Tori, Shino! Where are you guys?" Subaru, owing to her small stature, got lost in the crowd and was shouting and waving to get seen.

"Shino, could you take Subaru to the, uh, over there? That corner. The one with the big sign."

"Fine, fine." Shinozuki made her way through the crowd. Tori confirmed that she'd found Subaru successfully before hefting up the box of medicines once more and heading to the counter.

Platinum-ranked adventurers had an exclusive counter that catered to them. While the total population of adventurers was huge, platinum-ranked ones were few and far between. The exclusive counter was there to prevent urgent and difficult requests from being queued by the gold, silver, and bronze-rank adventurers, never reaching the platinum-ranked ones who could clear them. In other words, the counter catered to those who were literally on a different level from the rest.

It's been a while since I've been here, Tori thought as he reached the counter. He set the box of medicines on top. A young receptionist who Tori didn't recognize was manning the desk. She gave the box and Tori a confused stare.

"Um, do you need something? This is the counter for platinum-rank adventurers..."

"Oh, uh, I'm here as a representative of the White Witch..." Tori started. The receptionist's eyes widened and she stared at him.

"Huh? Th-The White Witch's—? U-Um, are you Tori? From the Muddy Four-Horns?"

"Ah, uh, yes I am."

Tori scratched his head. *Am I famous or something?* he wondered. He

suddenly recalled the talks around the clan unification and the personnel restructuring that had accompanied it. *There must have been rumors from back then*, he figured.

“W-Wow... You’re the one trusted by the White Witch herself... I-I apologize for my earlier behavior!” the receptionist bowed apologetically. Tori had also heard about the exaggerated rumors of the White Witch’s residence being a den of monsters and how he had been managing the said den. He had addressed Andrea, Suzanna, and Jean’s misconceptions, but it seemed that the other members of the guild were still under that impression.

“Um... Here’s the medicines requested of the White Witch. I’m here to deliver these as her representative,” Tori explained.

“Oh, uh, umm... P-Please wait a moment! Emily! Emilyyyy!” the receptionist ran behind the counter, shouting the name of one of her colleagues. Moments later, she returned, bringing a familiar face with her.

“Aisha, what is it all of a sudden?” the colleague asked.

“U-Umm, well, uhh...” the receptionist stammered.

“Jeez, you shouldn’t act so frantic at every little thing! A receptionist shouldn’t be acting like— Oh my!”

The receptionist’s colleague’s eyes went wide. She stepped out from behind the counter to greet Tori.

“Tori, it’s been so long!”

“Hey Emily. Nice to see you.”

“Huh? Emily, you and Tori know each other?” Aisha, the young receptionist, asked.

“Well yeah! He’s a platinum-rank adventurer after all. He was in the Muddy Four-Horns before you took over my post,” Emily explained.

“O-Oh, right! That was one of the clans that were merged into the Cerulean Dagger!” The way Aisha looked at Tori shifted drastically over the course of their conversation. Tori scratched his face out of embarrassment.

It had been almost a year since he’d last seen Emily, so Tori felt a sense of

nostalgia at seeing her. She was slightly older than him, and she'd worked as the guild's receptionist during his time at the Muddy Four-Horns. Tori'd talked with her many times over the course of his career when taking care of quest paperwork or handling the clan's finances.

Emily looked excited to talk to Tori. "I was so shocked when you suddenly vanished, you know!"

"Well, um, a lot happened back then. Emily, you quit your post at the reception desk?" Tori asked.

"That's right. I'm handling accounts and finances these days. But as you can see, I get called here pretty often, just like this. Aisha, could you go to the infirmary and call Dr. Theodore?"

"O-Oh, yes, of course!" Aisha dashed to fulfill Emily's request.

Emily turned to Tori. "Tori, I was worried about you when I heard that the Muddy Four-Horns disbanded. But I've heard the rumors, you know? I can't believe you're working under Gertrude the White Witch now!"

"Huh? G-Gert...what?" Tori was taken aback by her statement.

"Oh, I thought you knew her name?"

"O-Oh, yes, of course I do! Gertrude, huh? Ha ha, I just didn't catch what you said."

"Huh..." Emily looked puzzled, but she didn't pursue the matter any further.

It seemed that Euphemia and the White Witch were completely different people to the outside world. He still hadn't learned the reason Euphemia wanted it that way, but since she went out of her way to separate her identities, Tori figured he shouldn't divulge her secret.

Aisha returned to the counter, and beside her stood Theodore, the guild's physician: a middle-aged man wearing glasses and a white coat, with white hair on his head and face.

"Hey, hey! Are those the potions from the White Witch? And hey now, if it isn't Tori! Hah hah hah! So you were alive all this time? Thought you'd gone and died like a dog out there!" Theodore laughed heartily.

“I ain’t dying before you do, old man!” Tori laughed awkwardly as he retorted.

“I was worried sick about you when I heard the Muddy Four-Horns disbanded, you know? Thought I might hire you if you had nowhere to go, but you never showed up at the guild! And now you’ve gone and gotten hired by the White Witch of all people!”

“I just kind of got thrown into the fray...” Tori played along with Theodore’s hearty laughter. He was well acquainted with Theodore after having consulted with him many times about medicines and potions.

Back when he’d gotten fired, Tori had thought everyone he knew was sneering and jeering at him behind his back, but it had just been his imagination. He had been an adventurer for ten years, and he’d made connections well beyond his own clan. In hindsight, the thought of all of those acquaintances laughing at his misfortune was ridiculous. When in dire straits, it would seem that it was difficult to be kind or to recognize the kindness of others.

Looks like people have been looking out for me more than I thought, Tori realized. He felt ashamed of his own narrow-mindedness.

Tori pushed the box onto Theodore to hide his embarrassment. “Well, here’s the potions. Let me know what you think,” he said.

“Oh! Okay then, lemme see...” Theodore took a bottle and inspected it. “Incredible... I’d sent the request out of desperation, but to think the White Witch could pull it off... I’m impressed, to say the least.”

“Huh? Out of desperation?” Tori asked.

Theodore let out an awkward laugh. “I mean, did you see how many items were in that list? This would normally take a whole month to produce. Waiting a month would’ve been fine, but we’ve been low on potions and medicines a lot lately. There’s some clans planning long expeditions out there, so I thought the White Witch might be able to make it in time before they headed out. I added a huge bonus for completing it in three days, but to think that it’d be done with such high quality in that time... Anyway, looks like the clans will be getting their potions after all.”

With the increase in the population of adventurers, the number of injuries also increased, leading to supply shortages. While adventurers were largely responsible for taking care of their own injuries, the guild also offered medicines to gold-and platinum-rank clans whenever they sent out requests or bounties, to be taken out of the reward money later. And of course, the guild also needed to keep a stock on hand for emergencies.

“There’s a lot of platinum-rank clans that have been springing up lately. The medicines we provide are loans, so we still get money whenever the adventurers use them up, but we can’t provide that service if our stock dries up,” Emily explained.

That makes sense, Tori figured. During his time at the Muddy Four-Horns, his clan had to borrow medicines from the guild many times. There were occasions where they didn’t have to use up the items, but there were also times where they had to pay the fees to the guild. Tori had dealt with such financial transactions with Emily several times in the past.

Now that I think about it, Euphie must have made those medicines too, huh? Tori speculated. It wasn’t a far-fetched idea. She must have worked much harder this time with the rush order, but the quality was the same.

Theodore grabbed the box of medicines. “Thanks, man, you’ve been a big help. I’ll be countin’ on you guys again, so look forward to it!”

“That’s fine and all, but you better not give us such a tight deadline next time,” Tori griped.

“I gotcha, I gotcha! I didn’t force you guys to accept it, y’know? Cut me some slack!”

“Yeah, yeah. Theodore, take care of yourself, okay?”

“You bet I will! Come drop by anytime.”

Theodore left the counter, taking the box with him.

Emily calculated the reward money and showed Tori the receipt. “You made the three-day deadline, so you should be getting this much... Is that correct?”

“This much?!” Tori exclaimed. “W-W-Well, yes. Yeah, that’s correct.”

A regular adventurer could live an entire year off what she'd just handed him. Tori suddenly understood why Euphemia put so much effort into synthesizing the medicines.

Azrac's economy must be raking in the dough if they can afford to pay this much in one transaction, Tori marveled.

Right after receiving the reward money, Tori felt someone approaching him.

"T-Tori, sir?" a voice called out.

When Tori turned to check, he saw a well-dressed man that looked vaguely familiar. He racked his brain for a moment before finally remembering. "Oh, right, you're that guy from the Cerulean Dagger..."

Arpent, the manager of the Cerulean Dagger, was standing there with an awkward expression. He took a deep bow. "I humbly apologize for the grave injustice I have done to you..."

"H-Huh? N-No, no, that's fine! I don't mind at all!" Tori, startled by the gesture, waved his hands to dismiss Arpent's apology. Back when Tori was fired from his clan, he'd definitely found this grinning man to be irksome, but now, he didn't feel any particular resentment toward him. Tori's dismissal from the clan during the unification process had been based on a correct and proper evaluation of his skills. Arpent's apology only served to make him feel uncomfortable.

"B-But, I was completely off base in judging your skills—"

"Not at all! There's been a misunderstanding! I'm weak! I absolutely can't fight as part of a platinum-rank clan!" Tori explained.

"But I heard that Gertrude the White Witch places her trust in you!"

"Yes, that's true, but there are, umm...some unique circumstances behind that..."

"Like?"

"Well, umm..."

Tori was at a loss for how to explain the situation. Should he just be honest and say that the White Witch's personal life was a huge mess and she wanted

him to take care of her? But he also couldn't say anything about Euphemia. He decided to keep it as brief and concise as he could.

"Well, that girl—er, that old lady can't keep her private affairs in order. She only hired me to help out with household chores. Without someone helping, she can't even cook or clean up after herself. That's why she trusts me. Not because I'm strong or whatever. Really."

"Huh..." Arpent looked incredulous. He didn't seem to believe a single word Tori just said.

Aisha also looked perplexed. "But I heard her house was a lair of monsters or something..."

"Well, uh, we're talking metaphorically here. When they say that, it's not because her house is literally a dungeon—"

"You mean it's because it's a mess?"

"Yes! Emily, you got it!" Tori nodded profusely.

Emily looked skeptical despite being the one who'd said it. "The strongest, most powerful witch, of all people? I imagined she would just tidy things up with her magic."

"No, maybe she's super busy with magical experiments or developing new spells! That's why she's neglecting her chores!" Aisha speculated.

Arpent nodded in agreement. "I see. That sounds plausible. Such an adept witch must take her research quite seriously."

"That's so cool of her! She's so diligent and hardworking, and so scholarly! Being useless with chores sounds more like an adorable quirk than anything!" Aisha exclaimed.

"Well, yeah... Heh heh heh..." Tori felt cold sweat rolling down his back watching Aisha, Emily, and Arpent go wild with their speculation. Euphemia was the complete opposite of all those things, but Tori couldn't deny it or his story would look completely delusional. At this point, he would have to stick to "Gertrude" being a diligent, hardworking, and scholarly figure. He clutched his chest after feeling his heart pounding louder than usual.

Arpent sighed. “Still, it’s a bit of a shame. Your license is still valid, so I was expecting you to join the Cerulean Dagger at any time...”

Tori was taken aback. “Definitely not. I’m telling you, I’m weak and pathetic—Wait, my license is still valid?” He suddenly remembered that he never filed the papers for exiting the adventurer profession. Tori had felt that his life as an adventurer ended with the disbandment of the Muddy Four-Horns, but those were two completely separate things.

“Yes, that’s right. And you’re still registered as platinum-rank,” Arpent replied.

“I see... Um, could you keep my license around so I can use it as identification? But I do want my rank to be corrected to something appropriate. You could downgrade me to silver or bronze.”

Tori had no plans of going back to being an adventurer, so he didn’t care about his rank. He also didn’t feel that he deserved to stay at platinum.

Arpent seemed reluctant. “We could, but simply being hired by the White Witch would already qualify you as platinum-rank to most people,” he said.

“And I’m telling you, I’m not planning to go back to being an adventurer. But if I’m going to keep working under that gir—that old lady—it’d be convenient to have a title, even if it’s as a low-rank adventurer.”

“Well, I don’t mind doing that, but it’s such a waste. If you have a platinum license, you could return to the clan at any time.”

“Come on, I’m not going to do that. Don’t even joke about it.”

The conversation seemed to be going in circles. Then, Shinozuki arrived with Subaru on her shoulders.

“You done delivering the goods? C’mon, let’s go to the food stalls already,” Shinozuki urged.

“Meat buns! Meat buns!” Subaru yelled, thrashing her arms and legs about.

I’m saved, Tori thought. “You two have nothing but food in your brains,” he said.

“Wow! Wow, wow, wow! Shinozuki and Subaru? You two trained the Cerulean Dagger, right?” Aisha asked.

“Hm? What, are we famous or something? Wah ha ha!” Shinozuki cackled.

“U-Um, Miss Shinozuki, I heard this from the folks at the Cerulean Dagger, but is it true that you’re a fenrir?” Aisha asked, her eyes full of curiosity and excitement.

“That’s right!” Shinozuki huffed proudly. “I’m Shinozuki, proud warrior of the fenrir race! And this tiny brat here’s a phoenix.”

“Wow, so it’s true! Incredible!” Aisha marveled.

“Lemme down!” Subaru started throwing a tantrum, but Shinozuki paid it no heed and kept cackling.

Arpent stepped forward. “Miss Shinozuki, Miss Subaru, I thank the two of you for all the help you’ve given us.”

“Huh? What’re you talkin’ ’bout? Who’re you?” Shinozuki asked.

“My name is Arpent. I am the manager of the Cerulean Dagger...”

“What’s a ‘manager’?”

“Is that different from a swordsman or spellcaster? Sounds lame if you ask me!” Subaru commented, still sitting on Shinozuki’s shoulders.

Arpent let out an awkward laugh. “Well, I handle the clan’s internal affairs like personnel, finances, and schedules. In short, I work in the background supporting the entire clan,” he explained.

“Ohh! Like Tori, huh? Can ya cook?” Shinozuki asked.

“Well, uh, I don’t really do things like that—”

“Aww, lame.”

“Ahh! Are you trying to broach Tori from us?! You better not!” Subaru accused.

“Subaru, you mean ‘poach.’ Not ‘broach,’” Tori corrected.

“What?! I don’t want that! We can’t afford to lose him! We ain’t lettin’ go of him, got it?! If ya try anythin’ funny, I’ll eat you whole!” Shinozuki barked.

Despite being in human form, she was exerting an immense amount of pressure onto the room. Arpent, the receptionists behind the counter, and even Tori, all

felt the hair on their necks stand up.

“I-I-I-I am thinking of no such thing!” Arpent protested.

“Oh, okay then. Then we got no problem with you. Wah ha ha!”

The oppressive atmosphere vanished in an instant, but the commotion had drawn the attention of the entire guildhall to the group. Members of the Cerulean Dagger who had gone through Shinozuki and Subaru’s training started whispering among themselves.

Damn it, things are gonna get out of hand if this continues! Tori worried. He grabbed his belongings.

“W-Well then, sorry but we’ll be taking our leave now. I’ll leave that thing about my license to you guys. Shino, Subaru, let’s go.”

“Finally. Time for some skewers!” Shinozuki said.

“Skewers!” Subaru exclaimed.

Emily, who’d finally stopped shaking out of terror, let out a sigh of relief. “In any case, I’m glad you’re doing well, Tori. Stay healthy, okay?”

“You too. Give my regards to Andrea, would you?” Tori said, and the three of them exited the guild.

Shinozuki was pumping her arms excitedly. “Okay, I’m finally gonna have some skewers! I’m gonna have twenty of ’em!”

“Me too!” Subaru yelled.

“That’s too much! You still have dinner later, so keep it to two or three!” Tori scolded. Though it might sound like he was being tough, the fact that he didn’t outright refuse to buy them at all proved his softhearted nature. Of course, Shinozuki and Subaru would never stop pestering him if he refused.

Once they reached the stalls, though, when Tori was asked the number of skewers, Shinozuki and Subaru yelled out, “Twenty!” and Tori could no longer stop them. Shinozuki and Subaru ended up with ten skewers each and were now following Tori around with sauce on their faces.

“So sweet and spicy! Now *this* is a taste I can’t get from home!” Subaru

exclaimed.

“Mmm, that’s the good stuff. Tori, have one. Taste it and learn the flavor so you can make it for us.” Shinozuki shoved the skewer onto Tori.

“Fine, fine. Don’t poke me with it—you’ll get sauce all over my clothes,” Tori said. Once he took a bite, he realized the skewers really did taste great. He recalled his adventurer days of eating food from stalls like this and felt a wave of nostalgia wash over him.

Now that they’d finished their business at the guild, Tori figured he should also do his shopping since they were already in the city. It was already spring, and he wanted to pick out the trees to grow in the yard. The group quickly finished up their grocery shopping before they entered an alley and reached a quieter corner of the city.

Azrac was surrounded by wasteland, but there was a small region near the border where fields were cultivated for crops. Back when Azrac was still a mining town, farmers had used this area to grow vegetables and grains to sell to the city. Even today, with the city’s bustling trade and commerce, some people still chose to live a slow and peaceful life in this small area of farmland.

Among these townsfolk, there was one store that specialized in plants and seedlings. Tori’s group was heading for that same store. The seedlings were grown in this small patch of farmland before being transferred to planters inside the shop.

Tori approached the storefront, and he saw a field full of various plants behind a wooden hut. Planters of all sizes occupied the area, while some seedlings were also planted directly into the ground. He could see two youngsters tending the land out back.

Inside the wooden hut was the elderly shopkeeper, seated on a chair and smoking a cigar.

“Hello?” Tori called out, catching the old shopkeeper’s attention.

“Welcome. Are you here to buy plants?”

“I am. I want some for our garden. I’d like some fruit trees, please,” Tori said.

The shopkeeper exhaled a plume of smoke. “You’re in the right place, then. Our trees are all quite healthy. Feel free to pick any of them.”

Tori went out into the field, with Shinozuki and Subaru trailing behind.

“So many tiny trees out here,” Shinozuki commented.

“Whatcha gonna do with these?” Subaru asked.

“I told you, I’m gonna plant them in the yard. Don’t you guys want some apples, grapes, or peaches? We’ll be able to pick them from these,” Tori replied.

“Yay! I want some!” Subaru exclaimed.

“Sounds great. There any that grow meat?” Shinozuki asked.

“No.”

Tori picked out citrus, apple, and plum saplings and had them wrapped in straw mats. Shinozuki lifted them all with great ease, much to the shock of the workers in the field. Tori still had a lot of trees he wanted to grow, but they might not be able to get home if he bought too many at once. He decided to plant these first and come back for the rest another day. The yard was wide—in fact, it was difficult to tell where it ended since there were no other houses in the area—so there was more than enough space.

Tori’s group then left the city proper. They found a spot with no one around so Subaru could transform back into a phoenix, and the three of them headed home. Subaru flew slower than she had when heading to the city, perhaps because of her cargo, which included a load of snacks that she and Shinozuki had made Tori buy. Shinozuki appeared to be unbothered by the gusts of wind blowing past them, while Tori held on to Subaru’s back for dear life, unable to even lift his head to watch the scenery pass them by. As a result, he missed the ruckus that occurred when they flew past a group of flying creatures.

Soon, the three of them made it home. By the time they returned, the sun was already setting, and the house was casting a lengthy shadow.

“We sure took much longer than expected,” Tori sighed. “We’re home!”

“We’re back!” “We’re home!” Shinozuki and Subaru exclaimed.

The house was completely quiet in contrast to the noise Tori’s group had

made. Cecilia was sleeping alone on the couch. Her only reaction to the noisy intruders was a light moan and a small twitch of her body.

Who knew that even an archlich could get this tired? Tori thought. He took out a spare blanket and covered Cecilia with it. She appeared so vulnerable in her sleep, unlike her usual self. *She sure is a beauty, huh?* Tori gave a silent compliment.

“Subaru, could you light the fireplace?” Tori requested.

“Okaaay.” Subaru looked around. “I don’t see Euphie anywhere.”

“She’s in her room, ain’t she? She was sleepy as hell this morning,” Shinozuki replied. “Tori, can I have a bite of that meat you bought?”

“I’m gonna be cooking this, so no. Here, have some of the snacks instead,” he said.

While Tori was unpacking the groceries, Euphemia emerged from the bedroom. She took quick strides to the kitchen, crouched down and hugged Tori from behind.

“Did you deliver the medicines?” she asked.

“Yeah. You were fast asleep earlier.”

“Thanks.” Euphemia, seemingly pleased, snuggled against Tori’s back.

“Euphie, we brought snacks!” Subaru said. As Euphemia stood up, Tori suddenly remembered the bag of money and took it out.

“Oh, Euphie, here’s the reward for the medicines,” he said.

Euphemia declined the bag. “You can keep it. Use it for your shopping.”

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Tori realized he’d never seen Euphemia spend money, except for the times when they were out walking around the city or when buying ingredients for potions. He was always the one buying groceries and miscellaneous household items, so he supposed it was only natural to end up being the one managing the household’s finances. He had no recollection of ever being paid a salary for his work, but being in possession of all of the White Witch’s finances was an

impressive position to be in.

“I’ll keep this, then,” Tori said. “I spent some of it buying some fruit tree saplings earlier. That fine with you?”

“Yeah. Use it as you like,” answered Euphemia as she took a bite of the fluffy egg pastry in her hands.

“You don’t think I’ll waste all of it?”

“Are you going to?”

“Well, no.”

“See?” Euphemia seemed entirely unconcerned. It appeared that Tori had earned her complete trust. Even if the thought of wasting Euphemia’s money crossed his mind, he could never bring himself to betray her trust.

Tori shrugged and went on to make some tea.

“Commander! Are you okay?!”

“What the hell was that?” Robin muttered as she glared in the direction the phoenix had flown off to.

The members of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light were in the wastelands around the city outskirts. Their dragons were agitated and pacing while their handlers struggled to calm them.

The Order had been returning from a hunt when a phoenix suddenly flew from behind them, and the wind from its wings threw the dragons off-balance, forcing them all to land. The phoenix had whizzed by at an insane speed, and the dragons couldn’t hope to catch up to it before it went completely out of their sight. On top of that, the dragons went into a panic from their encounter with a legendary beast, and the members of the Order desperately tried to keep them under control.

Robin was petting her own dragon to calm it down; the color of its eyes indicated that it was still distraught from the unexpected encounter. She let out a sigh.

“Someone was riding on it, you say?” Robin said.

“Indeed. There was someone holding on to its back,” replied Kristoff.

Robin’s face went stern. If a human was riding it, then the phoenix must have been under that person’s control. And if they could tame a legendary beast, then it was very likely that they were also an adventurer. And if they operated in this area, it meant that they were based in Azrac.

“Is there even anyone out there who can tame a phoenix?” Kristoff wondered.

“There must be. Azrac’s adventurers are all high-level, after all. Hmph. I’ve never been so humiliated while up in the air since I became a dragoon.”

Robin plucked the string of her bow. Rather than humiliation, the look on her face was that of intrigue.

“Still, I’m not one to stand for such disrespect,” she said.

“Indeed! We shall teach that brute a harsh lesson!” Kristoff proclaimed, full of excitement.

Robin snorted. “We’ll move out once the dragons have calmed down. After we deliver the report for this job, let’s go around Azrac and gather info. We’ll smoke out that phoenix tamer.”

“Yes ma’am!” the members yelled in unison.

7. A Granddaughter?

It was now the time in spring when wildflowers finally bloomed, their petals scattering in the warm breeze. Color had returned to the once-bleak landscape, bringing with it the fluttering bees and butterflies, and the animals that had been in hibernation were also waking up and roaming around, trying to fill their hungry stomachs.

During this time, Tori was weeding the yard. He had already untangled and removed the vines from the apple tree, which was now blooming with white flowers and filling the air with a faint, sweet scent. After seeing the flowers dotting the tree, Tori couldn't help but be excited for when it finally bore fruit later in the year.

He had also finished planting all the saplings he had brought home over the course of several trips to Azrac. He supported the thin trees with stakes so they wouldn't be toppled by the wind. He had planted them strategically around the yard, and after finishing, he imagined what it would look like once they were fully grown and was satisfied with the result.

"So when can we get the fruits from these? In the summer?" Subaru asked as she stared excitedly at the small apple tree sapling.

"We're not getting them that quickly. At best, it'll take four or five years," answered Tori.

"What?! *That* long?!"

"How long did you think it'd take? These aren't vegetables, you know."

Unlike vegetables, which could be harvested within a year of planting them, fruit trees took years to grow, but once they did, they'd produce fruit every year. They were, of course, completely different from one another.

Subaru kicked the ground in disappointment. "Well, there's trees in the underworld that grow big in a year," she said.

"Huh? Really?" Tori looked incredulous.

“Yeah. There are also apples *thiiiis* big down there!” Subaru waved her arms to demonstrate. “They taste awful, though.”

“What’s even the point if they don’t taste any good...”

Apparently, the soil in the underworld greatly increased the rate at which plants matured and the size of their fruits, but at the price of ruining their flavor. Tori suddenly understood why Euphemia’s familiars didn’t like going back to the underworld.

“Tch. I thought I was gonna get to eat as many apples as I wanted!” Subaru complained.

“Well, we still have the old apple tree. You’ll get your apples,” Tori said.

“Hmph!”

Subaru looked at the older apple tree, but she still seemed somewhat dissatisfied. Although she loved meat and fish, she was also a big fan of fruit. She especially loved them when they were at their sweetest and ripest. It was one of the things that made her seem especially birdlike.

Now that it was the peak of spring, the various wildflowers in the hills had also bloomed like the flowers of the old apple tree. The weather had become warm, though traces of the winter cold still remained. It was the right temperature to be up and about. In this weather, Tori would tend to the garden, gather firewood, take a stroll through the nearby hills and forage wild greens, fruits, and mushrooms, all in between his regular household chores. He felt refreshed by the smell of the forest in full bloom. During his walks, Shinozuki would sometimes accompany him in her fenrir form, making use of her keen sense of smell to sniff out mushrooms that he otherwise would have missed. He found this to be an interesting sight to watch.

As the season passed, Tori finally decided to put into action his plan to make an oven for the yard. He didn’t have any problems with the one in the kitchen, but having a bigger oven also meant he could bake bigger things. Ignoring the absurd idea of roasting a whole dragon, Tori could expand his repertoire of meals with bigger pies or loaves of bread. Euphemia’s familiars would also surely enjoy having whole roast chickens or bigger cuts of roast beef. Of course, this also meant that he’d have to gather more firewood than ever before.

“I want to go to the city to look at how ovens are built over there,” Tori announced.

Euphemia mumbled something as she scarfed down her boiled potatoes. After chewing, she took a sip of tea before talking again. “I want to go too,” she said.

“Oh, really? Okay then, let’s go together. Anyone else?”

“We’ll be going back to the underworld for a while, so pass,” Subaru answered. It appeared that all three of them were going home.

“That’s unusual. You guys have a job or something?” Tori asked.

“What’re ya talkin’ ’bout? We’ll be gathering the materials for your oven. Oh, and we have a bit of business down there,” Shinozuki replied.

Tori was surprised. “Are you guys really going to bring back materials from the underworld for the oven? Just so we’re clear, I’m not cooking any dragons, okay?”

“Tori dear, we could make a really good and resilient oven with underworld materials, you know?” Cecilia advised.

“Really? I’m worried it’ll cause some weird things to happen...”

“It’ll be fine.”

Tori couldn’t really trust Euphemia’s familiars whenever they assured him something “would be fine.” However, they seemed quite eager to help, so it would be rude to just turn them down.

In any case, Tori bade the familiars goodbye, and he and Euphemia headed to Azrac.

Euphemia was wearing a cute dress for her trip to the city. Meanwhile, Tori merely wore his usual clothes with a coat on top. He couldn’t help but feel a little awkward from the huge contrast between his and Euphemia’s attires, but she didn’t seem to mind at all. She looked quite satisfied, in fact—it seemed that it was enough that she could take Tori out on a date. She linked arms with him as they walked.

“It’s a bit hard to walk like this,” Tori complained.

“I’m not having any trouble,” Euphemia said.

“Okay...”

Tori couldn’t bring himself to brush off her arm, so they continued on as they were. He felt piercing stares from all around him, though he wasn’t sure if that was actually the case or if he was just imagining it. For Tori, the feeling of bashfulness outweighed any sense of superiority that came from having a pretty girl walking beside him. He couldn’t help it; after all, Euphemia’s city outfit was so cute that it made him forget about her usual slovenly self.

“Where are we going?” Euphemia asked.

“Um... We’ll go to a shop with an oven. There should be one around here somewhere...”

“Your hand is cold.” Euphemia gripped his hand more tightly. He felt the warmth of her palm as she tried to warm his hand by intertwining her fingers with his.

Damn it, you’re too cute! Tori shouted in his mind. He almost felt that she was being sly, but her cuteness overcame all other thoughts in his head. Whenever she was affectionate like this, he couldn’t get himself to say another word. In a sense, he was completely in the palm of her hand.

Tori tried to deal with his feelings as they walked around looking for the right shop. As they did, they ran into Andrea standing in front of a plaza statue. He was wearing his armor, perhaps because he had just come from the guild.

“Hey, Tori. And Euphemia too,” he greeted.

“Hey there, Andrea. How’re you doing?” Tori said.

“Pretty okay. Buying groceries?”

“Uh, yeah...” Tori gave him a vague nod. Andrea laughed.

“How about you? I heard you met up with Suzanna a while ago,” Andrea said.

“Yeah, I ran into her while shopping. How’s things at the clan? I heard there’s a lot of new adventurers around these days.”

“Yeah, it’s gotten pretty busy. These days, especially... Euphemia, word’s

getting around that your medicines are very effective. Just having some on hand is so comforting.”

“Wah!” Euphemia, who had been linking her arms with Tori, squeaked and hid behind him. Andrea laughed again.

“Looks like I’m interrupting you two,” he teased.

“No, not at all. Right, Euphie?”

“Meow,” Euphemia answered Tori with neither a yes nor a no as she wiggled her body.

Tori sighed and turned to Andrea. “So what are you up to?”

“Just coming back from a job. I was gonna grab something to eat with a buddy, but...”

“Hey Andrea!”

Just then, a short-haired blond man called out, walking toward the three of them.

Andrea frowned. “Jeffrey, you’re late.”

“Sorry ’bout that. Had some business to take care of.”

Jeffrey? From the Clan Eternal? Tori stared at the man Andrea called “Jeffrey.” He had never spoken to him before, but he recognized him. Jeffrey had been the star of the Clan Eternal, a platinum-ranked clan just like the Muddy Four-Horns had been. He was now fighting alongside Andrea at the Cerulean Dagger after the guild-led unification of clans.

“Hmm?” Jeffrey stared at Tori and Euphemia. “You’re... Wait, I know you. Aren’t you Tori?”

“Huh? H-How did you know—”

“Yeah, weren’t you from the Muddy Four-Horns? I’ve met you before! And now you’re the guy trusted by the White Witch herself, aren’t you? Damn, I wish you would’ve joined us, man! How ’bout it, Tori? Why don’t you join us at the Cerulean Dagger?” Jeffrey cackled.

Tori felt overwhelmed. He could count the number of times he’d encountered

Jeffrey on one hand, and he'd never talked to him before. And yet Jeffrey still knew who he was.

Euphemia pouted and tightly hugged Tori's arm.



Andrea sighed. “Jeffrey, don’t push it. You know he’s not gonna come back.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! No way I’m stealing the White Witch’s favorite.” Jeffrey put on an exaggerated display of disappointment. He seemed to be a jolly guy. “Anyway, you sure got a cutie with you. She your girlfriend?”

“That’s right,” Euphemia replied.

“No! You’re my employer, remember?” Tori protested.

“Huh? Isn’t the White Witch your employer?” Jeffrey asked.

Tori went pale. Euphemia treated her regular form and the White Witch as different entities. He didn’t mean to expose her secret like this. Tori had even exercised caution about this exact situation at the guild, so this mistake especially distressed him.

Jeffrey narrowed his eyes and peered at Euphemia. Tori was frantically searching his brain for an excuse to give when Jeffrey suddenly snapped his fingers as if he had realized something.

“Oh, I get it!”

“A-About that—”

“She’s the White Witch’s granddaughter, right?!”

“Huh?”

Jeffrey laughed. He seemed satisfied after having connected the dots in his head.

“I’m right, aren’t I? Ha ha! I see, I see! Now I get why you don’t want to go back to the clan! I can’t believe the White Witch’s had such a cute granddaughter! You lucky bastard!” Jeffrey gave Tori light jabs with his elbow. Tori played along and gave vague nods of acknowledgment. The thought that the cute and dainty Euphemia could be the same person as the indomitable old lady apparently didn’t even cross Jeffrey’s mind.

“Quit fooling around. Let’s go,” Andrea chided Jeffrey in an exasperated tone.

“C’mon, man, don’t be such a spoilsport. Just wait a sec,” Jeffrey replied.

“Hey, li’l granddaughter, what’s your name?”

“Euphemia,” she replied, peeking from behind Tori.

“Okay. Euphemia, right? Thanks to your grandma, my skills have improved a lot. Haven’t seen her in a while, but is she doing okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, good. How about Subaru? She’s a phoenix, right? That was a shocker for all of us.”

“Subaru’s doing okay too.”

“Great to hear. Could you give her my regards?”

“Okay.”

“Jeffrey, we’re going. I’m starving already. Can’t believe you made me wait *and* stopped to chat,” Andrea complained.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry already. Tori, Euphemia, I’ll see you guys later. Sorry ‘bout intruding on your date!” Jeffrey said and walked away. Andrea turned and mouthed, “Sorry!” and gestured an apology to the pair of them. The two adventurers left for their destination.

I feel like I just weathered a storm, thought Tori, feeling relieved.

Euphemia clung to Tori’s arm once more. “Tori,” she started.

“Yes?”

“Granddaughter?”

“Yeah... Let’s go.”

Tori, partly due to the tense situation he’d experienced just now, wanted to find a seat as soon as he could.

The two of them finally found and entered the shop they’d been looking for. Tori went up to the counter and observed the oven behind it. It was large, and he could see the reddish glow of the fire burning within its furnace. A whole steel pot was inside, baking.

Euphemia was gazing up at Tori.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Tori, you’re not going to the Cerulean Dagger, right?” she asked in turn.

“I already told you I’m not. When are you going to believe me?”

“But you’re really friendly with Andrea and Suzanna, and you’ve gone on a lot of adventures with them. They all want you back. So I’m really worried you’ll leave, even though I know you won’t.” Euphemia voiced her worries to Tori. He found this quite precious, and he soothed her by running his hand over her head.

“I’m not going to leave,” he reassured her. “Besides, working at your place is more relaxing to me.”

“Mmm...”

“How can I make you believe that I won’t leave?”

“Hmm... Marry me?”

Not again, Tori thought. “I don’t want to be rushed into it,” he said, sighing.

“Why not?” Euphemia asked.

“I mean, I just want to prepare myself for it. Besides, getting married means that our relationship will be different from what we have now.”

“Hmm...” Euphemia looked amused. She took a bite from the pastry in her hand. “You’re right. I do like our current relationship. Do you think it’ll change once we get married?”

“I don’t know. But, well...”

It’ll definitely change once we have kids, Tori thought. *Also, having kids means doing the deed. The deed, meaning...*

Euphemia’s naked body suddenly appeared in Tori’s mind, and he rushed to clear away the thought.

Euphemia stared at Tori’s face, puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing.” Tori felt like he was always the one being yanked around. He took a sip of the tea that had just arrived at the table to hide his embarrassment.

Tori suddenly recalled something he wanted to ask. “Oh, right. Why are you

hiding your identity? Everyone's already given you a fake name. Uh, 'Gertrude,' was it?" he whispered to Euphemia.

Euphemia blinked. "Mother said I'm so cute that everyone will look down on me for my appearance," she said.

"Oh yeah, I think you did mention something like that before..."

"Also, I find it easier to speak while in that form. I'm a bit shy, after all..."

If Euphemia went around as the White Witch in her true form, she'd be too approachable, unlike the indomitable and formidable appearance of the old lady witch. It was also likely that among those who would try to approach her would have nefarious motives in mind. Though she wasn't overly distrustful of others, her shyness meant she wasn't enthusiastic about meeting people. She didn't want others to get too close, which was why she chose such an unapproachable form and actively separated her identities between Euphemia and the White Witch. In a sense, this was a problem brought about by her fame.

Tori nodded as he listened to Euphemia's explanation. "So that's why. So, we should maintain your secret, then?"

"Yeah," Euphemia said as she plunged a fork into her freshly baked pie.

The Cerulean Dagger, widely known as Azrac's top-ranking clan, was starting to feel the pressure of having to compete with the many strong clans moving into the city. Andrea had previously squabbled with one of those clans—the Order of the Dragon's Purifying Light. Besides them, more and more skilled clans from other regions were entering Azrac. The population of adventurers was steadily increasing by the day. Having rivals should have been motivating the Cerulean Dagger; they couldn't afford to be so lax now that their position at the top was being threatened.

However, since they had resided at the top for so long, this sense of urgency wasn't shared by everyone in the clan. This threat to the Cerulean Dagger's status varied in perception among its members, and it would seem that they weren't unified on how to deal with it.

Andrea was at a dining hall. It was a diner that catered to the masses,

frequented by adventurers and rogues. Andrea and his comrades were also frequent visitors.

“The Conquering Sword Brigade, the Moonset and Blinding Flash, the Weavers of Melancholy...and the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light. All of them are famous platinum-ranked clans. What are we going to do, Andrea?” Jeffrey the swordsman asked, his hands clasped behind his head.

Andrea, who was sitting across from Jeffrey, furrowed his brow. “What else are we supposed to do other than keep taking jobs like we always do?”

Jeffrey shook his head. “Well, it’s not like we should all be after each other’s throats. Still, it feels like there’s been a lull in the air lately.”

“You think so too, huh? We have the guild’s backing for now, but our members have been taking it for granted.”

“Yeah. And Jean leaving the clan was a pretty big blow too.”

“That’s not something we could’ve prevented. Jean was only working as an adventurer because he had a specific goal. Now that he’s achieved it, there’s no point in continuing.”

“I know, I know. But I think we’d feel less lethargic if we had someone who had their feet on the ground like Jean.”

Jean was previously the star spellcaster of the Cerulean Dagger. He had fulfilled his promise to his late mentor to complete a weather-controlling device and had returned to his home country of Pudemott. Now, he was working as the royal spellcaster for the kingdom—a title holding much more prestige than even that of a platinum-ranked adventurer.

Jeffrey scratched his head. “And Tori... Tori, huh? He’s been getting along with the White Witch’s granddaughter, so there’s no way he’ll come back.”

“Well, yeah. Though I don’t think he’d have any plans of coming back to being an adventurer regardless,” Andrea said.

“But he still has his license, right? That’s what Arpent said, anyway.”

“What? Really?”

“Yup. But he requested to have his rank demoted. Weird, right? Well, Arpent

doesn't seem to have given up on him yet, so he still hasn't done the paperwork."

"I see. Arpent sure is stubborn, huh."

"But since he still has his license, that means he's open to coming back, right?"

"Nah. I'm sure he just wants it because it's convenient for identification and all. He wouldn't ask for a demotion if he really wanted to come back."

"Aww, that's a shame. Well, it was a long shot anyway." Jeffrey looked disappointed as he dug into his roasted meat. Andrea shook his head.

Currently, only Andrea, Suzanna, and Jean knew the truth behind Euphemia and Tori's arrangement. Andrea also knew that Euphemia didn't want the identity of the White Witch to be exposed. He found it strange that Tori wanted to be known as a weak and low-ranking adventurer... The fact that he was trusted by the White Witch and living with her was already common knowledge within the Cerulean Dagger, and his "cleanup" of the "monster lair" as mentioned by Euphemia and Shinozuki had caused quite a stir among their members. No one would possibly believe Tori was weak.

However, explaining the relationship between Tori and the White Witch would require him to reveal Euphemia's identity, and that was definitely not something that Euphemia wanted to happen. Andrea couldn't say anything too detailed about their situation, so he could only nod vaguely to any rumors about them.

Jeffrey was still talking. "Oh, and I sure didn't know that the White Witch had a granddaughter. Euphemia, right? She was so cute!"

"Yeah," Andrea replied.

"Damn, what a mild reaction. Don't you think she's cute?"

"I do, but..."

"On top of that, he also lives with Shinozuki, Subaru, and Cecilia, doesn't he? Damn, he has a whole harem with him! Ain't that a man's dream! Tori's livin' the life. I'm jealous!"

Andrea could only stare at Jeffrey as he laughed. He had nothing to say. It was true that Tori was surrounded by beautiful women, but it wasn't the harem Jeffrey was imagining. Even though it certainly might look that way to outsiders seeing him surrounded by women, Andrea felt that Tori's life was filled with exasperation rather than sweet dreams.

Regardless, now that competition was getting more fierce with the increasing number of clans, Andrea also felt that he had to get stronger and train harder. He thought it might be a good idea to give Tori a visit and spar with Shinozuki one of these days.

Once they had finished dinner and returned to the Cerulean Dagger's base, Arpent was waiting at the clan hall with an anxious expression on his face. The other members were sitting on couches and seats with similar expressions.

"Arpent? What's going on?" Andrea asked.

Arpent hurriedly approached Andrea. "I have something to talk to you two about," he said.

8. Senynoma

There was now a pile of bricks in the yard. Tori picked one up; it was reddish-brown and lighter in weight than he'd expected. These were bricks brought by Euphemia's familiars from the underworld, and according to Subaru, not even phoenix flame could penetrate them.

"I got all these in exchange for lighting furnaces!" Subaru said proudly. Apparently she'd gone to a brick craftsman and used her flames to light their furnaces.

"These, huh?" Tori inspected the brick with skepticism. Bricks baked in phoenix flame would never burn, even when subjected to phoenix flames. Tori thought this was complete hogwash, but he couldn't deny that they seemed quite sturdy. "If I bake something in the oven made of these bricks, it won't get cursed or something, right?"

"It won't! These are made by an artisan from the underworld, after all. These are bricks used to construct castles down there. Their insulating properties are top-class, I assure you," Cecilia said.

Well, I suppose they have no reason to lie about that, Tori thought. The familiars were also invested in the completion of the oven. He could sense just how excited they all were. They might have different concepts of normal, but they would never bring anything that would make their food taste terrible.

In any case, the materials for the oven arrived earlier than he could obtain schematics for it. Tori didn't want the bricks to remain exposed to the elements for long, so it'd be best to start construction as soon as possible, but without a schematic to follow, it was going to be something of an experiment.

To start off, Tori drew a general outline of the oven's structure, then wrote in the measurements for each side. However, as he proceeded, the oven's form began to look more and more distorted, and the more he tried to fill in the details, the more twisted the image became. He wasn't progressing at all. Tori had observed the ovens in the city closely, but now that he was actually trying

to design one himself, he couldn't even visualize how to line the bricks to form the exhaust. The details all escaped him.

"Hmm... Doing this by myself is gonna be a lot harder than I thought..." he muttered.

Tori had no idea how to lay the bricks to create a dome-shaped ceiling. He knew the idea was to shave each one at an angle and use mortar to hold them together, but he balked at actually putting the idea into practice. And with bricks, a flat ceiling wouldn't work either. He couldn't make a brick oven that had a flat ceiling.

"What if I adjust the bricks one by one... No, that won't work. It'll stack too high..."

Tori was staring at his schematics spread over the dining table, discarding ideas one after the other. As he was working, Euphemia peered over his shoulder.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Hey. Well, not very well at all," Tori replied, leaning back in his chair.

At this point, it would be much faster to fashion a dome out of clay, but it would be a huge waste of the bricks that the familiars had brought all the way from the underworld. Tori considered making the oven out of clay and using the bricks to construct a storeroom instead.

As Tori was racking his brain, Shinozuki and the others came back inside after playing around in the yard.

"The weather's so warm and nice! Hey Tori, when's the oven gonna be finished?" Shinozuki asked.

"Well, I'm trying to come up with a design, but I don't think I can handle this with my skill," Tori admitted.

Subaru cackled. "Seriously? That's so lame, even for you!"

Tori glared at her. "Shaddup. I'm no craftsman, you know? I can't make anything as technical as this."

Euphemia was watching the bickering with amusement. Suddenly, she looked

like she remembered something.

“Should I call someone over to help?” Euphemia offered.

“Huh? Like who?” Tori asked.

Euphemia turned to Shinozuki. “Shino, can you drag Senynoma over here? I’ll send you down there.”

“Huh? That shut-in?”

“Yeah. She’s great at engineering, so I’ll have her help.”

“I guess... Fine, I’ll head down there,” Shinozuki sighed.

“See ya,” Subaru said, waving at Shinozuki. Euphemia gave her staff a flourish, and a magic circle appeared under Shinozuki, who then vanished into it.

“Senynoma?” Tori asked.

“She’s a cyclops. I originally had her do the repairs for this house,” Euphemia explained.

“Huh.” *That’s impressive*, Tori thought. While this house wasn’t exactly a ruin, she must have had to do several repairs to make the place comfortable to live in. Euphemia filling it to the brim with trash later on was out of the craftsman’s hands.

Around an hour later, a small magic circle appeared in the air. A voice rang out from inside it.

“Hey, Euphie, I caught her! Summon me back.”

The voice was from Shinozuki. With her, Tori could hear another voice struggling, the owner of which seemed to be resisting Shinozuki and shouting, “Lemme go! Put me down! Gaaah!”

Tori wondered if things were going to be fine. Euphemia waved her wand, and a magic circle appeared on the ground once more. From it, smoke started pouring out, and soon enough, two humanoid figures appeared. Shinozuki, in her human form, was holding someone by the nape—a woman.

The woman wasn’t very tall, and an eye patch was covering her left eye. She wore a kashket cap pulled down enough to cover her eyes, with long, brown,

messy hair spilling out from under it. She also wore a jacket and overalls, both stained with soot and oil. She had a pretty face, but the stains and her loose-fitting clothing overshadowed her beauty.

The woman was flailing about, but she couldn't beat Shinozuki's natural strength. Her resistance was futile. Regardless, she still attempted to struggle, crying and sniveling while doing so. "Gaaah! L-Let me go! Wh-Whoa! I-I don't wanna go to the surface!" the woman screamed.

"Give up. We're already there," Shinozuki said, annoyed. She threw the woman she had abducted onto the floor.

"Ack!" Senynoma exclaimed.

"Heya, Senynoma! You doing okay? Were you locking yourself away again?" Subaru greeted, grinning from ear to ear.

Senynoma flinched, staring at Subaru like a terrified dog. "S-Subaru? Wh-Why're you also i-in your human form?" she stammered as she scanned her surroundings, still perplexed. Then, her eyes landed on Euphemia. "Wh-Wh— Wah— Ayii— E-Euphe— Wh-What do you—?!"

"We're making a brick oven. We need your help," Euphemia said.

"A-A b-brick oven? Wh-Why? I-I thought y-you and Shino didn't knew h-how to cook... A-Also, wh-where am I? Y-Y-Your house s-should b-be filthier than my g-garbage bins at home..."

"She got someone to do the chores for her," Shinozuki answered. "Hey Tori! Here, she's Senynoma."

"Ah, hello. I'm Tori..."

Senynoma let out a shriek as Tori introduced himself. "A-A-A-A man?! I-I'm still in my work clothes! H-H-How h-humiliatin'!" she cried as she covered herself.

Looks like we've got another weirdo, Tori thought, confused at the turn of events.

Suddenly, Cecilia emerged from the bedroom. It looked like she had been doing something in the workshop.

“What’s going on out here? Oh my, is that Senynoma? What brings you here?” she said.

“Gah! E-Even Cecilia’s here! Why’re y’all here?! Wh-Wh-What’re y’all plannin’ to do to me?! Help!” Senynoma shouted. She tried to make a run for it, but Shinozuki was blocking the door, Subaru was by the window, and in her panic, even Cecilia managed to catch her. Cecilia hugged Senynoma from behind and caressed the cyclops’s face, resulting in even more screams.

“Gyaaaah!”

“How rude of you to run away upon seeing someone’s face! Heh heh. Looks like someone naughty needs to be punished,” Cecilia cooed.

“S-Stop! I-I-I ain’t into that!” Senynoma screamed.

“Oh? Into *what*, exactly? Like this? Do you like it here?”

“Aahn! Ohhn!” The most unerotic moans echoed throughout the parlor.

This is getting out of hand, Tori thought. He grabbed Cecilia’s shoulder and pulled her away. “Cecilia, stop it. We’re not getting anything done at this rate.”

“Ahh, Tori, you’re so rough!” Cecilia purred.

“Shaddup!” Tori turned to Senynoma. “Um, are you okay?”

Senynoma was slumped down on the floor, breathing heavily. Tori carefully approached her, and she looked at him warily.

“Th-Th-Thank you... I-I-I’m fine... Yes...” she stammered.

“Calm down, okay? Do you want some tea?” Tori offered.

“W-W-Wow, s-so nice of you... S-Sure, I-I’ll have some...”

Tori gave her some tea to drink, after which she seemed to calm down.

“Haah... Tastes great...” she muttered.

“You can have some snacks too.” Euphemia passed her a plate of pastries.

“Th-Thank you...” Senynoma took one and scanned her surroundings once more. She looked puzzled. “That’s weird. That window and that stove... They look like the ones I fixed up for you.”

“They are the ones you fixed up for me,” Euphemia said, taking a pastry as well.

“Ha ha ha. Your jokes need some work. Your house was way more filthy than this. Didn’t ever want to come back.”

“Right? That’s how I felt too,” Shinozuki remarked.

“And yet, behold! This is Euphie’s house!” Subaru exclaimed.

Cecilia nodded. “They’re right. I know it’s hard to believe, but Tori over there cleaned up the whole house.”

“You could clean that dump?!” Senynoma stared at Tori in disbelief. “Whew, humans sure are somethin’!”

“It’s not *that* big a deal,” Tori said, embarrassed by the praise. He poured some more tea for Senynoma.

“Tori does the cooking in this house every day. And now he wants to build an oven. I want you to help out,” Euphemia told Senynoma.

“I-I see...” She fidgeted around, keeping her gaze on Tori. “L-Lemme introduce myself. Name’s Senynoma, and I’m a cyclops. I ain’t all that, but I run a private atelier as a craftsman.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Tori. I got hired by Euphemia last year. Looking forward to working with you,” Tori replied.

“Hueh! You’re lookin’ forward to workin’ with me? I’m gettin’ shy...” Senynoma giggled and cupped her face with both hands.

Her self-esteem is so low... Tori worried about her.

“That reminds me. It’s the first time I’ve heard of a cyclops. What kind of people are they?” Tori asked as he refilled everyone’s teacups.

“Well...”

The cyclopes were a race of fiends from the underworld, born with one eye defective. While they were not adept at combat, they were largely experts at smithing and crafting. They handled crafting of accessories and furniture, and were often commissioned by other races to do construction and building

repairs. Youngsters from other races also studied as apprentices under cyclopes to learn craftsmanship and construction.

Cyclopes also preferred to work alone over gathering in big groups. After training under their parents, many would become independent and, like Senynoma with her private atelier, establish their own workshops. Senynoma had managed to keep hers running by the skin of her teeth.

“Well, she has the skills, but as you can see, she’s extremely shy. She ain’t steppin’ out to see people, so she ain’t gettin’ no jobs,” Shinozuki said mockingly.

“I-I-I just want to be thorough when I work...” Senynoma muttered.

“Cyclops artisans are famous for being able to work with any material—wood, stone, metal...you name it,” Euphemia explained.

“Amazing. Meanwhile, humans have to specialize. Senynoma worked on this house too?” Tori asked.

“Y-Y-Yeah. But Euphie always makes a mess of it... I get hurt seein’ this house in a mess too, you know!” Senynoma complained.

“Sorry,” Euphemia said.

Senynoma flinched and waved her hands around. “I-I-It’s fine! I-I-I forgive you!”

“Yay, I’m forgiven.”

“Phew... Thanks for getting forgiven.”

Tori watched the conversation unfold, completely baffled. He took a sip of his own tea, relieved that the atmosphere in the house had calmed down at least.

“Well, that clutter was out of this world. But I’m impressed with the construction of this house. Euphie made such a huge mess of it, but everything’s still usable even after I cleaned everything up,” Tori remarked.

“Gwah?! A-Are you praisin’ me?!” Senynoma squeaked.

“Indeed he is. He’s praising you to high heaven, my dear,” Cecilia said. Senynoma looked down at the cup in her hand, and they all saw the smile on

her face. She couldn't help but grin at the compliments. After basking in her own happiness for a while, she looked up.

"Heh. Heh heh... W-W-Well then, wh-what was your business with me again? I'll help out as much as I can!"

Senynoma's attitude was a complete reversal from the way she reacted to Tori earlier.

Shinozuki looked unamused. "Weak to flattery as always, aren't ya?"

"Heh heh heh! She's so easy to read. Isn't it great?" Subaru giggled.

You're not one to talk, Subaru, Tori chided her silently.

The group headed outside. Senynoma stared at the pile of bricks in awe. "Ain't these from Red-Headed Garaf's workshop? Why so many?" she asked.

"I brought these from down there. This enough?" Shinozuki said.

"Depends on how big you want it, but it should be fine."

"So I want to build the oven around here so I can start baking a bunch." Tori pointed out the location he'd chosen to Senynoma. She placed a hand on her chin and started thinking.

"You sure you want the oven here? No matter what?" she asked.

"Huh? Well, I'm open to changes... But why?" Tori wondered what was wrong with that spot.

Senynoma sniffed. "I mean, here's fine and all, but it's better to have all your cookin' done in one place. You gotta think about makin' a roof when buildin' an oven. Gettin' rain on your bricks ain't good for 'em, even if they're from the underworld," she explained.

"Ahh, I see."

In retrospect, it was an obvious flaw in Tori's plan. On top of that, he'd had trouble even going outside from all the snow last winter. Not being able to use it for an entire season seemed a bit of a waste.

"What about building a shelter over it, then?" Tori suggested.

"Again, fine and all, but... Tori, what do you want to bake in the oven? Do you

want a baker's oven or one for regular cookin'? They're a bit different from each other. You wanna cook over embers? Or do you wanna use it while a fire's goin' underneath? The oven's structure will change depending on how you plan on usin' it. If it gets too big for what you have in mind, it'll eat up a bunch of your fuel too."

"I see... Hmm..."

Senynoma had a point. Tori didn't plan on baking bread every single day. He also had chores to do other than cooking, and it was much faster to get bread from the city now that he could freely travel back and forth. Even if he had a craving for fresh bread, he didn't need to bake as much as a bakery would. He didn't need an oven that big.

"I'd like to use it for roast meats and pies. Might be nice to make some pastries with it too," Tori said.

"So, nothin' too big, then. In that case, we gotta expand the kitchen. Haulin' firewood over'll be much easier. Besides, startin' fires all over the place is a good way to burn the house down."

"E-Expand the kitchen? How?"

"Take me there."

Tori took Senynoma to the kitchen. The stove stood to the right of the entrance, while a small pump and the kitchen sink were to the left. Across the entrance was the preparation area. There were shelves on the upper part of the wall, which stored the plates and bowls, and underneath the table were spices and other cooking equipment. The kitchen appeared to be organized haphazardly, but Tori, master of his domain, knew where everything was stored. There was clutter to be sure, but it was a far cry from the state it had been in when Euphemia lived alone.

Senynoma let out a cry of awe in seeing such a well-used kitchen. "W-Wow, this place looks like a proper kitchen!"

"So how do we expand it?" Tori asked.

Senynoma tapped her hand on the kitchen stove. "We're gonna dismantle the stove and take down the wall over here to extend the room. Then we're gonna

rebuild the oven part of the stove. From what you told me, it'll be easier for you if the stove and oven are combined like this."

Tori nodded thoughtfully. It did seem like it would make things easier for him.

"Oh, but if we make the fire here even bigger, won't it get even hotter in the summer?" Tori asked.

"Oh." Senynoma placed a hand on her chin. "I-I see... It's a bit chilly today so I didn't notice..."

"It gets really hot here, especially in the summer."

"Might be a problem with the ventilation, then. Look here. The only window right now is that small one over the kitchen table. I'll add a bigger one above the stove once we expand the room."

"Huh? Where will the chimney go, then?"

"It'll pop up outside through the outer wall. Like this..." Senynoma took out a notepad from her pocket and started scribbling a diagram.

"So first we're gonna make the frame for the kitchen stove, then we'll build the wall based on that. Then, we'll make a window here. The chimney will go sideways to the outside, then up. We'll make it taller to compensate for the angle, so it should still draw out the smoke."

"I see, I see." Tori and Senynoma were looking at the diagram she made when Euphemia, pouting, inserted herself between them.

"I wanna help too," she said.

"Huh? Euphie, do you know anything about construction?" Tori asked.

"It'll be fine."

"But..."

"It'll be fine," Euphemia insisted as she clung to Tori's arm. Cecilia and the others were giggling behind her.

"Aww, she's getting jealous. That's so cute," Cecilia said.

"Hey Tori, Senynoma might have zero sex appeal, but she's still a woman," Shinozuki chided.

Oh, that's what this is about, Tori thought. He smiled awkwardly and soothed Euphemia with head pats. Senynoma looked puzzled at their exchange.

"Tori, what are you to Euphie?" she asked.

"My husband," Euphemia replied.

"No," Tori denied.

"My *planned* husband."

"No—wait, that's...not wrong, is it?"

As Tori mumbled out his words, Senynoma turned red and squealed. "I had no idea," she said.

"I'd be shocked if you did. Come on, let's keep going."

With that, they finished drafting the schematic for the kitchen. Tori left the rest of the details to Senynoma. From there, they figured out the remaining materials they needed to gather, then they could finally begin construction, which would take up the next few days.

It was now midday, and the other familiars were starting to complain about being hungry. Tori went off to prepare lunch. He made noodles out of that morning's dough, which he then boiled. Next, he sautéed meat and vegetables in a frying pan, then poured soup stock into the pan and simmered it. Then he added in the noodles, an herbal flower, some sauce, butter, and grated cheese before serving it.

Senynoma peered into the kitchen with excitement. "Smells tasty... I'm feelin' hungry."

"Tori's food is delicious, you know?" Euphie said.

"A-Am I joining you guys?"

"You don't wanna?"

"I-I do! B-But I-I think I'm a bit out of place..."

"That's not true."

While Senynoma was fidgeting around, Tori handed her a huge plate of pasta. "Here, thanks for waiting. Could you bring this to the table?"

“Wow, wow, wow! Wh-What a massive load of pasta!” Senynoma cried.

“Let’s eat a lot, okay? Let’s take that to the table,” Euphemia said.

A wave of excitement washed over the dining room with the appearance of the mountain of pasta. The food was still steaming hot, which led to the diners blowing on it to cool it down.

Senynoma nervously took a forkful of pasta and took a bite. Soon, her expression brightened. “I-I-I-It’s delicious! I ain’t never eaten anythin’ like this in my life!” she exclaimed.

“You’re exaggerating,” Tori said. Between this and Subaru’s talk about apples, he wondered if the food in the underworld was really that awful, and couldn’t help but shrug.

While everyone in the dining room was focused on their food, Tori went back to the kitchen and shredded some meat and fried it. Once browned, he added in some garlic and herbs, removed the pan from the fire, and let the lingering heat cook the rest.

Next, he threw sausages into a small pot of boiling water. As they cooked, he sliced some vegetables and mixed in salted fish paste, oil, pepper, cooking wine, and some dressing. He served this salad with the fried meat and boiled sausages, the latter of which he spiced as well.

Shinozuki cried out in excitement at seeing all the meat. “Hell yeah! Meat! Meat! Meat!”

“Shino, you better not take mine!” Subaru warned.

“First come, first served!” Shinozuki clapped back.

“W-Wow, wow, wow! There’s more?! How luxurious...” Senynoma said.

“Senynoma, what do you usually eat?” Tori asked.

“Um... Yesterday I had biscuits and tea. Before that, I had biscuits and tea... And the day before that, I had biscuits and tea!”

Tori placed his palm on his face. In Senynoma’s case, it would seem it was less of a problem with the underworld’s food and more of a problem with her lifestyle.

Euphemia poked at Tori. “Tori, I want some of that cheese-flavored rice.”

“You mean risotto? It’ll take a while,” he said.

“I’ll wait.”

“Tori dear, could you get me a platter from the kitchen?” Cecilia requested.

“Okay, okay, gimme a moment.”

Tori heated some soup stock and started preparing the rice. Once it absorbed all the oil and the liquid turned clear, he mixed in the stock. He also added in mushrooms, occasionally stirring the pot to prevent the rice from burning. He took care not to overmix it to prevent it from getting too sticky. Once the rice was finished cooking, he mixed in cheese and butter, topping it all off with some pepper.

At some point, Euphemia had come into the kitchen to watch Tori cook.

“I love when you make this. It’s delicious,” she said.

“I’m glad to hear it. Could you bring me that plate over there?”

“Okay.”

Tori only had a few days left in this current kitchen before they started renovations. It had scarcely been a year since he arrived at this house, but he felt a pang of sadness at the thought.

9. At the City

Since Tori couldn't use the kitchen during renovations, he was going to use the parlor as a substitute for the time being. It was time to bust out the legged cauldrons, tripod grills, and cast-iron ovens. Originally, Tori had used the parlor's fireplace to cook soups and stews, but now he would have to prepare a variety of meals here as well.

Tori watched Senynoma working in the kitchen while he swept up the soot in the fireplace. She was dismantling the kitchen stove. Rather than demolish it with a hammer, she was using a knife to dig into the gaps between the bricks, carefully cutting through the mortar to disassemble it brick by brick. She was also shaving off the residual mortar from each one before setting it aside. It looked like she was planning to reuse all of them.

"Can you even reuse those?" Tori asked.

"We can. We already have the bricks from the underworld, so I'm gonna use those to build the part that'll contain the flames, while these'll be for the oven's base," Senynoma explained. She appeared to be enjoying herself. Tori wasn't sure if it was just her nature as a cyclops, but she genuinely appeared to be having fun while working. She paid no heed to the dust and soot that accumulated on her.

Meanwhile, Euphemia and the others had gone out earlier that morning. The guild had requested another big order of potions. They'd also informed her that they would be making more such requests in the future, so she had gone out to gather more materials in preparation. Euphemia's reasoning for accepting the orders was that while one-off requests were fine, getting multiple orders a month would create a more stable source of income.

Lately, there had been fewer requests for the White Witch to do adventuring work. Azrac's adventurer bubble meant there were currently enough clans around to handle the majority of requests, but that also meant there were fewer reasons to call on the White Witch for help. And of course, adventurers

didn't get paid if they didn't take any jobs. While Euphemia wouldn't run into financial troubles for a while thanks to her work up till now, Tori couldn't help but worry, so the possibility of her getting something more stable was a huge relief for him.

Tori arranged fresh wood in the fireplace to start a new fire. It was almost time for lunch. He'd made packed lunches for Euphemia and her three familiars, so today, he only needed to make food for two. He wrapped sautéed meat and vegetables in dough, covered them in a deep dish, and placed it in the fireplace with a smoldering piece of firewood on top of the lid. While this was cooking, he prepared a simple soup consisting of dried meat, mushrooms, and herbs in a different pot. Once the buns were finished, he sliced one open and nodded.

"Senynoma, food's ready!" Tori called out.

"Coming!" Senynoma yelled back.

Moments later, she emerged from the kitchen, completely covered in dust. Her face was smudged with soot.

"Whew, lunch is lookin' mighty good today!" she exclaimed.

"Before that, you gotta wash those hands. And go outside and brush off your clothes," Tori chided.

"W-W-Wah! E-Excuse me!" Senynoma hurriedly went out to clean herself. In contrast to the belligerent familiars who argued with Tori every chance they got, she actually listened to what he said. It was a huge load off Tori's back not having to yell at her.

Once Senynoma washed her face and hands, she sat at the dining table across from Tori. "W-Wow! Thanks for the food... C-C-Can I start eating?"

"Sure, go ahead. Have as much as you want," Tori said.

"Heh heh... Heh heh heh..."

Senynoma, with her back hunched over, bit into the bun with a blissful expression on her face. This cyclops had a healthy appetite—something that was true for all the residents of the underworld he'd met. Tori held mixed feelings about this. Having people enjoy his food made the effort worthwhile,

but it also meant more mouths to feed and more food to make.

“Geh heh heh... So tasty... With food like this, it’s gonna be hard to go back to biscuits and tea,” Senynoma said.

“I think it’s for the best that you don’t,” Tori replied, worried about her lifestyle.

Senynoma took a sip of her soup and laughed. “But I can’t cook, y’know?”

“Even though you’re good with your hands?”

“I got no sense when it comes to flavor... Been tryna spice up my meals, though.”

“Have you been ‘spicing up your meals’ from the very start?”

“Well, yeah. I ain’t no cyclops if I just follow the recipe.”

Tori put a palm to his face. It was a classic case of trying to experiment with cooking before even learning the basics. It would seem that craftsmanship and cooking were two completely different skills.

Senynoma, having enjoyed a full meal, patted her belly with both hands.

“Phew... I’m full... Makes me wanna take a nap...” she sighed.

“Well, I don’t mind you taking one... Oh yeah, are you going back to the underworld again? You could just stay here, you know?” Tori said.

“U-U-U-Unthinkable! I-I-I can’t sleep when I use a different pillow! A-A-And lack of s-sleep will get in the way of my work. I gotta go back home!”

It had been two days since Senynoma started work on the kitchen, and so far, she’d always gone back home at night. It might have been because of her nervous nature, or because she didn’t like it when the other familiars teased her. Regardless of the reason, she would leave and then come back the next morning, almost as if she were working a day job—albeit a comfortable one, considering she got dinner and a bath before going home.

After cleaning up the dining table, Tori turned to Senynoma, who was happily mumbling to herself on a chair. “Senynoma, I’m gonna go out to do some shopping. Will you be okay here?” he asked.

“Huh?! U-U-Umm... Y-You won’t be gettin’ any visitors, will you?” she asked nervously.

“Nobody’s gonna visit somewhere this remote. You can have the snacks on the table if you want.”

Tori grabbed a rucksack and transported himself to Azrac.

The weather outside was pleasant, and the warm sunlight invited drowsiness to those with a full stomach. Tori stepped out onto a busy street. It really felt like the city was getting livelier day by day. He made his way through the crowd, taking care not to get swept away, and headed for the marketplace.

Naturally, the marketplace was also packed. Word had been going around about a newly discovered dungeon, and adventurers were already hard at work exploring it. Items, materials, and artifacts from it were now entering the market, and eagle-eyed merchants were busy negotiating prices with brokers all over the plaza.

Various scents blended together in front of a shop that sold spices. The tables were filled with containers of varying shapes and sizes, as the spices came in granules or powders packed into sachets both small and large. The herbs in this shop were mostly sold in their dried and powdered forms.

Tori leaned down and carefully perused the selection. He pinched a bit of spice in his fingers and took a whiff before turning to the shopkeeper.

“Mind if I taste this?” he asked.

“Nope. Just don’t bury your whole face in there.”

“Who’s mad enough to do that?”

“Some of my customers, apparently.”

“Yikes.”

Tori took some spice onto the back of his hand and gave it a lick. He felt a sharp sting on his tongue for a moment, which soon gave way to a sweet aftertaste. Its aroma was stronger than its kick.

“I’ll have this, this, and...I want the granules for this one. Which one of these is spicy?”

“This one. This other one too, but it’s really strong, so you gotta be careful.”

Tori ended up buying a number of spices he’d never tried before. He started thinking of how to use them in his cooking. He disliked the ennui that came from the habitual repetition of chores, so he very much enjoyed discovering and trying out new things, especially when it came to cooking.

Afterward, Tori peered into a shop he’d been curious about but never stepped into. He ended up buying more spices, some bottled preserves, dried foods, and a number of fresh items. After picking up some sweets and pastries to bring home for the others, he started to struggle with carrying his haul.

“Damn it, I went overboard...” Tori cursed. His basket and rucksack were both full. It wasn’t so much that he couldn’t transport it all home, but he struggled to lug his items through the crowded streets. His narrowed field of vision also gave him grief as well. It reminded him of his days in the Muddy Four-Horns when he would make his way through the crowds with huge armloads of miscellaneous items.

Tori found himself at a corner of the plaza. There, several stalls were lined up. It was still crowded here, but Tori managed to find a corner where he could sit down. He put his bags down and enjoyed a kebab he bought from a stall. The roasted meat and vegetables were wrapped in a bread called a “pita” and drizzled with a sweet and spicy sauce. The taste was impeccable.

“Hmm... Can I make this sauce with the spices I just bought?” Tori wondered to himself. He thought about the ratio of flavors he’d need to mix as he licked some sauce off his fingers. Visiting the food stalls was one of the things Tori always looked forward to during his trips to the city. He could take ideas from the way other cooks seasoned their foods, and it was something that energized him.

Today, Tori’s eyes were bigger than his stomach. He’d bought a total of three kebabs, each with a different flavor, but he’d also already eaten lunch, so by the time he was halfway through his second one, he was already feeling full.

The days were longer now that the weather was warmer, but the sun was starting to set. The shadows cast by buildings had lengthened, dimming the city streets. As Tori thought about what to make for dinner when he got home, he

stared at the passersby, wondering how he'd squeeze back through the crowd, and also what to do with his last kebab. As he mused, a small figure suddenly appeared before him.

"Damn that Kris. Can't believe he lost me again..."

It was a young girl with black hair peeking out from her hood. She had just made it out of the crowd, and she sighed as she took a seat beside Tori.

"This spot taken?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, not at all. Go ahead." he gestured.

"Thanks."

The girl leaned against the wall. She looked no older than ten years old, but her attitude was that of someone much older.

Suddenly, Tori heard a rumbling sound. He turned and saw the girl clutching her stomach and grimacing.

"Sorry 'bout that," she said.

"You okay? Are you hungry?" Tori asked out of concern.

"No... Uh, well, it sure smells delicious out here, but I don't have any money on me," she replied, clearly displeased.

Tori offered her the kebab in his hand. "You want this? I haven't taken a bite out of it," he said.

"What, you sure? I'll take it, thanks." The girl took the kebab with no hesitation and chomped into it. She paid no heed to the sauce smeared on her lips.

"Mmm... Yum!" she exclaimed.

"Good to hear..." Tori said. He felt relieved now that he no longer had to worry about the kebab. This wouldn't have happened if Shinozuki or Subaru were here.

Once the girl finished eating, she licked the sauce off her lips.

"Thanks for the kebab. That was great," she said.

“No problem. It was just an extra I got from a stall,” Tori told her.

“No, really, that was a big help. I was hungry and... I’m not too good with crowds. Can’t see a thing.”

“Ahh, yeah, that makes sense...”

The girl had the stature of someone around ten years of age. It was no wonder that she would struggle getting through a crowd.

The girl sniffed the air and spotted the bags that Tori had. “Smells like a lotta spices. Were you out shopping?” she asked.

“Pretty much. You too?” Tori asked in return.

“I’m on the way back from the guild. I got lost and separated from my comrades, though. Azrac sure is crowded these days.”

“The guild? You’re an adventurer?”

“Yup. Name’s Robin. Nice to meet ya.”

“Same here. I’m Tori.”

He didn’t know if they’d ever meet again, but it was only polite to give your name to someone who had given theirs.

Robin let out a big yawn. “Tori, I’m not sure if this is enough as my thanks, but if you’re ever in trouble, you can come to us. The Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light will help you out.”

“The Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light...? You mean that platinum-rank clan from Serisevunia?” Tori was startled by the name.

“Oh, you know us? Sounds like we’ve gotten real famous.” Robin laughed.

Tori was aware of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light—it was a peerless, first-rate clan in Serisevunia. He’d heard that several platinum-rank clans had made their way into town, but he was surprised that even they were here in Azrac.

Robin raised both her arms and stretched. “Ah, it’s gonna be a pain to find my group again. Azrac sure is lively, huh?”

“Is it different back in Serisevunia?” he asked.

“It’s pretty busy there too, but it’s a whole different level over here. We’re still new in town, so I haven’t gotten the feel of the place yet. What a pain.”

Serisevunia was located southeast of Azrac and was known as a key city for trade and commerce. Several dungeons were located in its vicinity, which also attracted a lot of adventurers. However, it was a lot more mellow compared to Azrac’s hustle and bustle.

“Don’t you guys have a stable place back in Serisevunia? Why move here?”
Tori asked.

Robin scratched her cheek. “Stability is boring. It’s more fun scrambling against strong folks. And it’s more thrilling to take the top spot than to protect it.”

“Huh.”

In other words, it was more fun to have rivals to challenge. A mentality fitting for an adventurer like her.

Adventurers dealt with violence as part of their job, and rivalries between clans could lead to one completely crushing the other. When Robin said she wanted to take the top spot, that must have meant that she was aiming for Azrac’s number one spot as well. Her clan seemed to be quite the belligerent type.

Does that mean she’d have to compete with Euphemia too? Tori wondered. Even if so, he couldn’t imagine Euphemia and her familiars losing to anyone. He easily envisioned them defeating any challengers with no sweat.

Not that Euphemia would be interested in that anyway, he thought.

Euphemia was leagues above everyone else in terms of power, but she showed basically no interest in competition. She was the type to prefer rolling around in bed over anything else.

“Commander!”

A golden-haired man emerged from the crowd and approached the two of them. He held several skewers in both hands.

“I cannot believe you got lost *again*! What will you do if you get abducted by a

pedophile, you little mumpsimus!” the golden-haired man yelled.

“Shaddup, you smellfungus! It’s your fault for losing sight of me!” Robin clapped back.

“My word! May I just say that *you’re* always the one who gets distracted and gets lost?!”

“Oh, are those skewers for me? I’ll take the one with the sauce.”

“Listen to what I have to say! You want the pork one?”

Tori stared wide-eyed at the mismatched pair’s argument that had suddenly unfolded before him. As Robin gorged on her skewers, she turned to Tori as if suddenly remembering his existence.

“Tori, this dumbass here is Kristoff, my vice commander. Om nom nom.”

“Hmm? And who might you be, knave? Why are you with our dear commander?! My name is Kristoff. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance! Om nom nom!”

“Hello, nice to meet you. Name’s Tori... Uh, I only ran into her by coincidence... Also, ‘commander’? Of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light?”

Robin gave Tori a resolute nod. “That’s right.”

“Seriously? And yet you didn’t have money to buy skewers?” Tori asked.

“I despise wastefulness,” she replied matter-of-factly.

“This little brat’s a huge cheapskate!” Kristoff exclaimed. “She’s our commander, and yet she refuses to treat our guild members to even a single drop of ale!”

“Don’t call me a brat.”

“Huh...” *What an amusing bunch*, Tori thought, puzzled at the sight of the two.

“Oh, yes. Tori, have you heard of the adventurer known as the White Witch?” Robin asked suddenly, so out of the blue that Tori was taken aback.

“I have,” he replied.

“Hmm... So she *is* famous. Heard that she’s the strongest in all of Azrac. Fenrir, phoenix, archlich... She even has some dangerous ones from the underworld as her familiars.”

“So they say,” Tori replied cautiously. If Robin and the Order were as competitive and belligerent as they seemed, they would naturally see Azrac’s strongest adventurer as their number one target. However, that was dangerous—in the sense that they might get destroyed by Euphemia.

“You really think you can win against her?” Tori asked.

“Well, of course. We’re aimin’ for the top, after all. Besides, while we were flying on our dragons the other day, someone riding on a phoenix flew right through us. There aren’t any wild phoenixes here on the surface, and only the White Witch has tamed one around these parts. Now that she’s gone and challenged us, ain’t no way we’re backin’ down from a fight.”



Subaru! That dumbass...!

Tori averted his eyes. As he cursed her, he had no idea that the person riding on Subaru's back during that time had been none other than Tori himself.

Robin stretched her arms. "Well, right now we're busy with other things. Besides, we gotta take down the other platinum clans before challenging Azrac's strongest."

"And besides! The White Witch hasn't shown herself at the guild for a while. She's a rare sight these days. And we're also busy with other things," Kristoff echoed.

"But I heard she's been delivering potions to the guild. I heard she's got someone who used to be part of a platinum-rank clan with her too."

"And supposedly that man is someone that the White Witch trusts unconditionally! Tori, did you know that?"

"N-No, first I heard of it," he muttered.

"Well, I don't expect a civilian like you to know matters relating to adventurers," Robin scoffed.

"But if we find that man, he could lead us straight to the White Witch. That might be the fastest way to find her, commander," Kristoff suggested.

"Maybe."

Tori felt cold sweat running down his back. As his sense of danger began to grow, another shadow approached them. When he looked up, a figure wearing thick armor and wielding a greatsword was standing before them. The young man, no older than thirty years of age, had short brown hair with streaks of white. He was holding a bun with some kind of filling in his hand.

"Hah. The Order of the Dragon's Purifying Light? No wonder it's so rowdy over here," the man snorted.

"Oh, if it isn't...Gazpacho? From the Conquering Sword Brigade," Robin said.

"It's 'Gaspar,'" the man corrected her. "A forgetful one, aren't you?"

"I don't care to remember names of people I'm not interested in."

Gaspar glared at Robin. Tori glanced behind Gaspar and saw a group of heavily armored men standing behind him.

“Howl as much as you want. We, the Conquering Sword Brigade, will be the ones standing at the top,” he spat.

“Oh? Still delusional, are we?”

A different voice called out. Tori turned and saw a gorgeous lady with fluffy, well-groomed, platinum-blond hair down to her shoulders. She looked to be in her twenties and had a cool expression on her face. She wore a pale blue robe, wielded a staff with several decorations, and was carrying what looked to be a bag full of pastries. She appeared to be a spellcaster. Behind her, her subordinates stood waiting.

Gaspar snorted. “Rosehill... Damned fox.”

“You got some business with us?” Robin asked.

“Not at all. We’re just passing by. Gazpacho, Robin, we, the Weavers of Melancholy, shall take the title of strongest in all of Azrac. I think you folks will find it quite impossible to achieve,” Rosehill scoffed.

“Then it’s even more impossible for you dainty greenhorns. Best you go back to your homes and read your books.” Gaspar sneered at her. “And it’s *Gaspar*, not Gazpacho!”

“Big words for someone who’s never read a book his entire life,” she shot back.

“Hey, hey! Looks like the gang’s all here!”

Yet another voice joined the fray. This time it was from a young man wearing bright-colored clothes and holding tacos in his hand. A mantle was around his shoulders, and his bluish-black hair was tied in a ponytail. He had the looks of a prim and proper man, but he carried himself like a womanizer.

Robin clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Marius... Great, the obnoxious one is here.”

“What’s going on here? All the great platinum-rank commanders are here. Let the Moonset and Blinding Flash join you guys!” Marius seemed like he was

joking around, but his eyes were scanning his surroundings like an eagle. Behind him, people who appeared to be his comrades were laughing.

Gaspar sneered and took a bite of the bread in his hand. “What coldhearted folks you are. None of you are fit to be the strongest in all of Azrac! Om nom nom.”

“My, then your savage behavior is nowhere near befitting that title! Om nom nom,” Rosehill said, nibbling into her pastry.

“Jeez! Why don’t we all get along? You’re all arguing, but that won’t change the fact that *we’re* the strongest! Om nom nom.” Marius laughed around a bite of taco.

“All of you need to know your place. The Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light will take the top. Om nom nom,” Robin said as she bit into a skewer.

“Oh, Robin, those skewers look pretty tasty. Mind if I have one? I’ll trade for a taco. Om nom nom.”

“Get away from me or I’ll cut off your balls. Om nom nom.”

Can you guys quit eating for a moment? Tori thought in annoyance.

The Conquering Sword Brigade, the Weavers of Melancholy, the Moonset and Blinding Flash, and the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light—all four were famed and highly skilled platinum-rank clans. They were all active in other regions but were apparently attracted to Azrac by the adventurer bubble, and were aiming to claim even more achievements to their names. And now their commanders were all here, exchanging heated words and letting sparks fly between one another. It should have been an awe-inspiring scene, but the tension was ruined by all the food in their hands and mouths.

While Tori was feeling disillusioned by this absurd scene, Rosehill took inquiring glances at the other clan leaders.

“Have you all received word from the guild, then?” she asked.

“Of course. Though I don’t see the need for them to talk to clans other than ourselves,” Gaspar replied.

Marius cackled. “They say that the bigger they bark, the weaker their bite.”

“What did you say?!”

“Quit your squabbling. It’s tacky,” Robin cut in. “You’ll all kneel before us in the end, so you don’t need to make yourselves look big. Om nom nom.”

“Heh heh heh. Well, I don’t mind kneeling before you, Robin, my dear. Om nom nom,” said Marius.

“You can kneel before her all you want, you perverted pedophile. Om nom nom.” Gaspar sneered.

“Oho! I can hardly wait to see all your pathetic faces in the next few days. I’m so excited. Om nom nom,” Rosehill scoffed.

Tori had absolutely no clue what the clan leaders were talking about, and he had no courage to even ask. In the first place, there was no need for him to even be here. The conversation had steered into dangerous territory, and he felt that he should make his exit as soon as possible.

Tori grabbed his belongings. The clan leaders were still arguing among themselves, and he didn’t feel a need to make his presence known. Right before he left, he called out to Kristoff.

“I’m off. See you around,” Tori informed him.

“You’re still here? You could’ve just ignored all this hubbub and left,” Kristoff said.

He was right. However, the clan leaders had all just happened to gather at the spot Tori had chosen. Now he just wanted to get away from here. He shook his head in exasperation and prepared to head home.

It was a nuisance that the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light had their eyes on them, but Tori simply could not imagine Euphemia and her familiars losing to anyone. There was the possibility that the Order might capture him as someone relevant to the White Witch, but he was an adventurer, not a rogue bandit. He wouldn’t meet some terrible fate out in the open, and he didn’t feel the need to be so afraid as to stop going out to buy supplies. However, it was now more difficult for Tori to introduce himself, and it might complicate his situation even more. It would be a huge pain if they managed to tie his identity to the White Witch.

Tori considered it but ultimately decided that it wasn't worth the time and that he should let things resolve themselves.

It seemed that the clan leaders were going to compete on something. They'd also brought up the guild, so it looked like some sort of special request had been brought to them. Perhaps that was what all the bickering was about. In that case, it was very likely that the Cerulean Dagger would also get involved.

Well, whatever, Tori thought. He entered a back alley and transported himself back home.

Euphemia had yet to return to the house, and the bowl of snacks on the table was empty.

Senynoma had finished dismantling the stove in the kitchen. As proof, the stove's former location had been smoothed out, and a mark had been drawn on the floor in the new spot, indicating the placement of the soon-to-be constructed new stove. Bricks were already lined up in preparation, though without mortar yet, likely because there were still some adjustments to be made to the structure and size.

Senynoma was so focused on her work that she hadn't noticed Tori had already returned.

"I'm back," he announced.

"Gyah?! W-W-W-Welcome back!" Senynoma jumped up and fumbled around, then tripped into the stack of bricks she had been building, causing it to collapse.

"Owie!" One of the bricks fell on her foot, making her leap around in pain.

"C-Calm down!" Though the area around the stove was clean and organized, foodstuffs and utensils were still lying around. Tori dragged the dazed Senynoma out of the kitchen before she could cause more damage. He still couldn't quite pin down whether her fumbling stemmed from her social anxiety or whether she was just a fidgety person.

"Guh..." Senynoma grunted.

"You okay?" Tori asked.

“I-I-I’m fine... We cyclopes are made of tough stuff...” Senynoma assured him while rubbing her injured foot. Tori surmised that denizens of the underworld weren’t easily taken out by a simple brick, though the pain was still very much present.

“I see you ate all of the snacks,” Tori remarked.

“Y-Y-Y-Yes, I d-did. W-W-Was I not s-s-supposed to?” Senynoma stammered.

“No, no, it’s fine. Just impressed by your appetite, is all.”

“H-Heh heh... The food here on the surface is mighty tasty...” Senynoma let out a sheepish giggle. It was an opinion shared by the other familiars. If Tori were to generalize, he would hazard that the denizens of the underworld simply never had good food in their lives.

Doesn’t this mean that denizens of the underworld are very easy to tame? Tori entertained this strange thought in his head before promptly dismissing it.

“And I see you’ve started building the oven,” he observed.

“Yup. I’m gonna need to bore holes through this wall. But the sun’s setting and the wind at night’s mighty cold, so I’m gonna save it for tomorrow,” Senynoma said. She was right—it would be a huge nuisance to leave big holes in the wall overnight.

“How long will it take to finish?”

“The stove itself shouldn’t take more than three days.”

“Huh? That fast?”

“Well, yeah. We already finished the design, and we have the materials. Though, if we consider the time for the mortar to dry, it’ll take another day before you can use it. After that, we need to extend the roof and put up a new wall, so we’re gonna need some wood... All in all, it should take about ten days, give or take.”

“Amazing,” Tori marveled.

“But to be honest, I’m still wet behind the ears, so it takes me longer than most. A more experienced cyclops craftsman would have it ready and working in a week,” she confessed.

“You mean it can get *faster*?”

“Yup. I’m smaller and weaker than most cyclopes, after all.”

Apparently, most cyclopes were giants. They had burly bodies, with great strength to match.

“How big are we talking?” Tori asked.

“About twice as big as me. The bigger ones are about thrice my size,” she answered.

In other words, some of them were big enough for their heads to reach the roof of this house. In that case, they would indeed be able to lift heavy materials with ease. Since Senynoma was shorter than Tori, she was indeed quite small for a cyclops.

They’re huge and strong, yet skilled in crafting? Underworld craftsmen sure are incredible, Tori thought, impressed.

Tori lit the furnace to heat the bathwater, and while he was preparing dinner, Euphemia and the others returned home. They brought a large haul of items and materials into the parlor.

“Whoa, that’s a *lot*,” he said, surprised.

“I’ll be getting regular orders, so I thought it’d be easier to stock up now,” Euphemia explained. She wasn’t wrong, but unlike last time, they wouldn’t be using them up in one go. Since the orders would only come periodically, Tori wanted to know where they planned to store these materials in the meantime.

Cecilia addressed Tori’s concerns. “We can prep and refine the materials so they won’t take up as much space. We’ll do that tomorrow.”

“Okay. We can’t just leave those in here,” he said.

Generally, when it came to potions, they were more effective when they were freshly synthesized instead of being old stock. This was why Euphemia wanted to refine the ingredients, then save them for when she needed to use them for synthesis.

Tori had considered it during Euphemia’s previous job, but now repairing the storehouse had shot up in priority. They all used the parlor as a place to eat,

and it was also Tori's bedroom. He couldn't rest easy while there were raw materials with strange and unusual odors lying around.

Euphemia snuggled up against Tori. "What's for dinner?" she asked.

"Stew, a roast, and potatoes," Tori replied.

"What about risotto?"

"What, you want it again?"

"Yeah."

"Well, guess I should make some."

"Tori dear, do we have hot water in the bath?" Cecilia asked.

"Yeah, it's heating up. Could you check the temperature? You can use it if it's ready."

"Got it. Senynoma, let's take a bath together! I'll wash your back for you, dear."

Cecilia grabbed Senynoma's arm, and she started flailing about.

"Nooo! Y-You're planning to tickle me again!" she squealed.

"Stop resisting, deary," Cecilia giggled. "Aren't you tired from all that construction work? Your big sis will give you her special massage for free!"

"Gaaah! H-Help meee!"

Senynoma's resistance was futile. Cecilia dragged her into the bathroom. It would seem that Cecilia was the stronger one between the two of them, which only confirmed that Senynoma was very weak for a cyclops.

"Why does Cecilia keep on teasing Senynoma?" Tori wondered.

"I'm sure she just enjoys her reactions," Shinozuki answered.

Subaru cackled. "Yeah, and Cecilia loves girls too."

I shouldn't have asked. Tori let out a sigh. He suddenly remembered something upon seeing Subaru.

"Hey, Subaru. Do you happen to remember flying past a group of dragons?" he asked.

“Huh? Oh, right, that. Guess I forgot all about it,” Subaru said.

“You...”

“What about it?”

“Those dragons were from a platinum-rank clan called the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light. Because of that, they thought that you picked a fight with them.”

“Huh. Well, a hundred flying dragons doesn’t sound very scary. Oh, were you scared, big bro? You’re always such a wimpy wuss, aren’t you? Heh heh heh!” Subaru taunted.

“Shut up! And Euphie, if you’re riding on her, you should warn her about those things! She caused a huge ruckus out there!”

“I haven’t ridden on her,” Euphemia said.

Tori frowned. “And who else is supposed to have ridden her, then?”

“You did,” she replied.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Subaru chimed in. “That was on our way back from Azrac. We even ate skewers on that day. Right, Shino?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, guess so. You were grabbin’ onto Subaru so tight, you didn’t even see what was goin’ on,” Shinozuki said.

Tori realized that it had all happened on the day he’d delivered the potions to the guild. He clutched his head. “Oh... It was me...”

10. A Reason

It was common knowledge that the only connections between the underworld and the surface were the astral gates, opened by contracts with fiends or through forbidden arts, and the Great Gate that was currently sealed off. However, there were also spatial distortions and other such anomalies that could create temporary connections between the two worlds.

There were cases of humans unwittingly wandering into the underworld, and others of underworld denizens climbing out onto the surface seemingly out of nowhere. In the case of the former, it wasn't much of a problem—except for the person who got lost—but the latter was sure to cause a huge commotion. Sometimes it would be a fiend who could understand reason, but a criminal fiend or a monster could cause untold damage to those living on the surface.

The underworld today held a policy of noninterference regarding the surface, but they were not thorough about its enforcement. If a problem arose in the underworld because of something from above, the underworld's denizens would resolve it within their bounds. On the other hand, if a dangerous fiend were to escape to the surface, the underworld would look the other way and refuse to interfere, which meant that it was up to the surface dwellers to solve the problem. The criminal fiend Renard was a great example of such a case.

Monsters from the underworld were often more powerful than those found on the surface, and even veteran mercenaries and adventurers would struggle to deal with one. However, loot from underworld monsters was highly prized, and succeeding in a hunt could lead to getting rich overnight.

A silver-rank clan from Azrac was the first to discover *it*. They had just finished exploring a nearby dungeon, and on the way back, they found a hill that they hadn't spotted on the way there. Though tired from their expedition, this strange location piqued their curiosity and adventuring spirits. The rugged rocks were covered in moss, but it was a kind the adventurers had never seen before, and a strange light shone through cracks in them as the clan felt small vibrations

traveling through the ground. All in all, they found the place bizarre and otherworldly.

Though it was the job of an adventurer to brave danger, it didn't mean they were willing to just throw away their lives. They had made it all the way to silver rank, which meant they had enough experience to sense when something was out of their league. The clan decided to descend from the hill—though whether that was the right call or not was debatable.

Suddenly, the small hill began moving. It was a slow but forceful motion, causing the ground underneath to shake. Trees began to rattle, shaking dried leaves from their branches. The motion must have set off something within the hill, because the cracks within the rocks began to emit a noxious vapor.

The adventurers quickly distanced themselves from the moving rock formation. At first they thought the hill had uplifted and tilted to the side, but then, a gigantic, scissorlike appendage emerged from the structure. Four limbs covered in shell-like armor followed, stabbing into the ground with their sharp tips. Soon enough, the creature's entire head emerged, and its two eyes, now fully active, scanned their surroundings.

"A-A hermit crab?!" one of the clan members cried out. It was, in actuality, a monster similar to a hermit crab known as an adamantine crab. Unlike regular hermit crabs, they did not use shells, but rather turned rocks and clay into mush with their secretions and hardened them into armor for their bodies. On the surface, they were no bigger than the palm of one's hand, but the ones from the underworld, such as this one, could grow into the size of a small hill. As a result, their armor was also much thicker and harder, and they often absorbed rare ores and minerals into their shells. Killing an adamantine crab from the underworld meant potentially gaining the equivalent of a small mine.

Of course, these adventurers had no such knowledge. Out of shock, they fled from this monster and reported its existence to the guild in haste. It was the guild's investigation that revealed the creature to be a gigantic specimen of adamantine crab.

It might have been a large creature, but the adamantine crab was a low-level monster. At first, the guild did not see it as a problem. However, soon enough,

word had spread and many adventurers had found out about the ore veins the creature might possess. Foolhardy gold-and silver-rank clans tried their hands at defeating it, but they were simply no match.

The adamantine crab was not a fast creature, but its shell was so tough that normal weapons couldn't even put a scratch on it. Additionally, it was enveloped in noxious mana, which functioned to repel magic. Trying to sever its legs or crush its eyes meant dealing with its sharp limbs and deadly claws. Archers tried to aim for its eyes, but they were as tough as its shell, and even the sharpest arrows couldn't pierce them. On top of that, the crab would swiftly retreat into its shell, making it difficult to land any hits to begin with.

On top of all that, there were monsters that lived and made nests on the adamantine crab's back, and they would crawl out and attack adventurers. They were reptilian and insectile monsters that were also common on the surface, but as these were from the underworld, they were also bigger and stronger than their surface counterparts. These monsters, now in the frailer environment of the surface world, had become violent and begun to destroy their surroundings. They had even started spreading a noxious blight wherever they went.

Soon enough, the area had become a priority for observation. If the region had been close to a town, the army could have been mobilized to deal with it, but they could not be bothered to move resources to such a far-flung area. After all, it took money to deploy troops and supplies. As it was, the only ones inconvenienced were the adventurers unable to get past it to explore dungeons. The problem had reached the Azrac guild, and now the adventurers had to prioritize eliminating the adamantine crab.

Of course, part of an adventurer's entire purpose was to hunt down monsters, and Azrac was home to the most skilled among them. They were absolutely capable of exterminating even beasts from the underworld. The guild knew this and made sure to turn the situation to their advantage.

The population of adventurers in Azrac was growing by the day, especially as those from other regions continued to move into the city. The guild had thrown all they had into forming the Cerulean Dagger, and now that the number of clans that could compete with them had increased, they couldn't just sit back

and support only one clan. The guild began to see this as a waste of resources.

However, the guild also couldn't afford to let the clans gain the upper hand over them. It was true that they had to rely on adventurers to do the work, but they wanted to avoid cases like the White Witch where the adventurer in question had too much power. Worried that the clans might eventually organize and consolidate their power, the guild decided to take the reins and announce a competition: Whichever one of the top-ranking clans, including the Cerulean Dagger, eliminated the adamantine crab first would receive a more lucrative deal from the guild.

Back in their clan's meeting room, the members of the Cerulean Dagger were listening to this shocking development.

"So you mean the guild could cut off their sponsorship if we do badly?" Suzanna asked.

"N-No, they wouldn't cut it off completely, but they would definitely scale back their funding..." Arpent, the clan's manager, bowed apologetically.

"But the Cerulean Dagger was formed on the premise that we'd be getting the guild's full support. Isn't that the entire reason they didn't appoint a leader and let us decide the clan's direction as equals? But now the guild wants to back out? How's that gonna work out from here on?" Curtis, an armored swordsman and former leader of the Crimson Venus, now a key member of the Cerulean Dagger, spoke out.

Curtis was referring to the fact that the Cerulean Dagger was formed out of the union of several platinum-ranked clans. Even now, as its size grew and members came and went, many of them had also been trained by the White Witch and her comrades. Their skills and achievements as a clan were all consistently first-rate.

However, a huge source of that consistency was the guild's full support. They were able to use the guild's resources for supplies and make use of their facilities. Since the guild took care of miscellaneous administrative tasks, the clan could focus on their actual work. On top of that, since they were a union of former top-ranking clans, they had no leader and instead worked together as colleagues to decide courses of action, under the supervision of the guild. Since

there were several members who had formerly acted as clan leaders, they could split up into teams and accept multiple jobs between them. If the guild decided to withdraw their support and sponsor a different clan, the fate of their current system would be left up in the air.

Arpent sighed. "I tried to explain all of that to upper management, but they insisted that the Cerulean Dagger's reputation would skyrocket if you all managed to prove your worth..."

"So we'll have to show them our skills, huh?"

"That's not in the deal we signed, though."

"Do we have to pay for our own supplies if the guild pulls back their support?"

"I just had our furniture at home refurbished, though..."

The members began to murmur among themselves and voice their dissatisfaction. Despite being adventurers, they weren't dying to jump headfirst into danger. Many of them had also joined the Cerulean Dagger precisely because they had the guild's backing.

Jeffrey scratched his head. "So what's the problem? We just gotta prove ourselves like the guild says, right? Let's make those upstart outsiders eat dirt."

"Easy for you to say..."

"What're we gonna do if we lose?"

There was no end to the complaints. The murmurs grew louder, and the air in the room became more tense.

Lotten, a spellcaster, was waving her arms around. "We gotta stop this! There's no point in arguing!" she shouted.

"She's right," Suzanna said. "Even if we complain, the guild won't change its mind."

The members looked around as another round of whispers went through the crowd. Then, the room went quiet. Everyone seemed to be waiting for someone to make a move.

Suddenly, Andrea, who had been quiet until now, spoke up.

“Our clan’s been too lax lately. We haven’t been in sync even while doing our jobs. We’ve become overconfident.”

Andrea’s words seemed to strike a chord among the members.

“Th-That’s...”

“W-Well, you’re not wrong...”

“We’ve been too complacent in our spot just because we’ve cleared a few difficult dungeons and eliminated Renard. At least, that’s what I think. But we’re all adventurers here. We’re not like salaried soldiers. Overconfidence leads to our ruin. We can’t afford to ignore all the platinum-ranked clans that have been coming in lately,” Andrea said. The members awkwardly averted their gazes.

“I don’t think we lack the skills at all. We’ve already trained under the White Witch. But what would she think if she saw our pathetic state right now? I’m sure she’d be less than thrilled.”

Andrea’s words evoked images of the White Witch’s terrifying glare in all their minds. They couldn’t imagine her being amused that the clan she had trained herself had fallen to such a dire state. The members all steeled themselves, as if the threat of the White Witch were more urgent than the guild possibly withdrawing their support. Only Suzanna looked like she was trying her best to stifle a laugh.



Andrea continued. "In any case, the competition will happen whether we want it or not. If we don't get it together, we'll be left in the dust. You can all spout your complaints after we win. In fact, this is our chance to strengthen our position with the guild. Right?"

"Yeah..."

"Back in the day, something like this would've gotten our blood boiling. Okay, I'm in. Let's beat 'em!"

The mood in the room had brightened. The members of the Cerulean Dagger, despite having been steeped in the complacency of stability for so long, were still veteran adventurers. They refused to get beaten by those upstart platinum-rank clans.

Suzanna whispered into Andrea's ear, "You sure pumped them up, huh? You know Euphie would never think that, right?"

"Of course. But now we've got everyone on the same page, right? Damn, now I owe those two again." Andrea laughed heartily.

While the Cerulean Dagger's members were being motivated by Andrea's speech, Euphemia was oblivious to her name being used for that purpose and continued to live her carefree life. When not making potions, she spent her days lazing around.

Today, she didn't hesitate to flop around on the freshly aired couch. She buried her face in the soft and fluffy cushions, indulging in the fresh scent of the sun-dried cloth, and bounced up and down to enjoy the comfy sensation. She rolled around, lay face down, and wriggled all over it.

Seeing this, Tori, who had been drying the blankets, sighed in exasperation. "How long are you going to be lazy for? How's the potion-making going?"

"Mmm..." Euphemia hugged a cushion and stared at the ceiling. "It's fine."

"Oh. Okay then." Tori spread a quilt over the bed.

Euphemia had finished selecting the highest-quality materials from what they had gathered, as well as refining and preparing them. All that was left was to do

the actual synthesis, and even then, she had just delivered the ones for the most recent request. She still had a lot of time before her next deadline.

The kitchen stove had also finished construction. Senynoma's craftsmanship had been in full swing; while Tori and the others mixed mortar or fetched materials for her, she'd taken on the tasks of extending the rafters, stacking the bricks, and smoothing out flaws, as well as building the wall and chimney. She had overseen the project till its end.

Now, Senynoma was busy making adjustments for a different project requested by Euphemia. It seemed she was doing some modifications to Tori's transportation device. She examined the pendant with goggles fitted with magnifying lenses, tweaking this and that.

While Senynoma remained on the surface, Shinozuki, Subaru, and Cecilia all returned to the underworld. Apparently, they had a job to do investigating small distortions in space. They didn't seem to be too thrilled by the prospect.

Thus, Tori's days had turned from hectic to quiet. It had been a few days since he'd encountered the leaders of the platinum-rank clans, and he had spent them with some anxiety. He'd thought of taking the first step to apologize and explain the situation to Robin, but decided against it after taking into consideration her belligerent personality. It might just add more fuel to the fire. This was not a problem that would be solved by Tori taking a punch or two to the face. Subaru was one of Euphemia's familiars, and Robin's grudge would certainly end up involving Euphemia at some point. This was something he wanted to avoid.

In the end, he couldn't think of any way to smooth over the situation. He could only spend his days working on his chores as always.

"Here's some apple slices," Tori announced. He placed the plate of peeled apple slices on the dining table. Senynoma didn't even glance up; she was completely focused on her task.

Meanwhile, Euphemia looked pleased. She stood up and went over to Tori, then opened her mouth expectantly. Tori stood there for a while without saying anything. Eventually, he gave up and put a slice of apple in Euphemia's mouth. She took a big bite.

“Man, you’re a handful, you know that?” he complained.

Euphemia continued to chew happily. She took a slice from the plate and held it out to Tori. He tried to take it with his hand, but she pulled back and shook her head.

Tori glanced at Senynoma. She was paying them no attention, fiddling intently with the transportation device.

“Ahh.” Tori opened his mouth. Euphemia happily put the apple slice inside. The sweet taste spread over his tongue, and Tori felt abashed as he chewed.

Suddenly, he heard a tapping sound coming from the window. Euphemia’s black bird familiar was tapping on the glass. In its beak was a letter. When he opened the window, the bird flew straight for Euphemia and landed on her shoulder.

Euphemia unfurled the letter. She gave it a quick read, then promptly crumpled it and threw it on the floor.

“Hey, don’t do that,” Tori chided. He frowned, picked up the crumpled letter, and smoothed it back out. As someone who’d taken care of administrative tasks for the Muddy Four-Horns, his experience told him he should keep such letters for their records.

“You can toss that in the fire,” Euphemia said.

“I’m not going to. It’s from the guild, right? It might be something important.” Tori scanned the letter and couldn’t help but be shocked by its contents.

“A hunt request for an adamantine crab from the underworld? Wh— For the guild’s full sponsorship? In a competition between the clans?”

“Dunno, don’t care.” Euphemia dismissed Tori’s surprise. She took another slice of apple from the dining table.

The letter was the same one that had been sent to Azrac’s top-ranking clans. The fact that Euphemia, an individual, was also receiving a copy was proof of the White Witch’s accomplishments.

However, the guild wasn’t expecting the White Witch to respond to this challenge, and it would actually be a huge inconvenience for them if she joined

in. She definitely did not need the support of the guild, and if they ended up having to sponsor her, it would be a massive burden to them financially.

In actuality, this letter had already been sent to all of the clans, and all of them—including the Cerulean Dagger—had already gone out to exterminate the threat. The battle had already begun by the time Euphemia received the letter, so it was only a cursory notification in her case.

Tori realized this competition was what the leaders of Azrac's platinum-rank clans had been arguing about in the plaza. The clans, fired up by the prospect of dethroning the Cerulean Dagger, were burning with ambition at the idea of getting the guild's full support and claiming Azrac's top position.

Andrea and his clan have gotten into quite a pickle this time, Tori worried. However, there wasn't much he could do about it. He could only hope that they would be the victors.

While Tori was folding the laundry, Euphemia suddenly leaned her weight on him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Womp." Euphemia rubbed her face against his back. It was something she'd been doing recently, suddenly beckoning for his attention, perhaps out of boredom. She would cling to Tori for a while and then, once satisfied, head back to the couch to roll around or finish the book she had been reading. She was a strange girl, but Tori continued to fall for her adorable side.

"W-Wowie, what a lovey-dovey couple!"

Tori felt a chill run down his spine. He turned and saw Senynoma, who had just finished her work. She hid her red face with both hands, shyly staring at Tori and Euphemia.

"I-I'm feelin' all warm and fluffy inside watchin' you guys," she said.

"Y-Yeah... Senynoma, care for an apple?" Tori offered.

"Yay! I'll have some. Oh, Euphie, I'm done tinkerin' with it."

"Thanks."

Euphemia looked over the transportation device she had just received from

Senynoma. Some metallic parts had been added to its exterior, and the front appeared to have been covered in glass. Behind it were circuits constructed out of magicstone, and the stones that were inside had also increased in number. Two notable features were also added—a button on the pendant’s upper portion and a small knob on the side.

“Looks good. Tori?” Euphemia called.

“Yeah?”

“Could you take this and go outside?” she requested.

Tori gave a reluctant glance, but he took the transportation device and headed out. The weather was pleasant; the sun was already starting to set, and its rays bathed the surroundings in a reddish light.

“Can you hear me?”

“Whoa?!”

Euphemia’s voice suddenly echoed from the device. Tori looked down at it, baffled.

“Can you twist the knob on the side? A blue magic stone will start glowing. You can talk once it’s lit.”

Tori, still confused, followed her instructions and twisted the knob. He heard a small click, and the stone glowed just as Euphemia said.

“Umm, so what should I say?”

“Oh, I heard that. Looks like it’s working,” said Euphemia.

“What’s going on? Does this mean this thing can transmit voices now?” he asked.

“Yeah. When you twist the knob, I’ll be able to hear your voice,” she explained.

“I-I see...” *This device suddenly got a lot more complicated*, he thought. Tori returned to the house.

Euphemia looked smug. An identical pendant was hanging from her neck. She grabbed it and showed it to Tori, making it glow.

“We match,” she said.

“When did you—”

“By the way, if you want to use the transportation device, you hold it like this and press this button. You pour mana into it like you did before, and you get transported,” Senynoma cut in to explain.

Euphemia clung to Tori’s arm. “Now we can talk to each other anytime.”

“Th-That’s great. It does sound pretty convenient.” Now, if Euphemia were to head out, Tori could check what time she planned to return home. It was also a load off his mind to be able to contact each other in case of emergencies.

“Senynoma, you made this?” Tori asked.

Senynoma, who had been stuffing herself with apple slices, turned to him. “Mmgh! Mmngh—! Guh!”

“Swallow, then talk.”

She gulped down her mouthful. “Euphemia and Cecilia worked on the schematics and the interior circuitry. I only furnished the exterior and added the button and knob... Just some finishin’ touches,” she said.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Euphemia boasted.

“Yeah, it’s incredible.” Tori suddenly realized something and turned to Euphemia. “Hey, about these technologies... You don’t have any plans of sharing them with others? They’re really convenient and all. If you sold these, I’m sure a lot of people would find them useful.”

“My mother doesn’t want that. I’m half fiend, remember? I’m a bit of an anomaly here on the surface. Spreading these technologies carelessly could cause chaos. And there are people who’d use them for evil. At least, that’s what she says.”

Such was Euphemia’s reason for keeping these technologies to herself. A transportation device could certainly be used for nefarious purposes, and even setting that possibility aside, introducing technology that could easily transport items could cause multitudes of people who worked in transport and operating logistics to lose their jobs. It would be fine if humans on the surface organically

developed it themselves, but spreading underworld technology with little thought did indeed seem like a bad idea.

That's fair, Tori thought. But then a question popped into his head. "What about your potions?" he asked.

"I use nothing but ingredients found on the surface for those. All of the techniques I use can be replicated here. The one I gave Cyril was different, but that was a special case," she answered.

Euphemia might seem somewhat airheaded at times, but Tori realized that she gave serious thought to these things. His feelings on this were mixed; on one hand, he was impressed at her unexpected thoughtfulness, but it also made her usual ditziness that much more apparent. Euphemia approached to prod him for head pats, and he felt relieved upon seeing her usual self.

11. The Underworld and the Surface

“Timbeeeeeer!”

“Okay, okay, okay!”

Senynoma gave the tilting wooden pillar a push, and with a loud groan, it fell onto the ground. The pillar, which had been eaten away by insects, crumbled in several places upon impact. It was completely unsuitable to be reused as construction material.

Senynoma wiped the sweat off her forehead and laughed. “Okay, we’ve taken down everything that can be.”

“We should burn these...” Tori poked at the crumbling, rotted wood.

Now that they had demolished the dilapidated storehouse, it looked like they had freed up a lot of space. Tori started thinking of a design to use for constructing a new storehouse. Since Senynoma was here, he felt that he shouldn’t waste this opportunity. If Euphemia were to bring even more materials for her potion-making, she would need a place to store them, as well as a bigger workshop. It couldn’t hurt to build it before the need became apparent.

Euphemia was sitting on the fence, watching Tori and Senynoma’s demolition work. She jumped down and approached the two. “I want a big one,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, you mean the storehouse. Yeah, we should have one with long eaves so we can do some work under them,” Tori suggested. It would be difficult to bring some of the larger materials inside, so he thought having some extra space with a roof over it would be a major improvement.

Senynoma was holding measuring tape in her hand and used it to measure the area. “We’re gonna need this much stone for the base... And what to do for the roof...we could use tiles, or maybe straw...” she mumbled to herself. As a craftsman, it seemed she couldn’t help being excited for more construction work.

Shinozuki and the others still hadn't returned from the underworld. It wasn't that Euphemia couldn't call them back, but rather that they were occupied and couldn't return to the surface just yet. For the past few days, Tori had been living with just Euphemia and Senynoma. Of course, Senynoma went back to the underworld at night, so it was just him and Euphemia during those hours. Euphemia had a big enough stock of materials for potion-making for now, so she didn't need to call back her familiars for help. She was living without a care in the world while Tori took care of the chores around the house.

During this time, Tori and Senynoma had worked on demolishing the storehouse, and now that the demolition job was finished, they could finally proceed with constructing a new one. The two of them were at the dining table, examining a schematic for the new design.

Senynoma was frantically scribbling notes on the sheet. "We'll use stone for the base of the wall, and put pillars here and here for support, like this. Might as well make a two-story structure while we're at it. We can put the staircase here, or have a ladder instead. There'll be one area over here where you can do the messy work, and we'll have a divider where you can place your things to avoid gettin' them stained."

"Wh-Whoa..." Tori uttered.

"I want a big working table in there. Preferably one I can use to sort the bigger materials I'll be using," Euphemia said, pointing at the schematic.

"Okay. We'll make this door bigger. If you leave it open, it'll expand the workspace to include this area under the eaves. H-Heh heh heh... I'm on fire today! Can't wait to start cuttin' the wood... Heh heh heh..." Senynoma was only talking about forming the construction materials, but she acted as if she were about to do something sketchy.

Tori went into the kitchen and started mincing onions and other vegetables. He threw them into a pan along with minced meat and fried them together. He added in salt, herbs, and other spices, then poured in a small amount of stock, milk, and condensed tomatoes. He let it cook until it reduced, then poured the mixture into a pie to bake in the oven.

The kitchen stove, which had recently finished construction, was now usable.

The oven portion was very wide, and it was easy to use for home baking. He could even use the residual heat from the oven to simmer pots on the stovetop, which made it convenient for saving on fuel.

While the meat pie was baking, Tori prepared soup with preserved meat and mushrooms. He spiced a few boiled potatoes and fried them, then garnished the resulting dish with finely ground herbs.

Now that there were no gluttonous familiars around, Tori no longer had to make inordinate amounts of food. Despite his workload being lighter, he felt a slight sense of dissatisfaction after having gotten used to making such exorbitant meals most of the time.

“Food’s ready,” Tori announced.

“Kay.”

“Wow!”

The freshly baked meat pie was still steaming hot, and the filling spilled out with every spoonful. Both Euphemia and Senynoma blew on it impatiently while scarfing down their portions.

“Heh heh heh... Once again, dinner is really tasty... Do I really deserve food this good?” Senynoma muttered.

“Tori, more soup, please,” Euphemia requested.

“Sure— Oh jeez, what a mess.” Tori reached out with a handkerchief and wiped Euphemia’s face, which was smeared with soup and gravy.

The three of them finished their lunch. Senynoma went to the yard to continue the storehouse planning, while Tori cleared the dining table and started cleaning the bathroom. Euphemia, meanwhile, was lying around on the couch while listening to both of them work.

Suddenly, a small magic circle appeared before her.

“Hey, Euphie, it’s me.”

“Shino? What’s going on?” Euphemia rolled over and peered into the magic circle.

“It’s gettin’ a bit hectic down here. We need your help,” Shinozuki said.

“Why? I don’t care about anything going on down there,” Euphemia replied curtly.

“Come on, don’t say that. At this rate, things’ll spill over onto the surface. There’s already a big monster that escaped over there. And some from the surface that wandered over here are goin’ berserk from the underworld’s air. They’re even worse than the usual ones that live down here.”

“Dealing with them’s not a problem for you guys, right?”

“Right—the monsters, at least. But we can’t plug the holes.”

“Some sort of spatiotemporal thing? Can’t Cecilia take care of that?”

“Euphie dear, I can’t do it,” Cecilia’s voice said from inside the magic circle. “It seems that long ago, there was a human spellcaster who wandered into the underworld and went into hiding. They were working on a spell that would allow them to move freely between here and the surface. The spellcaster died before perfecting the spell, but the remnants of it remain, and something’s caused it to activate.”

“So why should I take care of it?” Euphemia asked.

“That spellcaster was never very trusting of fiends. They put layers and layers of spells in place designed to keep us away, and they’re all quite potent. I can’t lay a finger on it. Euphie, you’re a half fiend, but the spells don’t seem to react to that, so you might be able to do something about it.”

“Don’t care. Besides, if you need a human, you can just call my mother.”

“Ernestine’s not available. She’s locked herself in her room downing bottles of wine.”

“Ethelbert tried to pull her out and got blasted out of the room. Took him three days to fully recover. Lame, right? Heh heh heh!” Subaru giggled.

“She just refuses to budge once she gets like that. So Euphie dear, pretty please? We can’t get back home if we don’t finish this!” Cecilia pleaded.

Euphemia pouted and waved her finger. The magic circle vanished, and the house turned quiet. The faint sounds of scrubbing could be heard from the

bathroom, and outside she could hear Senynoma's tools grinding wood.

Euphemia rolled over and stared at the ceiling for a while, then stood up in resignation. She headed for the bathroom and peeked inside.

"Tori," she called.

"Huh?" Tori, who had been scrubbing the bathtub, turned around. "What's going on?"

"I'm heading to the underworld. Don't think I'll be coming back today," Euphemia said.

"Really? Is it an emergency?"

"I'm being called in. They want me to help with something," Euphemia said as she put on her robe and hat and picked up her staff. Tori wiped his hands and stepped out of the bathroom.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked.

"Not really, but I want to get it over with."

"Can you wait a bit?" Tori rushed over into the kitchen and took out cold cuts and pickled vegetables, as well as small fish soaked in oil. He stuffed slices of bread with these items and placed them in a basket, which he handed to Euphemia.

"Here, I packed you some food. Eat it for dinner," Tori said.

"Wow..." Euphemia eagerly hugged him. "Thank you."

"Y-Yeah. Take care out there." Tori awkwardly gave Euphemia head pats. She looked up at him, gripping the pendant hanging from her neck.

"Let's talk through this, okay?" she said.

"Oh right, we have these. Will it work even while you're in the underworld?"

"Yeah. It'll be fine."

"Okay. I'll contact you later, so tell me if you can get home by dinner."

"Okay."

And so, Euphemia left for the underworld. Tori finished cleaning up the bathroom and moved on to the fireplace. He cleared out the soot that had gathered on the hearth and scattered it over the garden. Then he brought in the laundry and herded the birds back into the henhouse and fed them.

Once back inside, Tori folded the laundry and cleaned the floors. He filled the bathtub with water and lit the furnace to heat it. Finally, he got started on dinner. He still didn't know whether Euphemia or the others would be back in time to eat.

The sun had started setting, and by the time the sky turned red, the fireplace was blazing with the same color. When it got too dark out to keep working, Senynoma packed up her tools and went back inside the house.

"Phew... I sure did a lot today. Oh, where's Euphie?" Senynoma asked.

"She went back to the underworld," Tori replied while stirring the stew he had been cooking.

"Oh... She gonna make it back for dinner?"

"Dunno. Why don't we ask?"

Tori took out the pendant and twisted the knob. The magicstone glowed blue, and he spoke into it. "Hey, Euphie, can you hear me?"

There was a short silence before a voice replied, "I can."

"Are you gonna finish your work tonight?"

"No, I don't think I'll be home," Euphemia replied. "Oh, the food was great. Shino and the others were really happy about it."

"You already ate all of it?"

Apparently, Euphemia's familiars had been eating nothing but underworld food, and they'd missed Tori's meals.

"The spell is a lot more complicated than expected, and I have to do the work on my own, so I'll be taking a while. I might not be able to come back home tomorrow either," Euphemia said.

"Oh, I see. Okay then."

Euphemia appeared to be very busy, as she cut off contact right there.

“Looks like she can’t come home today,” Tori said.

“Yeah... I see... Huh?! W-Wait, d-d-does that mean I’ll be alone with you?!” Senynoma shrieked.

“Well, yeah, I suppose it does.”

Senynoma turned red up to her ears and shook her head frantically. “A-A-Alone with a man... I-I-I’m too shy for that!”

“Don’t you usually go home at night?”

“E-Euphie’s not here, so h-how am I supposed to get back?”

“Oh... Well, maybe we could ask Euphie to send you?”

“I-I’m on a temporary contract, so I can’t move around freely like Shino and the others do...”

“Huh? Temporary contract? What’s that?”

Senynoma explained how contracts worked. A familiar could be freely summoned and dismissed by the master they were contracted to. However, unlike Shinozuki, Subaru, and Cecilia, Senynoma was under a temporary contract, which meant there were limits to her summoning and dismissal. Whenever she was called to the surface, Euphemia would summon her through the magic circle in Senynoma’s atelier, and Euphemia had to open a direct connection from the surface to the underworld to send her back. As Senynoma mentioned, she couldn’t move around freely like Euphemia’s other familiars.

Since Euphemia was in the underworld, that meant Senynoma couldn’t open the astral gate to send herself back. Tori recalled that Shinozuki’d had to force Senynoma to come up here.

Well, that was something I hadn’t considered, he thought.

Of course, Tori was now completely used to his life here in Euphemia’s home, so he wouldn’t get flustered by someone like Senynoma at this point. He just needed to act like he usually did.

Tori pointed toward the bedroom. “You should use Euphemia’s room. You can

lock the door if you want.”

“Ooh... Ohh... O-Okay... Phew. This situation’s too intense for a lame and cruddy lady like me... I’m all hot and bothered ’n’ stuff...” Senynoma giggled, her face still flushed. It was almost like she wasn’t opposed to the situation. She was definitely alone in getting excited, however.

Tori sighed as he removed the stew from the heat and entered the kitchen. Senynoma was pacing around, seemingly unable to settle down.

“Sh-Should I help out with anything?” she asked.

“Sure. Could you check the temperature of the bath? If it’s too hot, please take some wood out of the furnace outside. If it’s just right, you can go ahead and use it,” Tori instructed.

“Y-You got it!” Senynoma went off to the bathroom.

Tori fried slices of fish in copious amounts of oil, then poured over a sauce made out of pickled vegetables, spices, and oil. He already served bread for lunch, and he wanted to save some for tomorrow, so he decided that dinner would be pasta. He took out the dough he had prepared earlier and stretched, cut, and boiled it, then topped it with some sauce he kept in the fridge.

Tori heard water running in the bath, which meant it must have been at the right temperature. He was setting the dining table with the platters of food when Senynoma came out of the bathroom, still covered in steam and vapor. She was still wearing her eye patch, but her messy hair had been tied back in a loose ponytail. She had also changed into her house clothes, which made her look quite cute.

“I-I went ahead and took a bath. Th-That felt pretty nice...”

“Good to hear. Let’s eat.”



The two of them had dinner. Tori was conscious of Senynoma taking furtive glances at him, but he tried his best to ignore it.

She's definitely not used to being around men, Tori thought. It wasn't that Senynoma was infatuated with him, but rather that the thought of being alone with any man at all was enough to excite her. Tori wasn't exactly a ladies' man either, but having lived in this house for a while, he had gotten used to their presence. He wasn't sure whether to be proud or ashamed of this reality.

"Senynoma, do you live alone?" Tori asked out of curiosity.

"H-Huh?! O-Oh, y-yes, I do! I live in the room behind my atelier," she answered.

"Your atelier, huh? What do you make there? Trinkets and accessories?"

"A li'l bit of everything, really. I get a lot of metalworking gigs, but I can work with wood and stone too. I also get called over to handle construction jobs."

Senynoma seemed to be capable of everything. It was no wonder that she was hailed as an artisan of the underworld.

"I don't hear much about cyclopes up here on the surface. Are there a lot of you guys?"

"U-Umm, I don't really know... B-But I know that cyclopes built a bunch of structures up here."

"Really?"

Tori could imagine powerful spellcasters of old having had cyclopes as their familiars. With the exception of Senynoma, cyclopes were apparently quite gigantic. Being able to summon a cyclops of colossal size would have made the construction of massive stone structures like forts and castles much simpler.

As they talked about such things, the air between them completely lightened up. Eventually they went to bed, and before long, the night gave way to morning.

Senynoma, the craftsman that she was, was an early riser like Tori. Nothing had changed with the new day—she was still Senynoma, the same old cyclops artisan.

“G-Good morning,” she greeted.

“Morning. You’re up early,” Tori replied while lighting the fireplace.

Senynoma laughed and started stretching. “Wakin’ up early means I can get a lotta good work done,” she said.

“Now *that’s* something I’d like Euphie and her familiars to hear,” he laughed as he placed a cauldron over the fire.

Tori warmed up the leftover stew from the previous night in the cauldron. Then, he went into the kitchen, took out some smoked meat and eggs, and fried both in a pan.

As the two of them ate breakfast, they heard a tapping sound coming from the window. Euphemia’s black bird familiar was back. Tori opened the window to let it in, and it left a letter on the dining table.

“A letter for Euphie?” Senynoma asked.

“Looks like it’s from the guild. And it has the stamp for emergencies on it.”

Tori weighed whether he should open the letter, then remembered the pendant hanging around his neck. He turned the knob and spoke into it.

“Euphie. Hey, Euphie. Are you awake?”

It took a moment before the pendant connected, and soon enough, he heard some mumbling and the rustling of clothes. The voice was muttering incoherently.

“Dammit. Hey, Euphie!” Tori yelled into the pendant.

“That’s Tori’s voice... I love him...” Euphemia mumbled. Tori heard the sound of Euphemia rubbing her cheek against the pendant.

“Gah! Stop mumbling and wake up already!”

“Mmmh... Oh, Tori. What’s going on?” Euphemia finally roused and replied, her voice still raspy.

Tori sighed in relief. “A letter from the guild just arrived. There’s a mark for urgent requests on it. When will you be back?”

“Mmm... I dunno. I’m only halfway through analyzing the spell. It’s really

complicated, and if I mess up, I might activate its defenses. So I need to be careful...”

“W-Wait. I dunno anything about magic. So what do I do with this letter?”

“Open it and read it to me.”

Tori broke open the seal and started reading it to Euphemia. “Uh... Lemme see... ‘To the esteemed Lady Gertrude, the White Witch, we hope that the fresh early spring breeze finds you well on this wonderful day. The city of Azrac is full of life as always—’”

“Skip the pleasantries and summarize the important stuff,” Euphemia instructed.

“Oh. Okay.” Tori perused the rest of the letter and began to go pale as he read the contents.

“E-Euphie! This is bad! Look!”

“I can’t see anything.”

“R-Right... Uh, remember that letter about the adamantine crab’s extermination? The one the platinum-ranked clans were doing?”

“Did they fail?”

“N-No, I think they got it. But all the clans that participated in the hunt have gone missing, including the Cerulean Dagger—”

“You mean Suzanna and the others?”

“Yeah. The guild found the corpses of the monsters, but the only people left were the members who were keeping watch on their camps and not involved in the actual hunt. The guild is requesting you to search for them.”

The hunt for the adamantine crab included the Cerulean Dagger, the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light, the Conquering Sword Brigade, the Weavers of Melancholy, and the Moonset and Blinding Flash—all well-known platinum-rank clans. Their ranks weren’t just for show; after a few days of observation, they had entered a fierce battle to eradicate both the adamantine crab and the monsters living on its back.

However, apparently, all the clan members had mysteriously vanished at the scene. The members who'd been guarding the camps went to check on the battle and found only the corpses of slain monsters everywhere.

Euphemia went quiet for a while. Tori waited anxiously for her reply. Senynoma was munching on bread while watching Tori.

"You said it's colossal for an adamantite crab, right?" Euphemia asked.

"Y-Yeah. I don't know exactly how big, though," Tori confirmed.

"I think that underworld crab must have absorbed a lot of magicstone while building its shell. The stones became arranged in an unusual way, and when its shell was shattered in the fight, they must have resonated and caused some kind of reaction."

Tori gulped. "Y-You think they all got blown into pieces?"

"No. If that happened, it would've exploded everything, including the camps around the area. I think some kind of spatial distortion occurred and everyone who was caught up in it got transported elsewhere."

"So, they're okay?"

"That, I don't know."

Tori let out a sigh of relief. At the very least, it looked like they hadn't been blown to smithereens.

"So what do we do now? Are you able to come back?" Tori asked.

"I can't leave yet," Euphemia answered.

"O-Oh..."

"Tori...you should go."

"...Huh?"

12. Tori the Adventurer

Tori anxiously stood in the parlor, holding his sword, which he hadn't touched in a long time. Along with his weapon, he had on him a number of other helpful tools for adventuring.

Senynoma oohed and aahed over him. "Tori, I didn't know you had a sword," she said.

"Well, I *was* an adventurer. Hmm, was this thing always this heavy?" Tori drew his sword and frowned. He had been wielding nothing but kitchen knives and billhooks at home, and it had been a while since he had held such a long blade. Tori could hardly believe that he used to swing this weapon every day.

The pendant around his neck had been left on all this time, and he could hear noisy chatter coming from the other end.

"Best of three! Rock, paper, scissors, shoot! Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

"Are you guys *still* trying to decide?" Tori complained.

"None of them want to give up," Euphemia replied, seemingly unconcerned.

Since Euphemia the White Witch was unable to leave the underworld, Tori was the one who would have to take up the job of investigating the disappearance of the platinum-rank clans. He would head to the site of the hunt for the adamantine crab, take a look around, and report to Euphemia through his pendant to figure out what to do next, in hopes that they would find a way to resolve this incident.

However, the transportation device Tori had could only go to Azrac. And of course, the journey to the site would be dangerous, so one of Euphemia's familiars would have to act as his escort and bodyguard. Naturally, all three of them volunteered, and now a terrible battle of rock paper scissors had unfolded to decide who would go. The winner was yet undeclared.

"Hey, no fair! You threw that after I did! You're cheating!" Subaru accused.

“You annoying little—! I ain’t cheating! A proud fenrir warrior would never cheat!” Shinozuki protested.

“Jeez, it’s so obvious that a magic specialist like me would be a better fit to accompany him! Why don’t you two just drop out and leave everything to me, your big sis Cecilia?”

“Who cares?! Play or forfeit!” Shinozuki yelled.

“Yeah!” Subaru agreed.

“Just get it over with already...” Tori groaned.

Whoever ended up going would be a tremendous asset in battle regardless. Tori was, of course, nervous about getting into trouble on the way, but he was more worried about Andrea and Suzanna.

Tori took a deep breath.

“Um, Tori...?” Senynoma started.

“Huh? What is it?”

Senynoma was fidgeting, her face red. “Um... W-Well... Wh-What should I have for lunch?”

All the tension suddenly left Tori’s body. It was indeed a valid concern, but Senynoma’s question took the wind out of his sails. He put down his gear and went into the kitchen. He fried minced meat and vegetables, then mixed them with breadcrumbs in a deep, heat-resistant bowl. Next, he made white sauce out of milk, butter, and flour and poured it over the mix. Finally, he topped the dish with grated cheese.

The kitchen stove still had some heat left from that morning’s breakfast. Tori checked the temperature and called Senynoma over.

“For lunch, you can put a few embers from the fireplace into the oven and use it to heat this. It’s already cooked, so you just need to wait until the cheese melts and starts to brown, then take it out. Just be careful not to burn it,” Tori instructed.

Senynoma took the bowl of gratin, her eyes sparkling in excitement. “Whew! A-Amazing... Y-You can just whip up somethin’ like this on the spot...”

Tori suddenly had the thought that the missing adventurers might be hungry. If they'd vanished in the middle of battle, they would have only had small, portable meals on them, especially if they'd had camps they meant to return to. Tori reexamined the items he had been planning to bring, then added biscuits and dried meat and fruits, along with three full bottles of water. Finally, he shoved a root of the mizuki tree into his bag, which he had been hanging from the rafters to dry. This particular root, when sucked, relieved thirst as if one had imbibed water.

While Tori was finishing his preparations, a magic circle suddenly appeared on the floor and Subaru emerged from within it.

"Hooray, it's the surface! Tori, feed me! I'm hungry!" she exclaimed.

"*That's* the first thing you say to me? Didn't you eat breakfast already?" Tori grumbled.

"No I haven't! And I want to eat *your* food! Come on, big bro! Do it for your cute little Subaru, okay? Big bro's food is the greatest in the world!" Subaru pleaded with the most obvious words of flattery ever to be spoken.

Just as Tori was thinking that Subaru had won the game of rock paper scissors, Shinozuki emerged from the magic circle next.

"Food!" she yelled.

"Huh? Why is Shino—"

Finally, Cecilia also appeared from the circle.

"Ahh, I'm at the point where I'm more comfortable here than down there... Hee hee... Tori dear, did you miss us? And oh my, Senynoma's here too! You two must have had something spicy going on up here, haven't you? You sly fox," Cecilia teased.

"S-Stop that! I-I-I ain't done nuthin' up here!" Senynoma protested.

"Oh really? I was talking about food, you know? What did you think I meant, hmm?"

"G-Gaah! I-I was just talkin' balderdash! L-Leave me alone!"

"Wait, wait, wait. Why are all three of you up here?" Tori cut in.

“None of us were willin’ to give in, so we thought it’d be faster if all three of us just went and took care of things,” Shinozuki answered.

“Besides, Euphie’s the only one who can do anything about that spell,” Subaru added.

“It’s just as they said, Tori dear. Also, none of us have eaten breakfast yet,” Cecilia said.

“I’m hungry!” Shinozuki yelled.

“Big brooo!” Subaru chimed in.

Tori would have to feed them before they could get anything done. He rushed to make omelets and grilled meat with a side of bread, and the three familiars eagerly gorged on the quick meal. Senynoma also heated up the bowl of gratin and happily ate with the others.

At this point, Tori thought that with all three familiars around, he would no longer be needed to finish the job. The three of them could also communicate with Euphemia, so his presence felt superfluous. After eating, Tori took his pendant and contacted Euphemia.

“Hey, Euphie?”

“What is it?”

“All three of them are here. You okay down there?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. I have some things left to do here,” Euphemia replied.

“Hey, since the three of them are around, do I still need to go with them? They can just communicate with you directly, can’t they?”

“You have to go. Just them won’t be enough.”

“Why not?”

Euphemia explained that familiars needed to operate close to their masters. In Euphemia’s case, she was so powerful that the three of them could operate independently of her as long as she was on the surface. But with the rift between the surface and the underworld standing in the way, it was impossible for the familiars to act on their own. Naturally, they could act independently

while in the underworld—their home turf—but on the surface, the contract between master and familiar weighed heavily on them.

“But what about right now?” Tori asked.

“The house is under special terms on the contract. Even while I’m in the underworld, my familiars will be able to remain so long as they don’t go far. Senynoma stuck around, didn’t she?” Euphemia said.

“Oh, you’re right... But why do they need me, then?”

“They’ll be needing the pendant.”

“This thing?” Tori grabbed the device hanging off his neck.

“Yes. With the pendant, you’ll act as the conduit for the mana between me and them. You’ll be emulating the special terms of the contract that apply to the house. That’s why you have to be there.”

“Can’t I just hand the pendant over to them?”

“When we added the communication function, I set it to stop working when used by anyone other than you. I don’t want strangers to get ahold of it, and I don’t want anyone to use it for evil,” Euphemia said.

“I see... Okay. Well, I’ll be careful, then.”

“Okay.”

Tori steeled himself and hung up.

With that, Tori and the three familiars finally headed out. Senynoma stayed behind, and Cecilia used her magic to transport the group to Azrac. First, they stopped by the guild to inform them that Tori would be acting as Euphemia’s representative and head to the location.

The city was as busy as ever, but the disappearance of the platinum-rank clans had led to the crowds buzzing around more than usual. It seemed that the guild had tried to cover up the incident, but word still spread through the grapevine.

The guild was packed when Tori’s group arrived. Several nosy bystanders were inside, trying to get as much information as they could about the incident.

“Oh my, it’s so crowded in here,” Cecilia said.

“There’s way too many people... You guys wait outside. I’ll go ahead and inform the guild,” Tori instructed. With that, the familiars stood by outside while Tori pushed his way to the counter.

Aisha the receptionist was at the counter for platinum-ranked clans. She seemed to be driving a group of tabloid reporters away, and it appeared that she’d been at it for a while, considering the irritated look on her face.

“Come on, you’re all so annoying! I’ll ban all of you if you keep insisting! You’re all bothering the adventurers, so go away!” she yelled.

Tori managed to get through the crowd of stubborn reporters. “Um—!”

“Oh, come on— O-Oh my, Tori?!” Aisha exclaimed out of shock. She jumped over the counter. “What’s going on? Oh right, the guild sent a letter to the White Witch—”

“Yeah, I’m here about that,” Tori said. “Eu—I mean, Gertrude is busy and won’t be able to make it, so I’m here as her representative.”

Aisha’s eyes sparkled upon hearing Tori’s words. “I knew it! You *are* an amazing adventurer!”

“No, no, no! You got it all wrong! I have three familiars acting as my escorts! I’m just an extra guy to them!”

“You’re being so modest!” Aisha didn’t seem to believe a single word he said. Tori was annoyed at the misunderstanding, but he couldn’t afford to waste any time.

“Anyway, I’m here to do the request on her behalf, so could you inform the guild?”

“You got it! We’re counting on you, Tori!” Aisha, relieved, saluted him.

Tori felt cold sweat run down his back from the heavy expectations that had suddenly been placed on him. He rushed out of the guild as quickly as he could.

When he did, he found Cecilia making a fuss near the entrance. She seemed to have captured something—or someone—in her arms and sounded very excited.

“Oh my, I can’t believe I ran into you here! This must be fate! It can’t be anything but destiny! Your big sis is so happy to see you!”

Tori hurried over. “Hey, Cecilia! What the heck are you up to? Stop making trouble for bystanders— Huh?”

“T-Tori?”

“Jean?! What are you doing all the way here?”

The person squirming in Cecilia’s tight embrace was Jean, former spellcaster of the Cerulean Dagger, looking as childlike as ever. He wasn’t wearing the usual attire worn by adventurers, but rather a regal-looking robe, fitting for an adviser to a royal household.

Jean let out a sigh of relief and fixed his robes after finally being released from Cecilia’s grasp. “Phew... It’s been a long time, Tori. You look well.”

“You too... What’s going on? I thought you went off to become the royal spellcaster for Pudemott,” Tori said.

“I did. Things have finally settled down and I finally have some free time, so I thought I should come visit and check on everyone. Looks like I came at a pretty bad time, huh?”

Jean seemed to be aware of the mass disappearance. He must have been on the way to ask the guild for details when Cecilia captured him.

“We’re on the way to check the area,” Tori explained.

“Do you mind if I come with you guys?” Jean asked. “I can’t just sit around at a time like this.”

“Of course not, dear!”

“No problem.”

“Sure, you can come with us!”

The three familiars seemed to have no objections. Cecilia in particular looked very happy and tried to stick as close to Jean as she could. Jean, meanwhile, had a complicated expression on his face.

The group went into a nearby alley, and Cecilia used her magic to transport

them to the site of the clans' disappearance. There, the remnants of the adamantine crab's gigantic shell could be found, sitting like a rocky, broken hill. Noxious mana lingered in the area, making it difficult to breathe. After hearing that the platinum-rank clans ran into trouble, other adventurers had steered clear of the place, and there was not a soul in sight. Still, foolhardy adventurers seeking treasure would likely start flocking to this place after a few days.

The holes in the crab's massive shell were so huge that they were reminiscent of gigantic caverns. The insides had already been destroyed during the battle, and corpses and fleshy remains were scattered all over. The stink of rotting shellfish permeated the air.

Shinozuki was pinching her nose, clearly uncomfortable with the smell. "Guuh! It stinks!"

"You do have a really good nose..." Tori sympathized.

"I'll stay out here. Call me if you need anything," she said, and walked far from the discarded crab shell.

Tori inspected his surroundings. The whole area was deserted. Even the adventurers who had been manning the clans' camps were nowhere to be found, presumably having returned to Azrac to regroup. The silence was eerie. The caverns within the discarded shell seemed to suck in wind from outside, causing an unearthly moan to echo from within.

"The caverns inside look very suspicious." Jean pointed to the cavity of the discarded shell.

"Right. I don't really want to step in there without a plan, but... I guess we have these guys around, so we'll be fine," Tori said, motioning toward the familiars.

"Sure reminds you of the old days, huh?" Jean muttered.

"Huh?"

"You know, back when we were still a silver-rank clan. We've gone out to do jobs together."

"Oh, yeah. We did."

Before Tori started doing background work for the Muddy Four-Horns, he used to swing his sword along with them as a frontline member. This memory now felt like the distant past to him.

“How’s your work as a royal spellcaster?” Tori asked. “Busy as ever?”

“Quite. But it’s fulfilling work, I would say. I feel very happy offering my services to my homeland,” Jean replied.

“Well, you *did* become an adventurer to do exactly that.”

“Hey, have you met up with Andrea and Suzanna since the last time we saw each other?”

“I did, just recently, even. They seemed to be doing pretty well.”

“That’s good to hear. I thought I would be able to meet up with them. It’d be one thing if they were out on a job, but to think that they disappeared into thin air... Well, it was always a possibility in their line of work...”

“Yeah. That’s just how adventuring is, I guess.”

It might be easy to forget since they were all highly skilled, but adventuring was still a job that toed the fine line between life and death. A friend could be laughing heartily one day and come back as a corpse the next. Tori shuddered at the thought.

Right then, Cecilia called out from atop the shell. “Jean, Tori, could you two come up here?”

“Okay, we’re coming,” Jean called back.

“Did something happen?” Tori wondered.

Subaru and Cecilia were on top of the discarded crab shell. Several magicstones and ores of various kinds were embedded in it, some of which had been shattered due to the fighting.

“Do these look familiar to you?” Cecilia asked.

“Dragon eye, golden amphibole, and striped quartz... These are all highly disruptive to magnetic fields,” Jean answered.

“Right. And there’s a mix of red and blue garnets over there. This combination

would gather an immense amount of mana in an instant.”

“With this many magicstones around, it could have triggered some kind of unpredictable reaction...”

Tori grabbed his pendant and twisted the knob. “Euphie? Are you there?” he called into the device.

A moment later, he heard Euphemia’s voice mixed with a trembling noise in the background. “I can hear you,” she said.

“Do you have a moment? We’re at the site of the disappearance.”

“I do.”

Cecilia and Jean then explained to her what was happening with the magicstones.

“It looks like the battle caused some sort of mana disruption in the area. The magicstones on the crab resonated and ripped open a hole in space,” Cecilia theorized.

“Right. In that case, the inside of the shell should still be connected to the space on the other side,” Euphemia replied.

“Does that mean everyone went in intentionally?” Tori asked.

“I don’t know about that. They might have been sucked in when the hole formed and connected the dimensions,” Euphemia said.

“That’s very possible,” added Jean. “See this? The shell is huge, but there’s very little flesh from the crab left here. I think its body was also pulled into the hole. If the force was strong enough to pull the crab in, then it would mean the others probably got caught too.”

Subaru had her hands folded behind her head. “So are we gonna go inside and look for them?” she asked.

“Looks like it,” Cecilia said. “Where’s Shino?”

“She’s still keeping her distance because it stinks over here,” Tori answered.

“Hey Shino! We’re going! Come here or we’ll leave you behind!” Subaru yelled. Shinozuki answered affirmatively from a distance. She would likely

follow soon enough.

Tori climbed down from the crab shell and stared into the dark cavern inside. He felt the wind being sucked into the cavity. Perhaps it was still pulling things in, albeit with a much weaker force.

Well, this is definitely an adventure now, he thought, clutching the strap of his rucksack.

13. Can't Fight on an Empty Stomach

The interior of the monster's shell was a veritable cavern. The corridors were wide, and the ceilings high. The walls glittered from the various magicstones embedded into the rock face, making the tunnels bright enough to traverse without assistance.

Space was indeed being distorted inside the shell's tunnels. The party had already walked enough to cross the width of the crab's shell outside, but the cavern inside kept going. On top of that, the paths branched off to the side, forming something akin to a labyrinth.

"Hiyaah!" Subaru's kick shattered a man-sized adamantite crab in her way.

"Too slow." Shinozuki's hand chop split the crab's shell in two.

"The obstacles here aren't even obstacles..." Tori muttered.

It had been some time since the party entered the cavern inside the shell, and monsters had started to appear. Many of them had incredibly tough shells, and regular adventurers would be hard-pressed to get through them, but these residents of the underworld dealt with them as if they were swatting flies off their shoulders. Tori appreciated the fact that they weren't in any danger, but all the tension and anxiety he had felt preparing for this trip now felt like a waste, considering how smoothly it was going.

Tori was carrying heavy luggage on him, so it wasn't realistic for him to step up and fight monsters. Shinozuki and Subaru had been looking for opportunities to go wild, so this was the perfect excuse for them to flex their muscles.

"Man, these monsters ain't worth the time! Not even good for a workout!" Shinozuki complained.

"Hey, can a tougher monster show up already? Any time now!" Subaru yelled.

"Stop it, you dumbass! What are you gonna do if one actually shows up?!" Tori shushed her.

As if on cue, a gigantic wood louse appeared. It crawled forward with its many legs, sending shivers down the spines of those who watched it.

Tori couldn't help but wrap his arms around himself and shudder. "Oh, gross!" he groaned.

"What? It's just a bug." Shinozuki, unfazed and unflinching, squashed the wood louse in an instant. She turned around and snorted with pride. "That's thirteen for me. Subaru, you're trailin' behind."

"Hmph! I'm at twelve, so it's still a close fight!" Subaru retorted. Apparently, they were competing on how many monsters they've defeated.

Cecilia, who wasn't participating in the competition, was keeping hold of Jean's hand. Her tight grip appeared to make it difficult for Jean to walk. Tori felt somewhat disappointed considering Jean had gone out of his way to join them but Cecilia was occupying most of his time.

"Jean dear, don't let go of my hand, okay? I don't want you to get lost," Cecilia said in a concerned tone.

"O-Okay..." Jean muttered.

"Hey Jean, if you don't like it, you should speak up. Cecilia's pretty persistent," Tori chided.

"My, Tori dear, you're such a spoilsport! Right, Jean?"

"U-Uh, well, I guess...?"

Jean, ever kindhearted, couldn't push away Cecilia's advances outright. He could only fidget around and avert his eyes.

Tori sighed. *This is hopeless*, he thought. He decided to leave the two alone.

As they went deeper into the cave, the passages also grew narrower. As the paths split more and more, Tori felt confused on which way to go, but Shinozuki, who had been leading the way, continued to walk forward without any hesitation. Her complete confidence made everyone follow her with no complaints.

"Shino, are we going the right way?" Tori asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, we’re good. I can smell it from here,” she replied.

“Smell what? The adventurers?”

“Nah, it’s the crab. Can’t mistake that awful stink for anything.”

“Huh? Why are you following the crab’s smell?”

“Didn’t everyone get sucked in together? If we find the crab, we’ll find everyone.”

“Oh, yeah.” Tori realized Shinozuki was right.

“Besides, the wind is blowing this way, right? Pretty sure we’re going the right way,” Subaru chimed in. As a phoenix, she was used to riding on the wind, so she was also sensitive to changes in air direction. Just as she said, Tori felt a light breeze blowing from behind them.

Shinozuki and Subaru might be somewhat idiotic, but they weren’t acting without thinking. In fact, Tori realized that he had been the thoughtless one and felt embarrassed by his ignorance.

Damn, I’ve been away from the field for so long that my skills have really dulled...

Even before getting hired by Euphemia, after taking on support jobs more and more, Tori had gone out into the field less and less. It had been several years since he had last set foot in a proper dungeon.

Tori shook his head. *I have to get it together*, he thought and sighed. As he hiked the rucksack up higher on his back, the pot hanging off let out a big clang.

“Tori, what’s with the pot?” Jean asked.

“Huh? Oh, well, I just thought everyone would be hungry...”

While Tori was watching Euphemia’s familiars scarf down their breakfast earlier, he’d thought of the adventurers all lost somewhere, likely starving. Instead of packing magic tools and items, he decided to take everything out and stuff his rucksack full of food, ingredients, and cooking tools instead. He brought as much water as he could carry, and thought he should prepare to even cook on the spot if needed, so he also brought a pot. At that point, he had officially packed too much, so he split his cargo with Shinozuki and Subaru so he

could walk more freely.

Come to think of it, this was pretty shortsighted of me, Tori thought. Still, all he could offer to this expedition was to cook meals. He had no idea if his tools and ingredients would be of any use, but at this point, there was no turning back.

Tori fixed the rucksack on his back once more, causing the pot to let out another loud clang.



The pain throughout Andrea's body woke him from his slumber. He had been lying on the ground. He sat up and looked around, finding himself in a poorly lit place. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, he realized he was in some sort of rocky cave. The ceiling was high, and the chamber he was in was wide, though large pillars of rock kept him from seeing the full scope of it. The rock walls were covered in gems and magicstone, with some of them emitting a pale glow, the only source of illumination in this chamber.

The next thing Andrea became aware of was the horrible smell invading his nostrils. It was a fishy, seafood smell mixed in with the stench of rot. The pungent odor made him hesitant to even breathe.

"What happened...?" Andrea squinted and saw the gigantic corpse of the adamantine crab lying nearby. Its shell had been shattered by physical attacks as well as Great Sorceries. Its soft insides had spilled out onto the floor as if it had melted. It would seem that this corpse was the source of the great stench.

Andrea lightly banded his temple with the palm of his hand repeatedly to jog his memory. He recalled that the battle took place at night. The monsters that had been living on the adamantine crab's shell had assaulted them, and as they'd repelled the assault, one of the other clans had started a counterattack on the crab itself.

The Cerulean Dagger and the other clans, afraid of falling behind, also went on the offensive, showering the adamantine crab with powerful attacks worthy of their mighty platinum rank. Great Sorceries were unleashed, along with weapons imbued with mana. The area became saturated with mana from all the spells and sorceries being thrown around, and soon, a turbulent wind started blowing. Andrea recalled that the gems on the crab's back began to glow, and soon the magicstones were emitting a brilliant light.

With the battle in full swing, the adamantine crab and its parasites had no time to retreat back into the gigantic shell. The enemy monsters were pierced, crushed, and smashed, scattering fragments of shell and chunks of flesh all over.

Nobody could tell who landed the finishing blow. However, shortly after the

clans had exterminated the adamantine crab, the corpse suddenly got sucked into the shell. All at once, a violent wind started pushing from behind them. More accurately, they were being pulled into the void inside the shell. Before Andrea could comprehend what was happening, his consciousness began to fade, and the next thing he knew, he was lying here on the ground.

“I...don’t seem to be injured,” Andrea muttered as he tested his arms and legs. He confirmed that he wasn’t badly hurt anywhere. He could feel some bruises here and there from the hard landing, but he wasn’t feeling pain from his bones or muscles. He did feel that it was a bit difficult to breathe, perhaps owing to the noxious vapors inside the cave.

Andrea stood up and examined his surroundings once more. He found several people who were similarly unconscious or off-balance, and then he heard a soft groan coming from nearby.

“Suzanna, wake up.” Andrea tapped the shoulder of Suzanna, who had collapsed not far from him. Suzanna mumbled, squirmed gingerly, and opened her eyes slightly. She squinted before sitting up.

“Huh, Andrea? What’s going on...”

“I don’t know either. Do you remember getting sucked into the shell?”

“Oh yeah... I think I do. Where is everyone?” Suzanna asked.

“They’re here, still knocked out. Let’s go and wake them up,” Andrea suggested.

The two of them went around waking up their clan members. Besides the Cerulean Dagger, members of other clans were also present.

“Are we all here?” Andrea checked.

“Yeah. Looks like it’s everyone who was at the battle,” Suzanna replied.

It seemed that everyone in the Cerulean Dagger who had participated in the assault had been sucked into this cave. Andrea surmised that it was the same for all the other clans.

“Oh, hello, everyone. Looks like you’re all still alive,” a voice called out. Andrea turned and found Robin, the leader of the Order of the Dragon’s

Purifying Light, emerging from behind a stone pillar.

Kristoff, the vice commander, cackled. “Hello, dear Andrea. It would seem that you are unharmed. All well and good! Now, can we head elsewhere? It *stinks* over here.”

“Hmm?” Andrea glanced at the corpse of the adamantine crab, which was still emitting the stench of rotting fish.

Robin sighed. “How about it? Looks like there’s a big space over there. Also smells better than whatever’s goin’ on here,” she offered.

Andrea and the others concurred. The group woke up the other adventurers and moved to an area away from the rotting corpse. There, they found the members of the Order, along with a number of dragons curled up on the floor.

Suzanna’s eyes went wide. “Even the dragons got pulled in,” she said in awe.

“Yeah. Poor things. They’re terrified.” Robin sighed and stroked the chin of one of the dragons.

As the other adventurers roused, they began to murmur to each other. The other clans seemed to have heard the commotion and started to gather around the same space. Soon enough, all of the adventurers that had been pulled in were in one place, many looking around anxiously.

Gaspar, leader of the Conquering Sword Brigade, spoke irritably. “Well? What’s going on? Where are we?”

“We got pulled into that crab’s shell. Damn it. Can’t believe that thing was saving this trick for when it died,” said Marius, commander of the Moonset and Blinding Flash.

“It was indeed completely out of the blue. Well now, what shall we do?” said Rosehill, head of the Weavers of Melancholy. Her gorgeous, platinum-blond hair was dirt-stained and disheveled. She was leaning against her cane, occasionally making pained expressions. It appeared that she had hurt her leg.

“In any case, we gotta look for a way out. We can’t just stay here,” Jeffrey said. The other adventurers looked at each other.

“Are we even gonna find one?”

“Well, we can’t just sit here forever!”

“We might get lost if we just wander around aimlessly.”

“Hey, I’m hungry...”

A commotion had started among the adventurers, but eventually, the leaders were able to organize their members in groups of three to explore the area in various directions. The commanders and the other remaining adventurers started planning what to do next, but they couldn’t come up with anything past that.

Andrea, who had been lost in thought, suddenly spoke up. “Come to think of it, how long has it been since we got pulled in?”

Rosehill, who had been sitting close to him, looked puzzled. “Hmm, it can’t have been that long ago, can it?”

“Aren’t we all hungry? Besides, the corpse of that crab is starting to rot. It would be strange for that to happen immediately,” he added.

“Now that you mention it... Does that mean we were all out cold for that long?” Marius asked.

Andrea nodded. “It’s also really hard to breathe in here, don’t you think? At first, I thought the air was just thin, but it seems there’s some kind of vapor lingering here. That might be why it took us a while to wake up.”

“Still, isn’t it too fast for a corpse that big to rot already?” Rosehill muttered anxiously.

Lotten, a spellcaster from the Cerulean Dagger, frowned. “Not at all. Creatures that hold a lot of water like that rot very quickly...though it was already pretty stinky anyway. It’s probably been only two or three days since then.”

“In that case, won’t the people outside have noticed by now? Are they forming rescue teams out there?” Suzanna wondered. The adventurers who had been posted at the camps would have sounded the alarm if their main squads hadn’t returned.

Robin nodded. “In that case, it might be better to stay put and just wait for

the rescue teams to arrive.”

“What? You want us, the proud Conquering Sword Brigade, to sit down and wait for help?” Gaspar scoffed.

Rosehill snorted. “My, if you would like to wander around until you die of thirst, be our guest. Our clan would welcome having fewer rivals running around.”

“Tch. You snooty brat,” Gaspar spat.

Curtis, the armored swordsman, stepped in. “This isn’t the time to be squabbling. In any case, we don’t have enough food or water to last us. Moving around aimlessly will be fatal.”

Marius sighed. “He’s right. We left all our supplies back at our camps.”

“Well, yeah. It’s not like we could carry around all our food while fighting that giant crab,” Kristoff said.

Right then, one of the recon squads came running back. “Help, help! We need backup!”

“What’s going on?”

A cast of giant crabs with dark blue shells were approaching from the same direction.

“Th-They came from that hole that was blocked by a rock! We thought it might lead to an exit, but then those things crawled out!”

“Hmph! Why’re you all scared of a bunch of crabs? Anyone who can still fight, follow my lead!” Gaspar shouted. He unsheathed his katana and charged at the crabs. Members of the Conquering Sword Brigade followed, along with a number of other adventurers.

Andrea also drew his sword and turned to Suzanna. “I’ll go too. Suzanna, I’ll leave this place to you.”

“Got it. Be careful!” she replied.

As Andrea and Gaspar started battling the crabs, another group of adventurers returned, and crawling behind them was a giant monster

resembling some sort of sea creature.

“Help! It’s after us!” the adventurers cried.

“Oh, come on, it’s one after the other!” Rosehill yelled and stood up. However, she winced in pain and grabbed her right leg. Despite that, she brandished her staff. “Hold the front line! I’ll blast them all with my magic!”

“Okay, okay! We’ll help out too.” Marius and the members of the Moonset and Blinding Flash readied their staves and grimoires. However, Robin stepped up front and stopped them.

“We don’t know what’ll happen if all of you blast these monsters with Great Sorceries all at once. Leave this to us.” Before she even finished talking, Robin readied an arrow, strung her bow, and took a shot. A spell seemed to have been imbued into the arrow, since as soon as it found its mark in the sea creature’s forehead, the monster seemed to explode from within. The gigantic monster collapsed onto the ground.

Kristoff clapped his hands. “Just as expected from our commander! I am always pleased to see that you have the bark to back all that bite.”

“Shut up or I’ll whack you,” Robin spat.

Rosehill sighed in relief. “Thank you, Robin.”

“It just ain’t the time to be squabblin’ between ourselves, is all. Why don’t you have that leg of yours looked at?” Robin suggested.

“What’s going on, Miss Rosehill? Did you sprain your leg? Why don’t I take a look?” Marius reached out, but she flinched and scooted back.

“Hey! Do *not* touch a lady without permission!” she cried.

“Oh dear, excuse me. Well, if you have the energy to yell like that, I suppose you don’t need any healing,” Marius said sarcastically. Rosehill pouted and glared at him.

Suzanna intervened. “Okay, okay, calm down, you two. I have some emergency healing items with me. Rosehill, do you mind if I use these on you?”

“Ngh... N-No, not at all. Please, go ahead.” Rosehill hesitantly pulled up the hem of her skirt, exposing her smooth, pale legs. The men nearby let out cries

of admiration.

“Hey, quit looking! I’ll gouge out all your eyeballs.” Robin aimed her bow at the men who’d gathered around to ogle and drove them all away.

Lotten sighed in exasperation as she set her bag down on the ground. One of Rosehill’s legs had a spot that was swollen and purple. “Why are all the men here such dumbasses? Suzanna, I have some potions that we got from the guild. Why don’t you use them?”

“Sure. Thanks, Lotten,” Suzanna said.

“Also, Rosehill, was it? You better quit acting so high-and-mighty. I dunno where you’re from, but we’re all adventurers here.” Lotten hauled her staff over her shoulder as she scolded Rosehill.

“Ngh...” Rosehill moaned.

“Agreed. And we’re all platinum-rank. You don’t have the right to scoff at anyone here,” Robin chimed in. Rosehill pouted and sulked.

Suzanna tried to clear the air. “Come on, you two. Don’t gang up on the injured.”

Suddenly, someone’s stomach rumbled. Robin frowned and rubbed her belly. “Sorry ’bout that.”

“Ha ha ha... Wait, this is no laughing matter. I’m hungry too,” Lotten realized and sighed.

After an hour of fighting, the swarm of monsters had been eliminated. The adventurers who’d fought them didn’t appear to have had much trouble, but they all looked exhausted.

“I’m hungry... No more energy...” Jeffrey grumbled.

Kristoff stared at the crab corpses lying around. “Are those crabs edible?” he asked.

“I suggest you avoid those. They’re poisonous. I recognize the marks on their back,” Marius warned. A few adventurers who had been talking about how to cook them shuddered and then eyed the crabs in disappointment.

Since the adventurers had woken up, they'd been too agitated to take notice of the state of their own bodies, but after performing intense movements in battle, the hunger and thirst had suddenly hit them all at once.

"It might have been a good thing that we were knocked out. If we'd stayed awake for three whole days, I don't think we would have lasted," said Andrea.

Curtis sighed. "Is that really any consolation? Or was it just prolonging our inevitable demise?"

Gaspar scoffed and folded his arms. "You're all pathetic. Truly excellent warriors would never complain about hunger!"

"Yeah, yeah. Good thing muscleheads like you don't ever feel hungry," Robin quipped.

Gaspar scowled. "What did you say, you little brat?!"

"Quit starting fights already. It's a waste of energy," Jeffrey cut in.

In the hours that followed, more monsters attacked the encampment. While the adventurers managed to take care of them, it used up even more of their energy and worsened the cries of their empty stomachs. Even these seasoned platinum-rank adventurers started to feel fatigued. On top of that, the noxious air they were all breathing accelerated their exhaustion. Even their sense of time was no longer functioning, and nobody could tell whether half a day or a whole one had passed. Time only served to sap more of their remaining strength.

Marius stared at the cowering dragons with empty eyes. "Are dragons edible?" he asked.

"What are you saying?! Of course not!" Kristoff shouted indignantly.

Rosehill, who had her arms wrapped around her knees, spoke up. "But at this rate, we'll all die of starvation."

"But how could you even suggest eating these adorable creatures!" Kristoff turned to Robin. "Commander, please say something!"

Robin averted her eyes, then said, "You can have my dragon first if it comes to that."

“Commander?!”

“We have to know our priorities. We can’t have anyone die just because we find dragons cute. But I need you all to wait a bit. Someone might still come and rescue us.”

Robin hugged her knees. Her stomach rumbled. “I miss Serisevunia’s sausage stew,” she muttered.

“Ooh, that’s a good one! I love the sauerkraut, and it’s great when paired with ale!” Kristoff exclaimed. The other adventurers gulped.

Marius laughed listlessly. “Ha ha, meat is great and all, but you gotta love fish too. Like Port Otobal’s seafood stew. The shrimp and squid juices in it are so rich and tasty. And when paired with dry wine... Man.”

Several of the adventurers sighed after hearing Marius’s words. Port Otobal was a port city in the southwest, known for its delicious food, and was the hometown of Marius and the Moonset and Blinding Flash. Being by the ocean, their cuisine was rich in seafood, and as a key location on the marine trade routes, it had access to all kinds of herbs and spices from other regions.

“Usimoria’s moose steak is also fantastic. It’s smoked in dried chimsy grass to give it fragrance, and you pour sweet wine sauce over it...” Rosehill reminisced.

Stomachs everywhere began to growl. Usimoria was a city in the northwest with a cold climate, and the homeland of the Weavers of Melancholy. It was covered in snow for most of the year, but its land was rich from the great river flowing through it, along with the fertile forests it fed. Moose had a unique flavor compared to other kinds of meat, but it was said to be addictive to those who’d had a taste of it.

Gaspar stood up. “What are you all talking about?! Maukaila’s grilled wraps are supreme! The crispy, freshly baked dough, and the juicy meat inside... It’s truly—” Gaspar cut himself short and looked up at the ceiling, pressing his mouth shut, seemingly trying to keep drool from dripping down his chin.

Maukaila was a great city to the west of Azrac, located in a rocky, mountainous region. The Conquering Sword Brigade used to operate in that city. Its rough and rugged terrain gave birth to a cuisine that incorporated

flavors of its wildlands, and many sang the praises of the city's food.

"Damn it, could you all stop talking already?! You're making me even hungrier!" Jeffrey yelled.

"I don't want to die here..." Lotten muttered.

"Who the hell suggested we stay here and wait?!" an adventurer who had seemingly reached their limit cried out. This defeated attitude was infectious, and soon enough, the cavern echoed with complaints, rants, and curses. Everyone was at their wits' end, and nobody bothered to stop them. Suzanna was sobbing in a corner, while Andrea kept quiet, trying to keep his despair to himself.

Right then, monsters began approaching once more. Giant, dark blue crabs and large wood lice were crawling toward them. On top of that, there were also monsters resembling amoebas in the mix.

"They're so annoying! I'm gonna cut you all down!" Gaspar and several other adventurers stood up and brandished their weapons, deciding to take out their irritation on the monsters to keep themselves together. While their movements lacked their usual grace and finesse, they were still platinum-rank adventurers, and they dealt with the monsters without major issue.

I don't think anyone will be able to move anymore after this fight, Andrea thought. His fears came true; after defeating the horde, the adventurers had reached their limit and collapsed in various positions out of exhaustion. They were officially out of energy. Considering that their battle lacked finesse or technique, many were also injured from taking attacks they usually wouldn't have suffered.

However, the assault didn't end there. An even larger crab appeared, snapping its gigantic claws. It was a completely different type of crab from the ones they had been fighting up till now, clearly distinguished by its thicker, bright red shell and much longer legs. Its eyes flitted around, glaring at the adventurers below.

The adventurers who had taken out their frustration on the previous crabs could no longer move.

“Damn it.” Andrea stood up unsteadily and readied his sword. He glanced behind him and saw the spellcasters attempting to rise as well. Hunger and thirst had dulled their focus, and they were completely unable to launch any spells even if they tried.

Its shell looks really tough. I sure hope my blade is sharp enough. Andrea gritted his teeth and faced the crab.

“Hey! No fair! You dashed ahead of me!”

“Shaddup! Faster one wins!”

All of a sudden, Andrea heard familiar voices. Just as he looked up, the crab’s shell split cleanly in two. The creature collapsed onto the ground, and Andrea saw a flash of silver hair. Shinozuki was standing there victoriously with a big grin on her face.

“Wah ha ha! That makes 186! Subaru, that’s a tie!”

“Damn it! And I was winning too!”

“Shino! Subaru!” Suzanna cried out. The members of the Cerulean Dagger looked up in surprise, and their expressions crumbled in joy and relief. Some even started crying. The rest of the adventurers looked puzzled as to who these people were, but they immediately understood that they had been saved.

“Oh hey, it’s Suzanna! Wow, everyone’s here! Hey, we found them! Tori, over here!” Subaru yelled.

“Huh? Tori?” said Andrea, dumbfounded.

“Oh, Andrea! And Suzanna! Glad you guys are okay!”

Tori appeared before the stunned adventurers, carrying a huge load on his back.

14. Trapped and Responsible

“Huh, so it was you guys who were riding those dragons! I didn’t know there were humans who could ride them!” Subaru cackled in her phoenix form.

Robin, who’d been chewing on the mizuki root, sighed and looked up at her.

“Yeah, that’s right. Man, this sucks. Can’t go out pickin’ fights with the folks who saved our lives, now can we?”

Subaru flapped her wings and laughed. “I don’t mind! I’ll for sure beat you guys up, though.”

“Hey, don’t move your tail feathers!” yelled a voice from behind Subaru. Tori was holding a large wooden spoon.

Subaru folded her wings, looking displeased. “Is it done yet?” she grumbled.

“No. Just hold still for a while longer.”

Behind Subaru were two makeshift stoves constructed out of stone, and her tail feathers were poking out from under them, ablaze. On one stove, a crab leg was baking inside its shell, and on the other, a pot was starting to boil. Hungry adventurers were gathered around, drooling in anticipation.

Boiling in the pot was a wheat porridge made hearty with dried meat and herbs, along with more meat from the gigantic crab the familiars had just defeated. Unlike the poisonous blue crabs, this one was edible. A tasty smell had started to waft from the crab leg, and the scent of herbs was spreading from the porridge. It was almost torture to the adventures who had spent the past few days without any food.

Tori gave the pot a stir and nodded to himself. “Okay, looks like it’s ready. But we don’t have any bowls... Sorry, but if you guys have any hats or helmets, can we use those and pass them around?”

“Hell yeah!”

Nobody bothered to complain that this practice was boorish or unhygienic.

The adventurers all rushed to fill their hats, helmets, and even bucklers with steaming hot porridge. The fats from the rehydrated meat and crab juices hit their hungry stomachs with a sharp sensation, but even that feeling filled them with bliss. Some even shed a few tears as they happily slurped down their meal.

“This might be the tastiest wheat porridge I’ve ever had,” Marius muttered.

“No way,” Tori laughed awkwardly.

“No, it really is that good...” Rosehill said, sniffing as she slurped down her food.

I know they say hunger is the best spice, but everyone’s going a bit too far with their praise, Tori thought, embarrassed.

The grilled crab meat had a rich flavor, so much so that it was delicious even without any salt. Even the dragons happily ate it and regained their energy. They were a bit on edge with a phoenix and fenrir nearby, but the dragoons did their best to keep them calm.

“C-Can I have some more of that porridge?” Gaspar asked.

Tori peered into the pot. There was only a little bit left. “Sure, why not? It looks like everyone’s had their fill, and it’ll make cleaning up easier.”

Subaru was still in her phoenix form, looking at her tail. “My feathers reek of crab!” she complained.

“At least it smells tasty,” Tori quipped.

“I don’t want it to smell tasty!”

“Don’t say that. Here, have some crab.”

“Okay!”

Subaru pecked at the huge, steaming piece of meat with her beak. Elsewhere, Shinozuki was also scarfing down a massive hunk of crab. There was so much of it that neither of them asked for any of the wheat porridge, making Tori’s work in distributing the food much easier.

“You’re incredible! I can’t believe you can tame a phoenix like this,” Kristoff complimented Tori.

Robin, who was next to Kristoff, pouted. “Tori, you sure are a sly man. You knew all about the White Witch and the phoenix, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t really say anything to folks trying to pick a fight with them, you know?” Tori replied.

“Well, that’s true.” Robin sighed and bowed her head. “You really saved all of us this time. The way things were going, we would’ve started eating our dragons. Or we might’ve been crab food even before that. We really owe you big time. We’ll make sure to repay you. Be sure to tell us if you ever need help.”

“It’s exactly as Robin says,” Marius said, joining the conversation. “Tori, right? You saved our whole clan. The Moonset and Blinding Flash are all grateful to you. We’ll be sure to return the favor if you’re ever in trouble.”

“The Weavers of Melancholy also give our utmost gratitude,” Rosehill said with tears streaming down her face. “When I think that we would’ve starved without your help...” She sniffed. “Thank you so much, Tori. We shall be sure to express our thankfulness. You may seek our assistance at any time.”

“Let it never be said that we, the Conquering Sword Brigade, are ingrates!” Gaspar stood up, having downed the last of the porridge. “We are grateful to you, Tori! If you ever need anything, be sure to inform us at once!”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey! Hold up!” Tori cried. “Why are you all telling me this? I’m only here as the White Witch’s representative!”

Andrea laughed. “That’s not right. Sure, the White Witch could have come here and rescued everyone, but you’re the only one who would’ve made sure to fill everyone’s stomachs. This was *your* doing, Tori.”

Tori gulped. He knew Andrea was right. He scratched his head, feeling embarrassed.

Suzanna slapped Tori’s back. “Here you are, saving all of us again! Thanks so much, Tori!”

“Y-Yeah.” Tori, trying to hide his embarrassment, started gathering up the utensils and leftover ingredients around the stoves. Behind him, the other clan leaders fidgeted about.

“We’ll help out.”

“Tori, let us assist you.”

“Please tell us what you need.”

“Don’t hold back, now.”

“Damn it, enough about me already! You guys go and get ready so we can head out soon!” Tori yelled. The clan leaders complied, and each of the clans started doing roll calls and taking inventory of their equipment.

Tori let out a sigh. Jean, who had been in Cecilia’s grasp the whole time, approached him.

“Good work, Tori. Looks like you’ve gotten even better at cooking,” he said.

“Well, that’s bound to happen when I do it every single day. I guess I was right to bring some pots.”

Tori originally regretted bringing his cooking supplies due to their weight, but it turned out to be the right call. He had used up a lot of ingredients while cooking—water, dried wheat, and preserved meat—which ended up lightening his load by a lot. It looked like the way home would be much easier.

“Hey Jean, I didn’t think you’d be here. Color me surprised,” Andrea said.

Jean laughed. “Yeah, same here. This isn’t how I imagined reuniting with you guys. But Shinozuki and Subaru were with us, so I didn’t really do anything on the way here. I really wonder why I even came.”

“Hey, you acted as Cecilia’s protective charm. That’s something,” Tori said.

“Ha ha, you’re the only one who’d console me like that, Tori.”

Suddenly, a thundering sound echoed and a large hole opened in one of the cavern’s walls. The adventurers, all shocked by the noise, stood alert and readied their weapons.

The hole was pitch-black, but before anyone could even ask what was going on, a gigantic figure appeared from within. It was the size of two people and had messy white hair, a great robe and hat, and a fierce expression on its wrinkled face. It was the White Witch herself, exuding a powerful and

intimidating presence.

The clan members who had never encountered her were terrified and prepared to fight. However, the members of the Cerulean Dagger all cried out in joy.

“Whoa, the White Witch is here!”

“Now we’ll be safe going back home!”

“Huh? That’s the White Witch? The strongest in all of Azrac...?” Robin gulped and felt cold sweat run down her back. “Damn... That’s a creature on a completely different level from all of us...”

“Commander... *That’s* what we were trying to pick a fight with?” Kristoff asked, his face pale.

The dragons, which had been calm up until that moment, suddenly reeled and started running amok. The dragoons hurriedly tried to quiet them, but to no avail.

“Silence.”

A voice, akin to a bellow from the depths of the earth, echoed throughout the cavern. The dragons shivered and whimpered before turning their heads toward the White Witch in trepidation. The adventurers all froze in place. They all looked at each other in concern or hid in the shadows. Even the members of the Cerulean Dagger, though elated at the White Witch’s arrival, didn’t dare speak at that moment and waited in apprehensive silence.

“Huh? Why are you here?” Tori asked.

The White Witch glared at him. “It seemeth that the adamantine crab hadst been transported to the surface by a spatial hole in the underworld.”

“What? Is that hole still connected to the surface, then?”

“I have finished investigating the spell that was cast in the underworld. Cecilia.”

“Yes? What is it?” Cecilia, who seemed to have been busy with something on another side of the cavern, asked.

“Hast thou finished thy investigation?” the White Witch asked.

“Yes, I’m all done. Now we just have to match the two spells and repair them, then our work will be finished.”

“It is thus, Tori. I am only here to confirm the state of things. I shall return to my previous post.”

“Oh, okay, then. Well, whatever. Good work.”

“Thou hast done well, Tori. My granddaughter shall be quite pleased,” the White Witch said.

Tori looked puzzled. *She’s saying something weird again...*

“What’s she talking about?”

“Granddaughter? Huh?”

The adventurers all started whispering among each other.

Amid the whispers, Jeffrey addressed the rumors. “Oh, the White Witch has a really cute granddaughter. Her name’s Euphemia. She’s really into Tori.”

“Indeed,” said the White Witch. Jeffrey shuddered and turned his attention to her. “It is as thou saith. My granddaughter Euphemia is in a loving relationship with Tori.”

“Hey!” Tori protested.

“Yeah, they’re so sweet that I might vomit sugar watching them,” Cecilia chimed in.

“Shut up.”

“Right? They feed each other by hand and do all that lovey-dovey stuff!” Subaru added.

“Damn it!”

“They even slept in the same bed once. That’s just how well they’re gettin’ along,” Shinozuki said.

“Hey!!!”

Tori’s cries fell on deaf ears as the whispering of the adventurers grew louder.

All gazes were now upon him. His eyes darted around the cavern.

Meanwhile, the White Witch snorted. “Tori is mine and mine granddaughter’s alone! Think not of taking him for thyselfes,” she proclaimed.

The clan members all shook their heads in unison. Only Andrea, Suzanna, and Jean were at the back, desperately trying to hold back their laughter.

Tori clutched his head. Then, he yelled at the White Witch with all his might. “You damn witch! You went out of your way to entrap me here of all places! If you keep yapping, I’ll make sure you get no dinner tonight!”

“Hmm, that would be a problem for me. Cecilia, seal the hole. I shall return to the underworld. I shall leave this place to thee.”

“Okey dokey!”

The White Witch vanished back into the hole. Tori tried to stop his rapidly beating heart by clutching his chest. All the adventurers surrounded him, their eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Th-The way home is going to be hell! Tori screamed in his head. Suddenly, he remembered the words that Euphemia apparently heard from her mother—men are the most vulnerable when trapped and made to take responsibility.

After getting showered with questions the whole way back and heading to the guild to report on the completion of his task, Tori returned home and collapsed on the couch. Euphemia wasn’t back yet.

“I’m exhausted...” he sighed.

“T-Tori, are you okay?” Senynoma, who had been left to watch over the house, asked with a worried expression.

Shinozuki cackled. “Oh, he’s gonna be fine. Tori, can we have dinner yet?”

“Shut it! I’m not in the mood to cook,” Tori grumbled.

“What?!”

“Why are you acting like this? I thought you loved Euphie!” Subaru complained, swinging her legs while sitting at the dining table.

“I do— Y-Yeah, I do! But so what?! She didn’t have to do that in front of all those people!” he yelled.

“Say that again.”

Tori froze in shock. He slowly lifted his head and saw Euphemia’s face, her eyes glittering in anticipation.

“Say that again,” she repeated.

“E-Euphie, you—”

“You said you love me. That makes me really happy.” Euphemia jumped onto the couch and hugged Tori. Now that it had come to this, he couldn’t just push her off him. It wasn’t that he was trying to be kind; he just couldn’t help but find her adorable. He gave up and ran his hand through her hair.

“Are you really okay with this? Saying all that in front of all those people, I mean,” Tori asked.

“Yeah. Now we can go on dates out in the open.”

Tori stared at her. Now, they no longer needed to pretend that Euphemia and the White Witch were unrelated. Tori no longer had to make excuses when they were out together; he could just tell everyone that Euphemia was the White Witch’s granddaughter.

She managed to use Jeffrey’s misunderstanding to her advantage, Tori realized. He sighed and rubbed Euphemia’s back. She looked up at him.

“Tori, you did great work today. It must have been really tough.”

“Well, yeah...”

In the end, Tori had only used his sword to slice up crab meat for cooking. Still, the adventuring left him exhausted, and he found it unlikely that he would ever return to that line of work anytime soon.

“Looks like my job here suits me pretty well,” Tori said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t wanna do any of that adventuring stuff in the future... Though, I’m glad we managed to help everyone out.”

As Tori mumbled out his thoughts, he suddenly felt a soft, fluffy, gentle but fleeting sensation on his cheek.

“Huh? Wha—”

Tori touched his cheek. There was no mistaking it; that had been Euphemia’s lips. He’d even felt the ticklish sensation of her hair on his neck for a short moment. His face grew red-hot.

Euphemia, unusually for her, looked somewhat abashed. “Heh heh... That’s your reward.”

“Guh...” Tori shook his head, still perplexed by this turn of events. He desperately tried to calm himself down.

Damn it, Euphie... You usually never get embarrassed, but now you’re shy all of a sudden? Oh no, it’s too much!

Tori’s bewilderment refused to leave him. Euphemia peered at his face, seemingly expecting something from him.

“Wh-What is it?” he asked nervously.

“I can kiss you in other places too, you know...” she whispered and closed her eyes. Tori’s gaze was drawn to her pink lips. His mouth flapped open and shut like a fish out of water. When he tried to look away, he saw Euphemia’s familiars gawking at the two of them. Shinozuki and Subaru had wide grins on their faces, and Cecilia, who had also just returned home, was smiling in anticipation. Senynoma, meanwhile, looked embarrassed and was covering her face with both hands, but her eye was peeking out from between her fingers.



“N-N-No way! I-I just can’t do it right now! Gimme a break!” Tori yelled, his embarrassment finally reaching its peak. He rolled off the couch and ran away. The familiars all expressed their disappointment.

“Aww, Tori dear, you’re such a chicken!” Cecilia complained.

“Where are you going?!” Subaru yelled.

“I’m out to feed the birds!” Tori yelled back. He ran toward the henhouse and into the enclosure. His sudden entrance shocked the chickens and ducks, and they started cawing and crowing.

“Sorry about that... You guys seem so carefree. Must be nice...” Tori sighed and muttered as he scattered feed for the birds. He started to calm down as he watched them peck at the food on the ground. Eventually, he gave another exhale and left the enclosure.

The sun was already starting to set. The storehouse that was under construction was casting a long shadow on the ground. In the end, Tori and his party had spent an entire day wandering around inside the shell of that giant crab. In that sense, they’d arrived and found the missing adventurers in the nick of time, just before they had completely run out of strength.

As Tori leaned against the fence and stared at the garden, Euphemia suddenly embraced him from behind.

“Why’d you run away?” she asked.

“I mean...”

Euphemia rubbed her face against Tori’s back, so he adjusted and positioned himself next to her.

“Kiss me on the lips someday, okay?” Euphemia pleaded.

“Y-Yeah...okay.” Tori promised reluctantly, embarrassed by his own words.

Euphemia let out a yawn. “I’m hungry. Everyone else got to eat your food...”

“Oh, right, yeah...” Tori realized Euphemia was the only one who hadn’t partaken in the huge meal he’d served earlier. He had also left Senynoma on her own. She must have been starving too.

Tori took a deep breath and stretched out his body. “Okay, I’ll cook up some food.”

“Yay. I want some risotto,” Euphemia requested.

“Okay, sure. Hey, can one of you guys heat up the bath? I’m gonna make dinner!” Tori yelled as he entered the house. Everyone inside lit up in anticipation.

Stomachs rumbled in hunger even after a big adventure. Tori would prepare dinner, and he would also prep food for tomorrow. He would do the chores and take care of everyone so they could continue living healthy lives.

This house was Tori’s place to be. This was his job. Once more, he rolled up his sleeves and entered the kitchen.

EX. Cooking with the White Witch

It was now a little past noon. Dark and thick clouds had stretched across the sky. A wet breeze started to blow, and soon enough, large droplets of water began to fall. As the rain came down, Tori, who had been working in the garden, ran to grab the clothes that were drying on the line. There was too much to bring in all at once, so by the time he'd gone back and forth, much of the laundry was soaking wet.

"Damn it, where'd *that* come from?" Tori grumbled as he dried his hair with a towel. He gazed outside the window as the rain battered the roof. Water was streaming down into the ground. The chickens ran frantically into the henhouse for cover, while the ducks frolicked around and quacked under the downpour.

The rain looked like it would continue for a while. Tori sat on a chair, resigned.

Euphemia, who had been sleeping on the couch, sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Is it raining?" she asked groggily.

"Yeah. I think it's just a passing storm," Tori replied.

Euphemia, hearing this, plopped back down. She had eaten a lot for lunch, so she was feeling especially lazy.

A short time had passed since the hunt for the adamantine crab and the search for the missing clan members. It had been a huge incident, but in the end, Tori and Euphemia were only passersby, and they had returned to their daily routines before long.

Euphemia's familiars were back in the underworld. The unstable gate that had formed between it and the surface was already sealed shut, but they still had to clean up the stragglers that had crossed through the portal. Senynoma had also gone back home to her atelier, saying that she had to gather tools and materials for the construction of the storehouse.

Thus, it had been just the two of them at home since yesterday. Regardless, nothing in particular had changed between them. Euphemia was as lazy as ever,

rolling around in bed all day, occasionally asking for cuddles from Tori out of nowhere and telling him whenever she got hungry. She was the same old Euphemia.

The rain appeared to be weakening, but it looked like it would still go on for a while. Doing work outside seemed out of the question for now.

Each passing shower in the tail end of spring meant summer was getting closer. On some days, the sun shone so intensely that Tori would end up drenched in sweat throughout the day. The colorful flowers on the mountainside had given way to the deep green of summer foliage, and the shade cast by the canopy of trees had grown thicker. Cabbage and canola plants that had bloomed early started to bear fresh seeds, meaning it was almost time for the first summer harvest.

Tori hung the soaked clothes to dry indoors; then he grabbed his shopping basket.

“Euphie.”

“Mm...yeah?” she turned her head to Tori, still groggy.

“Are Shino and the others coming back tonight?” he asked.

“I think they’ll be back tomorrow. Senynoma too,” Euphemia answered.

“Okay. I’m gonna go out and buy some groceries.”

“Okay,” she muttered and went back to her nap. It seemed she wasn’t in the mood to accompany Tori to town today. He shrugged, then transported himself to Azrac.

It wasn’t raining in the city, but the sky was overcast and it looked like it might pour at any time. The people on the streets were rushing to avoid getting caught by the imminent shower. The air also felt heavy and humid. It felt even hotter than back home, either because of the tightly packed buildings or the crowds of people on the city streets.

Tori only had to make dinner for himself and Euphemia tonight, so there wasn’t too much he needed to buy for that. However, considering that the four gluttons would be returning home tomorrow and the food consumption in the

household would go up again, he needed to stock up for that as well.

Tori went around various stores buying ingredients, then headed straight back home. By the time he returned, it had started raining in Azrac but stopped here. The blue sky peeked out from behind gaps in the clouds. Bugs and worms were emerging in the aftermath, so the chickens were overjoyed, pecking at the ground.

Euphemia was still lying on the couch. She always ended up sleeping when left to her own devices. Tori couldn't imagine what kind of dream she was having, but she had a blissful expression on her face, so he was reluctant to wake her.

After unpacking and storing the groceries, Tori lit the fireplace. It was no longer needed to keep the house warm, but it remained useful for drying clothes indoors. It was already too late in the day to rehang the soaked garments outside.

Tori had already done the house chores that morning, and he couldn't work in the yard with the ground soaking wet and muddy. Unusually for him, he was out of things to do. He decided to relax for once and poured himself some hot tea.

As his thoughts drifted, Tori recalled the commotion he had gotten himself into not that long ago. It had been a while since he'd done anything resembling dungeon exploration, but he hadn't been in any danger thanks to Euphemia's excellent familiars. He'd brought a huge load of food and cooking supplies on a whim, which turned out to be the exact thing the missing adventurers needed, and ended up being heaped upon with gratitude from them. Tori, who wasn't used to that kind of attention, had felt very embarrassed.

Thanks to his good work, the platinum-rank clans, including the Cerulean Dagger, started to adore him. On the way home, he was showered with much praise, along with getting grilled over his relationship with Euphemia, which resulted in a significant amount of cold sweat for Tori. Being dragged into talking about such pointless gossip made him feel like his circle of friends had expanded. During his days as an adventurer, he had distanced himself from making such bonds, and had been barely acquainted with his fellow platinum-

rank adventurers. He never would have imagined he'd be blessed with so many friends once he quit the profession.

Euphemia mumbled incomprehensibly and curled up. As Tori watched over her, he continued mulling over the strange coincidences and meetings that had occurred in his life as of late.

As the sun began to set, Tori went out to herd the birds back into the henhouse, then heated up the bath and got started on dinner. By then, Euphemia had woken up from her nap. She poked her head into the kitchen, calling out to Tori as he was slicing vegetables.

"You're making dinner?"

"Yup."

Tori threw the veggies into a pot and sautéed them in butter before adding stock and letting it simmer to create a simple soup.

"Is there risotto?" Euphemia asked.

"You sure love that stuff," Tori muttered. "I can make some, but aren't you tired of it?"

"Nope. I love your risotto," she replied, clinging to his back and pressing her face against him.

"Hey, don't hug me while I'm holding a knife!"

Euphemia ignored Tori's scolding and rubbed her face against his back. She still seemed to be groggy from her nap. Tori, though inconvenienced, couldn't just shoo her away, so he continued working despite the slight obstruction. He took boiled eggs and vegetables and mixed them into a salad, then sliced and toasted a baguette. Finally, he tossed some butter into a pan and fried rice in it.

"Euphie, were you always a fan of risotto?" Tori wondered.

"No, I tasted it for the first time when you made it," she answered. It had become her favorite since that day. As the cook, Tori found Euphemia's answer to be quite flattering. He felt a mix of happiness and embarrassment upon hearing it.

"Are there other foods you like besides risotto?"

"I like sweets."

"Those don't count. Did you have any favorite meals as a kid?"

"I don't really remember. My father's cooking mostly involved making snacks for my mother to go with her alcohol. It didn't taste bad, but I didn't like it very much." Euphemia looked displeased remembering the food she had been served as a child. While her mother had managed to snag a man who could do household chores, she was also a huge drunkard. To her, the wine and ale was the main course rather than the food.

It probably depends on how it's made, but risotto doesn't sound like it would go well with wine, Tori thought, perplexed by Euphemia's story.

Dinner was finally ready to serve. Tori and Euphemia sat at the dining table across from one another. Tonight's dinner was risotto, soup, salad, bread, and pickled vegetables.

"Tori, do you have any favorite foods?" Euphemia asked as she dug into her risotto.

"Me? Hmm..." Tori's gaze wandered as he thought about it. "Favorite foods, huh? Now that you mention it, I can't really think of any."

"You don't cook the foods you like for yourself?" she asked.

"Hmm, well, I like meat, but I'm not a carnivore like Shino. I season the food I make according to my tastes, so I guess this would be a flavor that I like eating," Tori answered, looking down at a spoonful of risotto.

"This is really tasty," Euphemia said.

"Yeah, I guess it is. Do you want seconds?"

"Yeah."

Tori scooped a second helping of risotto into her bowl and grated cheese on top of it. Euphemia, after taking the bowl, stared into it for a while as the cheese melted into the hot rice.

"What's up?" Tori asked.

"Nothing," she replied before digging in.

“Hey,” Euphemia said suddenly.

“What is it?” Shinozuki looked up at her from across the dining table. Euphemia, who was slumped over the table, didn’t reply.

“What is it?” Shinozuki repeated.

“Mmm...” She still didn’t answer, her chin resting on the table.

Euphemia’s familiars were back from the underworld, and the usual bustle of the household had returned. Senynoma busied herself daily with the construction of the storehouse, while the other familiars lazed around as usual. No requests from the guild were coming in other than the usual potion orders. Azrac’s population of adventurers had grown explosively, which included lots of newcomers and meant there weren’t many jobs for Euphemia’s party these days.

It was now afternoon on one of those quiet days. They had just finished eating lunch, and a lazy atmosphere had settled over the household. One could get drowsy and fall asleep just by being inside the house. Tori and Senynoma were outside, busy tending to the garden and working on the storehouse respectively, and Cecilia was tinkering with something in the workshop. Subaru was lying down on the couch, and Shinozuki was drinking tea at the dining table across from Euphemia.

“You sleep talkin’ or somethin’? I’ll pinch your cheeks ’til they’re red to wake you up,” Shinozuki said.

“No, I’m not,” Euphemia replied.

“So what is it?”

“Cooking.”

“Huh?” Shinozuki looked perplexed, still waiting for a proper answer.

Euphemia was mulling over several things in her head. “Shino, have you ever thought of cooking for yourself?”

“I have. But when I tried, it was a massive failure!” she cackled. Euphemia recalled the time Shinozuki and Subaru tried to roast some meat and ended up

burning it black. “Tori makes it look so easy, but it’s actually really hard. Besides, we fenrirs never needed to cook for ourselves.”

“I see,” Euphemia muttered.

“Why the sudden question?”

“Hmm... I was thinking of cooking something for Tori.”

Ever since Tori arrived at her house, Euphemia had been blessed with delicious meals every single day. When she lived with her parents, she hadn’t been able to appreciate having food on the table ready on demand, but now that she had experienced living alone with an unhealthy lifestyle, she understood how fortunate she was.

Tori always provided Euphemia with great food, so she wanted to show her gratitude. She loved the way Tori prepared his meals, and he also said that he seasoned his food according to his tastes. Perhaps if she figured out how to replicate that flavor, she would be able to produce something he loved.

“I want to show him my thanks,” Euphemia said.

“Aha, I see now,” Shinozuki replied.

“So, Shino, I want you to help me.”

“Huh? Nah, eating’s *my* job. You should be cookin’ with Tori.”

“It would be pointless if I asked him for help.”

“Mmm... Well, I don’t mind helpin’ out, but are you fine with just me?”

“I’m not sure.”

Euphemia was unsure how helpful her familiars would be. She already knew what to expect from Shinozuki and Subaru, and Senynoma wasn’t able to cook either. She had no idea about Cecilia, though she didn’t come off as someone capable in the kitchen.

“Still, I want to try. And I kind of did some cooking with Tori a while ago,” Euphemia said. Of course, the only “cooking” she’d done was assist him a bit when Andrea and the others came over for dinner. Despite that, Euphemia still puffed out her chest with pride.

Shinozuki shook her head disapprovingly. “Well, don’t blame me if things go wrong. Anyway, you should ask for everyone else’s help too. We’re all useless, but you know what they say. Three heads make for one Monjure.”

Monjure was a legendary and prodigious spellcaster of the underworld.

Shinozuki stood up and poked Subaru awake. She mumbled and opened her eyes.

“Whaddaya want?”

“Subaru, come help us. We’re gonna make some food.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

Subaru rubbed her eyes as she sat up. When Shinozuki and Euphemia explained their plan, she pouted in annoyance.

“Why do I have to help? That sounds like a pain!” she complained.

“I want to surprise Tori with something tasty. Help me out,” Euphemia pleaded.

“I can’t cook!” Subaru protested.

Shinozuki scoffed. “Well, whatever. I didn’t expect much from you anyway. Loser birds like you should just sit there and watch.”

“What’d you say?! You don’t get to say that after burning that roast with me! If you can do it, then so can I!” Suddenly fired up, Subaru started winding back her arm.

Then Cecilia entered the room.

“Phew, I’m done for now. Hmm? What’s going on here?” she asked, and everyone filled her in. She looked quite interested in where this was going. “Oh my, that sounds great! You’ll win Tori’s heart through his stomach, then?”

“Yeah. Cecilia, can you cook?” Euphemia asked.

“I’ve never done it, but I think I can!” Cecilia replied confidently.

“Hmm... Sounds pretty sketchy to me,” Shinozuki said.

Senynoma entered the room as well. She wiped the sweat from her face,

reached out for a cup on the dining table, then looked at everyone in bewilderment. “What’s goin’ on? You guys up to somethin’?”

“Well...” Euphemia explained everything once again.

“Huh...” Senynoma said. “I didn’t know you all could cook.”

“No, I’ve never cooked in my life,” Euphemia said.

“Huh?”

“We’ll figure somethin’ out. Senynoma, help us out,” Shinozuki urged.

“I-I dunno how to cook!”

“You’ll be fine! Cooking and crafting aren’t so different, right?” Subaru chimed in.

“W-Well, y-yeah... I think? B-But I’m—”

“No more buts! Don’t you wanna get those cyclopean creative juices of yours flowin’?” Shinozuki pressed.

“U-Ugh... Now that you said that, I ain’t backin’ down! Lemme at it!” Senynoma exclaimed. Even she had been roped into the scheme.

Right then, Tori came back into the house. He was carrying eggs and vegetables he had harvested from the garden. Seeing Euphemia and her familiars gathered around, he gave them a puzzled look.

“What are you guys up to?” he asked.

“Um, well...” Euphemia started.

“Yeah?”

“We’re gonna cook something.”

“Okay... Wait, huh?”

“And we’re gonna serve it to you.”

“O-Oh...”

Tori still had no idea what was going on, but it seemed that Euphemia and her familiars were going to prepare a meal in his place. He stared at the denizens of the underworld, one after the other. Seeing that they all seemed to be fired up

and enthusiastic, he suddenly started to feel anxious.

“W-Wait a minute. Are you guys gonna be okay? Shino’s kind of clumsy, and so is Subaru. I dunno about Cecilia, but Senynoma told me she can’t cook...”

“I’ll make it work. You even taught me how to cook last time,” Euphemia said.

“Last time? You mean back when Andrea and the others visited? I mean, I *did* teach you some things, but you haven’t cooked once since then...”

“You don’t want me to?” Euphemia stared at him with sad, pleading eyes. “You always make food for me, so I wanted to show my gratitude...”

“Guh...” Tori’s gaze darted all over the room. “W-Well, it’s nice that you guys are interested... I’ll let you try one meal, then.”

“Really? Okay, I’ll do my best.” Euphemia’s expression brightened. She put a fist to her chest and huffed.

Cecilia was grinning from ear to ear. “Tori dear, you’re so easy sometimes, you know?”

The market was busy and crowded. All sorts of people were walking about, and countless stalls were loaded with various types of merchandise. Foods of all kinds were on display, with newly harvested summer vegetables as the main attraction with their bright, appetizing colors.

Euphemia carried a shopping basket and was accompanied by her four familiars. They walked around the market, appreciating the huge variety of foods and ingredients being sold. Being a group of pretty women, the party naturally drew gazes from the crowd, but the five of them paid them no attention.

Today, the group had finished lunch early and headed out to Azrac. The plan was to buy what they needed and prepare dinner for Tori.

“Th-There’s so many people around... I-I ain’t so good with crowds... I-I should’ve just waited at home...” Senynoma muttered, fidgeting about.

“Bit too late to complain, Senynoma. Anyway, Euphie, whatcha gonna buy?” Shinozuki asked.

“Hmm... Something tasty,” Euphemia answered.

“The skewers over there look pretty tasty!” Subaru exclaimed, pointing at a stall.

Cecilia sighed and put a palm to her face. “We’re not here to buy snacks, you know? Euphie dear, do you have something in mind to make?”

“Tori said he wanted pancakes, so I’m making him pancakes.”

Most people who were bad at cooking often tried to take on food that was too complicated for them to make, only to fail spectacularly at it. Tori had anticipated this, so he requested pancakes to keep it simple. Euphemia was a bit dissatisfied since she wanted to make something that would surprise him, but since Tori himself had requested pancakes, she had no choice but to make some.

Subaru folded her hands behind her head. “Aren’t pancakes really easy? You just mix a buncha stuff together and cook it, right?”

“Yeah. But Tori said that’s what he wants.”

“So what are pancakes made of?” Cecilia asked.

“Um... Some kind of powder?” Euphemia answered.

“Eggs! Oh, and, uh, water!” Subaru exclaimed.

“Is it water? Or milk?” Shinozuki wondered.

“A-And there’s sugar too. The dough looks pretty sticky, so maybe you mix in some kind of cement?” Senynoma chimed in.

“You can eat cement?” Shinozuki asked.

“N-No you can’t.”

“Then why are you putting in something you can’t eat? You doofus!”

“That’s all so vague... We don’t know how much to put in for each either, right?” Cecilia added.

“Not at all. Cecilia, do you know?” Euphemia asked.

“No I don’t... Was there a recipe somewhere back at home?”

“I don’t think there was any in the cookbooks... I should have asked Tori.”

The five of them had all witnessed Tori making pancakes before, but they had no idea how much of each ingredient they needed, what order to add them in, or the steps needed to cook them. They only had vague recollections. Even with five heads, they couldn’t muster up a single Monjure.

Recreating a recipe from vague memory was an impossible task. The group tried their best to come up with an idea until a familiar face approached them.

“Oh hey, you guys are all here! What’s going on?”

Suzanna called out to the five of them. She was with Robin, commander of the Order of the Dragon’s Purifying Light; Rosehill, leader of the Weavers of Melancholy; and Lotten, a spellcaster from the Cerulean Dagger.

“Hey, nice seein’ you all. What are *you* doin’ here?” Shinozuki sent the question back at them.

“We’re all still recovering, so the four of us decided to have a girls’ day,” Robin answered.

“Oh, right, right!” Suzanna addressed the other three. “So, you guys know Shino, Subaru, and Cecilia, right? This girl is Euphemia. You know, the White Witch’s granddaughter.”

“Oh, Tori’s fiancée, correct?” Rosehill said. Euphemia, who had been hiding behind Shinozuki, stuck her head out and nodded.

Lotten let out an impressed cry. “Wow, she really *is* super cute. I thought Jeffrey was just exaggerating... Family resemblance sure works in mysterious ways!”

“Is she a new friend?” Suzanna’s gaze landed on Senynoma, who let out a squeak and, like Euphemia, hid behind Shinozuki.

“This one’s Senynoma, a cyclops. She’s Euphie’s familiar, and she works as a craftsman in the underworld,” Shinozuki introduced her.

“Huh. Even the White Witch’s granddaughter is strong enough to have a denizen of the underworld work under her. As expected of the White Witch’s family, I suppose,” Robin said.

“G-Granddaughter? Wh-What’s that mean? Euphie’s—”

Senynoma was interrupted by Shinozuki’s fist hammering down on her head. Senynoma clutched it and squirmed in pain.

“Anyway, we’re out here doin’ the groceries. We’re gonna make Tori dinner,” Shinozuki explained.

“Huh? I thought Tori was in charge of the food,” Robin wondered.

“Euphie wants to cook for him as thanks,” Subaru chimed in.

“My, the two of you are quite in love with each other, then,” Rosehill said, impressed. “That must be the power of being engaged.”

“Yeah.” Euphemia nodded.

Suzanna crossed her arms. “So what are you guys planning to make?” she asked.

“Pancakes. Tori asked for some,” Euphemia answered.

“Huh...”

“Do you guys know how to cook?” Shinozuki asked. Suzanna and her companions exchanged glances.

“I can cook,” Suzanna answered. “I make food for Cyril sometimes. What about you, Lotten?”

“Just rice. Can’t really make anything that I could serve to others.”

“I can cook, more or less,” said Rosehill.

Robin gave her a skeptical look. “Well that’s unexpected. Aren’t you from a rich family? You don’t look like one to cook.”

“I am an adventurer, after all. Being able to feed ourselves is a basic skill, is it not?”

“Well, I don’t cook. It’s faster and easier to earn money and buy food.”

Suzanna laughed. “Sounds like Robin has the most platinum-rank mindset out of all of us.”

“Do you guys know how to make pancakes?” Euphemia asked, fidgeting.

“I do. Why?” Suzanna asked in return.

“None of us know the recipe for them,” Cecilia said.

Robin looked incredulous. “You guys are even worse off than I am,” she sighed.

“Why are *you* on your high horse? You just said you don’t cook!” Subaru argued.

Robin scoffed. “I said I *don’t* cook, not that I *can’t*. It’s just too much of a bother. Even I can make pancakes, y’know?”

“Could you teach us?” Euphemia asked, and the four adventurers nodded. They took out a notepad and listed down the ingredients, amounts, and the steps. To make pancakes, they needed flour, eggs, milk or water, sugar, and salt. They had to mix them together and fry them in butter or oil. The amounts of each ingredient varied, but otherwise, it was a very simple recipe. If they had baking soda on hand, they could make fluffier pancakes as well.

“Huh, this doesn’t look hard at all,” Shinozuki said.

“It sure doesn’t. The ingredients aren’t too complicated either,” Cecilia added.

“Are we gonna make a whole bunch of ’em? We’re all gonna get sick of pancakes!” Subaru complained. Making nothing but pancakes was, indeed, a surefire way to get sick of them quickly. Euphemia wondered whether this was really what Tori wanted, but then Rosehill started giggling.

“You can spice up your pancakes with toppings. You can use something sweet, or serve them with something savory. It’d make for a nice meal,” she suggested.

Euphemia and the familiars recalled that Tori sometimes served pancakes with cured meat and eggs, or with steamed vegetables. Pairing them with different side dishes seemed like the ideal way to avoid getting bored of them.

“That reminds me. I heard from Gazpacho that in Maukaila, they make pancakes with buckwheat flour. They make ’em really thin, then put sunny-side up eggs on top,” Robin recalled.

Euphemia nodded. “I love having bacon and eggs with pancakes.”

“Ohh, yeah, I remember now,” Shinozuki recalled. “I want my pancakes with a

lotta meat.”

“I wonder if you can have them with fish. I want to eat some fish!” Subaru chimed in.

“I want mine sweet with lots of cream and jam,” Cecilia bared her preference.

“I... I’m gonna eat whatever you guys make...” Senynoma muttered.

“What, you’re a cyclops but you don’t got ideas of your own?” Shinozuki asked.

“I-I mean, I only eat biscuits and tea when I’m at home... I can’t come up with new combinations of food on my own!”

“Wow, you’re kinda useless!” Subaru teased, poking at Senynoma with a huge grin on her face.

Suzanna clapped her hands together. “I know! Why don’t we accompany you on your shopping trip? Robin and Rosehill can probably give you guys advice on the side dishes from their hometowns.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful. We have pancakes quite a lot back in Usimoria, so I’m confident I can give you my assistance,” Rosehill said.

“I don’t really know much about the ones from my city, but I’ll point out some things here and there,” Robin added.

“Thank you,” Euphemia said bashfully. She felt quite happy about having made new friends.

Meanwhile, Tori was organizing the kitchen. He was busy lining up the cooking implements so they were easily identifiable. Normally, only Tori used the kitchen, so he didn’t pay too much heed to where he placed things as long as he knew where they were. But this time, Euphemia and her familiars would be the ones doing the cooking. Rather than have them fumble around wondering where each item was, Tori figured that he should organize the kitchen so they could easily find what they needed.

“This should be good,” he muttered. Tori had arranged the spice cabinet and the shelves with silverware—they were places he’d never bothered organizing,

but he had now been given the chance to do so. Tori was thankful for this unintended consequence of Euphemia wanting to cook as he marveled at the newly organized kitchen.

“Are they really gonna be okay? Ahh, forget about it.”

At the very least, pancakes shouldn’t make that much of a mess. It might be difficult to get the right amount of browning on them at first, but with practice, they’d get it right eventually. Euphemia often thought that putting in effort was a pain, but at least she wasn’t clumsy. She wouldn’t be synthesizing potions if she were a klutz.

In any case, Tori had finished preparing the kitchen for Euphemia and her familiars. He planned to leave the rest to them for now. Despite everything, Tori felt very happy about Euphemia’s sincerity toward him. He couldn’t just throw her expression of gratitude aside.

“They sure are taking a while...” he muttered. They had gone out right after lunch, but now it was almost sundown. *Why are they taking so long to buy stuff for pancakes of all things?* Tori couldn’t help but wonder. In the meantime, he folded the laundry, filled the bathtub with water, and put firewood into the furnace for the bath.

While he was in the middle of doing chores, Euphemia and the others finally returned home. They were carrying a huge load of groceries with them. They didn’t just buy flour and eggs. They bought jam, cream, and fruits—reasonable additions to pancakes—but they also bought vegetables, meat, and even fish.

“We’re back,” Euphemia announced.

“H-Hey there. Welcome ba— Huh? Why do you guys have so much stuff?”

“We met up with Suzanna and her friends.”

Euphemia told him what happened during their trip to Azrac. They had learned not just the ingredients and the directions for making pancakes, but also recipe variations and toppings that went well with them.

It’s not a good sign that she’s already thinking of tweaking the recipe right off the bat... Tori’s confidence in their cooking ability started giving way to worry.

“A-Are you guys sure about this? I can help out—”

“No thanks. You should sit back and wait,” Euphemia said, full of confidence. The familiars also looked sure of their skills. Their complete confidence in themselves worried Tori even more, but he gave up and sat down on the couch.

The kitchen was too small for five people, so they used the dining table to prepare the ingredients. There, they would make the pancake batter, then move to the kitchen for cooking. Flour, eggs, and other things were lined up on the table. They’d ended up buying way too much of them.

Euphemia put on a frilly apron and placed a hand on her hip. “First, we’ll mix the batter, then make the toppings while we let the batter sit,” she started.

“Okay, then we should start with measuring the ingredients. Oho, it feels like we’re making potions,” Cecilia said.

“Gonna measure out some flour...”

“Use a sieve, okay? It’s in the kitchen cabinet under the counter,” Tori shouted.

Euphemia pouted in response. “Just sit and wait there, okay? Relax.”

“F-Fine...” Tori went quiet and leaned back against the couch.

Euphemia psyched herself up and went back to preparing the ingredients, but then...

“Achoo!”

“Whoa?!”

While Cecilia was trying to measure out flour, Senynoma let out a huge sneeze, scattering white powder all over the dining table. Cecilia, who had been across from her, was covered in a layer of white. She smiled, but her eyes had no light in them.

“Senynomaaa.”

“I-I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to! F-Forgive meeee!” Senynoma yelled.

“Gah ha ha ha! Cecilia, you’re all white now!” Shinozaki cackled.

“Ack, I’m covered in flour!” Subaru grumbled as she brushed the powder out

of her hair with her hand. Senynoma squealed as Cecilia summoned an undead creature to chase and harass her as revenge.

“Okay, I think the eggs should be next. Here goes.” Shinozuki broke open an egg, but it ended up dropping several fragments of shell into the bowl.

“Hmm... I really can’t get used to these hands...” She shook the egg from her fingers. It seemed that Shinozuki still wasn’t used to doing sensitive work with her human hands. Rather than simply crack open the egg, she had ended up crushing it completely.

Why did they let Shinozuki do the eggs... Tori thought as he put a palm to his face.

Despite everything, the group measured out the ingredients properly and mixed them together, resulting in a batter that looked normal. Since Cecilia and Euphemia often made potions, they must have been used to working with fine measurements. While Tori was worried about the eggshells mixed into the batter, it otherwise looked to be quite edible.

While the batter was sitting, the group started to make toppings for the pancakes.

“We’ll fry some eggs and bacon, then boil some potatoes,” Euphemia said.

“That fluffy woman said something about sauce,” Shinozuki recalled.

“Rosehill, right? I wrote down everything she said,” Cecilia mentioned as she took out a notepad. It had notes on the toppings and recipe variations they had learned. “Let’s see... It’s called ‘hollandaise sauce.’ It needs butter, egg yolks, lemons, and mustard.”

“I wanna fry some sausages too,” Shinozuki interjected.

“Let’s use this fish too!” Subaru yelled as she took out a jar of salted fish.

Euphemia peered at Cecilia’s notepad. “Mince the salted fish, then mix in the onions and herbs. Squeeze some lemon...”

Oh no. They’re starting to leave the realm of pancakes. Now that they were adding sauces and other sides, they were basically making a full meal. Tori started to get anxious and couldn’t relax. He couldn’t stay still on the couch and

alternated between pacing and sitting.

Then, after the long struggle of slicing and mixing ingredients, it was finally time to move to the kitchen.

“Subaru, light the fire,” Euphemia ordered.

“Okey dokey!” Subaru blew a fiery breath at the wood stacked inside the stove. The fuel began to burn.

“That’s too hot!” Tori, who had peered into the kitchen, couldn’t stop himself from shouting.

“It’ll be fine.” Euphemia placed a frying pan on top of the stove. She tossed a slice of butter into the pan, which instantly browned and burned due to the heat. Euphemia looked puzzled. “That’s strange...”

“No it’s not! Turn down the heat!” Tori yelled.

“Tori, I told you to sit and wait.” Tori tried to intervene in the kitchen, but Euphemia pushed him back into the parlor. He couldn’t sit still, but he gave up and sat back down on the couch.

Tori’s eyes darted around the room before his gaze landed on an exhausted Senynoma, who had been running around trying to escape the undead creature before collapsing on the floor. She was taken out before she could even contribute anything to the cooking effort.

“Senynoma, are you okay?” Tori checked up on her.

“Y-Yes I am...”

She absolutely did not look okay.

Euphemia and her familiars were packed inside the small kitchen. They all stood behind her, spouting instructions and opinions as she did the cooking.

Weren’t they supposed to finish making the sauce and boiling the potatoes first...?

The group had yet to finish preparing the toppings and sides. At this rate, they would be serving those with cold pancakes. Experienced cooks would be able to manage even with making the pancakes first; however, since Euphemia and her

familiars were still inexperienced, their order of operations was going to mess everything up.

Tori felt anxious and impatient, but he also didn't want to ruin Euphemia's determination. She was doing all this not to harass Tori but out of the sincere desire to thank him, which made it even harder to scold her. He ended up staying seated on the couch, hugging his knees and keeping his complicated feelings to himself.

Steam from the stove started filling up the kitchen. Euphemia and her familiars normally relaxed in the comfy parlor, so it was rare for all of them to get soaked in sweat as they were now.

"It's so difficult to get it to look round," Euphemia complained. She had been pouring batter into the frying pan, but she couldn't get it to look perfectly round. It was, of course, doable by holding the ladle still over the pan as you poured, but Euphemia wasn't aware of this trick. She had been moving the ladle around, causing the pancakes to settle into weird shapes.

"Euphie dear, could you let your big sister try?" Cecilia requested. Euphemia obliged and traded places with her. She tried pouring the batter carefully as if she were preparing one of their usual concoctions, but the results were no different from Euphemia's attempts.

"This is more difficult than it looks..."

"Yeah."

Soon, they had a stack of oddly shaped pancakes. Euphemia wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She set aside the frying pan and placed a pot of water atop the stove.

"I'm gonna boil the potatoes next," she said.

"Okay. I think we should've done that first... Next... Oh yes. We'll melt some butter in a saucepan, remove it from the heat, mix in the other ingredients while it's still a bit hot, then slowly heat it again on a weaker flame," Cecilia dictated.

“It’s like the recipe for Astraze potions,” Euphemia remarked.

“It is. The ingredients are different, but the method is exactly the same.”

Seeing this, Euphemia thought that perhaps cooking wasn’t so difficult after all. However, unlike potion-making, where she only had to think of the potion’s effects, taste was very important when it came to cooking. She had yet to get a sense of how flavors went together. And additionally, there were no potions that needed to be shaped perfectly round like pancakes.

While Euphemia and Cecilia were busy cooking in the kitchen, Shinozuki and Subaru were struggling with making toppings at the dining table. They were slicing onions while being completely inept in the use of kitchen knives, meaning they were making irregular cuts to the bulbs. Tears were streaming down their faces, and they were sniffing and sobbing.

“Ooh... Ugh... My eyes are burning...” Shinozuki groaned.

“Ugh... I don’t wanna do this anymore... Waah...” Subaru cried and sniffed.

Tori had never seen the two of them sob like this. He watched them, having found a funny and unusual scene to observe. Tori again wondered why Euphemia left a job that required finesse to these two clumsy familiars. It was a miracle that they had yet to cut a finger all this time.

Shinozuki rubbed a tear from her eyes with a finger, then screamed. “Gaaah! The onion juices got into my eye!”

“Heh... You dumbass...” Subaru’s sniffly retort lacked its usual bite.

Shinozuki threw the irregular slices of onion into a bowl, then yelled out, “Hey Senynoma! How long are ya gonna be knocked out over there?! Get your ass over here already!”

Senynoma, who had been lying on the floor, hastily righted herself and dashed to the table. “I-I’m so sorry!” she sobbed.

“Hurry up and trade places with me already!”

Unlike the two legendary beasts, Senynoma’s hands were built the same as those of humans. She took the knife in her hand and sliced the onions with no issue. The knife was one that Tori sharpened often, and it had a very sharp

blade. As long as one didn't put too much force into it, the onion's juices wouldn't release so much. While Senynoma had poor sense when it came to flavors, she was quite adept with this kind of labor.

"D-Does this look right?" she asked.

"Looks good to me," Shinozuki approved.

"Hey, no fair! How come Senynoma isn't crying?" Subaru complained.

Right then, Euphemia and Cecilia brought the finished pancakes to the dining table. They were now cold, on account of sitting while they boiled potatoes and made the sauces.

"The pancakes are done," Euphemia announced.

"Oh, are the toppings not done yet?" Cecilia asked.

"We're almost done," Shinozuki replied. "Should we put the fish here?"

"Yeah. The lemon and herbs too. Then we'll serve it along with the potatoes." Euphemia said.

"Shino, you're really strong, so could you froth the cream?" Cecilia requested.

"Huh? Sounds like a pain," Shinozuki grumbled, but she took the bowl of cream and started mixing it with a lot of force.

The group finished preparing dinner by the time it was dark outside. They had made a stack of oddly shaped pancakes, cream and jam, salted fish and potatoes, fried eggs, cured meat, sausages, sautéed mushrooms, and three types of sauce, which included the hollandaise.

"Tori, we're done," Euphemia called out.

"O-Okay."

Tori took a seat at the dining table. There were a number of plates and dishes served there, but it was a wild mix with little rhyme or reason.

"Have some," Euphemia urged.

"Okay. T-Time to eat..."

Tori placed a pancake on a plate. It was irregularly shaped and partially burnt.

Starting out simple, he poured syrup over the pancake, steeled himself, then took a bite.

“How is it?” Euphemia watched him with eyes full of expectation.

Tori chewed in silence for a while, then stuck out his tongue and picked an object out with his fingers.

“Eggshell...” he muttered.

“Oh... Sorry.”

Tori, seeing Euphemia’s dejected face, hurriedly followed up after himself. “W-Wait, uh, it tastes like pancakes. It doesn’t taste bad at all.”

Euphemia’s mood brightened, then she handed him a plate of salted fish and potatoes. “I was told that the pancakes taste good with these,” she said.

“I see...”

It didn’t look terrible. The green herbs gave the dish a nice accent. Tori took a taste, then frowned.

“It’s...”

“How is it?”

“...a bit salty.”

They must have put in too much of the salted fish. On top of that, they had also added a lot of lemon, so the flavor turned out to be a confusing mix of too salty *and* too sour.

Euphemia, shocked, also took a taste. “Ah... You’re right.”

“Subaru, even if you like fish, you put in way too much,” Cecilia chided.

“I didn’t know it would turn out like that!” Subaru protested.

“Come on, at least give it a taste...” Tori grumbled. Next, he sampled the hollandaise sauce. This one didn’t taste off to him at all. The spice and sourness mixed well with the rich taste of egg yolk and butter. It was delicious.

“This sauce tastes really good,” Tori said.

“Really?” Cecilia had been starting to look dejected, but her mood brightened

upon hearing Tori's praise. It seemed her experience with following potion recipes had paid off.

The food ended up being a random mess of various meals, but Euphemia and her familiars hadn't produced anything inedible. Tori felt relieved as he ate the not-quite-delicious pancakes and toppings.

In the end, the familiars looked dissatisfied with the result. They had been so used to Tori's cooking that today's meal felt like a disappointment. Despite that, they managed to finish everything they made.

It was now time to clean up after dinner.

"I've gained a new appreciation for Tori's food..." Shinozuki sighed.

"Same here. Ahh, I'm so full, but I'm not satisfied at all..." Subaru chimed in.

"Cooking's much harder than I thought... Your big sister's lost a bit of her confidence today..." Cecilia said, discouraged.

"I-I'm really no good at cooking at all," Senynoma muttered.

While the four familiars were wallowing in their disappointment, Euphemia was also feeling crestfallen as she gathered the silverware to take to the kitchen sink. Tori was already there, washing the used pots and cooking utensils.

"Tori?"

"Hm? Oh, the cutlery? You can put those over there."

"Sorry."

Euphemia was downcast. She didn't intend to cry, but she could feel the tears start to well up. Tori, caught off guard, wiped his hands and consoled her.

"Hey, hey, don't cry. I'm not mad or anything."

"But... I caused you nothing but trouble today, didn't I?"

Tori laughed awkwardly and lightly patted her head. "No one really gets it right the first try, you know? You didn't do it because you wanted to give me a headache, did you?"

"No... I just wanted to make you happy."

“That’s more than enough for me. Besides, it was mostly Shino and Subaru who caused trouble.” Tori laughed it off, which got Euphemia to crack a smile.

“In fact, you don’t have to be stubborn and do everything by yourself. Let’s cook something together next time, okay? I’ll teach you,” Tori suggested.

“Really? Promise?”

“Of course. Anyway, we have dishes to wash. Why don’t you give it a try?”

“Wash the dishes? Me?”

“Yeah. You’re not done cooking until you finish cleaning up.”

Euphemia didn’t look very enthusiastic, but she stood in front of the sink anyway. She took the sponge and started scrubbing the dishes.

“Yeah, yeah, just like that. Don’t drop the plates, okay?”

“Okay. Cooking takes so much work. Tori, you really are incredible,” Euphemia said.

“I’m not really doing anything too special...”

Once Euphemia got started, she committed and worked hard. She was usually quite lazy, but today, after feeling bad for causing Tori trouble, she was taking her task seriously.

Tori felt a lot of novelty in seeing Euphemia do the chores that he normally did. He found the sight of her working hard to be adorable, and the way she timidly handled the dishes and cutlery stoked Tori’s protective instincts.

As he continued to watch her, their eyes met inadvertently.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing... It’s just that it would be nice if you helped out like this more often,” Tori replied.

“Today’s special.” Euphemia finished rinsing the last item in the sink, then turned and hugged him with her hands still soaked.

“Whoa?!” Tori yelped.

“Thank you for everything you do. I love you,” she said, rubbing her face

against his chest.

You always catch me off guard like this, Tori thought, smiling awkwardly as he soothed her back. Today was a special day indeed. Tomorrow, they would return to their usual routine.

There were still several ingredients left over from the groceries Euphemia and the others had bought. Tori started thinking of meals he could cook with them for tomorrow as he pat Euphemia's back. It was now completely dark outside, and he could hear the cries of frogs and the buzz of insects.



Afterword

There's a Japanese word referring to adding legs to a drawing of a snake: *dasoku*, written with the characters for "legs" and "snake." It means "to add something completely unnecessary." Whenever I write the afterword to my books, it feels like I'm writing down too many unnecessary thoughts and making it much harder for myself than it needs to be.

In any case, the second volume is now set for publishing. It's a strange feeling to write a sequel to the first volume, which was already a complete story on its own.

Still, even though we're on the second volume, Tori is still cooking and cleaning, while Euphemia is still lazing around the house. The two of them continue the same routine, even as various things are happening around them, and in the end, they return to their normal lives.

Just from the title, you have the White Witch trying to live a cozy life in the woods, so there's not much drama to be expected from her. For the White Witch to have a cozy life, some drama might happen to the man doing all the chores in her house, but as a househusband, he wouldn't be the one taking up the sword to save the day either. So you shouldn't expect a life-changing story or dramatic twist from this novel. You could, however, observe the characters hanging out and moving through various tasks, laugh at some silly conversations between them, and maybe feel as if you were part of their daily lives.

In other words, it would be great if you could enjoy this story as a simple slice-of-life. You don't need to read the whole thing in one go. It would be great if you could find a scene you like, then maybe remember it once in a while. In fact, I would consider this work a great success if it provides you with such a scene.

Of course, enjoying it for syow's illustrations is also a valid way of reading this book. I receive rough drafts of the insert images and the cover illustrations, but when they get to me, they don't look like rough drafts at all. On top of that,

they get improved even further with various techniques, such that my text could never be a match for the beauty and perfection of these illustrations. I, MOJIKAKIYA, am a mere extra next to these drawings.

The thing with books is that once they're published, they stop being just the author's work. It's up to the reader to find their own interpretation of the text, and whatever it ends up being, it's none of the author's business. Frankly, you *should* read my work however you want.

In any case, a book is only complete once it reaches its readers. If, by chance, this book manages to reach your hands, I thank you. I would be honored if you enjoy reading it.

In this author's mind, Tori and Euphemia's story still goes on for a bit longer. I don't know if this means the rest will become a book in the future, but if it does, I would be glad if you pick it up once more.

MOJIKAKIYA

June 2023



A★CozyLife in the★ Woods with the★ White★Witch

author: MOJIKAKIYA

illustrator: syow

2

“L-Lemme
introduce
myself.
Name’s
Senynoma,
and I’m a
cyclops. I ain’t
all that, but I
run a private
atelier as a
craftsman.”

(cyclops)
Senyoma

A fiend adept at
construction and
smithing. She was called
over by Euphemia to
help build an oven.

A★CozyLife
in the★
Woods
with the★
White★Witch



(fenrir)
Shinozuki

One of Euphemia's familiars.
Her true form is a gigantic wolf
with silver fur.



(ex-adventurer)
Tori

After getting fired from his clan,
the Muddy Four-Horns, he was found
by the White Witch and ended up
working at her home.



(phoenix)
Subaru

One of Euphemia's
familiars. Her true form
is a monstrous bird that
lords over flames.



(archlich)
Cecilia

One of Euphemia's familiars.
She is a sage of the
underworld adept at wielding
various forms of magic
(including necromancy).



(The White Witch)
Euphemia

The strongest adventurer in all of Azrac.
Despite appearances, she is just a lazy and
spoiled young lady when at home.





“We’ll move out
once the dragons
have calmed down.
After we deliver the
report for this job,
let’s go around
Azrac and gather
info. We’ll smoke
out that phoenix
tamer.”

(Commander of the Order of
the Dragon’s Purifying Light)

Robin

A dragoon able to tame and command dragons. Despite being a newcomer to Azrac, she plans to take the spot of the strongest in the entire city.



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A Cozy Life in the Woods with the White Witch: Volume 2

by MOJIKAKIYA

Translated by Amanogawa Tenri Edited by Alex Chiccola

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Illustrations by syow

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