

A Cozy Life in the Woods with the White Witch

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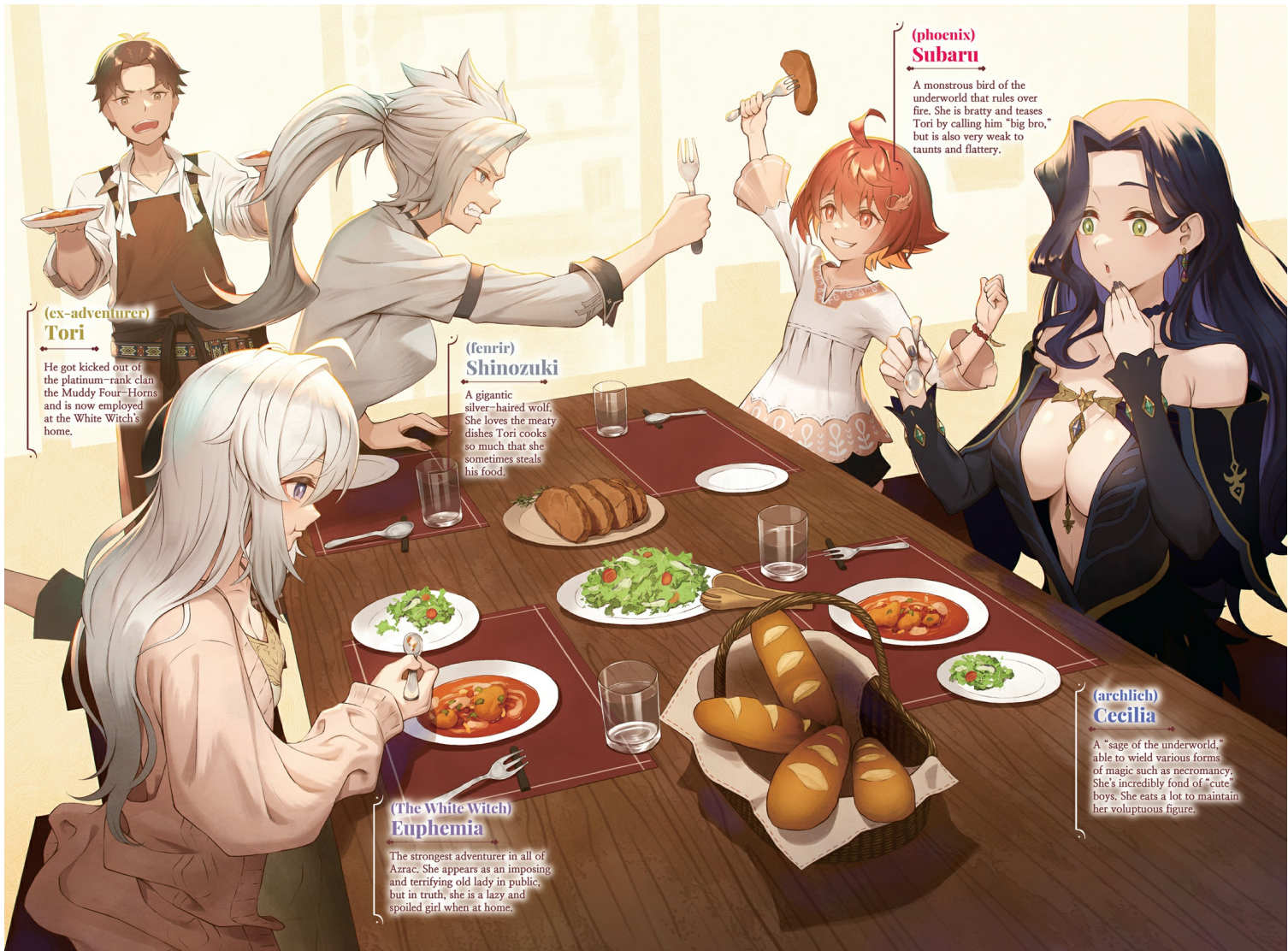
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“Your
first job...
Please
clean all of
this up.”

Tori was utterly
shocked and
appalled at the
state of the house.
The clutter was
beyond his wildest
expectations.

A Cozy Life
in the
Woods
with the
White Witch



(ex-adventurer)
Tori

He got kicked out of the platinum-rank clan the Muddy Four-Horns and is now employed at the White Witch's home.

(fenrir)
Shinozuki

A gigantic silver-haired wolf. She loves the meaty dishes Tori cooks so much that she sometimes steals his food.

(phoenix)
Subaru


A monstrous bird of the underworld that rules over fire. She is bratty and teases Tori by calling him "big bro," but is also very weak to taunts and flattery.

(The White Witch)
Euphemia

The strongest adventurer in all of Azrac. She appears as an imposing and terrifying old lady in public, but in truth, she is a lazy and spoiled girl when at home.

(archlich)
Cecilia

A "sage of the underworld," able to wield various forms of magic such as necromancy. She's incredibly fond of "cute boys." She eats a lot to maintain her voluptuous figure.



Tori and Euphemia
went around
looking for stores
that sold seeds and
seedlings, making
notes of what to
buy. Then, the two
of them stopped at
a fancy café.



It was
a shame
about the
cream on
her face,
though.

Tori found Euphemia,
sitting there across
the table from him,
especially adorable
today. While she was
incredibly lazy and
unkempt at home, the
combination of a
proper set of clothes
and the fashionable
backdrop of the café
made her look like a
veritable beauty.

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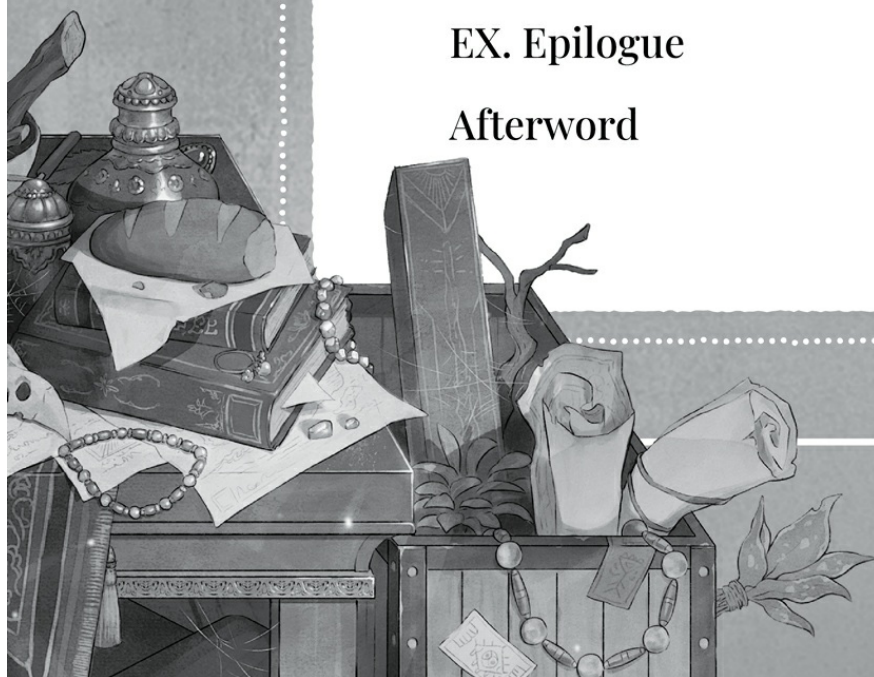
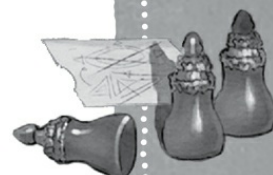


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0. The Beginning

The long march of monsters continued on. Many among them were demihumans like orcs and goblins, but four-legged beasts such as wargs were also present. The clangs of crude equipment banging together echoed as the monsters marched.

The largest figure among them was a creature called the ogre, whose size could easily reach twice or thrice that of an adult male human. Its mighty body was clad in armor, its hand gripped a gigantic club, and on its belt was a sword in its scabbard. The club was essentially a massive log, and the sword, if wielded by a human, would be considered a greatsword from its size. It would seem this ogre was leading this army of monsters.

The army was marching across the barren land. The monsters exchanged growls and sounds incomprehensible to human ears, all while lightly brawling with one another. Perhaps they were all excited about the slaughter they were about to commit.

A man was watching this scene from high up while keeping himself out of sight. He shook his head with a resigned expression.

“There’s way too many of them... I’m glad we didn’t try to face them head-on.” He sighed.

“How’d their numbers get so huge?! Damn it, how’re we supposed to pull off our job now?!” complained one of his comrades, a man equipped with a spear.

“What about reinforcements...?” a girl, seemingly a spellcaster, asked timidly.

“I already asked for them. But the message will take a while to reach Azrac, and even if they manage to make it here in time...”

“Gonna be a tough fight even just to slow these guys down.”

“Right. Charging out there without a plan will just get us killed. That ogre’s a real tough one. Just look at it.”

Their quest was an extermination mission. Monsters had been sighted in a wasteland close to the city, so the guild had sent them to hunt the monsters down. However, the creatures' numbers were much, much larger than had been identified by the scouts, so the party avoided direct confrontation and hid themselves to form another plan. While the monsters were fierce and tenacious, none of them were intelligent enough to perform detailed tasks such as reconnaissance, so the party should be safe as long as they hid and kept their distance.

An archer who was plucking his bowstrings spoke up as if remembering something. "Did you know they were talking about unifying the clans at the Azrac Guild?"

"Yeah. The guild was talking about unifying some of the platinum-rank clans and giving them full support, right?"

"Hmph. Got nothin' to do with us, then."

"Yeah, we'd have to be a clan that could put up a fight against that monster army..."

"We adventurers sure have it rough..."

The extermination squad went quiet and stared in resignation at the horde before them.

In this world, there were those who took up weapons like swords or learned spellcasting to induce phenomena using mana, and who used these skills to hunt dangerous monsters or explore dungeons for rare materials and resources. They put their lives on the line, yet they were neither soldiers nor mercenaries. They were commonly known as "adventurers."

These adventurers were divided by rank based on their skills: bronze, silver, gold, and platinum rank. The ones who reached platinum in particular were the envy of all. Many of these adventurers worked in uncharted territories or lands outside the reach of national authorities, fighting monsters or hunting for treasures to earn a living. It wasn't unheard of for one to obtain a rare item or artifact on the job and get rich overnight. Some had even managed to earn noble titles that way. As such, there were an endless number of people who took the path of the adventurer—from the second or third sons of families who

had no hope of inheriting the family home, to those bored of the monotony of farming, to those who simply sought glory.

It was by no means a stable profession. Adventurers often came face-to-face with danger, and brawn could only get you so far in this line of work. The difficulty went up the higher in rank you went. Those who relied solely on brute force would find it hard to climb the ladder.

The adventurers who'd joined this particular extermination squad were certainly not weak. Even so, monsters hostile to humans still posed a substantial threat. It was dangerous to take them on alone, so forming groups with fellow adventurers was fundamental. These teams formed to fight monsters were called "clans." Joining a clan was standard practice for any aspiring adventurer.

Still, there were those who transcended those fundamentals.

Suddenly, the march of the monster army slowed, and chaos seemed to be erupting within their ranks.

"What's going on?"

"I-I don't know! B-But..."

A howl echoed, and it was not from a mere dog or wolf. The sound seemed to originate from the very depths of the earth. Those who heard it would feel chills to their very core. Even the adventurers felt this chill, and they stood alert with their weapons in hand, scanning their surroundings.

A flash of silver ran through the monster army, and their formation fell apart. A gigantic wolf bared its fangs and mercilessly trampled on the fell creatures. Its stature was comparable to the ogre commander; its fangs were as sharp as swords, and they pierced through the monsters' crude armor with ease.

From above, a blazing orb of fire rained down on the chaotic jumble of monsters. Nay, it was not a blazing orb but rather the fiery wings of a great bird. Its gigantic wings brushed the ground as it scorched the crowd in its path. The smell of burnt flesh reached as far as the adventurers' hiding place.

The party watched in disbelief as the corpses of dead monsters rose up and started moving. Their soulless husks took up weapons and began attacking the

ones that remained alive. This was unmistakably necromancy, and its wielder stood at a distance from the battlefield. They wore a cloak of shadow and coldly gazed at the monsters with pale white eyes. The shadows stretched out like tentacles, invading the corpses and manipulating them as the caster pleased.

“Th-The monsters are fighting themselves?!”

“No, that’s someone’s familiar controlling them.”

“A familiar? But...that’s a phoenix and a fenrir down there... And what’s that shadow?”

“It must be an archlich. A fiend also known as a ‘sage of the underworld.’”

“H-How could anyone make *that* into a familiar?!”

“It’s her!”

The man with the spear pointed at a figure clad in white—an old lady. Her appearance was otherworldly: she wore an all-white dress and hat, and had a robust, muscular figure like that of a seasoned brawler. Her long hair was also completely white. Those who met her gaze might simply faint from its sheer impact.

“I-It’s the White Witch!”

The witch held her staff before her, and the jewel at its tip began glittering with light. Then a beam of light shot out from the staff, zooming past the horde of confused monsters to blow off the upper body of the ogre at the back, who had been trying to keep order among the ranks. The chaos rose to a fever pitch, and the monsters could no longer rally any semblance of resistance. From here, they were unceremoniously crushed by the witch and her familiars.

It hadn’t even been an hour, and the massive army had been obliterated without a trace. There were no survivors; only the presence of death lingered over the surrounding area. As the animated corpses collapsed one by one, the fenrir let out a howl. The White Witch, her expression unchanged, turned and climbed onto the fenrir’s back. The beast launched itself with all four legs, and the White Witch and her familiars vanished into the distance. They had come and gone in no time at all, as if they had merely stopped by for a quick stroll.

The adventurers all stared at one another.

“...Wow.”

“So that was the strongest adventurer in all of Azrac...”

“...I should just quit right now.”

While almost all adventurers joined clans regardless of rank, there was one lone adventurer who'd never done so and yet had climbed all the way to platinum rank and stood at the pinnacle of all adventurers. She was the strongest in all of Azrac—the White Witch—and she had just made short work of a veritable army of monsters.

In a thick forest in the untamed hinterlands, there stood a single house. The house was showing its age, and its surroundings had been left unkempt. Weeds had overrun the area, and thick vines had crept over its walls.

A magic circle glowed in the yard that was barely escaping the encroachment of nature. A girl was standing before it, and suddenly the silhouettes of the fenrir, phoenix, and archlich vanished into it. The girl had long, white hair and wore a white hat and dress. In her hands, she held a staff. In other words, she bore the appearance of the archetypal witch.

“You three are so mean...” the girl grumbled as the glowing circle vanished.

Just as she finished complaining, the front door opened, unleashing a cloud of dust. A mountain of garbage, books, clothes, and other miscellaneous items cast a big, black shadow on her. Creatures seemed to be wriggling and writhing in the crevices of the gigantic pile. Inside the fireplace, a hardened mound of soot had built up; it would seem it had been quite some time since a fire had been lit in it. Unwashed pots and silverware were scattered all across the kitchen. Cobwebs and dust clung to the lighting and other fixtures dangling from the ceiling.

The girl tiptoed across the living room. Plates were piled up on the dining table, and atop the same table was a basket of bread. She took one piece and headed into her bedroom, where clothes and empty bottles were scattered all over her huge bed.

“I’m exhausted,” she sighed.

The girl sat and finished eating her bread. She took a drink out of her magical cooling storage box—her “fridge”—and gulped it down. Then she took off her clothes and threw them haphazardly. She plopped down on the bed and sank into the covers, which had lost their fluff from not having been aired out for a long time.

The girl tossed and turned. Each time she did, her eyes landed on discarded bakery bags, candy wrappers, fruit peels, and crumpled pieces of paper scattered all over. Piles of books and clothes, many of which were covered in dust, were strewn all about the floor. Spiders had built webs all over the place, trapping dust and various insects in them.

“Won’t someone *please* clean this house?” the girl muttered. It seemed that she had no desire to do any of it herself.

“Adventurer great at performing household chores... From the Muddy Four-Horns... His name...” The girl continued mumbling as she closed her eyes. Soon enough, she was fast asleep.

1. Termination Notice

“So these tools are for Jean tomorrow... I have to schedule Andrea’s sword polishing for him, and restock some herbs for Suzanna...”

At the clan hall of the Muddy Four-Horns—a platinum-rank clan—a man was being hounded by a mountain of chores. His tasks included preparing the equipment of the vanguard, arranging tools for the rear guard, and buying other useful items. On top of that, he had to clean the clan hall, prepare meals, manage the accounting, and make schedules, all while carting a load of miscellaneous items here and there.

The name of this unfortunate man was Tori, and he was twenty-five years old. Despite having been in the adventuring business for a decade—long enough to be considered a respectable career—he had never once stood on the front lines. He had set out from his hometown thinking that he’d return with glorious honors under his name, but he had zero talent for fighting or magic. All he could do was support the clan from the back, fetching equipment and performing assistant work. Once the clan had climbed to platinum rank, even his support from the rear guard was no longer needed. He had been relegated to menial tasks such as managing the clan hall, replenishing supplies, and preparing food.

It wasn’t always like this, Tori thought. Back when the clan was still at bronze rank, he still fought alongside his clanmates, but at some point, he became the designated errand boy.

Tori, who had gone out to buy groceries, sighed and shook his head. “This sucks,” he grumbled.

He’d felt some pride in being helpful to his comrades, who were all hailed as heroes and champions, but now he was too busy to even feel that. His workload had increased along with the clan’s rise in rank, and he no longer had any time to rest. Moreover, though he dutifully fulfilled his tasks, said tasks were all accomplished in the background, away from all the action. The sad reality of his accomplishments sitting unnoticed gave Tori a sense that he had lost his

identity somewhere along the way. This feeling ate at him.

The Muddy Four-Horns operated in the city of Azrac, a massive city where all manner of trade and commerce converged. It lay close to hostile, undeveloped lands full of rare materials and items that could be harvested. Of course, this undeveloped land was also teeming with monsters. Trade routes extended to the south, east, and west, which made it easy for people to access. New adventurers arrived in the city all the time. This meant that the adventuring trade was quite lively, but also that competition was fierce. It was only natural that an adventurer like Tori with no skills to speak of was doomed to languish in the background. Still, this didn't mean that he could accept this pathetic fate.

The Muddy Four-Horns, being a platinum-rank clan, was full of promise. Their leader, the swordsman Andrea, was an excellent commander. The twinblade Suzanna was so fast and agile that monsters could not lay a claw on her. The spellcaster Jean was invincible in both offense and defense, and was also a wielder of Great Sorceries. The clan centered around these three, and their skills were perfectly balanced between frontline and rearguard strength.

The clan members who participated in battle could rest their bodies during rest days, but Tori still had to do work—he had to make food, clean the hall, do the laundry, groceries, accounting, and other such menial tasks.

I'm a burden in combat, after all...

It would have been a saving grace if he at least had skill in either swordsmanship or magic, but he couldn't get far with just his eagerness to learn. The shoddy sword techniques that had carried him while his clan was still in bronze and silver rank could no longer do so once the clan rose to gold, and once they reached platinum rank, he became nothing but a burden.

Lately, Tori had been spending more and more time thinking about the direction his life was heading in. However, he had been in the same world for ten years, and staying in the same place for so long made it difficult to imagine any other path. Or rather, he had too many regrets that got in the way of seeing a better future.

As Tori walked down the road carrying a mountain of supplies, a shadow suddenly draped over him. When he looked up, a large figure was looming over

him. The gigantic woman before him was over twice his size in both height and width. A large sun hat covered the figure's messy white hair. Various jewels and accessories dangled off the figure's robe. In one hand, she was holding a crooked staff, and a large, beaked nose poked out of her wrinkled face. There was no mistaking it—this gigantic old lady was the adventurer known as the White Witch. He could feel her sharp gaze piercing through him from the shadow of her sun hat.

Tori quickly stepped out of her path. "S-Sorry."

The White Witch continued past without a word.

"What an intimidating aura..." Tori mumbled.



While platinum rank was normally earned while being in a clan, the White Witch had earned that title completely on her own. Azrac was full of exceptional adventurers, and even among them, her skills were truly top-class, perhaps even the strongest of all time. She accepted nothing but the most difficult of bounties directly from the adventurers' guild, and always fulfilled them perfectly. It was through these feats that she'd become known as the ultimate weapon of Azrac. She was, in all senses of the phrase, on a whole different level from everyone else.

However, her appearance and unknowable motives also made her an object of fear rather than admiration and respect. No one had ever tried making conversation with her, and no one knew where she lived. She only showed herself in the city when she had a request to fulfill.

Yeah, that was no human. That was a monster, Tori thought to himself.

When he returned to the clan hall, Tori could sense that there was something off about the mood in the room. He tilted his head in confusion.

"I'm back... What's going on?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah..."

Andrea, the clan leader, glanced at Tori. The other clan members also looked at him with sullen or apologetic expressions on their faces.

A man with a huge smile was also looking at him. Tori remembered passing by him earlier on his way out to shop for supplies. He looked nothing like an adventurer.

"What's with the weird vibes?" Tori asked.

"This is Mr. Arpent, a manager from the guild." Andrea introduced the man standing next to him.

"Well, good day to you, Tori. I am Arpent," the man gave a jolly greeting without breaking his smile.

"Good day to you too... Wait, manager?"

"Indeed. We at the Azrac Guild respect all our platinum-ranked clans and adventurers as valuable assets in battle, which is why we have been engaged in

lively discussions about how to raise the efficiency of our clan administration. Our solution is to gather a number of existing clans that show huge potential for growth and unify them. Of course, we at the Azrac Guild will provide our full and undivided support to this newly unified clan,” Arpent explained.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Andrea, who had his head cast down, looked at Tori with a grim expression.

“Tori, as of today, the Muddy Four-Horns is disbanding,” he announced.

“...Why?”

Jean, the spellcaster, answered Tori. Due to a spell, his aging had stopped, and despite being one of the older members, he still appeared to be in his early teens. “It’s as Mr. Arpent said. A number of clans are being unified.”

“U-Um... W-We’re going to be working together with other top clans like Clan Eternal and the Crimson Venus...” the twinblade Suzanna added sheepishly.

Tori sighed. “I’m fired, aren’t I?”

“If I may, Mr. Tori,” Arpent interjected. “We have reviewed your capabilities, and we found it quite difficult to believe that your talents match the rank of platinum bestowed upon your clan. It would seem that you have not even seen combat in the past few years. The clans participating in this unification are all first-rate and the cream of the crop. I apologize, but we believe that it would be difficult for you to find a place in such an environment with your skills.”

Tori bit his lip and looked in Andrea’s direction. “I didn’t hear about any of this.”

Andrea averted his gaze. “I’m sorry for not including you in the talks, but it wouldn’t have changed the result.”

“Maybe not. But all this time, I thought I was one of your comrades.”

“You are. But...things have been different ever since you stopped fighting with us.”

“But I’ve been working so hard helping the clan in other ways. I’ve been doing all the jobs the clan gave to me,” Tori protested. He knew he was arguing over a done deal, but he couldn’t stop himself.

Andrea opened his eyes and looked straight at Tori. "I'm saying...those services are no longer needed."

"Even so...aren't we comrades who've gone through thick and thin...?"

"We've been putting our lives on the line. You know you haven't been doing the same, don't you?"

Tori was taken aback. Shocked, he stared at Andrea, who met his gaze directly.

Finally, Tori sighed and put down the supplies he was carrying. "Fine, I got the message," he said.

"Sorry. I crossed a line," Andrea apologized.

"It's fine. It's weird that a man like me who can only fight small fry is in a platinum-ranked clan like this in the first place. I should have left long ago."

"That's not— Hey, are you all fine with this?!" Suzanna protested.

Andrea turned to her. "Suzanna, we have our reasons for climbing as high as we can, remember?"

"Ugh..." Suzanna went quiet.

Tori gathered his belongings: a pack of clothes and a sword he'd not swung in a long time. His belongings were scant and very light.

"Here's your separation pay. Tori, I'm truly thankful for all your help. I'm sorry things had to end this way," Jean said as he handed Tori a small bag of coins. Tori hesitated for a moment, but he took the money.

"Jean, I hope you manage to fulfill our master's dying words."

"Tori..."

Tori then turned to Andrea and Suzanna.

"Andrea, I'm sorry I couldn't help you exact your revenge."

Andrea stayed quiet.

"Suzanna, I hope your little brother gets better. I'm praying for him."

"Tori... I'm so sorry," Suzanna sobbed.

Tori took a final look at his apologetic former clanmates. He forced a smile as he turned his back and waved goodbye.

“Be seeing you all,” he muttered, and departed the clan hall.

Tori felt as if a huge hole had opened in his heart. His jobs had been difficult, and he had even thought of quitting many times, but now that he had been kicked out, he felt an immense sadness. He’d already known he was useless to the clan, but the truth being shoved into his face like this still hurt.

What am I supposed to do now?

Tori walked along the road while holding back his tears. He had nowhere to go. Even walking now felt too much of an effort, so he plopped down on a stack of wooden crates by the roadside.

The streets remained busy as people went on with their daily lives.

I suppose nobody really cares about my circumstances, Tori thought. *That’s just how it is. But it makes me realize just how small my existence is.*

His thoughts were only getting gloomier and gloomier. If this kept on going, he would eventually succumb to despair. *Me? An adventurer? What a joke.*

Tori no longer had the will to do anything. He could only stare at the people passing him by.

It was then that a shadow blocked his view. Surprised, he looked up and saw the gigantic White Witch looking down at him. Her face was as terrifying as ever. Tori froze for a moment, but perhaps due to being in the pit of despair, he managed to glare right back without flinching.

“What do you want from me?” he hissed.

“Thou art Tori of the Muddy Four-Horns?” the White Witch bellowed. Tori would have flinched if it weren’t for hearing the name of his former clan, which irritated him.

“*I just left that place. Permanently. Actually, the entire clan no longer exists.*” Tori let out a derisive laugh. *What is wrong with everyone today?*

“I am aware.”

“Huh?”

Apparently, rumors of the platinum-ranked clans being unified and fully sponsored by the guild had already been going around for a while. She must have heard the news from one of the guild employees, including the termination of clan members deemed worthless.

Tori gritted his teeth, then let out another laugh. “Yeah... Yeah, that’s right. So, what do you want from me? Did you come all the way here to laugh at me? Must be nice having all that free time on your hands, being a platinum-ranked adventurer and all.”

“Nay... Tori, hast thou a place to turn to?”

“Of course not! I was stuck doing odd jobs all year round... Not even acknowledged as one of their comrades just because I couldn’t fight... Damn it all!”

Tori’s pent-up emotions burst out all at once. He couldn’t stop himself, despite knowing full well that it was all self-serving drivel. He kept going, not caring that he was ranting to no one. “You all had no right to scatter your things around just because I was there to clean up! I always tried to serve you warm and fresh meals! I went to so many stores just so I could get our supplies cheaper whenever I shopped! I sat through all your rants and complaints late at night even though I was sleepy! What time did you all think I woke up, huh?! Just who do you think was keeping all your daily lives in order?!”

“Precisely.”

“What?”

“I have sought thee out to keep my daily life in order,” the White Witch elaborated.

“*Your* life in order?” Tori repeated. The White Witch nodded. Tori snorted. *How shameless of her. Keep her life in order? The adventurer who climbed solo all the way up to platinum rank? She’s asking that of me, Clan Muddy Four-Horns’ designated errand guy, right after I got fired? She has to be making fun of me.*

In that case, I have ideas of my own.

“Uh, yeah, well, sure. You can hire me. But you should know that I’m really expensive. You’ll have to pay me about ten thousand a day—”

“I accept thy terms.”

“Huh? Wh—?”

The White Witch placed her hand on Tori’s head, and a magical light began to shine from her palm. The next moment, both she and Tori were floating in the air.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—?!”

“Let us depart. Hold on to me tightly.”

Tori felt a sensation akin to being yanked upward. He then realized they were flying in the air. The scenery beneath him vanished rapidly into the horizon behind. He had no idea where they were headed.

“Wh-Whooooaaa?!”

The two of them flew past the wastelands before gradually descending over a dark forest. Once inside, they landed in an open space where a small, quiet house stood. A battered wooden fence surrounded the house’s yard. There was a well with a pump nearby, along with a plot of land for growing vegetables and herbs, though it was currently overrun with weeds. There also stood an empty henhouse and an abandoned shed covered with grass and vines.

“We have arrived,” the White Witch announced.

Tori, dumbfounded, fell back onto his butt.

“Wh-Where are we?”

“This is my house, and from now on, thy new workplace,” the White Witch declared.

Tori scrambled back and looked up at the White Witch. “W-Wait, I haven’t agreed to being employed yet—”

“Didst thou not say ten thousand a day?” the White Witch calmly echoed Tori’s price. Tori was at a loss for words—she seemed to have taken the ridiculous amount he’d stated completely seriously. *Take care of this monstrous*

woman? Can't she already take care of everything on her own? She already seems all-powerful!

Tori hurriedly prostrated himself before the White Witch. "I-I-I-I'm so sorry! I was just kidding! I could never serve the great and honorable White Witch—"

"Euphemia."

A clear, soothing voice rang out. Tori lifted his head in surprise. The gigantic witch's figure became obscured in a cloud of haze, and when it cleared, there stood a young lady with smooth, brilliant-white hair and pearlescent skin. She appeared to be about eighteen years of age. She had a pretty face, and her droopy eyes even looked a bit cute.

Tori's mouth opened and closed out of shock.

"Huh? Eh? Y-You're— Who...?"

"I'm Euphemia, your new employer. Everyone calls me the White Witch, though," said the girl, and she let out a big yawn.



2. A New Workplace

“S-So, th-that old lady form is something you put on with magic?” Tori stammered.

“Indeed... My mother told me I wouldn’t be taken seriously if I looked frail and dainty,” answered the White Witch. Apparently, her voice and way of speaking also altered whenever she transformed into that form.

While Tori was dumbfounded and shocked by the truth behind “Euphemia the White Witch,” he somehow managed to regain his composure and absorb the current situation. On one hand, he was relieved that he didn’t have to be a caretaker for that monstrous old lady. On the other hand, it felt wrong to accept the offer now that he knew he’d be working for a beautiful young woman, even though he wasn’t doing anything to feel guilty about.

“Uh, but all I can do are chores and errands...” Tori started.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want you for,” Euphemia replied.

“B-But we’re very far from the nearest town. I can’t travel all the way here every day.”

“You can live here. I will allow you to take residence in my home.”

“Nngh... B-But a bachelor and a young lady living under the same roof...”

“I don’t mind.”

“B-But...!”

“Do you hate the idea of working for me that much?” Euphemia looked so frail and fleeting as she said these words with such a sad tone. Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes.

Tori panicked and flailed his hands. “O-O-Okay! Fine! I accept your offer!”

Euphemia’s face brightened upon hearing this. While the change in her expression wasn’t that drastic, Tori could easily tell that she was happy.

Euphemia turned around and opened the door to her home. “Come in,” she beckoned.

“O-Okay. I’m coming i— Huh?!”

Tori was utterly shocked and appalled at the state of the house. The clutter was beyond his wildest expectations. Clothes were scattered everywhere. Books were piled up all over. Balled-up papers were mounded in all corners of the house, almost as if they signaled the presence of waste bins underneath. Paper bags from the bakery, candy wrappers, fruit peels, chicken bones, and various other litter were strewn all over the place.

A pile of books and papers was sitting haphazardly on the desk by the windowsill. Next to the pile was an empty bottle of ink, toppled over. Right next to *that* was an empty medicine bottle, also on its side.

Cobwebs were hanging from the light fixtures on the ceiling. The webs had caught large clumps of dust, giving them a horrifying appearance. Of course, the room itself was also covered in a thick layer of dust. Each step they took kicked up a small cloud. The fireplace was overflowing with soot; it would be a miracle if it could even light a proper fire. A large cauldron sat inside the fireplace, looking as though it had expanded from its original size with how much charcoal and filth was stuck to it.

Stacks of unwashed dishes were piled up on what seemed to be the dining table. A pot on the table was filled with what appeared to have been stew, or some kind of meal, at least. Flies were hovering right above it, and it emitted a horrible smell.

“This is appalling,” Tori muttered.

“Your first job... Please clean all of this up,” said Euphemia as she walked skillfully around the floor, which did not look like it had any space to walk on. She entered what appeared to be her own room, which, from what little Tori could glimpse of it, seemed to be in a similar state to the rest of the house.

“...I no longer feel bad about charging her such a high fee.”

Tori put on an apron, rolled up his sleeves, and pumped his arm. He put on a bandanna and psyched himself up. Now that he had gotten himself into this, he

decided to put his full effort into cleaning up. As long as he chipped away at the mountain of clutter in front of him, he would eventually finish this monumental task.

Tori decided to start by clearing some space to walk around. He'd just started picking up some trash, when something started wriggling around. At first, he thought it was a rat or some insect, but when he looked carefully, a pitch-black slime creature slithered out. It then leaped straight at him.

"Gaaah?!" Tori reflexively threw the trash in his hand at the slime. The creature fell to the floor. It was quivering as it tried to slither toward Tori.

"What the hell is this *creature* doing here?!"

Tori grabbed the sword from his pack and slashed the attacking slime into two. The monster stopped moving and melted away. Tori was relieved for a moment before seeing more slimes and large rats crawl out of their hiding places. Those same creatures then turned their sights on Tori and attacked him.

"Why do I have to kill monsters before I can clean up?!"

Slimes and rats were really weak, so even someone as weak as Tori could take care of them without breaking a sweat. He managed to eliminate all the monsters in less than an hour. Tori had readied himself for cleaning, but now he was tired from the unexpected battle.

Tori struggled to make his way along the floor until he reached Euphemia's room. He opened the door and peered in, and saw the horrible clutter inside. Books, clothes, candy wrappers, food bags, and scraps of paper were scattered all over.

A quilt was rolled up in a lump on top of a gigantic bed.

"Um... Miss Euphemia?" Tori called out.

"Mmmngh..."

The quilt squirmed, and a head poked out of the rolled-up bedding. "Whaddis it...?" Euphemia mumbled.

"Were you asleep already...? Never mind that—why are there slimes and giant rats in your house?!"

“I think they showed up while I was doing a magical experiment...”

“What do you mean, ‘they showed up’?! *I’m* the one who has to clean this all up!”

“Aren’t you an adventurer? I’m sure you can handle a slime or two...”

I have no excuses for that one, Tori thought. “...So, where are the cleaning supplies?”

“In the corner by the front door... I’m going to nap for a while, so I’ll leave everything to you...” Euphemia mumbled before crawling back into her quilt and curling up. Tori immediately heard her sleeping noises once more.

Is this really the same White Witch that everyone in Azrac fears? Tori wondered as he headed back to the entrance to grab the cleaning supplies.

“I won’t be finishing this in a day... I’ll start with the kitchen and fireplace,” Tori concluded. *Otherwise, I won’t even be able to cook.*

Tori started with opening the windows throughout the house. This kicked up clouds of dust everywhere, which drifted out the windows. Next, he scraped the soot off the fireplace and dumped it all in a space by the garden. He did this again and again until he finally swept up the remaining soot with a broom, completely cleaning out the fireplace. It was now in a state where he could light a proper fire.

Next was the kitchen. Its entrance was located beside the fireplace, leading into a small space. There was a window in front of the kitchen counter, and the shelves above held pots and bottles of what seemed to be spices. There was even a small well pump and a kitchen sink. However, the sink was stuffed full of unwashed dishes and silverware. It also looked like the pump hadn’t been operated in a long time.

Besides the fireplace, there was also a stove and oven constructed out of bricks, but this was also covered in dust. Judging by the cobwebs and filth on it, it hadn’t been lit for a while.

Just as he did with the fireplace, Tori dusted off the brick stove. He also threw out all the caked-up and rotting items from the shelves.

Upon getting to the cupboard...

“Why are they so filthy?!” Tori exclaimed. The plates and silverware weren’t washed very well, and there were spots and food stains on all of them. Some of the stains had hardened and might be a struggle to remove. Tori grumbled, but he started gathering the dirty dishes and utensils and washing them in the sink.

“Euphemia... Just what kind of life do you live here?” Tori complained. He was at the point where he was actually concerned.

When he finally finished washing all the dishes, the sun was almost setting. It was getting dark.

That’s probably all I can clean for today, Tori thought as he stood in front of the kitchen counter. He grabbed some smoked meat and onions that were hanging there, and took some dried beans and flour from the shelves. Euphemia barely had any fresh items in stock, but there was no point in complaining about what wasn’t there.

“Eww, everything at the bottom has gone bad!” Tori had grabbed a basket of potatoes and found that the spuds at the bottom had rotted and turned goopy. It was one horrifying discovery after another in this house. For now, he took the potatoes that could still be salvaged.

Tori was worried about sparks from the stove, so he decided to use the fireplace in the parlor. He lit a fire and placed a pot filled with water over it. The smoked meat had been covered in dust, so Tori trimmed the meat to clean it up. He cut the potatoes, onions, and some shriveled carrots that he’d found, and threw them into the pot with some dried beans. He added in some caked-up salt for flavor, along with some dried herbs that were far past their prime.

While the stew was simmering, he kneaded and stretched some dough, spread it over a pan, and baked it. Since there was no yeast, the bread would be unleavened, but it would have to do for now.

As he was preparing the food, Euphemia woke up. She was still yawning and rubbing her eyes as she shuffled into the room.

“Ahh... What a nice smell... What’re you cooking?” she mumbled.

“Oh, I took whatever you had lying around and threw it into a stew...

Gaaah?!”

Tori panicked and averted his eyes. Euphemia was wearing what seemed to be a bathrobe, but there was clearly nothing else underneath. He could see her cleavage and thighs at the parts where the buttons met. It made it difficult to look.

“C-Could you *please* wear more clothes?!”

“Hm...? Okay.”

Euphemia seemed completely unfazed. She shuffled back into her room. Tori could hear the sound of cloth ruffling about.

I am very worried about how all this is going to work out, Tori thought to himself as he tried to calm his heart. He took some deep breaths and went back to cooking. He tasted the stew and added more spices accordingly.

Euphemia came back wearing a beige tunic. She placed her hand on Tori’s back and leaned forward to peek into the pot of stew.

“Looks tasty...”

“H-Hey, cut it out!”

Tori felt something soft pushing up against him and got flustered. On top of that, Euphemia was wearing a short tunic and nothing else, so her pale legs were exposed.

This woman clearly has no sense of personal space! Tori screamed in his mind. He escaped Euphemia by swiftly setting the dining table and making her sit down.

Euphemia, clearly impressed by the freshly cleaned table, traced her finger across its surface. “It’s been so long since this table was this clean,” she remarked.

“Wow.” *Just how long had she left the table like that?* Tori wanted to ask but kept it to himself as he was terrified to know the answer.

Euphemia took a bite of the stew and then a nibble of some bread. Before long, she was scarfing down the food, singing its praises as she ate. Since there were barely any ingredients around, Tori thought the food would taste bland,

but that didn't seem to be the case.

"More," Euphemia requested.

"You sure have an appetite."

After six bowls of stew, Euphemia yawned and looked sleepy once more.

"That was delicious... Thanks for the food," she said.

"Good to hear."

Just what has this woman been eating all this time? Tori thought. Then he remembered the *substance* that had previously been in this pot, and stopped thinking about it.

I probably shouldn't clean more at night. I'll just wash the dishes and call it a day.

"Um, where should I sleep?" Tori asked.

"Oh... Wanna sleep next to me?"

"No way! That's out of the question!"

"Okay... But I only have one bed..."

"How could you ask me to live here when you only have one bed..."

"I thought we could both just sleep there... It's pretty big, you know? There's enough space for two," said Euphemia without any hesitation. She showed no sign of being embarrassed at all.

Does she not see me as a member of the opposite sex? Tori made himself sad with this thought. *There'd only be trouble if she did, but I don't like it that she doesn't either.*

Wait, this woman is insanely powerful. Even if I lost my mind and assaulted her, she could easily throw me off. Is that why she doesn't care...?

If that was the case, then everything made sense to Tori. Euphemia was strong enough to beat the most powerful monsters on her own. He was no match for her.

Still, Tori felt that Euphemia was mean for teasing him like this.

In any case, Tori rejected the idea of sleeping with Euphemia. He dug out the couch that was buried under a pile of books and trash, and forced himself to lie down on it. It was dusty, moldy, and far from a comfortable place to sleep, but he still slept like a log.

The next day, the cleaning started early in the morning. Euphemia was slurping down the leftover stew from last night as she watched Tori work.

“Tori, you’re amazing. You’re so efficient,” Euphemia marveled.

“Thanks, I guess!” Tori called back. He had been gathering all the paper scraps and burning them in the yard. He then gathered all the empty bottles and took them outside the house, and took all of the books on the floor and tentatively stacked them in the corner of the room. He cleaned up all the food waste and buried it in a hole outside. Slowly but surely, the floor of the house became visible once more.

Then night arrived once again, but there was still a dire lack of ingredients. Tori threw the remaining potatoes into the fireplace and roasted them. After peeling and smashing them, he fried the onions and smoked meat with a small amount of water, and poured the resulting sauce onto the potatoes. Euphemia’s eyes sparkled upon seeing the food.

“Amazing. It’s a completely different meal from the exact same ingredients...”

“It probably tastes the same, though,” Tori remarked. He’d used the exact same spices as he’d done last night. Regardless, Euphemia happily scarfed down the meal.

Then it was the next day. The potatoes and smoked meat had finally run out. There were still some onions left, but Tori wouldn’t be able to cook a proper meal with just that.

“We’ll have to go out and shop for supplies,” Tori said while sipping on a simple onion and herb soup. “How do you go out and buy things?”

“I go to the city,” answered Euphemia.

“How?”

“I go whoosh with magic.”

“Well, I can’t do anything like that.”

“Let’s go together, then.”

“Ah.”

And with that, they went off after finishing their breakfast. Euphemia was wearing a proper robe for going out. In one hand was her staff, and in the other, she held a tight grip on Tori’s hand. Her hand was soft and smooth, and holding it made Tori’s heart skip a beat.

“Don’t let go, okay?” Euphemia warned. She mumbled a spell, and just like when she’d brought Tori to her house, they floated up to the sky and flew off at dizzying speeds. The scenery beneath them zoomed by in an instant. Then they decelerated, and eventually, the feeling returned to Tori’s legs.

“We’re here,” Euphemia announced. They had landed in a back alley. Tall buildings loomed over them on both sides, and only a narrow strip of sky was visible above.

The White Witch really does live up to her reputation, Tori thought. He pulled himself together and went off to buy supplies. Euphemia tailed him close behind.

Tori was worried that people would start whispering if he was seen with the terrifying White Witch, but no one paid him any heed. Instead, Euphemia’s ephemeral beauty was attracting attention and second glances from passersby.

“Nobody here knows you’re the White Witch, huh?” Tori commented.

“I only transform when I have work to do,” Euphemia explained.

That’s right. To everyone else, the “White Witch” is that gigantic old lady, Tori thought. Right now, the Euphemia beside him was a beautiful girl with silky, white hair. No one would ever think that someone like that was the same person as the White Witch.

...That also means that I’m walking right next to a mysterious yet gorgeous beauty, doesn’t it? Tori realized. He felt a bit of pride in looking like he was dating someone as beautiful as Euphemia, but he also felt that he was a poor match for someone like her.

Regardless, this wasn't the time to be puffing his chest. He had to shop for ingredients and supplies, or they'd be eating slop for the foreseeable future. However, he was worried that any fresh food they bought would just spoil.

"Do you have to go out to buy ingredients often?" Tori asked.

"No. I have a fridge," Euphemia answered.

"Where?"

"In my room."

"Why is it in your room?"

"Sometimes, I wake up and just want a cold drink. I can grab one from the fridge while still lying in bed," Euphemia replied.

What a luxurious way to live! Tori screamed internally as he put his palms to his face.

"Can I move the fridge to the kitchen?" Tori requested.

"Sure. I already made another one anyway."

A fridge was a specialized and expensive magic item created by taking a box and applying multiple layers of complex magic formulas to it to keep the interior of the box at a low temperature. For Euphemia to casually say that she just "made another one"? *Yeah, okay, just do whatever, I guess,* Tori thought.

In any case, having a fridge meant Tori could stop worrying and buy all the supplies he needed. However, now that he was going through his shopping list, there was no way he could carry everything in one trip. They were already out of potatoes, and he had no idea how old the flour in Euphemia's house was. However, staple foods and ingredients like potatoes, rice, and flour were too heavy, and not to mention too large, to carry around all at once. On top of that, he still had to buy meat, vegetables, and eggs as well. Tori was used to chores, and he *was* an adventurer, so he had undergone some physical training before, but there was a limit to how much he could carry on his own. He would definitely drop an item or two while walking around with that many things.

"We'll have to do multiple shopping trips at this rate," Tori announced.

"Why?" Euphemia wondered.

“We have too many things to carry. Even if we split the load, we won’t be able to carry all of them.”

“What else do we need to buy?”

“We still need to buy meat and greens. I also want some more spices, and there’s still a few other items left...”

“So, if we can carry all of it, we don’t have to make multiple trips?”

“Huh? Well, no, but...”

“Come with me,” Euphemia beckoned and led Tori into a back alley. Tori was confused, but he followed. They stopped at a dead end with garbage scattered all over. It appeared to be a hangout for lowlifes, but right now, it was completely deserted.

“What are we doing here?” Tori asked.

“Wait there.”

Euphemia raised her staff and whispered an incantation. A glowing magic circle appeared and expanded before her. From it, a gigantic silver wolf manifested. Tori’s jaw dropped open in shock. The great wolf appeared to be grinning as it opened its mouth.

“Euphie, it’s my time to shine, is it?! Where’s the enemy?! I, Shinozuki, warrior of the proud fenrir race of the underworld, will show them my strength!”

3. Shinozuki

Euphemia shook her head. “There’s no enemy this time,” she said.

“What?! Then why was I summoned?!”

“I want you to help carry our groceries.”

Shinozuki looked clearly displeased with Euphemia’s response. “You’re asking *me*, a proud fenrir warrior, to carry *groceries*?! I refuse!”

“No buts. If you refuse, I’ll never summon you again,” Euphemia threatened. Shinozuki’s ears immediately drooped upon hearing this.

“I-I don’t want that! If you don’t summon me, then who will?”

“Well then, you better listen to what I say.”

“Grrr... Fine...” Shinozuki seemed to nod reluctantly and started walking out of the alley with Euphemia. Tori, who’d been dumbfounded this whole time, was knocked out of his stupor and he chased after them.

“W-Wait, we can’t do this!” he yelled, and they paused.

“Hm? Who is this young man?” Shinozuki inquired.

“He is Tori. He’s currently taking care of me,” Euphemia answered.

“What? Hmph. You seem to have picked up an unreliable human. What can he do that I can’t, huh?” Shinozuki scoffed.

They’re not wrong there, Tori sighed. However, Euphemia got mad and smacked Shinozuki’s butt with her staff.

Shinozuki yelped. “Wh-What was that for?!”

“Tori is amazing,” Euphemia replied. “He can do things that you can’t.”

“What do you mean?! What can a mere human do that a fenrir like me cannot?!”

“Cooking.”

Shinozuki froze.

“Laundry.”

“W-Well, I *am* a fenrir... Look at my paws! Do you think I could cook and do laundry with these?!” Shinozuki protested.

“That’s not all. He also cleaned my house.”

“Wh-What?! You mean that house of horrors?!”

Ah, I’m glad even the fenrir thinks so, Tori thought, feeling validated by Shinozuki’s remarks.



“Fine, I acknowledge that this man is no mere human. What’s your name again, young man?” Shinozuki demanded.

“Uh, it’s Tori.”

“Tori, why did you stop us from leaving the alley? Were we not going to shop for groceries?” Shinozuki asked.

“We are, but it’ll cause a commotion if people see a fenrir casually strolling down the street,” Tori replied.

“Oh, that? All right, let’s do this, then.”

Before they even finished talking, Shinozuki’s fur stood up on end. A whirlwind began blowing around them, and once it subsided, there stood a tall, young, adult woman. Her long, silver hair—the same hue as the fenrir’s fur—swayed in the wind.

Tori stood dumbfounded. “Shinozuki, you’re a girl? Wait, you’re completely naked! Please put on some clothes!”

In contrast to her slender waist, Shinozuki had twin mountains for breasts, jiggling and making themselves known to the world. She was completely nude, and she made no effort to conceal herself.

Tori tried his best to avert his gaze, but the image had already burned itself into his eyelids.

Shinozuki looked at her own body, nodding in appreciation. “It’s been quite some time since I’ve taken this form. I just can’t imagine how you humans could live without a coat of fur on you. Euphie, my clothes.”

Euphemia, seemingly annoyed, waved her staff. In an instant, clothes appeared on Shinozuki’s body. She looked satisfied, marveling at her new outfit as she tied her long hair into a ponytail.

“This should suffice.” Shinozuki turned to Tori. “Why are you all red, young man?”

“Well, I mean...”

Tori’s head was still bent down. Euphemia huffed as she grabbed his arm.

“Let’s go shopping already.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah.”

“Hmm, I see...” Shinozuki was beaming as she watched Euphemia drag Tori out of the alley.

The trio resumed their shopping. Shinozuki still had the same strength in her human form as she did in her fenrir form, so she had no problems carrying the large number of items.

Finally, the trio finished their shopping and returned home with a full cargo.

“You two sure bought a huge amount of groceries,” Shinozuki said with an exasperated but impressed tone.

“I still have a lot of cleaning and repair work to do,” Tori explained. “I stocked up so I don’t have to waste time going out again.”

“Ohh! This place really *has* been cleaned up! Tori, you have done well!” Shinozuki showered Tori with praise.

“Thanks, but like I said, there’s still work to do.”

Tori started organizing the bags of groceries and supplies. As he did, he caught Euphemia trying to go to her bedroom.

“You can go to sleep later,” Tori said.

“Call me when dinner is ready...” Euphemia grumbled.

“Give me the fridge first.”

“Oh.” Euphemia headed to the kitchen as Tori stood in front of a kitchen cabinet he’d emptied of tools and utensils. She pointed her staff at the cabinet and mumbled an incantation. Before long, magic circles appeared on the cabinet’s doors and walls. Once the circles faded, Tori could feel cold air emanating from the interior.

“You can use this,” Euphemia offered.

“Incredible,” Tori said.

It happened so quickly that Tori thought it might have been some kind of trick. But he could tell that the storage cabinet was cold and chilly inside. He put

the meat, vegetables, and eggs inside the fridge, then left the bags of flour and grains in a basket.

Next, he boiled a pot of water on the fireplace and put in various vegetables and beans. He took some hot coals, placed a frying pan on a trivet, and began frying some smoked meat and eggs. He also tore some bread he'd bought in the city into pieces.

Shinozuki started sniffing around. "Smells great," she commented.

"Well, I hope you like what I make. Oh, right. Shinozuki, now that you're in human form, are you able to do some cleaning and cooking?" Tori asked.

"No way I'm gonna take any requests to clean this house. Sounds like a pain," Shinozuki answered.

"You're not wrong about that."

"Besides, I'm a huge klutz. Can't get used to these human hands. Ain't gonna handle them delicate tools and all that. I'm just gonna hurt myself with a knife, and I'll end up tearing the laundry if I try folding it," Shinozuki explained while waving her hands around. Just as she said, she probably didn't have any use for those kinds of tools while in her wolf form.

Though, it still seems like she's exaggerating, Tori thought.

"Shinozuki, how do you usually spend your time?" Tori asked out of curiosity.

"Well, I'm a proud fenrir, so I live off the hunt in the underworld, of course," Shinozuki answered without hesitation.

"Oh, yeah, I can see that. You're quite strong, after all." Tori remembered Shinozuki's gigantic wolf form from when she was summoned, and shuddered.

Shinozuki laughed, seeming to be in a good mood. "Right?! Right?! Ha ha ha! Tori, isn't 'Shinozuki' a mouthful for you? Just call me Shino, all right?"

"Sure... Miss Euphemia, time to eat!" Tori yelled. He heard some shuffling coming from Euphemia's bedroom, and before long, Euphemia appeared, wearing a thin dress.

"What a nice smell..."

“Okay, sit down, sit down. Also, could you *please* wear something over that dress?!”

Euphemia’s dress was so thin that it was almost transparent. Euphemia herself felt no shame whatsoever and just looked confused when she looked down at what she was wearing. Regardless, she went back to her room and put on a cardigan.

“I’m amused that Euphie actually listens to what you say,” Shinozuki snickered.

Dinner was a large serving of bacon, eggs, and bread, along with a pot of stew made with a huge variety of ingredients. Euphemia’s eyes were sparkling in awe, and Shinozuki was drooling at the sight.

Tori served Euphemia a bowl of stew. “Here you go, Miss Euphemia. Shino, the stew’s pretty hot. Please be careful, okay?”

“My tongue ain’t that sensitive. Gimme a huge serving! Gimme!” Shino demanded.

Tori was about to hand over the stew when he felt a pair of eyes glaring at him. Tori turned and saw Euphemia giving him a displeased stare.

“Wh-What is it?”

“You’re calling her ‘Shino’...” Euphemia pouted.

“Huh? Well, yeah, she told me to call her that...”

“Why don’t you call me ‘Euphie’?” she complained.

“Huh... Miss Euphie, then?”

“No ‘miss.’ And no need to be polite around me.”

“Okay... If you say so.”

Tori wasn’t a learned man, so his manner of speaking toward his superiors wasn’t always elegant. He would often slip up and toss in some casual speech. Euphemia appeared to be younger than Tori, so he didn’t feel like it would take much effort to switch to a more casual tone.

Euphemia nodded. She looked satisfied and returned to eating her stew. She

almost looked like a pet to Tori, or perhaps a cute little sister. He could almost forget the terrifying visage of the gigantic, monstrous White Witch. Shinozuki, meanwhile, was grinning as she watched over the two of them.

“Euphie, you’ve got something on your face,” Tori pointed out. Euphemia had been eating some runny eggs, and some of the yolk had stuck to her cheeks.

“Mmm...” Euphemia tried to wipe her face with her sleeve, but Tori rushed to get a towel.

“Don’t wipe it with your clothes! Come on, look this way.”

“Mmmph...” Tori wiped Euphemia’s mouth and cheeks with the towel. Euphemia had her eyes closed and looked ticklish as she sat there while Tori cleaned her up.

“Euphie, you look like a big baby,” Shinozuki teased. Meanwhile, she was struggling with her spoon as she tried to eat her stew. Soup was spilling all over the table. Eventually, the effort proved to be too much and Shino tossed the spoon aside to slurp directly from the bowl. “Damn, that’s good! Tastes completely different from raw meat, but I like it!”

“Hey, Shino! You’re making a huge mess too! Who do you think is gonna clean up after all this?!” Tori shouted.

“Ain’t that exactly what you’ve been hired for? Hey, if ya ain’t gonna eat that, I’ll take it!” Shino swiped some meat from Tori’s plate.

“Hey, that’s mine!”

“Tori, wipe my face.”

“Why’s your mouth all dirty again?!”

The trio finished their chaotic meal. By the time Tori finished cleaning up after them, he was completely exhausted.

Why do I have to tire myself out even while eating? Tori complained in his head.

Euphemia was starting to nod off. Shinozuki was playing around and poking Euphemia’s cheek. Tori grabbed some cleaning supplies to start tackling a new section of the house.

Right then, a black bird flew into the house through the open front door. The bird was holding a letter in its beak. The bird landed on Euphemia's shoulder and began chirping. Euphemia opened her eyes and took the letter. After reading it, she stood up.

"We have work to do," she announced.

"All right, monster hunting! I've been waitin' for this!" Shinozuki yelled.

Euphemia waved her staff. A robe decorated with numerous gemstones flew out from her room, along with a triangular hat. The robe wrapped itself around her, and the hat placed itself on her head. When Euphemia stepped out of the house, she was enveloped in a whirlpool of light. Her silhouette expanded, and she eventually transformed into the White Witch—the powerful, gigantic, and fearsome adventurer known to all of Azrac.

Shinozuki also transformed into her fenrir form and howled at the sky. "This form really is the best! Euphie, what are we fighting?"

"'Tis an armored dragon. I have heard 'tis quite a formidable foe. I may need to call on Subaru and Cecilia for assistance," Euphemia explained.

"Hmph, you don't have to call on them. I'll be more than enough to beat it up. C'mon, hop on already!"

Euphemia climbed onto Shinozuki's back with gracefulness uncharacteristic of her gigantic form. She faced Tori, who had been gaping at the two all this time. The White Witch's sharp gaze froze Tori in place.

"Tori, thou shalt fulfill thy role as the caretaker of this household. We shall depart until nighttime," Euphemia declared.

"Y-Yes, of course. Please take care of yourselves."

Her voice terrified Tori. The White Witch spoke like an ancient and powerful veteran. No matter how much she insisted he speak to her casually, Tori would default to polite and respectful speech in front of this form.

"Shino, let us depart," Euphemia commanded.

"All right!" Shinozuki howled and leaped with great force. Midway, she began to leap on air instead of ground, and eventually, they vanished into the

distance.

Tori stood dumbfounded as he watched the two of them depart. He shook his head to keep himself together.

“Okay... I can finally concentrate on the cleaning.”

Oh yeah. Back in the Muddy Four-Horns, I used to see off my fellow clan members just like this before doing the cleaning, cooking, and shopping, Tori recalled. He'd thought he'd been fulfilling his duty to the clan, when in truth, his comrades had no longer seen him as such.

Don't be dumb, Tori. Things are different now, he chided himself.

Tori slapped his cheeks with both hands and instantly regretted it as he hit himself harder than he intended.

Then Tori went back to cleaning the room. He organized all the books, gathered all the trash and burned it outside. He gathered the scattered clothing and tossed it into a laundry basket for washing later.

“How did she let this place get this cluttered? How many *years* has she let this go on?” Tori ranted as he sorted the laundry.

“Panties...” A pair of pale blue lace panties fell out of the pile. They were crumpled, so definitely unwashed. She must have taken them off and tossed them on the spot. She was definitely the type to throw aside clothes all throughout the house without a care in the world, which explained the amount of clutter all over the place.

Come to think of it, she probably sleeps naked too. Tori recalled how Euphemia would wear such skimpy clothing with nothing underneath. It definitely wasn't out of the question.

“This is so filthy, I can't even get excited about it,” Tori sighed and tossed the underwear into the basket. His desire to clean the place overcame his other worldly desires.

There were no longer any slimes or giant rats, so the cleaning went smoothly this time around. While organizing and stacking the books in one area, he found a hidden door that had been concealed by the mess. He carefully opened the

door and peeked inside, and was greeted by musty, stagnant air.

“She had a bath all this time?”

The door was hiding a bathroom. However, it looked like it hadn’t been used in years, and mold was growing in several spots. Vines had started creeping in from a window that was slightly ajar, and moss had also started growing.

Tori scratched his head. *I’ll have to clean this place up too, huh. Wait... If the bathroom is in this state, that means Euphemia hasn’t taken a bath in years...*

But she doesn’t stink at all. In fact, I thought she even smelled kind of sweet. Witches are so scary. Tori discovered a new, unusual quality to be impressed about with Euphemia.

Now that Tori had managed to clear out all the empty jars and bottles, he had a lot of space to work with, so he piled all the books in the cleared area. Tori’s bed—the couch—was finally completely visible.

Night started to fall while Tori was working, so he wrapped up and began preparing dinner. The space between the fireplace and kitchen had been cleaned, so he could finally move coals between the two fire sources. Tori took some coals from the fireplace and lit the kitchen stove. Unlike with the fireplace, he could cook without having to bend his knees here.

Tori toasted some uncooked rice in a pot, slowly added in a meat and vegetable broth, then finished it off with a generous helping of grated cheese to make a risotto. He grilled a large fish with some salt and herbs in the fireplace. He peeled potatoes, boiled them in a pot, and mixed in some salt, herbs, and oil.

I wish we had a bigger oven, he thought.

Tori loved cooking. He always wanted to make something delicious if he was going to cook. When he was still a bronze-rank adventurer, he would always be the one in charge of cooking for his comrades. Right now, he was in a proper kitchen instead of outdoors, but he still wished for even better facilities and cooking supplies. While this kitchen had a stove and small oven, he wanted a bigger one so he could make baked goods and sweets. He’d even be able to bake a huge batch of bread if he wanted. He enjoyed imagining things like this.

The fish was popping here and there and was almost done cooking when Euphemia and Shinozuki came back home. Euphemia had removed her transformation and was back in her usual appearance as a dainty young lady.

“Oh, welcome back,” greeted Tori. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Euphemia plopped down and hugged Tori. He suddenly noticed their difference in height as Euphemia’s head was right on his chest; then he got flustered.

“Wh-Wh-What’s going on?”

“I’m tired... Praise me. Pat my head,” Euphemia demanded.

“Um, okay. Good work out there.” Tori was still confused, but he indulged her request and patted her head. When he rubbed her back, Euphemia looked satisfied, and she rubbed her face on his chest.

This woman’s sense of personal space really is messed up! Tori screamed in his head.

“I’m hungry! Tori, dinnertime! Gimme something nice and tasty!” Shinozuki shouted. She seemed to be excited and was already seated at the dinner table.

Tori looked exasperated. “Shino, don’t you have to go back to the underworld or something?”

“I only went home when it was just Euphie because nothing good ever happens around here! If there’s good food, then there ain’t no reason to head back home!” Shino declared and laughed heartily.

And I thought you were a proud fenrir warrior. Tori shrugged.

Euphemia and Shinozuki looked elated as they scarfed down their dinner.

“This rice is delicious... I love the cheese in it.”

“Glad to hear that. There’s more over here.”

“I want seconds.”

“Me too! Oh, Tori, if you don’t want that fish, I’m taking it!”

“Hey! That’s *mine!*”

4. Subaru

The next day, the cleaning started again.

Tori was the first to wake up. He got breakfast started in a pot, left it to simmer, and got down to work. Much of the floor had finally become visible. Tori had already swept up and burned all the scraps of paper that had previously been scattered everywhere. All the rotting trash that had been the source of the foul smells had been thrown out. The house had finally started resembling a place that could be lived in. Tori wanted to take care of the massive piles of books as well, but he was going to let Euphemia choose where to store them.

Euphemia and Shinozuki were finally awake, so Tori fed them breakfast. He then got the three of them to take all of the books outside the house, both so they could be aired out and because they were in the way of his cleaning.

“Shino, please carry these,” Tori requested.

“Okay, leave it to me! These are light as a feather!” Shinozuki bragged. Thanks to her great strength, moving the books took almost no time at all. Once they were outside, the floor was finally completely visible. They had also carried out the couch and dinner table, as it was probably a good idea to air those out as well.

Now that the floor had been cleared, it was time to clean the dust and cobwebs off the ceiling. The dirty cobwebs hanging off the light fixtures had been bothering Tori all this time, so he was psyched to get them with his feather duster.

“Maybe you two should go out for now? It’s going to get pretty dusty,” Tori recommended.

“I’m totally fine,” Euphemia said.

“Me too,” Shinozuki concurred.

“Just get out of here already!” Tori drove them out of the room. He also asked

them to sort out the books they did and didn't need.

Tori tied a bandanna over his mouth and nose and began dusting the ceiling. Each sweep of the duster kicked up fresh clouds. Meanwhile, Euphemia was slacking off outside, seemingly enjoying herself as she gazed at Tori working inside. Shinozuki was yawning next to her.

"What a funny man. How's he not bored of what he's doing?" Shinozuki commented.

"He's a huge help," Euphemia replied.

After cleaning up the ceiling, Tori then wiped down the floor and furniture. Next, he stood on a stool and wiped the lights clean. The room that had been so dim before was now much brighter.

"Phew... Time for a quick break," Tori muttered as he took a towel and wiped his sweat.

Euphemia walked in and gasped at the state of the room. "It looks completely different..." she marveled.

"Wow, so this is how this place is supposed to look," added Shinozuki.

"It was a pretty tough battle, let me tell you," Tori said. "I'm planning to shelve all the books after lunch. Did you pick out all the ones you need?"

"I need all of them," Euphemia answered.

"Excuse me?" That meant that they had to bring all of them back inside.

Tori suddenly realized something. "Um, Euphemia, can't we just use your magic to bring the books inside?"

"No" was Euphemia's abrupt response.

"Why not? You can use all those cool spells."

"I'm good at blowing up monsters with flashy spells, but I'm not good with sensitive work like that. If I tried, I might burn all my books to ashes."

"But you can even make a whole fridge," argued Tori.

"I just have to stick a template spell onto a box. There's no delicate work needed."

“If she could do minor things like that, she wouldn’t have let this house get so cluttered,” Shinozuki interjected. Tori nodded, convinced by Shinozuki’s words. *She makes an excellent point.*

“Things just can’t be that simple, can they?” Tori lamented.

“Hang in there.” Euphemia pumped her fist to encourage Tori, who just sighed in response.

“Okay, okay. Shino, can you help me out, then?”

“Sure thing! But you gotta give me some extra meat, all right?!”

“Yeah, sure.”

I feel like I’m feeding a dog, he thought.

Tori went back to finish up cleaning the remaining dust on the floor and furniture, then they went to carry the books back inside. They ate a quick lunch, and by sunset, they’d managed to finish their task. Next, they arranged the books in a cabinet that had previously been occupied by empty medicine bottles and other unknown items. Tori had originally thought it was a medicine cabinet, but after learning it was actually a bookshelf, he was astounded.

“Then why are there no books on it?” Tori had asked Euphemia.

“I read, then I leave the book somewhere, then I forget,” she’d answered.

“Learn to put them back where you got them from!”

“Then I just happened to put the bottles there.”

“At least use a bookshelf for its intended function!”

When he reached a good stopping point, Tori wrapped up the cleaning and went on to start preparing dinner next. For dinner today, he kneaded together a mixture of flour, water, oil, and eggs and set it aside. Meanwhile, he minced some meat and vegetables and fried them. He poured in some milk, simmered the mixture, and added some salt and spices for flavor.

Euphemia wasn’t taking a nap today, so she was staring at Tori as he prepared the meal. She looked very enthralled. On the other hand, Shinozuki was on the couch, snoring.

“What’re you gonna do with the dough?” Euphemia asked.

“I’m going to stretch it out, cut it, and make noodles. Then, we put the sauce over it and eat them. Also, I’ve been pickling some vegetables since yesterday, and I also boiled some eggs. I made sure to sauté lots of meat for Shino too,” Tori explained.

“Looks delicious. I love your cooking.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

Hearing actual words of praise made Tori feel flustered. He felt his expression soften, and he averted his face so Euphemia couldn’t see it.

At dinner, Euphemia took her seat next to Tori. Up until now, they would each sit on one side of the rectangular table, but tonight, Shinozuki was sitting across from the two.

“Aren’t you a *bit* close?” Tori asked Euphemia.

“Don’t think so,” she denied.

“You don’t feel crowded?”

“Not at all.”

“I see...”

Euphemia looked rather satisfied, while Shinozuki was grinning from ear to ear. Tori gave up and went back to pouring a generous helping of sauce and grated cheese on his noodles.

When they finished eating, Euphemia and Shinozuki went to bed, while Tori continued shelving books, cleaning the floor, and doing more organizing. As a result of his efforts, the parlor was finally completely clean by the next morning. The books had been arranged on the bookshelves, and the workspace near the window had been cleared out. Tori realized that the parlor had so much space now that everything had been organized.

Euphemia was rolling around on the couch, burying her face in the freshly dried and fluffy cushions.

“So clean. I can nap here now,” Euphemia remarked.

“I’m impressed. I can’t believe you managed to clean everything up,” Shinozuki commended as she looked around the room.

Tori sighed as he took a sip of his soup. “I’m done with the parlor, but I have to clean the bedroom next. And the bathroom after that,” he said.

“What? This house has a bathroom?” Shinozuki looked astonished.

“Yes, but it’s completely unusable. I’ll do something about it,” Tori explained.

“Forget about the bath. Don’t like it,” Euphemia grumbled and turned her face to the ceiling.

Tori raised an eyebrow at her complaint. “We’re *not* forgetting about the bath. You’re filthy as hell!”

“I can fix that with magic. Washing my hair and body is too much effort.”

“Have you forgotten the pleasure of being submerged in a bathtub full of hot water? You lazy-ass woman! I am going to fix that bathroom no matter what it takes!”

Euphemia looked displeased, but she didn’t press the matter any further. She hugged the pillow tight and closed her eyes.

Tori snorted as he took a piece of freshly baked bread and placed it on a plate.

In any case, Tori would be cleaning the bedroom today. But before that, he had to buy more groceries. Shinozuki ate huge portions, so the food had run out more quickly than he’d anticipated.

Tori mentioned this to Euphemia, who took a bite of her soup, then said, “Okay, let’s do the groceries, then send Shino back to the underworld.”

“Why would you do that?! You only need more ingredients, right?! It’s not fair that only Euphie gets to eat good food! No fair! No fair, no fair, no fair! I don’t wanna go home!” Shinozuki threw a tantrum.

Tori shook his head in exasperation. “You can stay as long as you help carry the groceries.”

“I will! Leave it to me!” Shinozuki let out a hearty laugh.

So this is a proud fenrir warrior, huh? Tori silently judged her.

At that moment, a black bird holding a letter in its beak flew into the room. Euphemia looked displeased as she read over the letter.

“We have work to do. This one might take a while,” she said.

“What is it this time?” Shinozuki asked.

“We have to get rid of a giant spider that set up a nest in an abandoned mine,” Euphemia answered. According to the letter, the giant spider had made webs in an abandoned mine up in the north. Its offspring had begun escaping the mine and started attacking neighboring towns and settlements. The client wanted Euphemia to eliminate those and clear out the mine shaft as well.

“There’re other adventurers participating too, but they want us to be the ones to handle the mine. The tunnels inside are really complex and dangerous.”

“Ha ha ha! So the others are just there to kill the ones that leak outside? Sounds like the perfect job for chumps like them!” Shinozuki exclaimed.

According to Euphemia, the monsters weren’t that strong—by her standards—but there were huge numbers of them. Because of the complexity of the tunnels, it would take time to clear out the entire mine.

If that’s the case, then they probably won’t be able to go shopping with me. Tori crossed his arms and mulled over the situation. *Oh well, if Euphemia and Shino aren’t around, I don’t have to prepare anything too lavish for meals.*

The three of them finished their breakfast. Euphemia changed her clothes and took up her staff.

“I think we’ll be back in two days,” she estimated.

“Okay. Take care,” Tori said.

“I’m looking forward to some good food when we get back,” she added.

“I’ll make something with whatever we have left. We’ve run out of meat, though.”

“Even the smoked kind?”

“Yeah. Shino eats a lot, after all.”

“Shino...”

“Not my fault!” Shinozuki exclaimed. “It’s only right to finish everything that’s served!”

Euphemia pouted at Shino and said nothing more, then she grabbed her staff and waved it around. A magic circle appeared on the ground and emitted a bright light, and a giant red bird came flying out of it. Its wings were wreathed in flames, and its long, flowing tail was a thing of beauty.

Tori stumbled back from the shock. “Whoa! A phoenix?!”

The phoenix was a monstrous bird, said to lord over flames in the underworld. It circled above the three of them before landing right in front of Euphemia.

“It’s been a while since you’ve called on me, Euphie! That means you need my powers, right?” the phoenix squawked excitedly.

“I do,” said Euphemia.

“Ha ha, leave it to me! So, where’s the enemy? I, Subaru, will burn ’em all down!”

“There’s no enemy. I want you to take Tori to the city.”

“Huh? Who’s Tori?” The phoenix named Subaru started looking around and met Tori’s gaze. “You mean this lame guy? He’s asking for it?”

“Hey, Subaru, watch it,” Shinozuki interjected. “Don’t judge him by his looks. He’s no normal guy.”

“Oh hey, it’s Shino! Didn’t think I’d see you here. Why are you in human form?”

“Lots of things happened. I’m gonna be hunting down monsters with Euphie now, so see ya!” Shinozuki let out a hearty laugh.

“Huh?! Why does Shino get to hunt monsters but not me? No fair!” Subaru complained.

“No tantrums. I’ll never summon you again if you complain,” Euphemia threatened.

“What?! But there aren’t any spellcasters who can summon me except you...”

Subaru suddenly turned meek from Euphemia's threat.

Euphemia proudly puffed out her chest. "I'll give you lots of chances to go wild. If you accompany Tori and bring him back safely, you can join us after and help out. You know how to track our mana, don't you?"

"Mmm... Okay." Subaru turned to Tori. "Hey, you. Tori, right? Dunno what's going on, but be quick, okay?"

"O-Oh, okay." Tori stopped spacing out after being addressed directly. He had been feeling somewhat left out, despite being the topic of conversation.

"I'll leave everything to you," Euphemia said to Tori. "Here's my wallet."

Euphemia handed Tori a shockingly hefty wallet, which left him stunned.

First a fenrir and now a phoenix. Euphemia was clearly not an average spellcaster if she could make these monsters into familiars. She truly lived up to the White Witch's reputation.

"All right, hop on," Subaru called Tori over. "Come on, hurry up!"

Tori hurriedly hopped onto the phoenix's back. He'd thought it would be burning hot from the flames on her wings, but that wasn't the case. The feathers on Subaru's back glistened—a sight that surprised Tori. Euphemia and Shinozuki had already transformed, with Euphemia riding on Shinozuki's back. Shinozuki and Subaru then took off in different directions.

Subaru flapped her wings and flew high up, then accelerated. This was the speed that Tori would've expected from a phoenix. He held on to Subaru's back for dear life, trying his best not to fly off.

"Um, Subaru?" Tori yelled.

"Huh? What is it?" Subaru squawked back.

"Can you land right outside the city? It would definitely cause a huge panic if a phoenix landed in the middle of the city!"

"Hmm, all right, fine."

A little under an hour later, they arrived at the outskirts of Azrac. Tori felt a bit disoriented from the speed they'd been traveling at, so he shook his head

vigorously and tried to normalize his breathing.

Subaru looked bored and let out a big yawn. “So, do I just have to wait here? I wanna go to Euphie already, so hurry it up.”

“Um... I’d like it if you help me out with carrying the groceries...” Tori said sheepishly.

“Huh?! Help you with your groceries? Me, Subaru the phoenix? Are you stupid? Also, you were the one who said a phoenix would cause a panic in the city!” Subaru protested.

“Shino turned into a human and helped me out, you know.”

“Don’t care!”

“I see. It’ll be faster if I could have some help, but if you can’t do it, then I don’t want to force you.”

Subaru looked offended at Tori’s offhand remark. Her beak clacked in anger. “Who said I can’t do it?! Just watch!” she squawked. The feathers on her back stood on end. A powerful whirlwind blew and converged on Subaru. When the wind subsided, a young girl about ten years of age with fiery red hair stood where the great phoenix once had.

Subaru placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. “How’s that?” she exclaimed.

“So tiny!”

“Huh?! Don’t call me tiny!”

“And you’re naked!”

Like Shinozuki, Subaru had no clothes on when she transformed. Tori hurriedly placed his overcoat on her and fastened the front. She still looked improper, but it was an improvement on being completely naked. He decided that a stop at the clothing store was going to be his first order of business.

Subaru looked annoyed as she waved around her baggy sleeves. “These are too big. And they’re too stiff.”

“Well, sorry about that. Hang in there until we can get you some clothes,”

Tori said.

“And it smells weird.”

“It does *not*!”

Tori and Subaru finally entered the city and went into the first clothing store they could find. When Tori explained that he wanted Subaru to try on clothes, he got suspicious looks from the staff.

“Excuse me for asking, but how are you two related?” inquired one employee.

“U-Um... She’s my little sister. Right, Subaru?” Tori answered nervously.

“Huh? U-Um, yeah! My big bro is really nice to me!” Subaru exclaimed and struck a cute pose. The staff still looked worried, but they obliged and brought Subaru a white tunic and a carrot-colored skirt.

After purchasing the clothes, they left the store. Tori relaxed his shoulders and sighed in relief. “I’m already exhausted from all that,” he grumbled.

“Cheer up, big bro!” Subaru teased.

“You can stop pretending now.”

“Oh, but I’m having fun! Hee hee hee. Come on, let’s finish shopping already!”

The two of them finally started what they came here for. Each time Tori put something in their crate, Subaru would ask what it was for. She also pointed at item after item, asking if he was going to buy it or not.

“I’m going to bake this one,” said Tori about one item.

“What about this one?” Subaru pointed at another.

“That’s also going to be baked.”

“Why are you baking all of these?”

“There’s only so many ways to make food!” Tori exclaimed.

“Want me to bake them with my flames? Mine can get pretty hot!”

“Please save that for fighting monsters.”

“Hey, you don’t have to act so uptight around me,” Subaru said. “You’re my big brother, aren’t you? You should relax a bit more!”

“Huh? I can?”

“Yup! I don’t like it when you’re so stiff. I can feel my shoulders getting stiff too!”

“Well, if you say so...”

Tori was surprised that these monsters from the underworld could be so easygoing. First Shinozuki and now Subaru.

Actually, can a phoenix’s shoulders even get stiff? Tori wondered.

The two of them continued shopping even through the various distractions, and their load started piling up. Subaru might have looked like she was ten years old, but her physical strength as a phoenix carried over, and she carried huge crates of food and ingredients with ease.

“Wow, phoenixes sure are impressive,” Tori marveled.

“Hee hee, right? Oh? Big bro, you’re a grown man but you can’t even carry this much? Wow, so lame! What a loser!” Subaru taunted.

“Even losers like me are doing their best, you know...” Tori sulked.

“Huh? Oh... Sorry.”

The stares of passersby hurt Tori as they watched a small child carry the huge wooden crates of groceries.

Once they had finished their grocery list, the two of them exited the city proper. Subaru turned back into a phoenix, and Tori rode on her back to return to the house. Tori entered the house first and hauled the crates of food inside. Subaru, who had returned to her human form, entered the house and let out a yelp of surprise.

“Where the heck am I?!”

“Whoa, what’s wrong?!” Tori yelled back. “You scared me.”

“This is Euphie’s house, right?!”

“That’s right. I did a lot of cleaning.”

“*You* did the cleaning? That’s crazy! Wow!”

Subaru dove onto the couch and started rolling around and flailing about. “I can’t believe that garbage dump of a house could have this much space! Big bro, you’re amazing!”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks. Anyway, weren’t you going to find Euphie and help out? You’re gonna be late,” Tori said.

“I’m more curious about what you’re cooking with all those ingredients. Come on, make something! Chop-chop!”

What a cheeky brat! Tori sighed as he stuffed packs of meat into the fridge. He hadn’t planned on making anything too complicated until Euphemia and Shinozuki came home, but now Subaru was here. He decided to make a decent meal for her. He started by cutting the tail off a fish, seasoning it with some salt and coating it with flour.

“Are you gonna bake that?” Subaru asked.

“No, I’m going to sear it.” Tori seared the fish on a pan with a generous helping of oil. In a separate, smaller pot, he made a sauce out of tomatoes, pickled anchovies, and various herbs and spices, and poured it over the seared fish. He placed it on a plate and served some bread and boiled potatoes on the side.

“Wow, what’s this?”

“Hmm... What, indeed. I don’t have a name for it, but here’s some food, I guess.”

“Lemme see... Ow, that’s hot!” Subaru tried to grab some fish with her bare hands, but she got surprised and pulled back her hand.

She’s a phoenix, but that’s still too hot for her? Tori wondered. *What happened to being the lord of fire and flames? Oh well.* He handed Subaru a fork.

Like Shinozuki, it looked like Subaru had no idea how to handle utensils. She held the entire fork in her fist, stabbed it into the fish with some hesitation, and hauled the entire slice into her mouth.

“Thash hot! Huff, mmph, omm, whew! Sho tasty!” Subaru mumbled as she

chewed her hot food.

“Hey, don’t stuff your mouth with that much fish! Ahh, you’re spilling sauce all over!”

The tomato sauce was dripping from Subaru’s mouth onto her white tunic. Tori rushed to get a towel and wipe down her face. Subaru didn’t care one bit and kept on shoving food into her mouth with great enthusiasm.

“This is so good! Gimme some more! I’m taking that one!”

“Hey, that’s mine!”

“C’mon, big bro! Aww, I’m jealous of Euphie and Shino. I can’t believe they eat like this every day! Om nom nom.” Subaru took a big bite of bread with sauce on it.

Ahh, damn it, I shouldn’t have fed her a good meal. I should’ve just given her some boiled potatoes and called it a day, Tori regretted. Now I have to feed her and Shino every day!



Still, seeing Subaru stuff herself made Tori feel happy. He recalled his days in the Muddy Four-Horns, when he would work hard and make food for his exhausted comrades. He could make subpar meals for himself all the time, but he could never do that when he had to cook for someone else. He would always want to make something delicious for them.

Tori resigned himself to his fate and started eating the partly consumed fish he had prepared for himself.

The abandoned mine north of Azrac had once bustled with activity when the city was still a small mining town. Eventually, the quality and quantity of its ore had started declining, and by the time Azrac transformed from a coal mining town into a hub of commerce and base of operations for monster hunting, the mine had lost its purpose and become abandoned. Though its entrance had been sealed off, its tunnels had become a nest for monsters, and it was only discovered once they started escaping outside.

Clusters of giant spiders were currently crawling about in a nearby plain, and clans of adventurers were fighting against this massive swarm of monsters. Acting as the vanguard was the platinum-ranked clan called the Cerulean Dagger. They were a clan formed from the merger of several platinum-ranked clans—a fact made obvious by the sheer level of strength they showcased compared to the other participating clans. They repelled the hordes of giant spiders with ease.

Though the Cerulean Dagger was new to the scene, being formed from a union of platinum-ranked clans with the backing of the Azrac Guild made them one of—if not *the*—premier clan in all of Azrac. The guild provided them with staff who handled all the administrative tasks, from the maintenance of weapons and items to the handling of financial matters, which meant the adventurers could put all their effort into fighting monsters and exploring dungeons. This, of course, meant that the Azrac Guild couldn't let up their support, as it correlated directly with the guild's profits.

“Push them back! We'll secure the entrance to the mine!”

Andrea, the former leader of the Muddy Four-Horns and now a core member

of the Cerulean Dagger, waved his longsword as he shouted out orders. While his greatshield made clear his primary role of tanking enemy attacks, his cool demeanor and performance under pressure had also made him an indispensable commander in several missions.

In response to Andrea's commands, the other clan members yelled battle cries to boost morale as they trampled the enemy monsters. Suzanna's twin blades swiftly cut off the spiders' legs, and Jean's spells rained down from the sky and scorched the creatures' flesh.

"Andrea, our right flank is being pushed back!" one of the clan members shouted. Andrea clicked his tongue upon hearing this.

"We can't let them attack our rear... Everyone, halt the advance! Suzanna, take two of our squads and reinforce the right flank! All other members, hold the line! We'll resume the assault once our right flank has recovered!" Andrea yelled out as he stepped forward and braced his greatshield.

The battle had turned into a stalemate. While there were several highly skilled adventurers participating in combat, the giant spiders' numbers were overwhelming, and each of them was difficult to kill. On top of that, spiderlings were also joining the fray and assaulting the adventurers from unexpected directions. The more experienced adventurers couldn't afford to keep up the offense, having to pull back from time to time to prevent casualties. As a result, the more enemies joined in, the longer the battle became.

At that moment, a great shadow covered the sky, and in the blink of an eye, beams of light struck down like rain from above. Each beam pierced through a giant spider with extreme precision, greatly reducing the wave pouring out of the mine.

"That's—"

"She's here! It's the White Witch!" someone shouted and pointed at the sky. There, a fenrir was leaping through the sky with the gigantic witch on its back. The witch's crimson eyes coldly surveyed the ground below.

The power of the White Witch struck awe into the hearts of even the most battle-hardened members of the Cerulean Dagger. Everyone who saw her froze in place.

The ground shook as the fenrir landed. It let out a fearsome howl and started tearing into the spiders. Terrified by the power of this underworld warrior, the enemy spiders scattered and fled in different directions.

“Looks like the tide of battle has turned in our favor.”

“What a drastic change, even though she’s the only one arriving.”

Andrea and Jean could only mutter praises in half-resigned tones. Even though they were proud members of a clan filled with platinum-ranked adventurers, the White Witch was just on a completely different level from the rest of them.

The fenrir had opened a path straight to the entrance of the mine as it trampled over the spiders. Among the legendary beasts of the underworld, the fenrir was one of the most powerful. Very few spellcasters could even hope to command such a creature.

The guild’s orders were to leave the inside of the mine to the White Witch, while the other adventurers were to take care of the spiders that had escaped to the surface.

Andrea sheathed his longsword and sighed. “Looks like there’s nothing left for us except the cleanup.”

Jean could only let out a sardonic laugh. “She sits on a completely different plane of existence from us mortals.”

Suddenly, the White Witch turned her fearsome gaze toward Andrea’s group. The former members of the Muddy Four-Horns froze in place. Initially, they thought that it was a coincidence that she looked their way, but it was soon clear that it wasn’t. When the White Witch started taking great strides toward them, even Andrea couldn’t help but gulp. While Andrea was a large and muscular man, the White Witch was just larger in both height and width.

The White Witch’s aura was even more imposing and fearsome up close. She was emanating mana from her entire body. Her appearance was terrifying despite her all-white robe and hat. Even the veterans of the Cerulean Dagger couldn’t muster a word out of sheer terror.

Andrea mustered up all of his courage and spoke in a trembling voice. “I-Is

there something you need?"

"Thou art the members of the Muddy Four-Horns, correct? Nay, perhaps 'former members' would be a more accurate epithet."

The witch spoke in deep, bass tones that struck terror into those who heard it. It was as if a chilly hand had grabbed the depths of their guts.

"Y-Yes, we are," Andrea nodded, his face turning pale. Did she acknowledge the achievements of their guild? He could not tell if he should be happy or terrified.

"Tori now serves under me," the White Witch declared. Those who knew Tori's name froze in shock.

"U-Um, wh-what do you mean by that?" Suzanna nervously stepped forward and asked the White Witch.

"It is exactly as I said. As thou art his former comrades, it is only proper that I inform thee of his state."

"Wh-What are you doing to Tori?! Y-You're not forcing him to serve under you, are you?" Suzanna, despite her terror, continued to speak up. The other members were starting to get anxious. In response, the White Witch stroked her chin.

"Perhaps I forced him at first. However, he hath fully accepted his role, and I now rely on his talents. He is no mere human. He hath conquered the domain of terror known as my home, and he is the only one I trust to be its caretaker."

The members of the Cerulean Dagger all gasped. *Just what did Tori do to earn this level of respect from the White Witch?* Those who had previously known him began whispering among themselves.

"I have been entrusted with clearing the abandoned mine. I shall take my leave," the White Witch announced and turned in the direction of the mine. She joined up with the fenrir, who had finished eliminating the spiders at the entrance, and the two of them entered the mine.

The three former members of the Muddy Four-Horns stood dumbfounded and looked at one another.

“Tori... Is that really where you are now?”

“What’s going on? Was he really *that* strong?”

“No way... Sorry, but he really *was* weak... I think...”

The other members of the Cerulean Dagger started gathering around the three of them.

“Hey, what’s up with that?!”

“Your clan had someone so strong that the White Witch herself trusts him?!”

“Why isn’t he here with us now?!”

The former members of the Muddy Four-Horns flinched at the wave of questions thrown at them.

“W-Well, he was rejected during the clan unification talks for his lack of skill... That was the guild’s decision,” Andrea, still confused himself, explained the situation.

“You’re kidding, right?! The White Witch said he was defending her house!”

“I heard that the White Witch lives in the underworld.”

“Even if she doesn’t, I’m sure her house is surrounded by all sorts of crazy monsters!”

“Didn’t she say her home was a ‘domain of terror’?”

“D-Did she mean that she lives in a really high-level dungeon?!”

“There’s no way that someone tasked to guard a house like that is ‘lacking in skill’!”

Because the White Witch was so secretive, speculation flew left and right about her life. Even just her residence was subject to much theorizing, with guesses ranging from the underworld, to the depths of a monster lair, to a land full of dangerous beasts and rare materials, to the peak of a spirit mountain, to the innermost depths of an ore vein, to an abandoned temple ruin, and so on. Everyone started exchanging thoughts and rumors on the witch’s abode.

Similarly, people also started whispering about her background, throwing around theories of her being the scion of a great magical lineage, or of her

parents being residents of the underworld, or of her being a relative of the demon lord, or of her being the demon lord herself.

Regardless, the White Witch continued to be feared due to her enigmatic background and the lack of information on her private life. Anyone that the White Witch trusted enough to manage her “domain of terror” couldn’t possibly be a normal person.

Andrea turned to Jean and Suzanna. “It’s hard to believe, but...” he started.

“I-I can’t believe it either,” said Jean. “But I can’t imagine the White Witch would go out of her way to joke about this.”

“Was Tori...really that strong?” Suzanna wondered.

Could he have been hiding his true strength all this time? But why would he do such a thing? Was he just making a fool out of them as they looked down on him? None of it made any sense to the three of them. Tori wasn’t a mean-spirited man. While he wasn’t useful in battle, he worked very hard at everything else. He might have been awkward sometimes, but he was compassionate. None of them hated Tori, but they couldn’t escape the fact that he was fatally lacking in skill.

But what if his lack of skill had been a ruse all this time?

“Was he making a fool out of us?” Andrea speculated.

“Th-That can’t be it!” Suzanna protested. “He was really concerned about my brother Cyril. Tori visited him and even gave him some sweets and toys!”

“But if the White Witch herself acknowledges his abilities... Why didn’t he use them during his time at the Muddy Four-Horns?” Jean asked.

“That’s...”

“It’s a bit too late for us to be arguing about this. We’ll have to move on without him,” Andrea concluded.

Spiders had started pouring out of the abandoned mine once again, undoubtedly because the White Witch was driving them out. They could speculate all they wanted later. The members of the Cerulean Dagger reorganized their formation and confronted the new wave of enemies.

5. Bedroom and Bathroom

It was finally time for Tori to tackle the bedroom. He stood in front of the door and took a deep breath before opening it.

The scene he was met with reminded him of the parlor when he'd first arrived. Books and clothes were scattered all over. Empty boxes of sweets and candies, as well as soaked and crumpled scraps of paper, were littered across the floor. There were cobwebs with balls of dust hanging from the ceiling. He'd had a preview of the room on his first day, but it was even worse seeing it in full view. It was a miracle that she could even sleep in here.

Subaru was behind Tori. She peeked into the room and let out a cry of excitement.

"Yeah, this is it! *This* is what Euphie's house should look like!" Subaru gushed.

"I don't *want* it to look like this," Tori countered. "Subaru, if you're not leaving, help me out."

"Huh? Sounds like a pain!"

"You can just burn the trash I take out."

"Oh, well, okay then!"

The room looked horrible, but it was less than half the size of the parlor, so Tori suspected it would be a cakewalk in comparison. The bed was large enough to fit three or even four people, so it made the room look less cluttered.

Next to the bed was what appeared to be a fridge, and in front of it was a mess of discarded empty bottles. The fridge was close enough to reach from the bed, so it was easy to imagine Euphemia just rolling over and grabbing a drink between naps.

Euphie really puts so much effort into sleeping...

Tori opened the windows to let the breeze in, which blew out a cloud of dust. Next, he gathered the scraps of paper and candy wrappers, and dumped the

pile in the yard. Subaru then set the pile of trash ablaze. The great heat of her phoenix flames reduced the pile to ash in an instant.

Tori decided to air out the sheets as well. He braced himself for the smell of sweat and grime as he changed them, but to his complete surprise, they smelled sweet and pleasant.

For some reason, this annoyed him. *What is going on with that girl?* he thought.

The empty bottles looked like they could still be reused with a bit of washing. Euphemia was a witch, so she could use them as containers for medicines and potions. Tori decided to gather the bottles in one place.

There was a door in a corner of the room. *There're more rooms in this house?* Tori felt disheartened at the additional workload. He tried to turn the doorknob, but it was locked. Since he couldn't open it, he decided to put it off for later.

After burning the piles of trash, gathering the scattered clothes, and transferring the books to the parlor, it was time to start dusting the ceiling. Tori covered the bed and other large furniture with large sheets to prevent the dust from settling on them. He covered his mouth and nose again and used a feather duster to sweep the dust and cobwebs from the ceiling. A massive amount of dirt fell, irritating his eyes. Still, there was no soot from a fireplace like in the parlor, so it was a much easier job.

By the time it started to get dark outside, Tori had managed to sweep the floor clean and wipe it down with a damp cloth. Now that the room was clean, it was completely unrecognizable from its initial state.

The quilts and sheets felt warm and smelled pleasant from being aired outside. Tori placed them back on the bed.

Subaru looked amused. "So *that's* how you do it. Incredible! Good job, big bro!"

"Thanks, I guess. Looks like we're done for today. Let's make dinner," said Tori.

"Yay!"

“Oh yeah, you never went to Euphie in the end,” Tori realized.

“I mean, you asked me to help out, didn’t you? Oh well!” Subaru shrugged.

“Don’t make it sound like I kept you here! You’re just here to eat my food, aren’t you?”

“Oh? But I’m here to keep you company, big bro! I was sure you’d get lonely. I’m so hurt! Aren’t you glad your cute little sister Subaru is here? Hee hee hee!” Subaru giggled.

Is this what a phoenix is supposed to be like? Tori sighed.

Tori crushed some steamed potatoes, mixed in some flour, and simmered the resulting mash. He took some leftover tomato sauce from lunch, thinned it with water and other ingredients to make a broth, then added it to the mashed potato mixture. He cut some meat from a larger slab, rubbed in some salt and spices, and roasted it.

Subaru stared at Tori as he turned the meat over with a wooden spatula. “You sure are good with your hands. I can’t do anything like that,” she complimented him.

“Well, you *do* have wings instead of hands,” Tori quipped.

Both Shinozuki and Subaru normally took the form of beasts. Perhaps because of this, neither of them were much good at handling their human forms. They were particularly bad with their fingers, so they were unable to do anything that required delicate dexterity.

Once they finished eating dinner, Subaru took advantage of her master’s absence and got cozy on the huge, fluffy bed. As usual, Tori slept on the couch.

Then it was the next day. Tori woke up at the break of dawn out of habit and drank some water. He made a broth out of vegetables and smoked meat, then mixed in some grains to make a porridge. While the porridge was simmering, he went off to mop the floor in the bedroom once more and shelved some books. He had no idea if Euphemia had any kind of organizational system for her books, so he was just blindly shelving them. He’d done the same in the parlor without her complaining, so he thought it would be fine.

By the time he finished with the books, the sun had completely risen, but the weather was cloudy. It looked like it might rain. Tori was glad he'd hung the bedding outside yesterday.

The porridge had finished cooking. Tori went to poke Subaru awake. She had been sleeping soundly on Euphemia's bed.

"Wake up. It's morning."

"Mmph..." Subaru mumbled. She rolled over and plopped face down, hugging the pillow and burying her face in it. Then, she started snoring.

"Wake up already! If you don't, I'm going to tickle you awake!"

"Gaaah?!"

Tori started tickling Subaru's sides. She writhed and flailed her legs, but she stubbornly held on to the pillow in her arms.

"Don't you want breakfast?" Tori asked.

"I do!" exclaimed Subaru as she jolted awake. *Is this girl really a phoenix?* Tori once again wondered to himself.

Rain began falling right after they finished breakfast. It wasn't a heavy rain, but it didn't look like it would stop anytime soon. The dry ground was soaked in no time, and the grass and trees looked even greener than usual.

Once again, Subaru was just lazing around.

"Hey, weren't you supposed to meet up with Euphie and Shino?" Tori prodded.

"It's raining outside," Subaru replied curtly.

Are you really okay missing all the action? Tori wondered, but he didn't care enough to say it out loud.

Tori had more or less finished the bedroom, so it was now time to clean the bathroom. He started by pulling out the vines that had crept through the window. There were dried leaves and branches scattered on the bathroom floor. He gathered the litter into a pile and swept it outside with a broom.

Next, Tori used the broom to sweep the bathroom ceiling. He scrubbed the

moss off with a brush, and used a rag to remove the mold from the walls and ceiling.

The bottles of soap and shampoo had sat for so long that they'd become unusable, so Tori threw those out. There were a few other bottles that still seemed fine, so he left those alone.

The bath came with a well and pump for providing water. Tori took some water from the well outside and poured it into the pump, then swung the handle up and down. Soon enough, a gurgling noise emanated from it and filthy water started pouring out. Eventually, the cloudy water gave way to clean.

"Good, this seems usable," Tori muttered.

Even the kitchen had its own well, so this house was actually quite a well-furnished residence. Once it was properly cleaned out, it would become a pretty comfortable place to live.

While the water tank was a bit rusty, it didn't have any holes in it. It appeared that there was a furnace outside linked to the tank. Tori took a brush and started scraping off the rust from the tank. In doing so, he noticed there was a door leading to the outside. He opened the door to see what was on the other side.

The door led Tori to a shed housing the furnace and a pile of old, withered wood. The place was also covered with vines and weeds. When he got closer, insects of all sizes started flying around.

Aha, so this is where you light the fire for the bath, Tori discovered.

But if I had to get here through the bath, that's a pretty long detour from the front door...

Just as he thought this, he noticed a second door on a different side of the shed.

Was there a door connecting to this from the inside? Tori wondered. To confirm, he went inside the house and found that the door was being blocked by a bookshelf, completely hiding it from view.

"Damn it, Euphie, just because you hate baths..." Tori muttered. "Hey,

Subaru!”

“Yeah?”

“I need to move this bookshelf. It’s blocking a door that leads to the furnace.”

“Huh? You can’t even move a single bookshelf? Come on, big bro,” Subaru teased.

“How am I supposed to move this thing when it’s full of books? Stop pretending to be a bratty little sister and help me out!”

“You can just move it after taking out the books! Can’t believe you’re a dumbass *and* a loser!”

“You call yourself a phoenix and you can’t even move a single bookshelf? Wow, how pathetic! What a loser!” Tori retaliated.

“Who’re you calling a loser?! Who said I can’t move it?! Just watch!” Subaru walked up to the bookshelf. She placed a hand on the side and pushed it aside with ease.

Too easy. Tori grinned. *I’m glad that handling this legendary creature of the underworld is a piece of cake.*

Subaru placed her hands on her hips and proudly stuck out her chest. “How’s that?!”

“Wow, impressive! That’s a phoenix for you. Here’s a snack as a reward,” Tori offered. Subaru looked smug as she accepted a pastry they’d bought yesterday. She looked like she was in a good mood.

Way too easy, Tori thought, pleased with himself.

Even in the city of Azrac, few people had baths in their homes. People instead used public baths. Having a personal bath was a luxury.

After finishing lunch, Tori went and cleaned out the furnace and its surroundings. Rainwater was dripping from the rafters. It seemed that the rain had no intention of stopping anytime soon.

It was already afternoon when the sun, which had been hiding behind the clouds all day, finally showed itself from the west. While the sunlight wasn’t

strong, Tori felt like the shadows had gotten more defined.

Tori had finished cleaning the bathtub, and with that, his housecleaning mission was close to complete. Still, there remained a few minor things he wanted to take care of. On top of that, because of the rain, he wouldn't be able to hang the huge pile of laundry out to dry.

I can do the laundry here now that the bathroom's been cleaned up, Tori thought. *I'll have to dry the clothes indoors, though.* He decided to light a fire in the furnace. The heat should be enough to completely dry the clothes.

"Might as well prepare a bath now that I'm at it."

Tori filled up the water tank for the bath. He cleaned out the soot in the furnace, tossed in a live ember from the fireplace, and added some dried wood to start a fire. He blew into the furnace to help the flames grow stronger.

Before long, the water was heated. It looked like the tank still had a bit of dirt inside, so the water was slightly cloudy, but it was enough for washing clothes. Tori brought a washbasin into the bathroom and filled it with hot water. He tossed in all the clothes he'd gathered throughout the house. He dissolved some soap in the basin and watched as the dirt on the clothes began to come off.

"I thought there'd be more clothes," Tori muttered. "Oh well, less work for me, then."

It had looked like there was a huge mass of clothes scattered in Euphemia's room, but when Tori gathered them all, the resulting pile was smaller than he'd expected. It was still a considerable pile, but it was nothing compared to the mountains of books and trash he'd had to deal with.

Tori included all of Euphemia's various undergarments in his washing. Normally, this would have flustered him, but at the moment, his desire to finish the laundry was much stronger. This was no time to be embarrassed by a pair of panties.

Eventually, the hot water started to run out, so Tori used the remaining water to clean out the inside of the tank before dumping it. Once he heated up a second full tank, the resulting water was now clean enough to use for bathing.

“Wh-Wh-Whoa! Wait, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Tori was finishing up the laundry when he heard Subaru making a ruckus outside. When he opened the bathroom door to check what was going on, he saw Euphemia standing right outside, completely soaked. She was pouting as water dripped from her giant, pointed hat.

“Huh? Euphemia? I thought you’d be home tomorrow,” Tori said.

Euphemia didn’t answer and instead approached Tori and clung to him.

“Hey, watch it! You’re soaking wet!”

“You dummy,” Euphemia muttered as she buried her face in Tori’s chest.

Tori was still confused at the situation, but he took off Euphemia’s hat and patted her head.

“Whoa, look at that. The bath’s all clean too!”

Shinozuki had also returned. Like Euphemia, her hair was also completely soaked.

“Shino, I see you’re also back early.”

“Yeah, about that. Subaru didn’t show up at all, right? Euphie thought it was weird that she would pass up the chance to go wild against a buncha monsters,” Shinozuki explained.

Euphemia lifted her head, still pouting at Tori. “Subaru had your cooking all to herself all this time, didn’t she.”

“Oh... Well, yeah.” Tori smiled awkwardly. Behind Shino, Subaru was grinning as if she’d done nothing wrong.

“So, we ended up finishing the work that should’ve taken us until tomorrow a day early. We hunted down every last spider in that mine with no breaks and headed back home.”

That’s something only the White Witch and her fenrir companion could do, thought Tori.

Euphemia, still pouting, reached out her hands and sandwiched Tori’s face between them. “I’m hungry. Feed me,” she demanded.

“Okay, okay. I’ll prepare dinner,” Tori relented. He was finished with the washing, so he tossed the damp clothes into a laundry basket and went into the parlor.

“Euphie, you’re all soaked. Aren’t you cold? I heated up some water, so you should take a bath,” Tori directed Euphemia to the bathroom.

“No. I hate baths,” Euphemia complained.

“You don’t have a choice here. If you don’t take a bath, you don’t get any food,” Tori threatened.

“This is tyranny. The will of the employer should be followed. No, it *must* be followed,” Euphemia protested.

“And it’s *my* job as your helper to ensure the health of my employer! Now shut up and go take a bath!”

“...Only if you take a bath with me.”

“Huh?”

“Washing myself is too much effort. If you help me wash my hair and my body, then I’ll take a bath.”

Euphemia looked dead serious. She started undressing. Tori looked at Shinozaki and Subaru. Both of them looked amused at the turn of events.

“C-Can either of you just help her?”

“Heh heh heh. I thought it was your job as the helper to ensure the health of your employer,” Shino echoed Tori’s words.

“Good luck with that, big bro!” Subaru taunted.

“You demons...”

Tori couldn’t help but feel that he’d dug his own grave, but it was too late to back out. He braced himself for the task.

Euphemia’s pale white skin was smooth enough that droplets of water rolled off her back as she sat in the washing area beside the tub. Tori refused to cross the line and take off his own clothes, so he stood behind her while still fully

dressed. He bit his lip as he started washing her hair. There was one bottle of shampoo that remained unopened and free of mold. He lathered some up with his hands and applied it to Euphemia's white hair.

Euphemia's eyes were shut tight as she sighed. "Feels nice..." she muttered.

"Right? If it feels nice, you should do it yourself," Tori attempted to excuse himself.

"No" was Euphemia's curt reply.

Euphemia was shorter than Tori, but her body proportions were well-balanced, and she had curves in the right places. Her chest and other places might have even been considered slightly bigger than average.

Tori desperately tried to avert his eyes from Euphemia's body, but he realized that he was stuck in a dilemma. If he closed his eyes and stopped looking, his hands might accidentally touch places they shouldn't. In the end, he couldn't decide whether to keep his eyes open or closed, and suffered from his indecision.

Tori finished washing Euphemia's hair and twisted it up into a bun to prevent it from getting soaked in the bath. "Okay, you can get in now."

"You haven't washed my body yet," Euphemia pointed out.

"That's a bit..."

"You said you would wash me. That's why I agreed to take a bath."

"H-How about I just wash your back? *Just* your back. You can do the front," Tori tried to compromise.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why?' Wouldn't you hate it if a man started washing your breasts or some other part of your body?!"

"I don't mind if you do it, though."

"Huh?!" Tori froze. *What did she mean by that?* He was so confused that he couldn't fully process what Euphemia had said.

Seeing Tori's reaction, Euphemia sighed. "Fine. Just wash my back, then," she

said and turned away.

Tori had mixed feelings. On one hand, he felt like he had just missed the chance of a lifetime, and on the other, he felt like he'd narrowly escaped the jaws of death. This mix of emotions stuck with him as he washed Euphemia's back. He gently scrubbed her with a soapy towel. Euphemia's skin felt like luxurious porcelain to Tori, so much so that he couldn't help but take extra caution in the way he washed her.

As Tori was finishing up, Euphemia spoke up. "You know, I ran into the members of the Muddy Four-Horns. Oh, wait, it's ex-members now."

Tori felt a jolt from hearing that name, but he didn't stop moving his hands. "I see. Did you talk to them?" he asked.

"Yeah. I told them that I hired you."

So they know I'm working here now, Tori thought. He pursed his lips. *There's no point in complaining about it now. Actually, why do I even care? There's no way they'll ever see me here anyway.*

"How were they doing?" Tori asked.

"They're doing fine. I think I scared them a bit, though," Euphemia answered.



Tori couldn't help but laugh. *Anyone would be terrified if that old lady started talking to them*, he thought.

"I'm glad they're doing well, then. What do you think of them? Are they strong?"

"They are. They deserve being crowned platinum. They're still weaker than I am, though," Euphemia gave her honest opinion.

"Compared to you, sure... Never mind. I'll rinse you off now."

Tori scooped up some water and poured it over Euphemia's back. Droplets of water stuck to her smooth, white skin, further emphasizing its color and smoothness. The seductive allure of her skin made Tori feel flustered once more.

"Th-There. You can do the rest on your own," Tori said, and he made a run for the door to escape. Shinozuki and Subaru turned their faces to him. The two of them had been lounging around on the couch in the meantime.

"Oh hey! Didja make some great memories in there?" Shinozuki teased.

"Hee hee hee. Big bro, I didn't know you were such a perv," Subaru piled on.

"Sounds like the two of you don't want any dinner tonight," Tori said ominously.

"Gah?! Anything but that!"

"Sorry! I'm sorry!"

It would seem that Tori had the two legendary beasts in the palm of his hand.

To clear his head of impure thoughts, Tori returned to the laundry and hung it up to dry, then started preparing dinner. He kneaded together a dough of flour, water, and eggs, set it aside, and salted some thick slices of meat he'd cut from a large slab. Next, he sautéed vegetables and mushrooms, and added them to a cauldron of water along with herbs and spices, bringing it to a simmer. He mixed in some crushed tomatoes, and once they started to cook down, he seared the meat and added it directly to the pot. He left it all to simmer, and once the meat was tender, the soup was done.

Meanwhile, Euphemia had finished her bath. Small droplets of water still covered her body as she sat on the couch. Her hair was still wet, and her cheeks were flushed from the heat. Everything about her looked erotic. The thin, blue blouse she was wearing emphasized her body even more. Her naked, smooth, white body that Tori had witnessed in the bath flashed in his mind for a moment.

Begone, impure thoughts! Tori begged internally. He shook his head. While forming the dough into noodles, Tori turned to Shinozuki.

“Shino, didn’t you also get soaked? Why don’t you take a bath next?”

“Sounds nice, but I gotta have some of that meat. Meat, meat, meat!” Shinozuki exclaimed.

“Meeeeeat!” Subaru hollered.

“I’m hungry. Is it ready yet?” Euphemia asked.

The three of them started clamoring like chicks waiting to be fed. To shut them up, Tori served the soup as an appetizer. The three of them cheered upon seeing the large slices of meat floating in the soup.

After seeing the three girls start to eat, Tori returned to cooking. He boiled the noodles, mixed in some butter and pasta water, and topped it with cheese and pepper. He served the noodles next to the soup.

“Here you go. Be sure to eat these with sauce,” Tori instructed.

“Yay! This smells great too!” Subaru exclaimed.

“I see, so you added more flavors into this. These small touches are very much like you, Tori. What a delicious meal!” Shinozuki added.

Euphemia was munching on her food.

The three of them had huge appetites. The two legendary beasts aside, Euphemia ate a lot despite her size, but she showed no signs of retaining any fat.

Witches are terrifying, concluded Tori, once again impressed with Euphemia in an unusual way.

After dinner, Euphemia started lazing around on the couch. Meanwhile, Shinozuki and Subaru took a bath together. Baths didn't exist in the underworld, and it sounded like the two of them were playing around with the soap bubbles in the tub. They'd been complaining right before entering the bath, but now they weren't coming out and kept making loud noises inside.

"Shino, Subaru, don't make a mess in there!" Tori yelled from outside the door.

"There's no mess in here!" Shinozuki yelled back.

"Whee! There's bubbles everywhere!" Subaru hollered. The two of them continued to make noise.

Tori was worried about them, but he couldn't just open the door and peek. He gave up and turned around.

"Euphie, you'll catch a cold if you sleep out here. Sleep on your bed." Tori gently jostled her.

"Mmm..." Euphemia was curled up on the couch. Her eyelids drooped, and she yawned. She stretched out a hand toward Tori. "Take me there," she requested.

"Fine," Tori relented. He reluctantly carried Euphemia on his back and found her to be light. He took her straight to her bedroom and laid her down on her bed. She then stretched herself like a cat.

Tori's eyes went to the locked room in the corner. Curious, he decided to ask about it. "Euphie, what's that door?"

"That's my workshop," replied Euphemia. "It's where I make my potions and magic items. It's dangerous, so don't try to clean up in there."

If that's really her workshop, then she's right. It would be dangerous for an amateur like me to step inside and handle anything. Though, I'm sure it's really filthy in there, Tori imagined.

Tori sighed in relief knowing that he didn't need to add another room to his list of places to keep clean.

Suddenly, Euphemia started taking her clothes off.

“Whoa?! Why are you undressing?!” Tori shrieked.

“Can’t sleep with clothes on...” she mumbled.

Tori panicked and threw a blanket over her. She tossed her blouse out from under the blanket, curled up, and poked her head out.

“Sleep beside me?” Euphemia offered.

“No!” Tori cried, and he left the room. He shut the door and leaned against it as he breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was an intense sequence of events,” Tori muttered. He struggled to decide whether to consider today’s events a perk of his job or just plain torture. Regardless, he would be living here for the foreseeable future. His sanity wouldn’t last if he reacted this way every single time. He had to get used to it.

It wasn’t long after he steeled himself when Shinozuki and Subaru busted out of the bathroom completely naked, laughing gleefully as they ran around. The two of them were covered in bubbles. It looked like they’d been playing in the bath and it had escalated to this.

Tori buried his head in his hands. “I am *done* with those three,” he muttered.

6. Cecilia

Now that Tori had finished most of the cleaning inside the house, he decided to turn his efforts to the outside next. Euphemia's home had a garden and a henhouse, so it looked like it was intended to make the owner fully self-sufficient. But now, most of the structures were old and abandoned, and the yard had been overrun with weeds.

Today's weather was pleasant. It was the morning after the rain had stopped. The sun started shining right as Tori finished breakfast, and its rays glimmered off the droplets on the leaves as he stood next to Euphemia.

"How long has the yard been like this?" Tori asked.

"I don't know. It was like this when I arrived..." Euphemia answered drowsily. According to her, this had been an abandoned house. The house came with a bath, so the former owner must have been quite rich. When Euphemia arrived, they'd already been gone, but the yard hadn't yet deteriorated this far, so it probably hadn't been long after the owners left.

Tori suddenly realized that he had no idea where this place was on the map. It must have been close enough to Azrac to travel, but he didn't know the exact location. Regardless, it didn't pose any problems at the moment.

For now, Tori started his cleanup by removing the weeds in the yard. Because the yard had been left to its own devices for several years, the weeds had grown thick and were deeply entrenched. The soil seemed rich and well fertilized due to the dead weeds depositing into the ground.

Tori uprooted the weeds and piled them in one place. The soot from the fireplace he had spread around had already started mixing into the soil thanks to yesterday's rain. Among the plants in the yard were some useful and edible herbs that had overgrown, which Tori decided to leave in place so he could cultivate them for food.

After about an hour, he had barely cleared out a tenth of the garden area.

Tori sighed and wiped sweat off his forehead.

“This is going to take a while,” he muttered.

Once this garden could grow vegetables, it would greatly reduce the number of trips he needed to take to the city for groceries. That went the same for if he could renovate the henhouse to keep chickens for eggs and meat. Shopping for groceries did take up a lot of time, and he always needed to ask someone else for help to do so. Being more self-sufficient wouldn't hurt at all.

Shinozuki was lying around in her fenrir form after having eaten a big breakfast. Subaru, who was also full, was cuddling with Shinozuki in her human form. Shinozuki's fur must have felt really nice and comfortable for Subaru to look so relaxed and satisfied. Meanwhile, Euphemia was inside, lying on the couch with her eyes closed. It looked like she was taking a nap.

Looks like I'm the only one who's working, Tori thought. *I guess that's fine since I'm the only one actually employed here.*

Tori continued weeding the garden. He didn't dislike this kind of work. Even while at the Muddy Four-Horns, he had a lot of experience doing tasks like cooking, cleaning, or performing maintenance on weapons. He was used to the menial work, of course, but it was also a part of his personality to a degree.

Maybe I wasn't meant to be an adventurer after all, Tori thought. *I feel like a dumbass for it taking me ten years to realize. I'd been wasting away all my time by sticking to being an adventurer.*

While Tori was still upset about being fired from the Muddy Four-Horns, he'd started to feel that it was an inevitability.

Tori had used up all morning in weeding the garden and managed to clear out a significant amount of space. Some roots still remained in the ground, but a rake should be enough to take care of those.

Tori stared at the plot of land, thinking about what to cultivate. Grains weren't a good choice because he'd need large amounts of them consistently, and the yard was nowhere near big enough to support that much yield. On the other hand, potatoes had a good yield and occupied much less space in comparison. It was probably not a bad idea to grow them. He also wanted to

grow ornamental plants, leafy vegetables, and root crops. Herbs would also be nice to add for accentuating flavors. Fruit trees would be nice too, but there was too little space for that.

Shinozuki got up and let out a big yawn. “That was a good nap. Is it lunchtime yet?”

“Aren’t *you* having a good time,” Tori said sarcastically. “Shino, you do nothing but eat and sleep all day.”

“I’m a fenrir. You think these paws can do yard work?” Shino retorted and showed her paws to Tori.

You’re only a fenrir when it’s convenient for you, Tori silently complained.

Because Shinozuki had stood up, Subaru, who had been lounging against her, opened her eyes and started mumbling. “Mmm? Wha’s goin’ on?”

“How long are you gonna sleep, you lazy bum?” Shinozuki taunted Subaru despite only having woken up a few moments ago herself.

Tori went inside to prepare lunch. He made noodles out of dough he’d left to rest earlier in the morning, then simmered fried meat in milk, added in the boiled noodles, and grated some cheese to top the dish. In other bowls, he tossed some vegetables with oil and salt and readied some pickled roots.

“Smells good,” Euphemia mumbled. She was on the couch, stretching herself awake. Gentle rays of light shone on her from the window, giving her an aura of relaxation.

However, it appeared that it wasn’t a good time to be relaxing. Once again, a bird carrying a letter in its mouth flew into the house. Euphemia furrowed her brow as she read the letter.

“Another job?” Shinozuki entered, back in her human form.

“Yes. But we’re not hunting monsters this time. They want me to make a magic potion,” Euphemia explained.

“Magic potion? Like what?” Subaru asked.

Euphemia tossed away the letter and sighed. “A recovery potion. They’re running out of stock because there are so many monster-hunting requests

going out.”

“What’s wrong with those guys? Why’re they relying on those potions so much when they fight?”

“Oh, boo! That means we don’t have to do anything! That’s boring!”

“Subaru, you didn’t even participate in the last job. You don’t get to say that,” Euphemia coldly scolded her.

Subaru froze and tried to laugh it off. “W-Well, that’s... Heh heh, I mean, it’s all Tori’s fault! The food he makes is too good!”

“You’re right, but still...”

“Don’t just agree with her!” Tori interjected. He was setting the finished meal on the table.

“Do you even have materials for the potions?” Shinozuki asked.

Euphemia shook her head. “I have some, but not everything. I’ll have to buy or harvest them.”

She took a piece of paper and listed down the ingredients she needed. “These ones can be gathered in the woods around here. These others will come from monsters, so we’ll have to hunt some. The rest I’ll have to buy in the city.”

The paper was filled from top to bottom. It looked like she needed a huge amount of ingredients for the potion. Euphemia ate some cream pasta as she talked. “It’s still a monster-hunting mission in the end. Shino and Subaru, you two will come with me.”

“Sure.”

“Okay! I’ll work hard this time!”

“So, you’ll start working in the afternoon?” Tori asked while warming some bread to mop up the cream sauce with.

“Yeah. It’s an urgent request, so I have a pretty tight deadline,” Euphemia replied.

“You seem to be busy lately. Also, wipe your mouth. You have sauce on— Hey, not with your sleeve!” Tori set aside the bread, grabbed a towel, and

cleaned Euphemia's face. She closed her eyes and sat still as Tori did his job.

Tori looked at the list of potion ingredients and was impressed. It was long and full of various items. He found it incredible that Euphemia could write that entire list in an instant. Once again, she lived up to her reputation as the White Witch.

However, as he looked at it, Tori noticed some rare items there. Some of them would likely need to be poached from monsters.

"Are potions usually this complicated to make?" Tori inquired.

Euphemia shook her head. "This one isn't normally so complex. But my recipe is especially effective. I charge a higher price for it, and it usually sells out."

"Made by the White Witch herself" does sound like effective branding, Tori thought. Her patrons probably can't even imagine the amount of effort she puts into making them.

"This is so much, though," Tori expressed his concern. "Can you even gather all of these?"

"We'll split up and search. I'll have Shino and Subaru help out," Euphemia replied. She raised her hand and summoned her staff from the bedroom. She chanted a spell, and a magic circle appeared. After a brief glow, a woman appeared above the circle. She wore a triangular hat not unlike Euphemia's over her blue-black hair. Her robe was excessively revealing; her voluminous chest was particularly exposed. It was even bigger and more pronounced than Shinozuki's already huge mounds.

The woman's skin was pale as a ghost's, and the colors of her eyes were inverted; in other words, her entire eyes were pitch-black except for the rings of white that were her irises. Writhing, black shadows surrounded her body. Were the shadows her mana made visible, or perhaps her familiars or servants? Regardless, these characteristics made it obvious that she was a denizen of the underworld—a fiend.

The woman landed on the floor, raised both arms, and showed a big smile. "Euphie! It's been a while since you called on me! Do you need something from your big sister Cecilia?"

“I’ve had a request to make some recovery potions. Could you help me out?” Euphemia asked.

“Oh my, is that all? Of course I can. That’s child’s play for an archlich like me. Leave it to your big sis!” Cecilia grinned and puffed out her chest, which jiggled.

An archlich? Seriously? Tori was dumbfounded. An archlich was an archfiend, creatures that possessed massive amounts of mana. They were said to wield over a thousand kinds of spells, a feat that earned their race the title “sages of the underworld.” Euphemia having one of these sages under her command was yet another clear sign that she was no ordinary adventurer.

“Shino, Subaru, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you two! How are you doing?” Cecilia greeted the other familiars in the room.

“Heya! You haven’t changed a bit. Haven’t seen you around even in the underworld,” Shinozuki replied.

“Om nom nom!” Subaru was still too busy stuffing her face to speak.

Cecilia looked around the room and at the food on the table. “Euphie, did you finally move out of that house? You have lots of delicious food here too,” she wondered.

“No, this is the same house,” Euphie replied.

Hearing this, Cecilia cackled. “Oh jeez, Euphie, you’re such a joker! You shouldn’t tease me like that!”

“She ain’t teasin’ ya. The house has been cleaned up,” Shinozuki interjected.

“It’s all thanks to big bro Tori!” Subaru giggled.

“Committing to the bit, are we?” Cecilia said. Her eyes darted around the room and finally landed on Tori.

“Wow!” Cecilia placed her hands over her mouth. “He’s so cute! Who is this lovely boy?”

“Cute...? Lovely?” Tori was perplexed at these terms that had never been used to describe him until now.

Cecilia beamed as she examined Tori. She was slightly taller than him, giving

Tori the feeling that he was being doted on by an older woman.

Euphemia mopped up the sauce on her plate with some bread. "This person is Tori. I hired him. Tori, this is Cecilia, an archlich under contract with me."

"Nice to meet you, Tori. I'm Cecilia. Let's get along, okay?" Cecilia introduced herself. She started poking Tori's cheeks with both index fingers, and gushed excitedly about him.

"H-Hey there. I'm Tori." He turned to Euphemia. "Wait, so, she's going to help out with gathering materials?"

"That's right." She nodded. "There's a few things we can get in the city, so I want you to buy those and have Cecilia send them to me."

"Oh, I see now. I can do that," Tori said.

"Wow! A date with a younger guy! This makes big sis so happy!" Cecilia fawned over Tori.

"If you lay a hand on him, I'll never summon you again," Euphemia threatened. Cecilia froze and started sweating immediately.

"I-I'm not gonna lay a hand on him..." she promised through a forced smile.

"Besides, you'll be shopping, so you won't have time to play around with Tori," Shinozuki added.

"No way! What's even the point, then?" Cecilia lamented.

Subaru raised her hand. "I can go with Tori instead of Cecilia! That way, I can just meet up with you guys!"

"Subaru, you still owe me some work from last time. Besides, you're going to end up just eating Tori's food again," Euphemia chided her.

"Oh..." Subaru fidgeted, clearly having no retort for this.

Cecilia reached out and wiped some sauce off Subaru's plate with her finger. She took a taste of the sauce.

"Oh my, this is delicious!" Cecilia turned to Tori. "You made this?"

"Well, yeah," Tori answered sheepishly.

Cecilia looked elated and grabbed his hand. “My, this makes me so happy! The food in the underworld is so bland! I’m looking forward to dinner tonight, okay?”

“O-Okay...”

“Just so you know, Cecilia’s also a big eater. You better prepare yourself,” Shinozuki warned Tori.

“You’re joking.”

“She’s not! I gotta keep this lovely figure somehow, you know?” Cecilia leaned forward, drawing attention to her bountiful breasts.

Tori smiled awkwardly. *Great, I have more mouths to feed*, he cursed in his thoughts.

Tori finished cleaning up after lunch and prepared to head out. Shinozuki and Subaru transformed into their fenrir and phoenix forms outside the house.

“Okay, let’s go! Wah ha ha! I’m so pumped right now!” Shinozuki howled.

“Yeah, this form feels like home!” Subaru stretched out her gigantic wings.

Euphemia, in her usual White Witch disguise, sat on Subaru’s back. “Tori, Cecilia, I leave the rest to thee. Our task may last ’til the morrow, but please worry not.”

“Huh? What about dinner?”

“I shall leave that up to thee as well.”

“Hey!”

Before Tori could even blink, the three of them had taken off. Tori folded his arms. At this rate, he would need to think of a dinner that would keep until tomorrow.

“Hmm. Stew, I guess,” he muttered.

Cecilia giggled. “It’s finally just the two of us, huh?” She placed her hands on Tori’s shoulders. He felt a chill run down his back. Cecilia giggled again.

“Don’t be so scared of me, dear. I might looove cute boys like you, but I’m not so shortsighted as to sully Euphie’s favorite.”

“I-I see...”

“Oh, but if you decide to lay a hand on me, well, I don’t have any reason to reject you, now do I?” Cecilia smiled. Her seductive expression felt like it was enveloping Tori. He felt that he was being drawn in by her cleavage, her well-placed curves, her voluminous backside, and her sultry gaze.

To hell with that! I’m not falling for her temptations. Rather than be taken in by her seduction, this only fueled Tori’s stubbornness.

Azrac was surrounded by untouched, undeveloped land. Much of this land had complex terrain, some of which had transformed into dungeons. In such places, monsters far outnumbered humans, so these locations were also considered monster lairs.

Some of these places had once been settled by humans, but those settlements were now ruins, buried by the passage of time. These forgotten ruins harbored artifacts from ancient civilizations, which were seen as incredibly rare and valuable. This attracted endless numbers of adventurers who entered monster lairs seeking these precious relics.

Since these lands sat long undisturbed by human hands, they were also home to many rare and unusual plants and minerals. Although collecting monster bounties was part of an adventurer’s job description, a major—if not the main—part of their work was braving danger to explore these untouched lands.

The ancient street known as the Old North City Road had once been a major route for trade and transport. Now, roots had grown in and eroded the old road, leaving only traces of the once-paved street behind. Still, it was enough to serve as a landmark for adventurers exploring these northern ruins.

“Did you find any?”

“Nope. Everything’s been got already.”

An adventuring clan was exploring a forest off the old city road. There were over ten people in the clan, all taking up their usual front, back, and support positions. They were here as explorers, not monster hunters.

The surrounding area was full of uplifted rocks and tall cliffs. Because of this, the cliffs trapped water vapor easily, making fog a common phenomenon in the area. The weather made this place ideal for fungi and moss to grow. Several species of mushroom and moss could be found here, including some rare varieties.

This clan was here to harvest rare mushrooms, but due to bad timing, most of the mushrooms in the area had already been collected by other adventurers.

“What are we supposed to do now? We’ll be coming back empty-handed.”

“Hmm... I think we should go farther in.”

“Isn’t it dangerous down there?”

“We’ll check it out for a bit, then decide if we want to keep going. Our finances will be taking a huge hit if we leave with nothing.”

Being an adventurer was expensive, especially when operating as a clan. Each mission required frequent maintenance of weapons and equipment. Neglecting this meant getting injured at best and killed at worst. No adventurer should be unprepared when exploring.

The clan advanced farther into the forest and away from the main road. The signs of civilization gradually became buried in trees and moss, and their surroundings started brimming with the rich sounds of animals and monsters.

“Found something. Dragontree herb.”

A nearby tree branch was almost completely covered in lichen. One of the clan members scraped it off and found the herb they were looking for amid a sea of green. The others looked elated and began harvesting it.

“Ha ha, looks like we’re out of the red. We might even net a profit from this.”

“We’re still a long way from that.”

At that moment, the adventurers heard a noise coming from beyond the bushes. They braced themselves for an attack.

The noise seemed to be coming from some distance away. They heard the cracking of branches, the sound of something crawling, and the rustling of leaves. The noises echoed in the forest in short intervals. It sounded almost like

a fight was taking place, but they heard no clangs of metal. Was it monsters? Or perhaps other adventurers?

“Is someone out there?”

“I don’t know, but...”

The two scouts of the clan decided to take a look ahead, and they quietly moved toward the source of the noise.

A gigantic serpent was wrapping itself around a boar. The boar, constricted by the snake, was lying sideways, struggling desperately to escape. The snake’s mouth enveloped the boar’s head completely. It looked like the snake intended to swallow its prey whole.

The boar in question was larger than a human, which meant the snake trying to swallow it was truly enormous. It bore a colorful pattern of scales; they were red and black with specks of gold. This pattern made it look like its body was covered in eyes—just looking at it would make anyone go dizzy.

One of the scouts gulped. “A serpent-eye lord...”

“What’s that? A rare monster?”

“It’s a very dangerous predator. This is bad. We have to get away from here.”

The serpent-eye lord was a gigantic venomous snake, with a body as thick as a tree trunk. It was a violent serpent with a voracious appetite. It was particularly aggressive when hungry, instantly devouring anything it came across. Its venom was deadly; getting scraped by its fangs was enough to cause serious injury, and getting bitten meant certain death.

This clan of adventurers specialized in exploration. They were not prepared to fight a creature like the serpent-eye lord. The two scouts prepared to retreat back the way they’d come, but the great serpent had finished devouring the boar right before their eyes. Its attention immediately turned to the two scouts. It had spotted them despite their distance.

“Oh no. We gotta run!”

“Damn it, this is *not* our lucky day!”

The scouts hurried back to their comrades.

“Retreat! Retreat! There’s a serpent-eye lord!”

“Huh?! We didn’t hear of any sightings of those around here...”

“Who cares?! It’s right over there! Start running if you don’t wanna get eaten!”

The clan members, who had just resumed harvesting, all scrambled to retreat in a panic. However, the bushes started rustling, and within seconds, the serpent-eye lord showed its head.

The clan members shrieked. The serpent’s glare froze the adventurers in place. Several monsters possessed the ability to wield magic, and among these, the serpent-eye lord was able to freeze its prey in place with its glare. If one was unfortunate enough to meet its gaze, it would pour mana directly into them, making them completely unable to move, much less avert their gaze.

The serpent-eye lord opened its mouth wide, revealing its sharp fangs. At that moment, a loud screech echoed from the sky. It was the cry of a bird. The adventurers looked up, startled by the sound, and saw a gigantic bird descend from the trees. The giant bird bore blazing wings, and its sharp beak had a visible glint. It swooped through the air and pierced through the flesh of the serpent-eye lord. The great serpent began writhing violently.

“Whoa!”

The violent struggle crushed and toppled nearby trees, flinging fragments of wood and debris everywhere. The binding on the adventurers had been lifted, and they immediately ran from the battle.

“It’s a phoenix!”

“Wh-What’s a legendary beast from the underworld doing here?!”

The mighty phoenix flew high and flapped its wings as if taunting the serpent baring its fangs below. Embers from its wings landed on the ground, sparking fires in the dead leaves. The serpent-eye lord’s attention was now fully turned toward the phoenix. It hissed angrily at the legendary beast as the phoenix continued to taunt it by flying around at a distance barely out of reach.

The adventurers had managed to find a safe distance away from the battle.

“What’s going on over there?”

“I think it’s...a battle for territory?”

At that moment, a staff flew into the fray. The jewel embedded in its crooked tip started glowing, enveloping the whole staff in a bright light. The light took the shape of a sword, and with one slash, it sliced off the giant serpent’s head.

“Subaru. Why art thou fooling around? We have yet to finish gathering materials,” spoke a deep voice that seemed to resound from the depths of the earth, and a gigantic witch clad in all white appeared.

“I-It’s the White Witch,” one of the clan members gulped. The adventurers swallowed their breath upon witnessing the arrival of Azrac’s most powerful adventurer. She had crushed the serpent-eye lord in one fell swoop. In contrast, these adventurers had stood no chance against the giant serpent and had almost become its dinner.

The White Witch lifted the serpent-eye lord’s corpse with magic and hung it on a nearby tree branch. She collected the blood dripping from its corpse with a bottle.

“It appears Shino hath also done her part. We must keep moving,” the White Witch muttered as she finished filling up the bottle with blood. She rode on the phoenix and flew off.

The adventurers who were left in the dust looked at one another.

“I’m guessing she doesn’t need that?” one of the adventurers pointed at the serpent-eye lord’s corpse.

“I-I don’t think so, but we can’t just take it...”

“But if we do, we’ll make a huge profit out of it.”

“Ugh...” The adventurers folded their arms and groaned. The serpent-eye lord’s fangs, skin, and meat were left completely intact. It would be a waste to leave it all behind, but there was a chance that the White Witch would come back for it. If they poached this corpse and got caught, they couldn’t even imagine what the White Witch would subject them to.

In the end, it took the group until sunset to make a decision. Faced with the

pressure of the setting sun, they regretfully decided to leave it alone. The prospect of making a huge profit was tempting, but they were too terrified of drawing the ire of the White Witch.

Of course, none of them knew that their fears were completely unnecessary.

Meanwhile, Tori had gone with Cecilia to Azrac to do their shopping as planned. Cecilia's transportation magic was no different from Euphemia's, and they reached the city in what felt like an instant. They could hear the distant sounds of crowds passing by from the back alley they had landed in.

Tori took his basket in one hand and his shopping list in the other.

"Thank you," he said to Cecilia. "I'm gonna go shopping now, so if we could meet back up at around sunset—"

"Oh? Let's forget that and just go together! We don't have much to buy, after all," Cecilia argued.

"But don't you have other things you need to find?"

"Oh jeez, it's not gonna take long for your big sis to get all of those. Come on, Tori dear! Pretty please?" Cecilia begged as she clung to Tori's arm. He immediately became conscious of the sensation of Cecilia's breasts rubbing against it. Flustered, he somehow managed to push her away.

"O-O-Okay, fine! But *please* keep your distance!"

"Aw, jeez, you're no fun." Cecilia giggled. Tori had no idea whether she was making fun of him or being serious. Regardless, he felt like he was being made to dance in the palm of her hand.

Is there any man out there who wouldn't? Tori wondered.

Tori realized that Cecilia's pale skin and eye color would attract too much attention in public. Fiends rarely appeared on the surface, and it would cause a huge commotion if one suddenly showed up in the middle of the city. Tori would rather avoid making a spectacle.

"Cecilia, do you think you could do something about your appearance?" Tori requested.

“Oh my, I nearly forgot. Hocus-pocus!” Cecilia waved her fingers around, and in an instant, color returned to her corpse-pale complexion. The blackness of her eyes turned white, and her irises became a beautiful green color. She was pretty even while in her archlich form, but now that her fiendish characteristics had vanished, she looked even more beautiful. Tori became conscious of his own appearance and felt way out of his league walking beside such a beauty.

“Okay then, let’s go!”

“Huh...” Tori ran after Cecilia, who had started striding mirthfully into the city. He felt like a servant to a noblewoman.

The two of them stopped by various stores—the apothecary, the jeweler, a shop for magical artifacts, another for magical ingredients—and gathered the items they needed. Cecilia’s nature as a sage of the underworld was very helpful; her knowledge let her discern the quality of materials in an instant. This let them buy only products of the best quality.

Cecilia’s supreme beauty, voluptuous body, and seductive clothing attracted gazes everywhere she went, be it the shops or the city streets. Tori heard whispers following them wherever they went.

“What a mismatched couple.”

“Don’t you think the guy looks so lame?”

Cecilia was terrifying. She exuded such an erotic aura just by walking around.

In any case, Tori didn’t want any more strange rumors to spread from them walking together. It was probably too late, but they had already finished shopping, so they had no reason to linger around. Tori ran into an alley, and Cecilia used her magic to transport the two of them back home.

Tori was completely exhausted when they reached the house.

“What’s wrong, Tori dear?”

“Nothing, really.”

It was late afternoon, and the sun’s rays were starting to dim. Tori left the shopping crates in front of Euphemia’s workshop door. It was then time to prepare dinner and the bath.

Tori was chopping vegetables when he realized Cecilia was right behind him, watching him work.

“Cecilia, don’t you need to go out and gather other ingredients for the potion?”

“Oh, they’ll be fine. Anyway, you sure are good with your hands,” Cecilia giggled.

“Hey! I’m holding a knife here!” Tori panicked as Cecilia rubbed against his shoulder. “Can you not be so seductive all the time? You’re more like a succubus than an archlich.”

“Oh my, you’re sharp for noticing.”

“Noticing what?”

“My mother was a succubus.” Cecilia placed a finger on her lips and giggled.

I can’t believe Euphie left me alone with this ticking time bomb! Tori buried his head in his hands.

Seemingly having had her fill of teasing, Cecilia finally went out to gather materials. *Finally, some peace and quiet*, Tori muttered in his mind, feeling more relaxed as he continued cooking.

Tori had no idea whether Euphemia and the others would be coming home tonight or tomorrow, so he prepared for both events just in case. He sautéed the finely chopped vegetables and mushrooms until browned, and transferred them to a pot. He repeated this until the pot was half filled, then added some water and various herbs, and left it to simmer.

Meanwhile, he fried several large cuts of meat and transferred these to the pot as well. He had also added some cooking wine to the frying pan to boost the meat’s flavor. He added some crushed tomatoes and skimmed off the foam that rose to the surface as it all reduced.

Next, he made dough from wheat flour and put it aside. Once Euphemia and the others returned, he would make noodles to serve with the stew.

Tori heated up some water for the bath. It had become dark outside while he was folding laundry. It didn’t look like Euphemia would be coming home

tonight.

Probably tomorrow, then, Tori thought. Just then, the door opened and Cecilia entered the house.

“Tori dear, I’m back!”

“Welcome back. What about the materials Euphemia requested?” Tori asked. Cecilia wasn’t holding anything.

“I have them right here. Come on in!” Cecilia beckoned. At her command, a number of skeletal four-legged creatures entered the house. It looked like they might have been a type of dog. They were carrying baskets on their backs, filled with various medicinal herbs, tree branches, and mushrooms.

“Wow... That’s necromancy, right?” Tori was impressed.

“Hehe. It’s the archlich specialty. Oh my, something smells nice.” Cecilia stood in front of the pot and started sniffing.



“Shall we go ahead and eat? I don’t know if Euphemia’s coming back tonight,” Tori offered.

“Oh my, is that okay with you? I’ll take up your offer!” Cecilia removed her hat and took a seat at the dinner table.

Tori suddenly realized that their dining table only had four seats. It hadn’t been an issue yet, but if all five of them were gathered, one of them wouldn’t have a place to sit.

We need one more seat, Tori thought as he started cutting the dough into noodles and boiling them.

Once the noodles were served, Cecilia quickly took a mouthful. In an instant, her expression lit up.

“That’s delicious!” she exclaimed.

“Good to hear,” Tori replied.

“I haven’t eaten anything this good ever since Euphie summoned me!” Cecilia added. *Just what has Euphemia been feeding these three until now?* Tori worried over her remark. Now he felt that he had to step up and make even better food from now on.

The large cuts of meat he’d been stewing were now soft and tender, but because the outsides were seared, the cuts kept their shape. The meat tasted great when shredded and eaten with the noodles.

Cecilia lived up to her reputation and had five additional bowls of food. She sopped up the remaining sauce from her plate with a piece of bread, wiping it completely clean. She rubbed her belly and let out a satisfied sigh. “Wow... This is heaven...” she muttered.

“You really *do* eat a lot, huh,” Tori commented.

Cecilia giggled. “I mean, your food really does taste good! Euphie found herself a wonderful man right here.”

Tori felt tickled. It made him very happy whenever someone complimented his cooking.

I wonder when the last time anyone complimented my cooking at the Muddy Four-Horns was, Tori tried to recall. His comrades once used to eat his food so happily. Once they became a platinum-rank guild, they finished their food quickly and slept like logs, never once stopping to say anything about the taste.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Cecilia peered into Tori’s face, catching him off guard.

Tori laughed it off. “Oh, I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“It looks like Euphie won’t be home until tomorrow,” he replied.

“She might not.” Cecilia giggled. “Are you thinking about her?”

“Can’t say I’m not... Cecilia, do you think Euphie’s incredible too? Like her magic and all,” Tori asked.

“Of course she is! I would never have agreed to serve under her if she wasn’t. She’s a prodigy, and even those in the underworld would take notice of her talents.”

Apparently Cecilia thinks Euphie is amazing too, Tori thought. Of course, she had a fenrir, phoenix, and archlich serving under her. The powers of these creatures were top-class among the races in the underworld.

Am I included among those top-class creatures? Tori entertained a ridiculous idea in his head.

Cecilia smiled mischievously. “And she’s *very* cute too. Tori, you fell for her cuteness too, didn’t you?”

“W-Well, I wouldn’t say that...” Tori stammered. Still, he didn’t mind getting employed by her once he found out she was a cute girl and not a gigantic old lady. He couldn’t fully deny Cecilia’s words.

Tori glanced at the bathroom and changed the topic. “Oh, Cecilia, the bath is ready. Why don’t you take one?”

“Wow, we even have a bath tub? Oh yes, why don’t we take a bath together? As thanks for the delicious meal, I’ll wash your back for you.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re funny. I politely refuse your offer.”

“My, you’re no fun. Come on, let’s get in together!” Cecilia said and grabbed Tori’s arm. While she might look like a frail woman, she had superhuman strength as a denizen of the underworld.

“Seriously?!” Tori screamed. He tried to resist, but he was completely powerless. Cecilia dragged him all the way to the bathroom.

She started humming as she disrobed. “Your no sounds like yes to me!”

“Have you ever considered that no means no?!”

“You know what they say about men who don’t eat the food served right before them!”

“I thought you were just going to wash my back!”

“I am, I am! Now come on and take those clothes off!”

“Nooooo!” Tori screamed. At that moment, he heard someone say “I’m home!” from the front door. Euphemia and the others had returned. Cecilia froze. Tori took this chance and slipped from her grasp, and he tumbled out of the bathroom.

Cecilia giggled and put a finger to her lips. “My, did I go too far?”

Tori crawled away from the bathroom, managing to shut the door behind him. He could hear the sounds of Cecilia humming and water flowing from inside.

Euphemia had taken off her hat and was staring at Tori. “What are you doing down there?”

“I’d like to know myself,” Tori flopped back against the bathroom door and let out a big sigh. Euphemia pouted and clung to Tori. She looked up at him.

“Did Cecilia do something to you?” she asked.

“I was on the verge of *something* being done to me. Just so you know, I resisted, okay?!” Tori tried to explain himself.

“Okay. I’ll punish Cecilia later. Grrr...” Euphemia said as she snuggled against Tori’s chest.

Why is this girl always so sweet to me? Tori wondered. He ran his hand

through Euphemia's silky-smooth hair.

Shinozuki and Subaru took their seats at the dinner table and started making a ruckus.

"Nothing like a hard day's work! Tori, feed me! Gimme a big helping!" Shinozuki shouted.

"Me too! Wow, it's stew! Looks tasty!" Subaru exclaimed.

"Okay, okay! I'll prepare the noodles, so just sit tight. Euphie, do you wanna eat?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry."

Tori sighed as he went back into the kitchen.

7. The Two of Them

Tori wanted some seeds and seedlings for the garden. He'd finished clearing out the weeds and tilling the plot of land with a rake he'd found in the shed. At this point, all that was left was to start cultivating crops. Tori, who had already hung the quilts and laundry and had just finished cleaning up after lunch, was explaining his plan to Euphemia. She was sitting on the couch, hugging a cushion.

"That's why I want to go to the city today."

"But I want to rest more today. I'm exhausted from making so many potions," Euphemia complained and plopped down on her side.

Tori was annoyed. Euphemia had indeed finished synthesizing a massive order of recovery potions, and she'd even managed to deliver them in time for the deadline. In some ways, her job had been more exhausting than going into combat, so she declared she would relax since she was completely worn out. True to her word, she'd done nothing but laze around since then—but that had been days ago.

"We're running out of food for meals," Tori tried to appeal to her.

"Can't you ask someone else to go with you?"

"Those three went home just yesterday. Do *you* think you could call them back?"

Shinozuki, Subaru, and Cecilia had been staying with Euphemia recently, but all three of them were high-ranking figures in the underworld. They couldn't leave their posts empty for long, so they decided to return and tend to business there for now. While they probably would answer a call from Euphemia in a pinch, it would completely defeat the purpose of their going back home in the first place.

Euphemia turned over and lay prone. "But I don't wanna move," she grumbled.

“You’ve been lying around for the last four days. It’s time for you to get moving,” Tori argued.

“Mmph.” Euphemia rolled around and around and eventually settled for lying face up. She then turned to Tori and held out her arms.

“What?”

“Pick me up,” she demanded.

“Why?”

“Help me stand.”

Tori, exasperated, conceded to Euphemia’s demands and lifted her to her feet. She yawned and stretched, then went and put on her robes.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said.

“Okay.”

The two of them finally left the house. Euphemia used her transportation magic to fly them to Azrac.

The city was as lively as ever. Large crowds of people were walking about on the streets.

“Okay, now where should we start?” Tori mused aloud.

“Tori, I want something sweet. Let’s get a snack,” Euphemia requested.

“Hmm, then let’s browse some shops and go from there.”

The two of them held hands and started walking. Euphemia showed no hesitation in walking around with Tori like this. Did she hold a lot of affection for Tori, or did she think nothing of him? He couldn’t even begin to guess which was the case, but he still indulged in the soft sensation of her hand.

Tori and Euphemia went around looking for stores that sold seeds and seedlings, making notes of what to buy. Then the two of them stopped at a fancy café. Tori was worried they might stand out, but Euphemia looked like the perfect fit for this place.

Looks like I’m the only sore thumb here, Tori thought derisively about himself. He could never fully get rid of his boorishness, even after all this time.

Euphemia seemed excited upon receiving a cake topped with loads of cream. This was something she didn't get to eat at home. While the change in her expression wasn't drastic, it was still enough to tell that she was very happy.

"Do you like it?" Tori asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"There's some cream on your—I keep telling you not to wipe it with your sleeve!" Tori scolded Euphemia and quickly grabbed a nearby napkin. Euphemia sat still as Tori cleaned her up. She then immediately stuffed herself with another mouthful of cake, smearing more cream over her lips.

Tori found Euphemia, sitting there across the table from him, especially adorable today. While she was incredibly lazy and unkempt at home, the combination of a proper set of clothes and the fashionable backdrop of the café made her look like a veritable beauty. It was a shame about the cream on her face, though.

The longer Tori stared at her, the easier he found it to forget that Euphemia was also the White Witch. After a while, her transformation into an old lady who spoke in a deep, rumbling voice and archaic dialect felt almost like a dream.

When Euphemia was making the magic potions, she and Cecilia had locked themselves in her workshop, and when they finally emerged from the room, Euphemia had been covered in filth and her beautiful face was drawn.

Curious, Tori asked about this. "Was making the recovery potions difficult for you?"

"It's hard to make something that effective. Making a mistake with the measurements is the difference between heaven and hell. It uses up a lot of my brainpower. Killing monsters is much easier," Euphemia explained.

"I see..."

Tori was reminded of Suzanna's little brother, Cyril. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and he was only surviving because of a regular intake of expensive medicines. Tori had never met him, but he couldn't help but sympathize with Cyril's plight. He had given Suzanna snacks and toys to send

whenever he could.

“If only there were a potion that could heal any kind of sickness...” Tori muttered.

“What for?” Euphemia asked when she heard Tori’s words.

“Oh, um, one of my comrades named Suzanna—she has a brother who has this sickness called the deathblight. He has to take expensive medicine to keep the symptoms at bay, but it’s incurable, and I really feel bad for him.”

“I see...” Euphemia sipped some tea. Tori sighed and leaned back in his seat.

“Now that I think about it, all three of them had something serious to motivate them, while I was only ever thinking about myself. All this time, I never stopped to consider their feelings. How selfish of me.”

“Something serious?”

“Yeah.” Tori went on to tell Euphemia about the matters that plagued his former comrades.

Andrea’s goal was to hunt down the monster who killed his parents. While he knew its identity, this knowledge only made clear to him his own lack of strength. It was the entire reason he continued to seek more power.

Jean wanted to complete the spell he had been working on with his late mentor. To do that, he needed to conquer many high-level dungeons to find the artifacts he needed. To that end, he needed to be with a strong and capable clan.

Like Tori had already explained, Suzanna was paying for her brother’s rare and expensive medicine every month. Despite being in a platinum-rank clan, most of her earnings went to those expenses. She would be unable to afford treatment for her brother if she were to quit being part of the clan.

“I don’t have anything to do with them anymore, but I still wish for the three of them to accomplish their goals,” Tori said.

Euphemia nodded as she listened to Tori’s stories. “Would you be happy if they manage to fulfill those goals?” she asked him.

“Huh? Well, yeah.”

“Even though they don’t concern you anymore?”

“I just want to support them, especially when I know just how much effort they’ve put in to get to where they are. In the end, my support didn’t help them one bit, though. I was so convinced of my importance because I took care of them, but really, anyone can do chores. It didn’t have to be me.”

“But I can’t do any chores.”

“Well... You’re a special case.” Tori let out a wry laugh and drank the last of his tea.

It had been some time since Euphemia had hired Tori. At first, he’d held regrets about no longer being an adventurer, but he realized that those regrets had faded over time. Tori realized that he was starting to enjoy his new life. He was now able to think of his former comrades in a more objective light, and he could even pray for a better life for them.

The two of them finished their treats and headed out of the café to resume their shopping. Euphemia looked happy and satisfied after having had her fill of sweets for today. She looked like she was about to fall asleep. She grabbed onto Tori’s arm and leaned her weight against him. Her steps were wobbly and off-balance.

I can’t carry our groceries like this...

Tori struggled, but he managed to buy the seeds and seedlings that he wanted. He also bought as many ingredients as he could carry before the two of them went back home. Upon returning, he took the dried laundry and quilts inside. Euphemia went back into the bedroom just as he finished putting the fresh quilts back on the bed.

“You gonna sleep?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. Wake me up when dinner is ready,” she requested, then she locked Tori out of the room. He shrugged and went back outside.

Immediately, he jumped into planting seedlings. It was just the right season for starting summer vegetables. A good harvest would brighten up their meals in the future.

Tori hadn't done any farming since leaving his village to become an adventurer. He'd left precisely because he hated the tedium of farming, but it turned out that this sort of work suited him more. Tori didn't find this realization particularly amusing, but he pushed the feeling down and kept working.

After some time, he finished planting the seedlings and watered them. The wet leaves sparkled under the afternoon sun. It was now almost time to start dinner.

Tori had a daily routine by now, consisting of preparing three meals for the day, some cleaning, and the laundry, plus whatever extra tasks needed doing.

Now that he'd finished taking care of the garden, it was time to repair either the henhouse or the shed. His eyes fell on the dilapidated henhouse. The wire netting surrounding it had rusted, and the pillars supporting the structure were deteriorated and close to collapse. Thick weeds and vines had grown into the henhouse. Rather than repair each part individually, it would be much more efficient to reconstruct the whole thing.

Being able to harvest their own produce and obtain meat and eggs from poultry would make things much easier for Tori. On top of that, it would give some much-needed color to his daily life. Tori's past adventurer self would never have imagined having fun living out the tedious parts of daily life like he was now.

Oh yeah. I wonder how long Euphie plans to keep me around? Tori thought. He had already finished cleaning up the main house. He thought that his job could've ended there, but Euphemia said she wanted him to take care of her. In that case, he couldn't just abandon her. And if he suddenly disappeared one day, he could just imagine the house deteriorating back into the horrid state it had been in before he arrived.

"Does this mean I'm employed for life?" Tori wondered. A future of farming and taking care of chores, while also caring for Euphemia and her familiars... That didn't sound too bad at all. No matter how hard he might try to go back, Tori knew the path to becoming an adventurer was now forever closed to him. Battling monsters and exploring dungeons was done by the young and strong,

after all—those with the energy and motivation to keep up.

With all that in mind, living here seemed like the most stable path for Tori. He wasn't fully on board with the idea yet, perhaps because he hadn't completely adapted to his new life yet, or because he still had lingering regrets about the end of his adventuring career. But regardless of his feelings, it wasn't like he had that many choices left.

Tori went back into the house, still grappling with his feelings. He started preparing dinner like always.

The house felt more spacious than usual. Euphemia was in her room sleeping, and none of her three familiars were here. Tori was alone. While he found the others to be noisy and annoying sometimes, he couldn't help but feel lonely now that they were gone.

The sun had already set and the meat had finished slow roasting when Euphemia finally left her room. She still had bedhead and was rubbing her droopy eyes.

"Smells nice," she mumbled.

"You sure have great timing when it comes to food," Tori quipped.

Tonight's dinner was bean soup and slow-roasted meat, with a side of bread and cheese. The two of them sat facing each other at the dining table, which made Tori realize they were alone together in this house. Tori found it a strange feeling. Ever since he'd finished cleaning up the house, they had always been accompanied by the three legendary beasts. It felt like a change of pace to be alone with Euphemia.

"Delicious," Euphemia commented as she happily scarfed down some meat.

"Euphie, what did you eat before you employed me?" Tori asked.

"Potatoes. Sometimes I went to the city to buy bread and snacks. And I did some cooking occasionally," she replied.

"What? You can *cook*?"

"Yeah. I slice ingredients, boil them, and add some salt. I also roasted some meat."

“I see... Cooking, huh.”

She *had* had some ingredients in the kitchen. While she didn't *not* cook, it would seem that all she did was boil and salt her food.

“I also tried making some stew,” Euphemia added.

“Oh yeah, I remember there was a...mysterious substance when I was cleaning out the pots and pans,” Tori recalled.

“That one was a failure. I think I burned it a little.”

“You *think*? A *little*?!” Tori was incredulous. Euphemia looked proud of herself for some reason, so Tori let the matter stand and returned to eating.

Once the two of them finished, Tori caught Euphemia as she tried to run into the bedroom, and he hauled her into the bathroom instead.

“Let me out!” Euphemia yelled.

“No! You don't have to wash, but at least have a soak and get warm!” Tori shouted back. Euphemia seemed to relent, and Tori could soon hear water splashing around inside. He sighed. As he was packing up the plates and silverware, Euphemia burst out of the bathroom, still dripping wet.

“Tori, towel. And a change of clothes,” she demanded.

“Whoa?!” Tori rushed to cover Euphemia with a dry towel. She stood there without moving as Tori finished wrapping her up, water still dripping from her hair.

“Oh, come on.” Tori turned Euphemia around and started scrubbing her hair with another towel. Euphemia writhed from the force and mumbled some complaints. “Don't squirm,” Tori chided her.

“Be more gentle,” she retorted.

“Stop complaining.”

Euphemia pouted in response and turned her head to look at Tori. “You were gentler when you were washing my hair.”

“I mean, back then, you—actually, you shouldn't show your naked body to men so casually. Aren't you embarrassed?”

“Not when it’s you, Tori.”

“Guh,” Tori gulped. She’d said as much before. Tori tried to rationalize what it meant but was unable to. But keeping quiet would have made things even more awkward, so he just rambled out the first words that came to his head. “Y-Y-You shouldn’t say things I might misunderstand. I-I’m—I mean, I might...you know.”

“Misunderstand?”

“Y-Yeah. I-I might think that you I-love me or something,” Tori stammered. He went pale upon realizing what he just said.

Euphemia looked surprised. “Of course I love you,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What?! Why? What did I do to earn your love?”

“You’re good at cooking. You clean the house. You take care of me. You praise me and pat my head. I love you.”

“How self-serving! But...I guess I *am* doing all that for you...” Tori groaned.

Euphemia leaned closer to him. Warm water seeped into Tori’s clothes. “I remember what my mother said to me...” she recalled.

“Huh?”

“Urp... Euphie, listen to me. I’m about to tell you something very important,” Euphemia’s mother said.

“Yes, mother?”

“Listen carefully. Witches are hopeless at everything that doesn’t involve magic. That includes me. I spent all my days on experiments, making potions, and improving my magic, and now my house is a complete dump... I can’t even perform the most basic of chores anymore. I can’t even hope to make a nice meal for myself!”

“I know.”

“That’s why—if you ever find a man who can do all that, you must keep him no matter what! Use your knowledge, wealth, beauty... Use everything you can and make him yours! That’s how I managed to tie down your father.”

“I see...”

“Euphie, you’re so cute, just like me. I’m sure you could get any man you want if you try hard enough. You can use your own body as a weapon. Use your physical beauty! Men are the most vulnerable when trapped and made to take responsibility! Listen carefully to your mother, okay? Don’t forget... Urp... Ueegh... Uurgh... I can’t do it—”

“Mother? No! Stay with me!”

Tori had a grim look on his face as he draped the towel over Euphemia’s shoulders. “Your mother was saying some horrifying things...” he remarked. “Those were your mother’s last words?”

“Huh? No. She was about to throw up from a hangover. I was panicking trying to stop her from barfing all over,” Euphemia answered.

“That’s so confusing! Wait, so that means your mother is still alive?”

“Yeah. She’s living in the underworld with my father.”

“The underworld?! I thought she was human!”

“She is. My father is a high-level fiend,” Euphemia explained.

Tori started to feel dizzy from the amount of information being revealed to him. Being half fiend would certainly explain Euphemia’s ridiculous level of power.

Wait, this means her mother is making a high-level fiend do chores for her! What is Euphie’s mother doing?!

It appeared that the apple didn’t fall far from the tree in Euphemia’s case. However, Tori conveniently forgot that he had also been using a phoenix and fenrir to carry around groceries for him.

Euphemia wiped her face with a towel. “Tori, I heard rumors of your housekeeping work for the Muddy Four-Horns. People were mocking you for it, but I never thought it was something to be mocked. I thought you were amazing for doing things like cooking and cleaning—things I could never do. But I didn’t want to take you away from your friends and ruin your friendships.

When I heard you were free, I rushed to look for you.”

“I-I see.” Tori scratched his head. He hadn’t realized he’d been scouted that long ago. He felt happy, yet bashful about this knowledge. It was a complicated feeling for him.

“That’s why I want to be with you forever. You can do anything you want with me. I’m using my physical beauty on you.”

“You should *not* be saying that so lightly!”

“Tori, do you not like being with me?” Euphemia gave Tori a sad gaze. “I want to be with you. I enjoy being with you.”

“I don’t dislike being with you. But that doesn’t mean I want to do all those things with you. That’s just not how things work. You don’t have to rush, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Really? I’m glad.” Euphemia hugged Tori, and he sighed as he gave her pats on her head.

“Good to hear. Now put on some clothes.”

Euphemia pouted and grumbled in response.

Tori felt like he had just been subjected to a confession of love, but the flow of events from start to end was too sudden, and the mood just hung over them with nothing happening. He just couldn’t process it as a confession.

In any case, it would seem that it was okay for him to stay here for a while. But what about in the future? If he were to believe Euphemia’s story about her mother who had married the man she’d asked to do chores for her, then getting married to Euphemia was a very real possibility. Was the way she was being physical with Tori part of her plan?

You mean to tell me that her lack of respect for my personal space was intentional? Tori wondered. However, when he looked at the carefree way Euphemia clung to him, he found it impossible to tell whether she was completely serious or just a total airhead.

I feel like not thinking about this would be better for my mental health in the long run, Tori decided. He shoved a set of underclothes into Euphemia’s hands.

Euphemia plopped down on her bed and buried her face into one of her pillows. The fabric smelled like freshly aired laundry. Before Tori started airing out her pillows, they always smelled like her own hair. She wriggled around as she took off her clothes, tossing them onto a corner of the bed, then covered herself with a quilt. The sensation of the silky-soft quilt touching her skin was wonderful. Like her pillows, this quilt had rarely ever been aired out, but Tori giving it a good wash made it fluffier, especially when it was just dried.

Euphemia kept rolling around the bed, enjoying the sensation of freshly washed sheets on her skin.

“I’m glad Tori came here,” she muttered. This was a thought Euphemia had every time she drooled over his tasty meals, or whenever she was wrapped with clean sheets. Until recently, she had been living in a filthy house, eating bland and tasteless food, and her familiars always left for the underworld immediately after finishing their jobs. Now, she had someone to accompany her in her daily life, and every day felt like a blast. Euphemia always had trouble expressing herself, but she was truly enjoying her life right now.

Tori had also done away with his initial reservedness and started expressing his unfiltered opinions to her. He would even scold Euphemia sometimes. Despite that, he would pamper her when asked, and would even praise her when she worked hard. This made Euphemia very happy. Before, she had only ever experienced fear and awe from the citizens of Azrac as she acted as the White Witch, so the way Tori treated her felt novel and fresh. While she didn’t have the need or desire to prove herself to anyone, being praised by Tori still felt nice.

Euphemia rolled around and poked her head out from the quilt to stare at the ceiling. The moonlight streaming from the window lit the room just enough to see the wooden beams above her. For a long time, they had been covered with cobwebs, but now they were completely clean.

“I wonder if he’s going to leave...” This had become one of Euphemia’s recent worries. She didn’t think that Tori disliked living in her house, but he seemed concerned about his comrades at the Muddy Four-Horns. Tori could be brash

and awkward at times, but he was a good man. He had been kicked out of his old clan, but he was still worried about the well-being of his old friends. Was he concerned enough to go back to them? He'd even spent his time worrying about Suzanna at the café earlier today.

Euphemia didn't want him to leave. She wanted him to stay by her side all the time. That feeling grew stronger with each day that she spent with him.

Euphemia heard some sounds coming from the parlor. Every night, just after she would go to her room, Tori would take care of various things around the house. He would clean up after dinner, fold the laundry, and start preparing for tomorrow's meals. He would snuff out embers from the fires he had lit earlier in the day, lock up the doors, then finally head to bed.

Tori had made Euphemia very happy. If Euphemia could make Tori happy, would he want to stay by her side forever?

"Maybe Tori would like it if I..."

Euphemia closed her eyes as she considered what to do. She thought of doing this and that, pondering until her plans went out of control and into the land of dreams, where she drifted off to sleep.

8. A Cure for Deathblight

Every day, crowds of adventurers went in and out of the city of Azrac. With them came huge loads of supplies, attracting the eyes of merchants and artisans. Today, Azrac was one of the most prosperous cities, and it was projected to grow even bigger.

Monsters were a threat to human civilization, but they were also a source of precious ingredients and materials. The dungeons surrounding the city were also a plentiful source of supplies. Once a person had obtained the strength to fight these threats, this danger turned into a fountain of wealth. As long as you had the skill for it, it was not only possible to live off being an adventurer, but to get rich off it as well.

However, death or a lifetime of disability awaited you if you misjudged your own skill. Danger accompanied the huge rewards of adventuring. Though questing was the lifeblood of an adventurer, it was the irony of the profession that highly skilled adventurers tended to avoid going out unless necessary.

Suzanna the twinblade, the ace of the Cerulean Dagger's vanguard, was carrying a large bag of money into Azrac's infirmary. She was bringing it to pay for the treatment of her brother, Cyril.

The price of her brother's medicine had recently gone up again, apparently due to a lack of supply. Even Suzanna's income as a platinum-rank adventurer was only barely enough to cover the expense. Despite that, for her last living relative, she would wield her sword as much as necessary to pay for her brother's treatment.

Recently, Suzanna had been busy with work and unable to visit her brother. She knew that Cyril wanted to see her face, but if she let her work pile up, she would be unable to afford his continued treatments. On top of that, many other adventurers were eyeing her position. The Cerulean Dagger's membership grew daily, and they were at the point where they had enough members to field one or two armies. If she failed to show results, she would struggle to maintain her

current position. She had no choice but to keep taking more jobs.

When she entered the room, Cyril greeted Suzanna with a smile from his pale face. Though he was thirteen years old, he had lost a lot of weight from being ill for so long, and he looked two or three years younger than he actually was.

“Hey, sis.”

“Cyril, I’m so sorry. I haven’t been able to see you in a while.”

Suzanna placed the bag of fruits and sweets she’d brought on the bedside table.

“I feel pretty good today,” Cyril said. “I was even able to take a walk this morning!”

“Wow, that’s great! You’ll get better in no time at this rate!” Suzanna laughed along as she started peeling a piece of fruit from the bag. Cyril gazed out the window.

“The breeze’s been getting warmer lately. Is work busy?”

“Yeah... But you know, I’m a platinum-rank adventurer, so you don’t need to worry about me! Here, eat up. It’s pretty sweet and tasty!”

Suzanna was trying her best to act bright and happy, but even now she was about to break down and cry. She had talked with Cyril’s doctor right after handing over this most recent payment. The deathblight inside Cyril was growing bigger, and he only had about two more months to live. Even though current medicine could suppress the illness temporarily, it wasn’t possible to remove it completely.

Were her efforts a waste of time? Suzanna had done her best to keep her brother alive, but he was reaching his limit. Should she cut back on work and focus on spending time with him instead? Or should she keep working to cover his treatment to extend his life even a little bit longer? No matter what she chose, only pain and sadness awaited ahead.

“Sis? Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Cyril looked surprised as he reached out to Suzanna’s cheek.

“Huh?” Tears were falling down Suzanna’s face. Once she realized it, she

couldn't stop them from falling. She covered her face with both hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Cyril... I'm s-sorry... Your big sister is such a failure..."

"Sis, it's okay. You're gonna be okay. You're not a failure..." Suzanna cried as Cyril patted her head to comfort her. What had been the point of kicking out one of her friends to keep her source of income when Cyril was going to die anyway?

At that moment, a deep voice echoed from behind them. "Permit me to enter," it announced. Suzanna shuddered, and when she turned around, she was shocked by the White Witch standing right behind her. The gigantic old lady was so huge that her head almost hit the ceiling.

"Wh-Wh-Wh—" Suzanna stammered.

"Wow! So tall! Hello, miss lady witch!"

Unlike Suzanna, who was frozen in terror, Cyril gave the witch a friendly greeting.

"*Miss*" lady witch? Suzanna fidgeted. No matter how she looked at her, the witch was an ancient old lady, far from someone who could be called "miss." Sometimes, Cyril would say some rather odd things.

The White Witch's expression loosened, though it was barely noticeable. "A wonderful greeting, young man," she bellowed. "Suzanna. I have met thee at the battlefield once before."

"I-Indeed..." Suzanna mumbled.

"I have been informed that thy brother suffers the deathblight," the White Witch announced.

"H-How did you—"

"Tori hath informed me. He is sorely worried about thy brother's condition."

Tori is? Suzanna sat there, dumbfounded. *He remembers my brother and is even worried about him? Even though we did something so horrible to him?*

"H-Huh? N-No way... S-So, um, wh-what business does the White Witch have

with me?” Suzanna asked. Right then, the White Witch took out a small vial from her pocket. Or rather, it would have actually been a regular bottle in Suzanna’s hands; it only looked small compared to the witch’s gigantic frame.

“What’s this?”

“It is an experimental cure for the deathblight. I have gathered ingredients from here and the underworld with my familiars, and have thusly developed this potion through trial and error. Drink half a glass after every meal, and within seven days, the affliction should disappear.”

Suzanna’s eyes went wide. “A-A-A cure?! O-Oh, but I can’t take something this valuable—”

“It is naught but a trial potion. It differs not from using thy brother as a test subject for an experiment. I need not thy money in return. However, I have gathered several rare ingredients for this cure. I cannot imagine that it will have no effect. So then, wilt thou attempt the cure, or wilt thou not? I await thy answer.”

Suzanna hesitated no further. Tears started falling from her eyes again. “Th-Thank you so much... I’d almost given up on finding a cure for him...”

“Thou mayst give thy thanks after thy brother is cured. Now, I shalt take my leave.”

“Thank you, miss lady witch! Please visit us anytime!” Cyril waved his hands at the White Witch without a care in the world. The White Witch left the room, and Cyril giggled. “Wow, that lady was amazing! I was so surprised!”

Before Cyril could even finish speaking, Suzanna threw her arms around him in a big hug.

“Mmph! S-Sis, I can’t breathe!”

“Cyril... I’m so happy... I’m so happy for you!” Suzanna couldn’t stop sobbing, and this time, her tears were of joy and warmth.

Tori noticed a strange plant growing in the garden while he was repairing the henhouse. His face twisted in confusion at the mysterious plant—it was thorny,

and the buds that grew at the tips had a strange and toxic-looking color.

“What the hell is this?” Tori wondered out loud.

“Oh, it’s already grown this big? Maybe the different environment here on the surface is making it grow faster.”

Cecilia suddenly popped up right beside Tori, her face uncomfortably close to his. Tori let out a deep sigh and turned back to the plant he was touching.

“So, what is this plant? A crop from the underworld?” Tori asked.

“That’s right. Euphie gathered a lot of materials for medicine, so I brought some of it back to the surface,” Cecilia replied.

“Just so you know, *I* was the one who found it! Only a phoenix could go around all of the underworld and fly against steep cliffs just to harvest this plant!” Subaru interjected, proudly announcing her contribution.

“Did Euphie get another request to make potions?”

“Nah, apparently it’s something else,” Shinozuki answered. “Dunno the details myself, but she was traveling all over the underworld looking for supplies.”

The three of them had returned to the underworld to take care of their personal matters, but once they were done, they were immediately summoned back to Euphemia. She didn’t have any particular requests for them to help with, but the three creatures of the underworld insisted three times over to be summoned, so she gave in. The first word they uttered immediately after returning was “Food!” It would seem that Tori had completely domesticated them with his cooking.

After that, Euphie had begun going down into the underworld every day. It looked like she was gathering items, and each time she returned home, she immediately went into her workshop with Cecilia and locked the door.

During this time, Tori was alone in taking care of the house. He was spending his time tending to the yard and repairing the henhouse. No one disturbed him, so it wasn’t all bad.

Well, it’s not like I have any say in Euphie’s work anyway.

Tori went back to working on the henhouse. He was close to finishing the repairs.

“What’s gonna go in there?” Subaru asked.

Tori answered her as he was adjusting a plank of wood. “It’s a henhouse. We’ll be putting creatures like you in it.”

“Oh, Subaru’s finally gonna have her own house?” Shinozuki interjected with a wide grin.

Subaru pouted and flailed her arms dramatically. “I don’t wanna live in there! It’s such a small house! Why are you exiling me?”

“I’m just kidding. Don’t take me so seriously. It’s for ducks and chickens,” Tori explained to Subaru.

“Oh, you’re going to start keeping livestock? Ooh. How lovely,” Cecilia chimed in on the conversation.

“Cecilia, the word ‘livestock’ sounds like it means something else when you say it,” Tori commented.

“My, Tori dear, is that what you’re into? Shall I start keeping you as *my* livestock?”

“Can you not twist my words like that?”

Tori continued his repair work while being harangued by the three bored legendary beasts. While they were playing around, the White Witch returned home and reverted back to being Euphemia.

“Hey, welcome back. Were you out doing a job on your own?” Tori greeted her.

“No, I went out to deliver medicine,” she answered.

“To who?”

“To Suzanna.”

“Huh?”

“I gave her medicine for the deathblight.”

Tori stared at Euphemia, dumbfounded. He started walking toward her. “Huh? You— Don’t tell me that’s what you’ve been doing these past few days?”

“It is. I wanted to try and craft something new, and this was a good opportunity. Right, Cecilia?”

“Right. There hasn’t been a cure for deathblight until now.”

“Lemme tell ya, it was a huge pain looking for those materials. All of them were rare items, up here *and* in the underworld. Probably won’t be easy to mass-produce either,” Shinozuki added.

“I flew all over the underworld for materials too!” Subaru bragged.

Tori felt an odd sense of relief wash over him. “D-Does that mean Suzanna’s brother...? Will he be cured?”

“In theory. It’s experimental, so I can’t say for sure, but I’m ninety-nine point nine percent certain he’ll be cured,” Euphemia assured Tori.

“Hah... Hah hah... I see... He’ll be cured, huh? That’s amazing.” Tori laughed as he scratched his head. This news wasn’t even about him. In fact, it was news about his former comrade, who he had already bid farewell to. Even so, it didn’t change that it made him feel really happy when he heard the news.

Suddenly, Tori realized Euphemia was looking at him, like she was expecting something. Tori laughed again and ruffled her hair with both hands.

“Thanks, Euphie,” he said.

“No, not that,” Euphie complained.

“Huh?”

“This!” Euphie held out both her arms. Tori shook his head in resignation and embraced her. He gave her a gentle pat on the back.

“Good job! You did great work! Thank you so much, O great White Witch! You’re the best!” Tori showered Euphie with compliments.

“Yay!” Euphemia returned Tori’s embrace and buried her face in his chest.

“Tori! Aren’t you gonna give your big sis some pats on the head too?”

“I worked really hard too! Your little sis wants head pats too, big bro!”

Cecilia and Subaru started hounding Tori as well. Euphemia pouted and pushed away the other two. “No. Tori’s head pats are only for me.”

“What? Euphie, that’s so unfair of you!”

“Yeah! Not like they’ll run out. It’s fine!”

“No! No, no, no!”

Euphemia threw a tantrum and jumped on Tori’s back. Tori was caught off guard and nearly lost his balance.

“Wh-Whoa! Don’t just jump on me like that!”

“You’re wide open from the front! Here’s my chance!” Subaru shouted as she leaped on Tori from the front.

“Gah!”

“Aww, it looks like I’m too late,” Cecilia looked disappointed, placing her hand on her cheek.

“Subaru, no! Let go of him!” Euphemia was flailing around on Tori’s back, which threw Tori even more off-balance.

“Stop it, stop it!” Tori shouted.

“Where’s my dinner?” Shinozuki yawned, completely unconcerned with the chaos around her.

“Shino, quit pretending you’re not involved and help me out, damn it! You’re not getting any food while I’m tied up over here!”

“What? That’s not good. Hey, you two! Get off Tori already! I can’t eat while you two are pinning him down!”

As they were all caught up in the chaos, something fell from the sky—a small package—and hit Tori square on the head. He slapped a hand to his head and groaned in pain.

“A package?” Subaru picked up the item on the ground. It was a bundle of papers with names, portraits, and numbers on them.

“These are wanted posters,” Shinozuki realized.

“Oh my, there’s so many of them. Euphie, did you request all of these?”
Cecilia asked.

Euphemia climbed off Tori’s back and stared at the bundle of wanted posters.
“Yeah. I used up a whole lot of money making that medicine, so I thought we could hunt some bounties to make up for it. I asked the guild to gather some bounties and send them to me.”



“You used that much money? I feel bad for making you spend so much,” Tori said apologetically.

“It’s fine,” Euphemia gently dismissed Tori’s concern. “I haven’t even paid you your salary yet.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Tori suddenly realized she was right. Still, he had been living here for a while, and all he did when going into the city was buy groceries. His food and living expenses didn’t cost him much at all, and there was even a bath here. Plus, they were living so far away from the city, he had nowhere to spend his money even if he had any. He hadn’t felt any inconvenience, so he never even noticed until now.

Tori scratched his head. “Well, I guess it’s fine. I’m not in need of money yet, anyway.”

“All right, who are we gonna kill first? It better not be some weakling!” Subaru looked ready to pick a fight.

“Hunting down a human bounty doesn’t sound very fun. There any big-name fiends in there?” Shinozuki asked.

“Oh, this one looks really cute. I want this one,” Cecilia pointed at one of the posters.

The three denizens of the underworld left Tori alone and started leafing through the wanted posters. They sounded like they were planning a field trip while talking about who to murder next.

Euphemia took one of the posters and showed it to everyone. “Right now, this is the one with the highest bounty. Renard the Great Demon.”

Tori’s eyebrow twitched upon hearing the name.

“What, this guy’s still alive?” Shino said.

“Lemme see! Mass murder, wholesale destruction of villages... Oh, is this guy the kind that enjoys slaughtering humans? Don’t like him one bit!”

“This man is a criminal who escaped the underworld a couple years back. Euphie, are you sure you want to hunt this guy down?”

“I think I do. But he’s kept quiet for the past several years, and we don’t know where he is... Tori, what’s wrong?”

Euphemia noticed that Tori’s glare was fixed on the wanted poster.

“That’s the demon that killed my comrade’s parents,” he said.

9. Cooperation

Renard the Great Demon was a criminal on the run from the underworld. Residents of the underworld normally had to be contracted to a human on the surface to pass through the astral gate of summoning, but Renard, having committed a crime, instead used a forbidden art to escape to the surface. He lost much of his power as the price for this forbidden art, but he was still a force to be reckoned with on the surface world. He wielded his power with no discretion, causing harm to humans wherever he went.

One of the great demon's victims was Andrea of the Cerulean Dagger. Renard had assaulted Andrea's hometown on a whim, obliterating it and slaughtering his friends and family in the process.

Since then, Andrea had been pursuing Renard to exact justice upon him. However, Andrea was well aware that his strength was far beneath the great demon's. He continued to fight stronger and stronger monsters to build combat experience, and challenged difficult dungeons in pursuit of rare artifacts. He sought the path of war in the hope that someday, he might succeed in taking Renard's head for himself. It was a long and arduous path, but he would not allow himself to be killed without enacting his revenge. As much as he wanted to charge in recklessly, he instead put all of his efforts into training and bettering himself, slowly but surely building his strength and skill.

Today, the Cerulean Dagger was engaged in combat against a cohort of armed orcs in a wasteland near the city of Azrac.

"Watch out for the cliff above!"

"Everyone, turn right! They're faster than expected!"

Orcs were tenacious monsters. While they were not ones to strategize, they were able to make use of proper tactics in battle. In large numbers, even platinum-ranked adventurers could struggle against them.

Amid her comrades fighting cautiously, Suzanna was the only one plowing

ahead, swinging and slashing her sword against the enemy hordes. Her swift and surgical strikes targeted the weak spots in the orcs' armor, disabling them one after another. Her light and agile movements could fool anyone into thinking that she never once placed her feet on the ground.

Voices of awe rang out from her comrades.

"Suzanna is incredible... She's been on a roll lately."

"Yeah. I heard her brother finally got cured."

"Hasn't she been working to pay for his treatment all this time? No wonder she feels so free."

Thanks to Suzanna's efforts, the clan managed to eliminate the horde of orcs. The clan members started to gather the monsters' equipment as spoils of battle. It was mostly poor-quality, but it'd be usable as a source of metal. On top of that, some of it was decent equipment stolen from other adventurers. As long as a lost-and-found report had yet to be posted, monster loot belonged to the ones who took the creature down. This was a good way to earn extra income outside of the bounty rewards.

Andrea approached Suzanna. "You're doing great," he said to her.

"Yeah! Cyril's all better now, and I've never felt this great. Heh heh. The White Witch sure was a nice person! I feel bad for judging her based on her appearance all this time," Suzanna replied, scratching her head.

The story of the White Witch bringing Suzanna a special cure for deathblight might have been difficult to believe; however, there were several eyewitnesses who'd seen a gigantic old lady clad in white at the infirmary, and Cyril really was fully cured of his disease. These events left no doubts about Suzanna's story.

The White Witch had once been feared and surrounded by a veil of mystery, but the idea of her actually being a kind and gentle person quickly gained traction within the Azrac Guild. Since then, the White Witch hadn't accepted any new requests, so there hadn't been any chances to strike up a conversation with her. The contrast between the White Witch's previous reputation and her newly discovered kindness made the rumors spread like wildfire. At this rate, she might even turn into an idol for adventurers.

Andrea started to gather up his loot and equipment. “And you’re sure she said that Tori was the one who requested it?” he asked.

“That’s right. That’s why she made the medicine. The doctor examined it thoroughly and said that around eighty percent of the ingredients were rare materials from the underworld. It’s probably really difficult to replicate, let alone mass-produce,” Suzanna explained.

“Even though it was only one bottle, it’s incredible that she managed to make such a potion. She truly is on a different level from the rest of us,” Jean said as he let out a wry laugh. As a fellow spellcaster, he must have had complex feelings about the matter.

Suzanna smiled and picked up her things. The equipment she’d looted from the horde of orcs made clanging noises in her pack. “I’m very thankful to Tori,” she said. “Even if he was hiding his true talents from us, his connection to the White Witch created this opportunity and helped us in the end.”

“Maybe so... Even if he is somehow really strong, there’s still no way he could have gone to the underworld and back without any help,” Jean added.

“I really think I said too much to him,” Andrea said, dejected. He never should have implied that Tori was never one of his comrades. Even now, Tori showed concern for Suzanna and gave her the help she needed. Andrea didn’t have any ill feelings toward Tori, but having been faced with the task of firing him, he’d had to put his own emotions to the side. He might have even used cruel words to justify his actions. In the end, it all led to nothing but regret.

When the clan finally returned to the guild, there was a commotion, the source of which was apparently the White Witch herself in the lobby. The adventurers were looking at her from afar, exchanging rumors and whispers among one another. While the rumors of her good nature had already spread wide, the White Witch in the flesh still possessed an intimidating aura that repelled even the bravest of adventurers.

Suzanna ignored all of that, running up to the White Witch and bowing before her.

“Miss White Witch, thank you for all your help! My brother is fully cured thanks to you,” Suzanna expressed her sincere gratitude.

“I see. Then I can consider the trial cure a success.” The White Witch’s terrifying voice echoed throughout the lobby. The other adventurers all froze in terror, but it didn’t deter Suzanna.

“Yes!” she said cheerfully. “And it’s amazing that all the ingredients were from the underworld! I heard from the doctors. Thank you for going out of your way to gather such rare materials! And, um... Please also tell Tori that I’m thankful for his help.”

“Very well. I shall express thy gratitude to him.”

Suzanna had still felt somewhat tense talking to the White Witch, but upon hearing this, her expression relaxed.

The White Witch narrowed her eyes. “Well then. Where is the one called Andrea?”

All eyes in the room turned to the former clan leader. The man in question couldn’t immediately comprehend being called by name, and his eyes darted all over the room as he stood frozen in confusion.

The White Witch seemed to have deduced Andrea’s location from the gazes, and she stood up and walked toward him. The crowd parted to make a path.

Sh-She’s still terrifying to me! Cold sweat poured down Andrea’s back, but he did his best to stand before the White Witch and return her gaze.

“D-Do you need something from me?” Andrea stammered.

The White Witch took something from her pocket and showed it to him. It was a piece of paper with a portrait of his longtime archenemy—the very same, unforgettable face he stared at every single day on the wall of his room.

“Renard?”

“I will be hunting down this monster,” the White Witch announced.

Andrea’s expression darkened. He long desired to be the one to slay his nemesis. He knew that his abilities were far too lacking, and this drove him to aim for greater heights. However, if the White Witch were to take on Renard the Great Demon, she would surely slay him easily.

Andrea looked to the floor and bit his lip, then let out a sigh. “I see. If that is

what you have decided, then do as you must. It is none of my concern.”

“Tori hath informed me that Renard is thy greatest enemy,” the White Witch said. Andrea looked at her in surprise.

“Are you suggesting that you will slay Renard for my sake?”

“Nay. I propose to cooperate with thee and thy clan.”

Andrea gasped. Behind him, whispers erupted among members of the Cerulean Dagger.

“Cooperate...with the White Witch?”

“Seriously? We’ll fight alongside her? And it’s not gonna be like that time with the spiders?”

“I-Incredible. I never thought that she would suggest anything like that.”

The White Witch paid no heed to the commotion around them and kept her attention on Andrea. “Renard concealeth himself deep in the hinterlands. He hath under his employ a number of legendary beasts summoned from the underworld. I cannot imagine myself suffering defeat against him, but I would like to prevent his escape.”

“And that’s why you want to cooperate with us?”

“Correct. However, thy clan’s strength is inadequate. I cannot call it cooperation if thou wilt stay behind me and merely observe.”

“Yes, so...”

So why would you come to us at all? Andrea was about to ask, but then the White Witch snorted.

“I shall train all of thee. Perhaps not to the point of fighting as my equals, but I shall see to it that thou shalt be able to lay a hand on him. I ask for thy cooperation with this in mind.”

Loud gasps and shouts of excitement erupted throughout the room. The members of the Cerulean Dagger were elated at the White Witch’s proclamation.

“The strongest adventurer of all time is going to train us personally? For

real?”

“Oh my, this is amazing! We’d finally be able to explore all those dungeons we couldn’t do before!”

In contrast to the excitement of the other members, Andrea looked at the White Witch with suspicion. “Why would you go this far for us? Is it out of pity?”

“Nay, I pity thee not. However, Tori hath requested as such.”

Andrea’s eyes went wide with surprise. “Tori did?”

“I had originally planned to hunt down Renard on my own. However, Tori requested that I stay my hand, for Renard is thy nemesis. Still, I knew not when thou wilt be able to slay him. Thus, I propose to train thee out of mine own volition,” the White Witch explained.

“I see.”

The White Witch noticed Andrea looking dissatisfied and snorted once more. “I shall not force my will upon thee. Wilt thou choose thy pride over thy vengeance? I await thy decision.”

Andrea bit down on his lip. She was right. He wanted to take vengeance on Renard for his parents. It wasn’t that he thought he needed to do it alone without help from anyone; however, his skill had reached the point where he’d started feeling proud. Could he exact his revenge on Renard even if it meant swallowing his own pride?

“Andrea, are you okay?”

Worried, Jean put a hand to Andrea’s back. Andrea lifted up his head and faced the White Witch.

“I understand. I must accept the help of others if I am to exact justice on my archenemy. White Witch, would you help me and my clan in hunting down Renard?”

“I shall of course.”

Once again, cheers rang out throughout the lobby. The Cerulean Dagger and the White Witch—two of Azrac’s greatest forces—had decided to cooperate.

Not long after the gathering in the lobby, the White Witch's training began. However, the White Witch herself never set foot in the training grounds, opting to stand by the wall, arms crossed and merely observing. In her place, three beautiful women stood before the members of the Cerulean Dagger.

"Hey hey! Are you all getting pumped up? I ain't gonna go easy on ya, so you better prepare yourselves!" Shinozuki, the tall, jolly, silver-haired woman, was grinning and flexing her arms.

"Heh heh. Will anyone win against me? Don't be sad if I beat you, 'kay? I'm pretty strong, after all!" Subaru, the small, red-headed girl standing with her hands behind her head, had a mischievous smile on her face as she taunted the clan members.

"Oh my. So many cuties all over. Big sis is getting motivated!" Cecilia, the sultry spellcaster, smiled seductively.

These three women would be the ones to train the Cerulean Dagger. The clan members started whispering among themselves.

"Sh-She had *friends*?!"

"And they're all hotties too! What a treat!"

"Sh-Shinozuki is so pretty... Her legs are so long, and her boobs are so huge!"

"Subaru is so cute! Can I get her to call me big brother?"

"You all have no taste! Clearly Cecilia's the only choice here. Just look at those massive tits and huge ass!"

Amid the brainless rabble, Andrea took a deep breath and readied his sword. He trained his eyes on his opponent, Shinozuki, and bowed respectfully.

"I am ready."

"Okay! I'll try not to hurt you, but don't blame me if I do!" Shinozuki punched her palm with her fist.

Andrea's face scrunched up. "Don't you dare belittle me! I'll take you down!" He kicked off from the ground and lunged at Shinozuki. He was a large man, but his well-trained muscles gave him superb agility. Thanks to his agile footwork and gigantic shield, his flexibility allowed him to act as a tank and quickly shield

his comrades from harm. Now, he was using this agility to go on the offensive. His speed and constitution let him unleash a powerful strike. Despite being a tank, he could easily switch gears and become the main offense for his clan. He was wielding a wooden sword now, but a direct hit from him was sure to cause serious injury.

However, Shinozuki swiftly evaded his attack and delivered a chop to Andrea's wrist. Andrea felt the force of the strike all the way up to his fingertips, and the pain made him drop the sword.

"Gah!"

"Oh, did I hit you too hard? Sorry 'bout that!" Shinozuki laughed. Andrea stared at his right hand, which had gone numb, then shifted his gaze to Shinozuki in disbelief.

The way she moved... That was inhuman. There's no way a human could move like that, Andrea thought.

Shinozuki was shaking out her hands and frowning. "Man, I just can't get used to these hands! I gotta get in some training myself. Sorry!"

Andrea didn't fully understand what Shinozuki meant, but he knew that she wasn't taking this match seriously. It wasn't that she was holding back; she was just playing around. She was truly on a different level.

Despite this gap in their strength, Andrea laughed heartily. While Shinozuki was a tremendous foe, he didn't feel that she was impossible to beat. If he kept trying, he felt like he could ascend even further. He would be able to feel the blade of his sword reach Renard's neck. No, he was *sure* he could reach it.

Andrea flexed his hand until the numbness went away, and gripped his wooden sword once more.

"Again!" he yelled.

"Okay! Come at me all you want!"

Some distance away from Andrea and Shinozuki's sparring match, Subaru was raising her hand to look for volunteers.

"Raise your hand if you want to have a match with me!" she yelled. The men

around her all put their hands up with great enthusiasm.

“Okay then, what about that blondie over there?”

“Oh, looks like I’m up. All right, Subaru, let’s get to it!”

The man who stepped up was a swordsman with short and well-kept blond hair. He was Jeffrey, the star of the former Clan Eternal. Now that he was part of the Cerulean Dagger, he remained a lead member at the front lines.

“I feel like I’m about to beat up a kid. Well, not that I’m about to let my guard down around her.” Jeffrey readied his sword and stared at Subaru.

Subaru, her hands still behind her head, returned his gaze. “Well? Are you gonna attack?”

“I’m the adult here, so I’ll let you have the first move,” Jeffrey offered. In truth, his fighting style involved luring his opponent into attacking, then striking back with a counterattack. He would have an easier time by letting Subaru strike first.

Subaru looked intrigued, but she kicked the ground and launched herself. “All right, here I come!” she yelled.

Sparks appeared to light up around her feet, almost as if they really were aflame. She approached Jeffrey at speeds fast enough to leave a blazing trail. Even before Jeffrey could react and defend himself with his sword, Subaru managed to land a kick straight to his jaw.

Jeffrey felt the shock wave go straight to his brain. His eyes rolled up and he went flying backward. The men watching started murmuring among themselves.

“Huh? What just happened?”

“Jeffrey... No way.”

Subaru laughed before the confused clan members. “Wow, I thought he was all grown up, but he’s so weak! I can’t believe any of you would lose to a kid like me! How lame! Such losers! Heh heh heh!”

“You little brat! Everyone, let’s avenge Jeffrey!”

“We’ll show you just how scary grown-ups can be!”

The clamoring fools attacked Subaru one after the other, but she effortlessly repelled every single one of them while laughing.

Finally, Suzanna stood up to face Subaru.

“I’m next. Subaru, don’t go too hard on me!”

“Okay, okay! Not that it’s gonna make a difference or anything!”

Suzanna closed the gap between her and Subaru in an instant. She quickly swung her wooden sword at Subaru, who dodged the slash as if she were flying through the air.

“Wow, not bad! Lady, you’re the best one I’ve fought so far!”

“Heh heh. I’m pretty confident in my speed! Let’s keep going!” Suzanna said as she launched another attack. Subaru looked impressed as she dodged the hit.

Suzanna was starting to get frustrated. “Ugh, my attacks aren’t hitting at all!”

“Whoops!” Subaru managed to swoop Suzanna off her feet. Suzanna rushed to right herself, but before she could, Subaru landed a kick to her arm, making Suzanna drop her sword.

“Wow, lady, you’re amazing! With some more practice you might be able to catch up to me!”

“Subaru, you’re way too fast! Ah, I gotta work harder. One more!” Suzanna psyched herself and stood back up.

Meanwhile, the clan’s spellcasters were all gathered at another corner of the training grounds.

“All right then, all spellcasters and support members, please gather around. Your big sis will be hammering into you all the ins and outs of magic, so listen up, ’kay?” Cecilia was cheerfully beckoning people over. The backline supporters and some frontliners had gathered. Many of them were head over heels for Cecilia.

“Okay, now, can someone hit me with the strongest spell you have in your

arsenal?”

“Huh? Wait, isn’t that dangerous?” Jean looked concerned as he spoke. Cecilia smiled and placed a hand on Jean’s shoulder. There was something questionable in the way she touched him, and he felt a chill down his back and his face turned red.

“Heh heh. How cute of you to be worried about me! What’s your name?”

“My name is Jean. My physical aging has stopped because of a spell, but rest assured that I am still grown mentally.”

“Jean, huh? I like kind and gentle boys like you. But I’ll be fine, so hit me with all you’ve got! I’ll be giving a reward to good boys who can burn off the seams of my dress. It’s gonna be special and ex-clu-sive!” Cecilia bent forward and squeezed her breasts with her arms to emphasize them. The men all cheered, while the women rolled their eyes.

Jean stepped forward, his expression calm and serious. “Then I shall give it all I have and not hold back.”

“Go ahead!” Cecilia urged. Jean readied his staff and started chanting an incantation. Mana began to swirl around the staff as it manifested into a phenomenon. This spell was considered Great Sorcery—several times more powerful and more complex than regular offensive magic.

“Fegefeuer!”

A gigantic ball of flame emanated from the staff and enveloped Cecilia. The clan members began to panic.

“Cecilia!”

“H-Hey, that’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“Jean, I think you went too far.”

Jean remained calm. “We’re talking about the White Witch’s comrade here. I just hit her with a Great Sorcery spell, but with my level of magic—”

The flames died down, and in the center stood Cecilia, smiling from ear to ear. Not a single hair or patch of cloth on her was even singed.

“Wow, that was sooo hot. But that’s not enough for me,” she said.

Jean couldn’t help but flash a resentful smile. “I’m impressed. If you were completely unharmed by that, then I stand no chance.”

“No, no, you have a lot of potential, Jean. But you need to work on how you gather your mana. See, like this...”

“H-Hey!”

Cecilia wrapped her arms around Jean from behind. Jean’s face was red as a tomato as he tried to wriggle free of her grasp. He was a pure and naive man at heart.

To onlookers, the scene looked like a sexy cougar trying to seduce a boy much younger than herself. It certainly looked quite risqué. The other spellcasters began to murmur again, then called out.

“Jean, you playboy! Get out of there!”

“Save the flirting for later! It’s my turn with her!”

“Cecilia, I’ll do my best to burn the seams of your clothes!”

“Oho! Do your best, boys! Give me your hottest, most passionate shot!”

Meanwhile, Tori looked relaxed as he watched chicks and ducklings run around the newly refurbished henhouse. Right before Euphemia had gone off to do a job, he asked her to take him to the city and buy chicks along with some groceries.

“That’s right, little babies! Chirp chirp! Aww, they’re so cute,” Tori gushed. The fluffy yellow chicks waddled back and forth across the soil. Someday, they would grow older and provide eggs for the house, and eventually become meat for food. But for now, they were adorable, so he shoved those thoughts aside.

Tori spread some vegetable and grain shavings all over the soil, then sprinkled fresh water over the ground with a watering can. The chicks pecked at the falling droplets, while the ducklings started bathing under them.

“It’ll be so much easier once we can harvest eggs and meat from these

guys...” Tori murmured to himself.

The vegetables in the garden were also growing well. The one plant from the underworld was perhaps growing a bit *too* well, and Tori had a bad feeling about it. It was apparently a precious source of medicine, though, so he opted to not uproot it and just left it alone.

Recently, Tori had made an unusual request to Euphemia—he asked her to let Andrea defeat Renard the Great Demon so he could pursue justice for his parents. While Tori felt he was stepping out of line by making this request despite his utter lack of combat skill, he remembered well that during their days in the Muddy Four-Horns, Andrea would train day and night in pursuit of that goal. Tori just didn’t want Andrea’s efforts to go to waste.

Euphemia accepted Tori’s request, and when she left, she took all three of her familiars with her. Tori didn’t know whether she was going to aim for a different mark, or if she’d accepted a different job altogether. Either way, he had no power to help or intervene. All he could do was his usual tasks—clean the house, make food, and wait for the four of them to come home.

Shinozuki was very fussy about having meat, so Tori prepared a gigantic roast for her. He also put together a large pot of sauce to go with it. He’d bought a bunch of cheap sliced meat from the butcher as well, which he ground finely and mixed with liver to make a pâté. Pâté could be eaten even when chilled, so it would last a few days if kept in the fridge. Of course, it would probably be gone in less than a day.

With four big eaters in the house, Tori had to prepare food in large quantities. Because of how much they ate, Tori’s portions looked small in comparison, but he did get to eat some when tasting the food, so he still wound up full in the end.

Tori went back and forth between stirring a pot on the fireplace and toasting some rice in butter. While he was cooking, the door opened. Euphemia and the others were back home.

“I’m home,” Euphemia announced.

“Whoa, smells delicious!”

“I’m hungry!”

“Oh, I’m exhausted!”

“Welcome back, everyone. Good work out there.”

Euphemia entered the kitchen and peered past Tori’s hands. “Oh, you’re cooking rice. Is it that cheese-flavored rice again?” she asked.

“Risotto, yes. It hasn’t fluffed up yet, so you should go take a bath first.”

“Take one with me.”

“No! Who’s going to finish cooking, then? Hey, one of you get in with Euphie!”

“No way! I’m hungry!” Subaru complained.

“Yeah, same here! Gimme dinner before I take a bath!” Shinozuki yelled.

“You can’t have dinner yet. You’re all drenched in sweat!” Tori sent back. Shinozuki and Subaru were so sweaty that their clothes were completely soaked and dark with grime. Even with summer approaching, it was an unusually large amount of sweat. If they were in their original forms, they probably wouldn’t have been this drenched.

Subaru pulled at her clothes, which had stuck to her skin. She blinked in surprise. “Oh, no wonder I felt sticky all over.”

“So that’s why I felt gross all day. Man, human bodies are such a pain,” Shinozuki complained.

“Right? That’s why you gotta get in there. Euphie, you too.” Tori managed to herd the three of them into the bathroom. Once that was done, he shook his head in exasperation.

Have they been working in their human forms all this time? he wondered. In any case, he went back to stirring the pot of rice.

Cecilia was sitting alone at the dining table, grinning at Tori.

“Cecilia, aren’t you going to join them?” Tori asked.

“Oh, I think four’s a crowd in that tiny bathroom, don’t you think? I’ll have a good soak later. Tori dear, you haven’t taken one either yet, right? Care to join

me?”

“Ha ha ha. In your dreams, lady.”

“Aww, you’re getting meaner to me. You’re making your big sister sad,” Cecilia gave Tori an exaggerated pout, which he ignored. He shrugged and turned his attention back to the kitchen. In their interactions, Tori had figured out that taking Cecilia too seriously would just end in her taking advantage of his weaknesses. Being mean to her gave him just the right amount of distance.

The other three complained a lot when asked to get in the bath, but once they were in, their happy, excited voices could be heard echoing inside. Cecilia had recently synthesized some fragrant soap and shampoo, the scent of which wafted out from the bathroom.

If only they would just get in without complaining so much, Tori sighed as he poured stock into the pot of risotto.

Cecilia was watching Tori cook when she seemed to remember something. “Tori, Jean was one of your former comrades, right?”

“Huh? Do you know him or something?”

“I ran into him earlier. That boy has a lot of talent, you know? He said that he was working toward a goal, but what is it? If he wants a cute wife, I could volunteer.”

Tori laughed. “Yeah, maybe in your dreams.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?”

“You know exactly what I mean. Besides, Jean is a no-nonsense kind of man. I’d feel bad if you sank your venomous fangs into him.”

“You’re so mean! I don’t have venomous fangs.”

“Oh, don’t you play dumb with me. Leave Jean alone, okay? He’s trying his best to fulfill a promise to his mentor,” Tori chided her.

“A promise?” Cecilia wondered.

Tori mixed butter and cheese into the risotto as he explained. “Yeah. He and his mentor were developing some kind of complicated spell. What was it again?”

I think his mentor got killed by monsters when they were trying to obtain the, uh, Jewel of the Sun. And he still needs the Jewel of the Moon, which is why he wants to explore the dungeon they believe it's in. But apparently that dungeon is a really difficult one, so he needs to stick with the strongest clans."

"I see..." Cecilia looked intrigued by Jean's story.

Right then, Euphemia and the others emerged from the bathroom. A pleasant-smelling steam wafted out with them.

"I want food," demanded Euphemia.

"Ahh, that was refreshing. Food now!" Shinozuki yelled.

"I'm hungrier now that I'm all warmed up!" Subaru said.

"You're all just right on time. But first, put on some clothes, okay?"

Euphemia was lying on the couch, watching Tori wash the dishes in the kitchen. She was sleepy after having eaten a hearty dinner. Euphemia loved the drowsiness that came after a meal. She felt bliss in lazily watching Tori, comforted by his presence.

Shinozuki and Subaru were busy playing a card game they'd recently learned. Cecilia, meanwhile, was taking a long bath. Euphemia had gotten used to spending her nights like this, but she hadn't forgotten how much her life had changed since Tori arrived. Before then, her familiars would just leave immediately after a job without even stepping foot into her house. Her lonely nights and dinners were now this fun and lively.

Tori had been overjoyed when she helped Suzanna out. He even embraced her and gave her pats on the head.

Euphemia giggled when she recalled this, hugging a cushion and burying her face into the couch. She felt a tingling sensation all over her body, so she rubbed her face on the cushion to distract herself. There was just so much fun, so much enjoyment, and so much excitement in her life.

Currently, her job was to help out the Cerulean Dagger. If she assisted Andrea and Jean in achieving their goals, Tori would surely be even more happy.

Euphemia knew that Andrea's goal was to defeat Renard, but Jean's goal was a mystery. She had heard from Tori that he was trying to fulfill a promise with his mentor to complete a spell. To that end, he was seeking some kind of artifact.

What kind of artifact could it be? Euphemia closed her eyes and pondered.

She had almost drifted off to sleep when Cecilia stepped out of the bathroom in a cloud of warm steam. Cecilia's erotic body, fresh out of the bath, was many times more seductive than usual. She sat in an empty spot on the couch next to Euphemia.

Euphemia leaned against her. "Meow," she cried.

"Euphie, why don't we go to the Seven Spires next?" Cecilia suggested.

"What for?" Euphemia was caught off guard. It was unusual that Cecilia would suggest such a thing.

"It's about Jean," Cecilia started as she wiped her damp hair with a towel.

"Go on," Euphemia said.

"I heard from Tori that Jean wants the Jewel of the Moon. That's in the Seven Spires, right?"

"I think so. I heard that the previous owner used it as a catalyst for a weapon, but they died while exploring the Spires."

"Right, right. Can we go there next? Pretty please? Jean's just so cute and adorable. I want to help him out," Cecilia gushed.

Euphemia rolled over with her head on Cecilia's thighs, which served as fantastic pillows. Their softness made them very comfortable to lie on.

"Okay, let's go for it. We can use that to test the Cerulean Dagger once they've gotten stronger. Two birds with one stone," Euphemia said.

"That sounds good to me. Oho, I'm so excited for this!" Cecilia giggled as she stroked Euphemia's hair.

So, Jean wants the Jewel of the Moon, Euphemia thought. If he manages to obtain it, will Tori be happy?

"Cecilia, you'll get cold if you don't put something on soon," Tori scolded. He

had just finished washing the dishes and was drying his hands with a towel.

“Well then, Tori, would you be a dear and warm me up?”

“Not a chance. Put on some clothes already.”

“My, you’re such a downer lately.”

Tori chided Euphemia next. “Come on, Euphie, get up and sleep on your bed. You’ll end up with a sore back on the couch.”

Euphemia stretched her arms out toward Tori. “Take me there,” she requested.

“Gimme a break.” Tori sighed and tugged Euphemia upright.

Cecilia pouted. “What’s with this difference in treatment? Why don’t you be nicer to your big sis?”

“No way. I’m never gonna let you get under my skin ever again. Euphie, come on, stand up already.”

“Heh heh.” Euphemia looked victorious as she clung to Tori’s arm.

10. Training

Andrea aimed his blade straight at Shinozuki. His sword was wooden, but he swung it with enough force to cut through steel.

“Ha ha! Good, good!” Despite that, Shinozuki evaded Andrea’s strike with only the slightest of movements, grabbed his arm and shoulder and threw him up into the air. The momentum of Andrea’s failed attack caused him to spin midair before falling down. He managed to cushion his fall but lost his balance when trying to right himself. His inner ears seemed to have taken a hit from the impact.

“Ugh...”

“Whoa, you good? Gonna throw up?” Shinozuki, concerned, went up to Andrea and rubbed his back.

Andrea looked up with a wry smile. “I don’t think I can match your skill,” he conceded.

“Well yeah! I’m a great fen—er, a great warrior, after all! But you’ve improved a lot, ya know? There’s no shame in not being able to beat me. That’s ‘cause no one can! Wa ha ha!” Shinozuki bragged.

Andrea plopped down on the ground and sighed. “Tori’s working under the White Witch now, right? What does he do for her?”

“Cleaning, cooking, the laundry. Lately he’s been taking care of the fields and some hens too,” Shinozuki replied.

Andrea laughed. *So he’s been doing the exact same things he did for us*, he mused. *The White Witch needs him for the things we deemed him useless for. Perhaps this astuteness is what makes her first-rate, unlike us.*

Andrea recalled something the White Witch had mentioned. “I heard that Tori is taking care of the White Witch’s monstrous lair.”

“Monstrous lair? Yeah, that place might as well have been a lair of monsters.

Even I was horrified and hated stepping inside. But Tori was unafraid and did a thorough cleaning. Now it's a comfy place to be in. That man's also great at cooking. He's amazing."

Shinozuki let out a hearty laugh. Andrea, hearing all this, sighed once more. The man they had all considered useless was being praised to high heaven by the woman he couldn't even beat in a sparring match. He was appalled at his poor judgment.

Despite this, it was all thanks to Tori that Andrea could receive the training he needed. Even though he had treated Tori so poorly, his former clanmate still extended a helping hand. Andrea now had another goal to accomplish: once he had exacted his revenge, he wanted to meet with Tori and apologize.

The clan's training sessions consisted solely of one-on-one matches. It was basic, but they'd kept at it every single day from dawn till dusk for two weeks. While the Cerulean Dagger's overall skill level was no match for the White Witch, they were all still platinum-rank adventurers. Training against foes much stronger than themselves quickly yielded results. As proof, the clan members sparring right this moment had faster and cleaner movements compared to how they started out.

The White Witch, who had been observing the day's training session, suddenly stood up.

"Enough," she bellowed. Her voice echoed throughout the training hall and halted all movement from the clan members. They all turned to the White Witch in nervous anticipation of her next announcement.

"Thou all hath grown far in strength this past fortnight. Thus, I shall put thee to the test. Today, we shall explore the Seven Spires."

The members of the Cerulean Dagger tensed up upon hearing this. The Seven Spires were ruins of an ancient city located deep within the hinterlands. As the name suggested, the ruins consisted of seven sharp spires, each home to powerful and dangerous monsters. Despite the danger, this ancient city was also a trove of rare artifacts, making it an attractive high-level dungeon for Azrac's adventurers to explore.

Jean's expression was particularly somber, even as his fellow clan members

were abuzz about the exploration. Suzanna approached him.

“Jean, isn’t the Seven Spires—”

“It is. It’s the dungeon that holds the Jewel of the Moon.”

Jean needed the Jewel of the Moon to complete the spell he and his mentor had been working on. However, the dungeon posed a challenge even to platinum-rank adventurers. Even the members of the Cerulean Dagger, the strongest guild in all of Azrac, would have to exercise caution when exploring it.

But if they had the White Witch and her allies on their side, conquering the dungeon now felt like a realistic prospect.

Master...

Jean and his mentor had performed and repeated several dangerous experiments and brought their spell close to completion. It was due to one of these experiments that Jean’s aging had stopped. Now, he was at the point where the spell’s fundamental structure was complete. All he needed was a catalyst—the Jewel of the Sun and the Jewel of the Moon. His master had lost his life in exchange for obtaining the Jewel of the Sun, and Jean had yet to obtain the Jewel of the Moon.

Jean tightened his grip on his staff. *If I could just get that jewel...*

“Are we going immediately?” Andrea asked. “Exploring the Seven Spires will take time, of course, but so will getting there. We’ll need to prepare a lot.”

“Worry not,” answered the White Witch. “I have completed preparations for the journey. Our stores of food and potions will suffice. I shall take us to the Seven Spires with my transportation spell. Thou may concentrate thy efforts on conquering the dungeon.”

The members of the Cerulean Dagger whispered among themselves in disbelief. The White Witch was unmoved and kept her arms crossed. “It is currently the tenth hour. Prepare thy weapons and rest thy bodies. We shall gather here once more at the thirteenth hour. Latecomers shall be left behind. Thou art now dismissed.”

The White Witch finished talking and used her transportation spell,

disappearing with her three comrades.

A commotion immediately swept through the hall. The clan members rushed to head back to their homes or their bases to prepare their equipment. None of them wanted to be late to the reconvening.

Andrea slapped Jean's shoulder. "You're almost there."

"Yes... What a strange turn of events," Jean replied.

"This might sound absurd, but I feel like Tori had a hand in all this. Though I don't have any proof."

"Me too! That's exactly what I felt!" Suzanna chimed into the conversation. Andrea laughed.

"We'll have to see him once this is all over."

"Yes, we have to," Jean agreed.

"Right? We gotta face him and apologize, and thank him for all he's done for us," Suzanna added. The three of them laughed. They each held out the weapon in their hands, and placed them against one another.

Meanwhile, Tori was busy admiring the chicks and ducklings he had been raising. They were growing well under his care, being given time to roam in the morning sun and fed a diet of grass and insects. At night, he would herd them into the safety of the henhouse to prevent them from being stolen by monsters.

The baby birds had learned that Tori would feed them whenever he approached. In the afternoons, they would follow him as he walked to the henhouse, chirping and circling his legs as if begging for food. Tori, of course, found this very adorable. At first, the chicks were timid and easily scared, but now they were trotting around the garden with no fear.



The rays of the sun were changing from that of spring to those of summer. The herbs Tori had planted had their roots firmly in place and their leaves growing in size.

Now that Tori had cleared out the weeds in the garden and planted some crops, bugs had also begun to come out to feast on the plants. He had to work hard in keeping the bugs away and watering the plants every day. Though the baby birds liked to eat insects, they would also peck on growing seedlings, so he had to keep a watchful eye on them.

Just as Tori was enjoying his relaxing time with his crops and baby birds, Euphemia and her familiars returned home without warning, demanding food from him. Tori hurried back into the house and started chopping vegetables, yelling over his shoulder at the girls.

“Would it kill you all to *please* just give me a heads-up if you’re planning on coming home for lunch?! I haven’t prepared a single thing!”

“Tori, I believe in you,” Euphemia said.

“You’ll be fine. Break a leg!” Shinozuki gave Tori words of encouragement.

“Come on, big bro! Fight!” Subaru cheered him on.

“Tori dear, I’m sure you can do it. I believe in you!” Cecilia added.

“You evil little...” Tori cursed them under his breath as he chopped the vegetables and sautéed them, then boiled them together with some soup stock and meatballs. He made noodles out of the dough he’d planned to save for tonight, poured a healthy serving of sauce on top of them, and topped it all off with grated cheese.

“Here you go! It’s not much, though.” Tori served them the food.

“Yay!” the four girls cried. Simple meal or not, it didn’t matter to them, as long as it tasted delicious. They all scarfed down their food. Tori was worried that this would lead to even more unreasonable requests now that he’d given in once, but that ship had already sailed. He shook his head and just filed it as another consequence of his own actions.

Come to think of it, don’t Shino and the others have to return to the

underworld soon? Tori wondered. Shinozuki and the others were apparently important figures down there, and they might have business to take care of. In fact, they had already gone back to the underworld once for exactly that reason. But recently, they had been completely swamped with work, and they showed no signs of leaving anytime soon.

“Shino, is it okay for you all to be away from the underworld for so long? I thought you guys had business to handle down there,” Tori asked.

“Mmph.” Shinozuki’s mouth was stuffed with food. She downed a glass of water to wash it down. “Fwah! Yeah, it’s fine. It ain’t a good look if we loiter ’round here like last time, but since Euphie, our contractor, has business with us, they don’t mind us puttin’ our business aboveground first.”

Thus said Shinozuki. It seemed that their contract had some stipulations they had to abide by.

The four of them finished their meal and immediately began preparing to head out.

“You all seem to be in a hurry. You guys going out again?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. We have a dungeon to explore. We might not be back tonight,” answered Euphemia.

“I see.”

In that case, that wasn’t much of a problem. Tori was a bit miffed that he had to use up the dough he had been saving for later, but if Euphemia and the others would be out late, there was no need to prepare as much. Still, they might show up without warning again, so it wouldn’t hurt to have some ingredients prepped.

Recently, the four of them had been heading out every day. Tori never bothered to ask what they were up to, but he could at least sense that they were incredibly busy, and were likely taking on a big mission. Regardless, Tori went on with his business as usual—cleaning up the house, preparing fuel and hot water for the bath, and cooking large servings of food for everyone.

Tori saw the girls off and swiftly cleaned up after their meal. The four of them rarely had leftovers, at least, which took a huge load off his shoulders. He

washed the silverware, the plates, and his cookware, and let them all dry.

The laundry Tori had hung earlier that morning was now dry, so he took it inside and started folding. Euphemia had a surprisingly large wardrobe, so Tori had a regular cycle of laundry to keep up with. She would often walk around the house with barely anything on or nothing at all, so he hadn't realized the breadth of her clothing at first. Much of it was because whenever Euphemia transformed into the White Witch for a job, she would head out with a different outfit each time.

Cecilia, a humanoid familiar, had a huge variety of clothes to wear as well, though they were all quite bold in how much skin they exposed. Shinozaki and Subaru, now that they were getting used to their human forms, had also started taking interest in fashion, so their wardrobes were also expanding in kind.

In contrast, Tori had one good shirt, which he wore with the sleeves rolled up, along with an apron and a bandanna wrapped around his head. It might as well have been his work uniform. It was efficient and easy to move in, so he didn't really care about being fashionable.

In any case, it was time to work the fields. Tori headed out to resume his weed pulling.

The Seven Spires might have had differing heights, but they all shared one thing—they were all towering structures akin to spears piercing the heavens. At their base were the muted gray ruins of an old city, and above, dark clouds hung around the spires. A low rumble could be heard from the clouds as they circled the towers like a slow tornado. Ever since these clouds formed, they had never cleared out.

There was no sign of movement anywhere. The city below was abandoned, but a strange presence lingered in the area—one that was enough to make even the most seasoned warriors tremble.

The White Witch's transportation spell had taken the Cerulean Dagger straight to the Seven Spires. Immediately, they were greeted by the overwhelming aura in the dungeon. The adventurers of the Cerulean Dagger battled monsters daily, and they were no strangers to putting their lives on the

line, but this presence was enough to make these experienced veterans flinch.

“We shall head for the fourth tower,” the White Witch announced, pointing her staff at their destination. “The mana field of that tower is unstable, and its astral gate openeth and closeth at random intervals, beckoning monsters from the underworld. These monsters taketh residence in the tower, and it is thy task to hunt them down.”

Andrea spoke up. “What’s the plan for exploring the dungeon?”

“This exploration would cometh quickly to its end should I take the lead. I shall step back and focus on providing thee support.”

“The three of us’ll be doin’ the same. Don’t worry, if anyone’s in trouble, we’ll come and save ya!” Shinozuki said assuringly.

“Show us how far you’ve improved, big bros!” Subaru said.

“I have high expectations for all of you,” Cecilia added, giggling.

Though some of the clan members were excited at the provocation from these beautiful women, the tense atmosphere prevailed over the others as they gazed pensively at the ruined city.

“Andrea, what do we do?” Suzanna asked. Andrea sighed and looked up at the sky.

“Mixing things up would only cause confusion among our ranks,” he figured. “We’ll go with our usual strategy and divide our members into squadrons, with each one covering the others’ blind spots. Got that?”

“Gotcha. All right then, frontliners, form two squads under me!” Jeffrey the swordsman yelled out the command to gather the members of his squads.

The Cerulean Dagger’s usual formation consisted of two squads in front and one squad in the rear, making it easy to adjust their formation midbattle as needed. They could have the two front squads flank the rear squad, or have the rear stand back and focus on support as the front pushed enemies forward. This flexibility and the individual members’ high levels of skill was what made the Cerulean Dagger stand out from the rest of the pack.

Once the clan had settled into formation, they entered the ancient city with

great caution. Shinozuki and Subaru accompanied the front line, while Cecilia supported the rear. The White Witch acted as their escort.

The presence that everyone had been feeling since arriving grew stronger once the clan entered the ancient city. The members felt overwhelming gazes from all around, and the mana in the air had grown thicker. It felt like thousands of needles were pricking their skin. In contrast to the tense members of the Cerulean Dagger, the White Witch and her comrades remained unfazed.

The ancient, ashen gray city was devoid of all signs of life, but the structures within it remained mostly intact. The city was completely still and hushed, as if all living creatures had vanished in an instant and time had stopped in its tracks. The complete absence of life was eerie, and each step into the ruins gave a sense that something was out of step.

Large bluish crystals were floating all over the ruins. They gave off a pale, flickering light, perhaps due to a phenomenon induced by mana. The pale light illuminated the ancient ruins. Sunlight couldn't reach some places, and the bluish glow provided enough light to allow the group to see their path and not trip.

"What a creepy place," Jean whispered.

"Yeah. There's no monsters around, but everything feels off," a clan member responded. Cecilia, who had been walking beside them, giggled.

"Well of course you'll feel off, dear. Something's been watching us all this time," she said.

Someone in the rear squad whipped their head this way and that, clearly terrified. "Wh-Where are they watching from?"

"Oh, here and there. Heh heh. I don't dislike being watched, you know?" Cecilia replied as she struck a seductive pose.

"Cecilia, do you know of the artifact known as the Jewel of the Moon?" Jean asked, ignoring the other men hooting at Cecilia.

"My, of course I do."

It was said that a jeweler from the underworld crafted the Jewel of the Moon.

As its name suggested, it was a transparent jewel containing a shiny round ring that evoked the image of the full moon. The jewel looked the same regardless of the angle it was viewed from. And, like the moon, it constantly emitted a pale bluish glow. This contrasted with its twin, the Jewel of the Sun, which radiated a powerful crimson light.

Both jewels contained powerful mana within. Over several years, they had appeared in different forms, ranging from unassuming decorations on weapons to being cores on powerful magical tools. The Jewel of the Moon's previous owner—an adventurer—died here in the Seven Spires, and it had sat untouched ever since.

“Your big sis got a tiny peek at it once, long ago. It was quite the beautiful jewel,” said Cecilia.

“Long ago? Cecilia, how old might you—”

Cecilia placed a finger on Jean's lips before he could finish his question. “My, my, Jean dear, did you not learn any manners? It's rude to ask a lady her age.”

“S-Sorry!”

Jean scratched his head. As someone whose aging had stopped due to magic, he figured that Cecilia must have been in the same boat. Of course, he had no way of knowing that she was actually an archlich.

Cecilia looked amused at Jean's reaction. She peered into his face. “So, what do you want with the Jewel of the Moon?”

“Umm, I was developing a spell together with my master. One of the experiments related to it is what caused my physical aging to stop,” he answered.

“Oh, I see! I did hear about that from Tori.”

“From Tori?” Jean perked up in surprise at hearing that name.

“That's right. He scolded me for making fun of you, you know? ‘Leave Jean alone, okay? He's working hard to fulfill his promise to his mentor!’ and all that. Don't you think he's too harsh on me?” Cecilia huffed, putting on an exaggerated pout for effect.

Tori said all that? Jean thought. I knew it was because of him that we were able to get here. ...Also, Tori scolding Cecilia? That sounds incredible.

The spellcasters of the Cerulean Dagger were all first-rate, but despite that, none of them were able to pierce Cecilia's magic defenses. Anyone who dabbled in magic would immediately be able to tell that she was on a whole other level. Jean couldn't imagine anyone scolding this monster of a spellcaster, but apparently Tori was able to. Perhaps Tori really was as amazing as everyone thought. Jean could only give a helpless mental shrug.

"So, what kind of spell are you trying to develop?" Cecilia asked. Jean hesitated a bit but relented.

"I'm developing a type of weather-manipulation spell. My mentor and I hail from the nation of Pudemott. The country's mana field went berserk after a battle against monsters. Because of that, rainfall became scarce, and the country has been suffering from drought ever since. Our lands have become completely barren."

"I see... And that led to famine?"

"Yes. A Great Sorcery spell would be enough if we just wanted to make some rain fall, but a strong rain shower would just flood the land and run off. It just worsens the condition of the land. That's why I wanted to find a way to manipulate the weather. And I need a catalyst to maintain the new conditions. That's what I really want to use the Jewels of the Sun and Moon for."

Maintaining the weather for an entire region would expend an enormous amount of mana. The two jewels contained enough mana to supply that spell, and it was even theorized that using them together would turn them into a perpetual mana-generating machine.

Cecilia giggled and ruffled Jean's hair. "My, what a very noble wish! That's so respectable of you! Good boy!"

"U-Um, I'd like you to know that I'm already in my thirties—"

"Oh my, you're so young!" Cecilia laughed. Jean had to wonder just how old she was, but he didn't dare ask out loud.

Right then, something moved in the shadows of the ruins. A creature shaped

like a human but made of crystal stepped out in front of them. In place of a face, there was a shining light in the shape of an eye. It was a monster.

“They’re here! Everyone, take your positions!”

The members of the Cerulean Dagger snapped into their formations to face the creature. More monsters appeared from the shadows, one after another, as if beckoned to the start of this battle.

“Let’s go! It’s time to show what all that training’s been for!”

“Aye!”

The adventurers raised their weapons and charged at the approaching horde.

Meanwhile, Tori was staring at the crop from the underworld that still grew at an abnormal pace. Just now, its leaves had stretched out abruptly and started flailing about. Tori had been leisurely weeding out the garden when one of those leaves slapped him in the back. He winced in pain and took his distance.

“What in the world is this thing?” he muttered.

The fruit hanging at the ends of its branches looked like faces. The two long, flailing leaves acted like its arms. On top of that, the leaves had small thorns, which made it all the more difficult to approach. Even if the plant was supposedly a source of medicine, leaving it alone would cause more problems than it was worth, Tori was certain. If it grew any bigger, it might even get in the way of hanging the laundry. He had to do something, even if Euphemia wouldn’t like it.

Tori grabbed a sword from inside the house, but he had no idea how to fight this creature. He had some familiarity with fighting plantlike monsters, but not with any from the underworld. He wasn’t sure whether the same tactics would apply.

Tori decided to cut the plant’s leaves down to pacify it, so he went forward and took a stance. He slashed at the waving leaves, which stood no chance against the sword, and the severed ends fell to the ground. He slashed again and again until all the leaves were well trimmed.

“Whoa, guess I could pull it off, after all,” Tori marveled. Gaining more confidence, he stepped even closer and cut off one of the leaves from the base. It squirmed for a bit before going quiet. He did the same to the other flailing leaf, leaving only a writhing stem.

“That should do it.”

Tori stared at the felled leaves. He wondered if these could also be used as medicine; if they could, he couldn't just leave them on the ground. The leaves had thorns on them, so he put on a pair of leather gloves and left them beside the entrance of the house. The plant kept squirming even while in Tori's hands, almost like it was trying to dance. It almost looked cute and amusing to him.

At some point, the sun had started to set. Tori herded the chicks and ducklings into the henhouse and fed them.

Euphemia had said that they wouldn't be home by tonight, but she'd said that before and come back anyway, so Tori decided to prepare for that occasion.

In the end, though, the four of them never returned, and Tori managed to spend a full night in peace before waking up early the next morning.

Euphemia and her three familiars typically slept together in her gigantic bed, while Tori used the couch in the parlor. He was always the first one to wake and do various chores around the house, so he would rather not wake everyone else up by going in and out of the bedroom, disturbing their sleep. He'd tried to explain this to Euphemia as a reason to not sleep beside her, but that was only his rationalization. In the end, he just didn't want to sleep next to a naked girl—not because he disliked the idea but because he was worried he might make a fatal error in a moment of lust. Once, he had been annoyed at all of them for not waking up and decided to barge into the bedroom, only to be met with the sight of all four girls scantily clad and squirming sleepily on top of the mattress. Since then, he swore never to barge into the bedroom in the morning ever again.

In any case, Tori woke up and started his day by feeding the birds outside, where he discovered the underworld plant flailing its leaves around once more. The leaves were even bigger than yesterday, and they were slamming against the nearby eggplant seedlings, flattening them.

“How did this happen?” Tori was disheartened. He’d thought that he had pacified the plant by cutting off its leaves, but they had grown back even bigger overnight. He didn’t like the idea of working up a sweat to cut its leaves only for them to return. Tori realized that he really didn’t know anything about plants of the underworld. He decided to put a hold on working on the garden until Euphemia and the others returned home.

After Tori finished feeding the chicks, he went back into the house and started tidying up. Today, he was able to start with the bedroom early. He picked up clothes that had been strewn about, discarded food wrappers, and empty bottles, then swept the floor clean. The weather was also good today, so he decided to air out the sheets as well.

Tori hung the sheets on the clothesline away from the flailing underworld plant. He couldn’t tell whether it was dancing around or going berserk; it could be either one, but regardless, he wanted it to stop hitting the other plants.

While Tori was busy being irritated at this new problem, a magic circle appeared at the edge of the garden and Euphemia and the others appeared from it. They were back. Euphemia removed her gigantic White Witch disguise and returned to her usual form. She ran toward Tori and pounced on him in a hug.

“Womp.”

“Welcome back. Sorry for pushing this on you right when you just got home, but could you do something about that?” Tori motioned to the thrashing plant.

“My, it sure grew quickly! It’s so energetic,” Cecilia chimed in.

“This is no time to be impressed! It’s supposed to be used for medicine, right? Could you harvest it already?”

“Oh, we’re not gonna use this. You could’ve just cut it down, you know?”

“What?! You’re kidding! Besides, I chopped off the leaves and they grew back in a day!”

“It’ll wither if you cut it from the stem. If you cut it from the leaves, they’ll grow back even bigger,” Cecilia explained.

Couldn't you have told me all that earlier? Tori complained in his thoughts. He slumped his shoulders in resignation. He felt like he had wasted so much effort in dealing with this plant.

Shinozuki was flailing her arms and shouting. "Tori! I'm hungry! Feed me!"

"Shino, that's all you've been saying to me lately. Didn't you eat breakfast?"

"We just finished clearing a dungeon and came straight home! I'm hungry too!" Subaru said.

Tori shrugged. "I'll start cooking, so wait a bit." He went back into the house, with Euphemia still clinging to him. He went into the kitchen and lit the stove.

"Ah, damn it. I haven't prepared any dough yet. We'll have potatoes...and pancakes, I guess."

The four of them returned much earlier than Tori had anticipated, so he had yet to prepare anything. He made batter out of water, flour, salt, and sugar, and left it to sit. While waiting, he made soup with onions, yams, and beans, then fried some eggs and preserved meat. He then steamed potatoes in a thick cauldron.

Euphemia was squirming behind Tori all this time.

"You sure are restless today. Did something happen?" Tori asked.

"Well, you know..."

"Yeah?"

"We went into a dungeon."

"I know."

Tori placed the fried eggs and meat onto a plate. He washed the pan, then poured the batter into it to make pancakes. Euphemia was still fidgeting and looking at Tori with puppy dog eyes.

"We went into the Seven Spires," she said.

"That's that one really difficult dungeon, right?"

"Yeah. We went with the Cerulean Dagger."

“Huh?”

“And we got the Jewel of the Moon. And I gave it to Jean.”

“W-Wait, I’m not seeing where you’re going with this. What are you saying?”

Euphemia kept going. “Then, Jean said he’ll be able to complete his spell. And then he told me to thank you.”

“Huh? Why me? Wait, why are you even exploring dungeons with them?”

“I’ve been training them so we can beat Renard together.”

“What are you talking about— Wait, Renard? The Great Demon? Isn’t that Andrea’s—?”

“Is the food ready yet?!” A loud voice from the parlor interrupted Tori’s baffled stammering.

“Okay, okay, just wait a bit! Whoa!” Tori remembered he was cooking pancakes and hurriedly slid them onto a plate before they could burn.

Euphemia scooted closer to Tori. “Are you happy?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Are you happy that Jean achieved his goal?”

“Y-Yeah...” Tori hadn’t fully processed it yet, but he at least understood that Jean had managed to accomplish his long-standing goal. “Yeah, I’m glad. Thanks, Euphie.”

“Heh heh.” Euphemia wrapped her arms around Tori and hugged him even tighter than before. He was about to complain that she was getting in the way of his cooking, but he stopped himself.

I’ll let her be for today, he thought as he stroked Euphemia’s head. He could hear the others making a ruckus in the parlor.

“Hey, is the food ready yet?!”

“The smell is making me even hungrier! Hurry up!”

“Okay, okay, okay!”

Tori slathered butter and honey over the pancakes and handed the plate over

to Euphemia. "Could you bring this to them? I'll make some more pancakes. You guys can go ahead and pour yourselves some soup too."

"Okay," replied Euphemia. She happily trotted out of the kitchen.

"I'm so happy for Jean," Tori murmured as he flipped the pancakes in the pan. He was glad he could say that with full sincerity.

Rain was falling on the barren lands of the nation of Pudemott. It was not a storm, but rather a gentle shower embracing the parched land. Beneath this rain, the citizens of the nation were shouting with great joy. The country had not experienced this much rain in decades. And whenever it did pour, it was always squalls that caused floods, washing away crops, homes, and people.

"Master... I did it," Jean said softly, deeply moved by the scene before him.

The spellcaster Signe had been born in Pudemott and felled by monsters before achieving his goal. He'd dreamed of rain pouring down over the country's soil. Jean, his student and also someone born in Pudemott, had shared the same dream. At the end of a long, arduous road of research and adventuring, rain had finally blessed the nation.

Jean turned around. Behind him were two jewels shining inside a magical mechanism. Layers and layers of complicated spells were cast upon this machine, which was sealed inside a powerful barrier so no one could steal its contents.

Jean was in the royal palace of Pudemott. King Guttican IV, the monarch of the nation, approached him. The king was young and had ascended to the throne only a few years ago, and he was known for his great wisdom. The king bowed before Jean.

"Sir Jean, we are forever grateful to thee for thy work. Surely Master Signe must be overjoyed in the heavens," King Guttican IV said.

"Indeed. Your Highness, I cannot express the joy I feel for having granted my master's final wish," Jean replied.

King Guttican IV held Jean's hands firmly. "Words fail to express the depths of

our gratitude for thy efforts. Sir Jean, wouldst thou consider staying as our royal spellcaster? We, King Guttican IV, guarantee thy freedom under our yoke. Our nation is poor, and many trials and tribulations await us. We wish for thee to assist us in bringing prosperity to our country.”

Jean felt abashed by the king’s offer. “I am honored by your proposition, Your Highness.”

“Then, dost thou accept?”

Jean smiled awkwardly and gently shook his head. “Your Highness, I’m afraid that I still have much left to accomplish. I must help out my comrades who have helped me throughout my journey in achieving my goals. Thus, I must humbly refuse your generous offer. However, once I have accomplished my task, I promise to return and reconsider my position.”

The king laughed heartily. “Aye, it is a shame, but we understand. We look forward to thy return. Until then, we shall pour all our efforts into defending these precious jewels.”

Jean returned the king’s smile and went back to gazing out the window. The gentle rain continued to fall, seeping into the parched land. It was almost as if the land of Pudemott were crying tears of joy.

11. The Hunt for the Great Demon

Now that the underworld plant had been uprooted, the seedlings Tori had been cultivating had fully grown into summer vegetables. Slowly, the garden was gaining more and more color with each day. Flowers blossomed, then gave way to ripe fruits, heralding the hot summer. It was the season where Tori had to switch from wearing thick clothes to sleeveless shirts. The weather made it difficult to cook in front of a blazing-hot fireplace, but he still stuck to his usual routine of cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

“Gaah, it’s too hot!” Tori whined as he sautéed thinly sliced onions and potatoes. He wiped the sweat dripping off his forehead. Cooking, of course, required lighting a fire, and lighting a fire meant dealing with the heat. It was made worse by the kitchen’s insulation, which raised the temperature even further.

However, this only applied to the kitchen. The parlor and bedroom maintained a cool, comfortable temperature thanks to Euphemia’s magic. Tori thought this was unfair, but he couldn’t really complain as he could just keep himself cool while he was in the parlor. It was just that, for some reason, her magic didn’t affect the kitchen.

“I feel like all the water’s gonna leak out of my body,” Tori grumbled as he poured stock into the pot and brought it to a simmer. He used a wooden spatula to mash the potatoes and onions with the stock. Once they were sufficiently crushed, he removed the pot from the heat and strained the whole thing through a moulin strainer. He returned the filtered mush to the pot, added in some cream, and put the heat back on. After adding some salt and pepper, he put the resulting soup into the fridge for cooling. The cold soup would be ready for serving by dinnertime.

Now that Tori had given it a good look, he realized that the fridge was looking livelier than ever. Before, it had mostly been occupied by fresh, uncooked meat, but now it was accompanied by stock, sofrito, pickled vegetables, jarred fruits,

and homemade jams—some were prepared ingredients for future meals, and some were preserved goods. It might be time to consider getting more storage space for the food.

“Phew. Time for a quick break.” Tori grabbed a jar of peaches in syrup that he had stuffed in the fridge. He used the peaches and whipped cream to decorate a square egg cake, and topped it off with a sprig of mint from the garden. It wasn’t as fancy as the cakes in the city cafés, but he felt like he had made something nice and fashionable.

Tori popped his head out from the kitchen. “Y’all want a snack?”

“I do.” “You betcha!” “Yeah!” “I’ll eat, deary.” The four women had a variety of responses to Tori’s simple question.

After conquering the fourth floor of the Seven Spires, Euphemia and the Cerulean Dagger had decided to take some time off for Jean so he could return to Pudemott, his homeland. Euphemia’s desire to lounge around was greater than usual; she had been doing nothing but alternating between her bedroom, the couch, and the dining table.

Euphemia had been sitting on the couch, reading a thick book, before she decided to walk into the kitchen. It was her habit that whenever she got up from the couch, she would leave whatever book she’d been reading lying around, which meant Tori had to shelve them every time he saw one scattered about.

“Put on something less risqué. I’m begging,” Tori said, exasperated.

“It’s too hot out here,” Euphemia retorted. She was wearing a thin blouse and nothing else. She sat down at the table with no trace of shame on her face. Her eyes sparkled upon seeing the cake. “Wow... Peaches...”

“What, no meat?” Shinozuki complained.

“What’s that? Shino, you don’t want any? I’ll have your share, then!” Subaru declared.

“Who said I ain’t havin’ any? Don’t take my food!”

“Tori dear, could you pour me some tea?” Cecilia requested.

“Sure. Black or herbal?” Tori asked.

“Hmm, herbal tea sounds nice.”

“Okay, coming up.”

“Tori, is there enough cake for seconds?” Euphemia asked.

“There is, but anyone going for seconds doesn’t get dessert tonight.”

“Hmm... Hmm! The ultimate decision!”

“The peaches are so cold and sweet!” Shino exclaimed.

Now that Tori was used to life in this household and had mastered the kitchen, he had started to make food outside of their three daily meals. It turned out that he also enjoyed making snacks.

“Could we get a brick oven for the yard?” Tori suggested as he sipped tea.

“A brick oven? What for?” Euphemia asked.

“You know, like for bread and cakes. I’d be able to make bigger pastries, and it’ll be easier to roast meat.”

“That sounds urgent. What should it look like?”

“Hmm... I’ll mull it over. Lately during my shopping trips, I’ve been asking bakeries to show me around their stores, including their ovens, so I have an idea of how they work. The materials... I guess we’ll need heat resistant bricks, rocks, and clay.”

“My, that sounds doable,” Cecilia chimed in. “Though making heat resistant bricks sounds like a hurdle.”

“So we just gotta get some that can survive my flames, right?” Subaru said.

“Where are we supposed to find that? The underworld?”

“Oh, great idea. We should look for the materials in the underworld!” Shinozaki suggested enthusiastically.

“Huh?”

“Yeah. We’ll make a brick oven that can survive being trampled by a dragon,” Euphemia said.

“What?”

“How big should we make it? Should we make it big enough to fit a dragon?” Shinozuki asked.

“Sounds good. I wanna eat dragon steak.”

“Hey!”

Right as Tori protested, a bird flew inside, holding a letter in its beak. Euphemia unfurled the letter and skimmed it, her expression growing more serious as she did. She then stood up from her seat.

“What’s up? Is it a job?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. It’s an urgent one. You three, get ready.” Euphemia put on her hat and robe.

Shinozuki scarfed down the rest of her cake in one go. “Mmph. What is it? We hunting a monster?”

“No, it’s a request from Andrea and the others.”

“My, that means Jean’s back, doesn’t it?”

Tori perked up upon hearing the names of his former clanmates. “What’s this about Jean?”

“He went back to Pudemott to finish that spell he was making. He said he wouldn’t be taking any jobs until he was done. Right, Euphie?”

“Right. But that ended today. We’ll be hunting Renard the Great Demon. They managed to pin down his location while Jean was away, so all that’s left is to go in and take him down.”

“Huh? But that means—”

“Hey, no need for you to worry, bud! I’m sure Andrea can take him one-on-one now! I was the one who trained him, after all!” Shinozuki reassured Tori.

“S-Seriously?” Tori marveled. Andrea, having been trained by a fenrir warrior, was sure to have improved by leaps and bounds. He already had plenty of talent, so the opportunity to practice with an opponent above his level would have undoubtedly led to a massive improvement in his skills.

“Suzanna’s gotten so much stronger too! I wasn’t using my full power, but a human being able to keep up with my speed is no easy feat!”

“Oh my, speaking of improvement, Jean got so much better at using magic too. He’s improved the efficiency of his spells and can cast them without chanting now. And he can hold a lot more mana compared to before.”

Subaru and Cecilia gushed nonstop about Suzanna and Jean. Tori was dumbfounded knowing that his former comrades had gotten so much stronger.

“That’s great... So this means Andrea will finally have his revenge, right?” Tori asked Euphemia.

“Yeah. The Cerulean Dagger will handle most of the fighting, but we’ll be splitting the reward money seventy-thirty, with the seventy going to us. I’ll be making us money while barely lifting a finger. How do you feel about taking me as your wife now?”

“Don’t need your sales pitch. But...thanks.” Tori placed his hand on Euphemia’s shoulder. She closed her eyes. A long silence hung over the room.

“What are you doing?” Tori broke the silence.

“Weren’t you supposed to kiss me there?” Euphemia looked puzzled.

“Absolutely not! You’re getting more and more shameless by the day!”

“A relationship without shame is something to strive for, don’t you think?”

“Uh, sure.” Tori was perplexed. Euphemia seemed to be quite aggressive today.

Suzanna’s brother was fully cured. Jean had completed the spell he was developing. And if Andrea succeeded in his revenge, the goals of his former friends would all be accomplished. This wouldn’t have been possible if he had never met Euphemia.

Maybe it was the right call to have me fired after all, Tori thought. Being fired from his job had been a painful memory for him, but now he didn’t think much of it. In fact, he was starting to accept that it might have been for the best.

Euphemia clung to Tori, begging for some affection. “Rub my back.”

“Okay, okay. What is it this time? Indigestion? Heartburn?”

“No. I like getting pats on my back. I also like pats on my head.”

“Fine.” Tori sighed and relented, wrapping his arm around Euphemia to reach her back. At this point, it might have been the smarter choice to give in and start acting like a boyfriend, but he wouldn’t have felt good about it. It was just the way Tori worked. It would be a while before their relationship reached the level of intimacy that Euphemia demanded.

To reach the surface from the underworld, one would have to pass through the Great Gate that was currently tightly sealed, or form a contract with a human and be summoned through an astral gate. The former was being guarded by the underworld’s army, and the latter required a contract, so there were no easy ways for the denizens of the underworld to go to the surface.

But sometimes, there were fiends who committed crimes and managed to escape to the surface. Exiting through astral gates drained an enormous amount of mana. Forming a contract greatly reduced that amount, but without one, it would severely weaken any fiend trying to pass through.

Renard the Great Demon had once rebelled against the current demon lord. In the underworld, might made right, and taking the demon lord’s throne by force was a valid way to assume power. However, trying and failing marked you as a rebel and traitor, and you would be captured and executed immediately. You either won as a hero or died as a recusant.

Renard knew that he couldn’t win against the demon lord on his own, so he led his personal army against the demon lord’s forces. However, the opposing army proved too powerful. They were pushed back, and he was forced to use a forbidden art to escape to the surface.

While Renard had lost most of his powers, he was still more powerful than any human, and on the surface, he hunted down helpless villagers and bided his time to regain his strength.

Renard had possessed enough cunning to be able to raise a whole army in rebellion against the demon lord, and he knew he could do it again. His plan

was to escape his pursuers and hide in the hinterlands while he recovered. There, a tear in space and time would occasionally appear, and mana from the underworld would leak out from it. He would absorb this mana and slowly regain his powers as a great demon. Then, he would take control of the surface and break through the sealed Great Gate and launch an invasion on the underworld.

“Heh heh heh. Everything is proceeding as planned,” Renard laughed as he clasped his gigantic hands.

Currently, Renard was in a fortress. Torches lined the structure’s stone walls. The castle’s outer walls were tall, and the gates were thick and formidable. Outside the gates, an army of fiends were preparing their weapons, waiting impatiently for the order to deploy. Renard let out a low laugh as he surveyed his army.

Now that he had regained much of his power, Renard had opened his own astral gate to summon his underlings to the surface. While it was an incomplete gate and his underlings had lost much of their power traveling through it, their strength was still more than enough to deal with humans. Once they conquered the surface world, they would regain most of that power. And Renard himself had more than enough to subjugate the human race.

Renard enjoyed trampling over the weak. He derived a perverse glee from crushing helpless humans like ants. He loved to give false hope and fake mercy to those he tortured, and enjoyed the expressions of despair his victims showed in their final moments. To Renard, humans were frail toys to be replaced whenever they broke.

“Lord Renard.”

The great demon’s faithful commanders gathered before him.

“Your orders, milord.”

“Aye.”

Renard’s power had grown significantly, and his forces were ready. It was time to strike. He gave his army the order to deploy. Renard’s fortress lay in the middle of the hinterlands. From there, he planned to conquer the nearby

countries and use them as footholds for future invasions.

Renard unsheathed his sword and raised it high. “Now, our age begins!” he proclaimed, his voice echoing loud and clear. “We will exterminate these foolish humans and take the surface for ourselves! And then, we will finally take the head of that loathsome demon lord!”

“Yeeaahhh!” Renard’s army let out a loud roar, and they began moving. However, there was a clear lack of discipline among his forces. Individual soldiers were doing as they pleased. Though they were all under Renard’s banner, they were nothing but mere rogues and bandits.

That being said, they were still denizens of the underworld. Each one of them held great power, enough to crush puny humans who stood in their way. The fiends of the underworld had a strong individualistic culture, so it was more effective to let them go wild rather than putting a leash on them.

Renard couldn’t help but laugh as he anticipated his army crushing village after village. Trampling over the weak, after all, was his greatest entertainment.

However, shortly after they started their march, one of Renard’s commanders returned with a panicked expression on their face.

“L-Lord Renard!”

“What’s all this ruckus? Are the preparations for the invasion going well?”

“W-Well, we are currently engaged in combat with some strange fellows!”

“Oh, some bounty hunters, perhaps?”

A high bounty had been placed on Renard’s head, so occasionally, foolhardy adventurers looking to make a quick buck would come and try to hunt him down. But Renard repelled every single one of them. More than a few times, he’d entertained himself by watching these proud and confident adventurers give in to fear and despair, begging for their pathetic lives.

“Th-They are adventurers indeed, but...th-they’re much stronger than expected! Our first squadron has been destroyed!”

“What?!” Renard stood up from his throne upon hearing this. There were, indeed, many strong warriors among the humans—in particular, adventurers

who made a living from battling and hunting down monsters—so a few of them were bound to be extraordinary. Even so, he found it hard to believe they would be able to take down an entire squadron of underworld denizens. Fiends were exceptionally strong—and even if a human happened to take down one or two of them, Renard had an entire army, along with the familiars and legendary beasts that served under his soldiers. There was no way that humans could have broken through such a formidable force.

Another one of Renard's commanders returned to him, panting and out of breath.

"W-We are being forced back! The second and third squadrons have been routed!"

"Impossible! Those pathetic humans couldn't possibly have done this!" Renard yelled. Indignant, he stepped forward and swept back his mantle. "I will handle them myself! Keep pushing forward!"

I will slaughter every single one of those fools! Renard thought as he gripped the hilt of his sword. Upon stepping out of the castle gates, he witnessed a giant pillar of flame, with a number of figures burning inside it. Great Sorcery had been cast.

"Such power!" One of Renard's underlings gulped from beside him at the display. Renard watched as his soldiers were scattered and routed all over. In the distance, he saw a large group of armed humans approaching. He gritted his teeth in anger and turned to his subordinates.

"Gumatedos! Zautar! Kill all of those fools!" he commanded.

"Bwa ha ha ha! As you wish, milord."

"Heh heh. A trivial task."

Gumatedos, a fiend with a bovine head and humanoid body, readied his halberd. The skeletal Zautar brandished a sword in each of its four hands. Both of them headed toward the invading army, filled with confidence in their skills.

"Hisryne! Shoot down those spellcasters! Don't let them support their front line!" Renard barked.

“Yessir. Leave it to me!” Hisryne glided across the sky with their birdlike wings.

Renard’s three commanders were top-class among his underlings. He was confident these humans were no match for them. He stood back and watched the battle unfold.

Upon Jean’s return from Pudemott, he prepared himself and joined up with the White Witch and the Cerulean Dagger as they headed out to hunt down Renard the Great Demon. Now, they clashed headfirst with the encroaching army of fiends. It was pure chance that they’d caught the army just as they were preparing to invade human territory. It might have even been a stroke of good luck, as the White Witch demanded that the fiends and other beasts allied to Renard be spared no quarter.

The Cerulean Dagger fearlessly charged into the fiendish army. Though they were greatly outnumbered, the White Witch and her subordinates had overwhelming strength. They covered all the blind spots of the adventurers, and turned the battle into a one-sided slaughter.

The clan broke through the front line, while Shinozuki and Subaru went around hunting down the stragglers. Cecilia supported the group from behind with well-timed spells. Even farther behind, the White Witch was standing with her arms crossed, showing no signs of intervening. Despite that, it was clear that the adventurers had the overwhelming advantage.

Once they’d gotten closer to the enemy’s main fortress, the enemy commanders began to show themselves.

“What’s this? Gah ha ha! A puny woman! Can you handle even one of my strikes?”

The bovine-headed Gumatedos swung his halberd at Suzanna. Suzanna, who had just finished cutting down an enemy soldier in front of her, swiftly dodged the strike. The halberd hit the ground, scattering dirt and debris.

“You slimy little—!” Gumatedos roared and swung his weapon in a series of rapid strikes.

“Too slow.” Suzanna calmly dodged all of his attacks. After having faced Subaru several times over, Suzanna’s speed had greatly increased, along with her ability to predict her opponent’s movements, and she had become more agile overall. Gumatedos’s attacks might have had a lot of force behind them, but to her, they were so slow that it bored her. Regardless, she kept her guard up and dodged his swings one after the next, then sent her blade straight for Gumatedos’s throat. However, his skin was tough, and she only left a small scratch.

“Hmm, more force, huh.” Suzanna slid low between Gumatedos’s legs, leaped up onto his back, and plunged her sword deep into the base of his neck.

“G-Gaaah! Y-You little—!” Gumatedos tried to swat Suzanna off him. The sword in his neck wouldn’t dislodge, perhaps because his muscles had cramped and locked down. In her other hand, Suzanna injected mana into her second sword, aimed it at his neck, and slashed. *Swoosh!* She felt slight resistance, and then Gumatedos’s head parted with the rest of his body. Suzanna twisted deftly and landed on the ground. The rest of Gumatedos’s body flailed around before falling over with a great crash.

Suzanna breathed a sigh of relief. “That was nerve-racking...” she muttered. Gumatedos had been at a level she could deal with, but one hit would have been fatal to her. She’d had to put her full focus into the fight, and now that it was over, she was drenched in cold sweat.

Meanwhile, the flying fiend Hisryne flew over the clan’s army and went straight for the spellcasters at the back.

“Aha ha ha! Die, die, die!” Hisryne swooped low over the ground, slashing with their sharp talons like a bird of prey. The spellcasters cast a defensive barrier on the spot, but Hisryne still left a clear dent in the magical wall. It was a formidable attack.

“Hah! Looks like you all have some fight in you. But how long will that last?”

Behind Hisryne, a number of their fellow flying fiends brandished their weapons and swooped down from the sky. They were too fast for spells to pin them down. Even as the spellcasters tried to aim carefully, the enemies would just sweep in and out and continue their assault. It took all the casters’ strength

to maintain the barrier, and they were unable to find an opening to strike back.

Without the support of the rear guard, the front line's assault began to lose steam. They weren't being pushed back yet, but they were unable to make progress.

"Jean, what do we do?!"

"Should we ask Cecilia for help?"

Jean glared at the enemies in the sky, then shook his head. He readied his staff.

"What's the point of all our training if we call on her now? Give me thirty seconds. I'll shoot them all down in one go," he said.

"Got it! Everyone, pour your efforts into defense! We'll hold the line!"

"You got it! Let's go!"

The spellcasters strengthened the barrier with as much mana as they could. Jean closed his eyes and began chanting. Though he'd learned how to cast spells silently, more powerful spells required the caster to follow the full procedure to maximize their efficacy. Mana swirled and gathered around him, causing his hair and robe to sway.

Meanwhile, Andrea was facing Zautar, the skeletal swordsman. He managed to fend off repeated strikes from its four arms with his greatshield.

"Heh heh heh! Come on, what's wrong? Aren't you tired of just defending, you dullard?" the skeletal warrior taunted.

Andrea silently glared as he continued to shield against the assault. He stood his ground, never once yielding to Zautar's attacks. Whenever Zautar tried to slash from a different direction, Andrea followed and cut off its path. Eventually, Zautar caught on and got irritated.

"Stop blocking and die already!" The skeletal swordsman raised all four of its swords and brought them down in one blow. Andrea's shield received the full brunt of the strike. His shield hand trembled, but he didn't budge.

"It didn't break?!" Zautar looked on in disbelief, starting to falter after Andrea managed to withstand that full-force attack. In that moment of weakness,

Andrea shoved forward with all his might, and slammed himself and his shield straight into Zautar.

“Bwah?!”

The heavy greatshield scored a direct hit on Zautar, breaking three of their arms and scattering fragments of bone all over.

“Don’t get cocky, you brat!” Zautar swung its sword with its last remaining arm. Andrea threw aside his shield and drew his own sword. He leaped like a hare and sliced off Zautar’s head.

“Heh heh heh! You fool! Do you think you’ve killed me?!”

“Hmph.”

Zautar’s body, with blade still in hand, rushed at Andrea. Andrea reacted by drawing back his sword. It was up to fate on whether his counterattack would make it in time.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light flared behind them. Multiple beams shot out from the spellcasters’ squad, shooting down the flying fiends in the sky.

“Gaaah!” Hisryne, their chest pierced by a beam of light, screamed as they fell from the sky.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Zautar, distracted by the flashes of light, wavered. Andrea crouched and dodged the incoming attack. He righted himself, then smashed Zautar’s talking skull into pieces.

“Try coming back from that,” Andrea spat out. He kicked the fallen arm on the ground and picked up his shield.

Suzanna ran toward him. “Andrea, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. But that was a close call,” he replied.

The stalemate had been broken. The Cerulean Dagger pushed forward. The members’ fatigue seemed to vanish into thin air after the three commanders were vanquished. The enemy’s numbers were clearly dwindling by the minute.

“Where is he?!” Andrea readied his sword and shield and glared around until his gaze stopped at the fortress gates. There Renard stood, with his dark blue

skin and golden hair. One could sense his cold cruelty and haughty arrogance from his handsome face. His sharp gaze was full of contempt for those he viewed as beneath him. It was the exact same face as on the wanted poster Andrea had seen so many times.

Andrea gritted his teeth and stepped forward. “Renard!” he screamed and charged at the great demon.

Renard’s eyes went wide. He drew his sword but saw that his opponent was charging at him with a shield, so he opted to dodge instead. Andrea swiftly brought up his sword and slashed at Renard, who parried the attack and pushed Andrea back.

“You worm!” Renard spat out.

“This is for my friends and family from Hoda Village! I will avenge them!” Andrea shouted.

“How foolish! Die!”

Renard swung down his sword. Andrea blocked it with his shield. The great demon’s attacks were much stronger and much heavier than Zautar’s. But Andrea stood his ground and pushed back with his shield. Now that Renard’s stance was broken, Andrea took the opportunity to strike with his sword.

However, Renard quickly moved out of the way and landed a kick to Andrea’s back, who lost his balance from the impact.

“Haaah!”

Right then, Suzanna rushed in, slashing at Renard with her twin swords. Renard’s face twisted as he retreated from the attacks.

“Andrea, are you hurt?!” Suzanna yelled.

“I’m fine. I can still move.” Andrea stood back up and raised his shield, facing Renard’s direction. Behind them, the rest of the Cerulean Dagger had almost eradicated the fiendish army. Suzanna readied her twin blades.

“We have him on the ropes! Andrea, let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

The two of them charged at Renard.

“Insolent pests!” Renard readied his sword. An eerie shadow began to wrap around its blade. As he slashed through the air, the blade left a dark trail, which flew toward Andrea and Suzanna like a bullet. Andrea ran forward to protect Suzanna and blocked the attack with his shield.

“Guh!” When it hit, Andrea felt like a bolt of lightning had run through his body. Renard swiftly charged at Andrea and landed another kick on him, sending him and his shield flying back.

“Die, you insect!” Renard yelled as he thrust his sword into Andrea’s shield. The sword pierced through the thick, heavy shield and into Andrea’s shoulder.

“You—!” Suzanna ran at Renard. He aimed his left hand at her and launched a wave of magic that threw Suzanna back.

“Graaah!” Andrea forced himself up and pushed back Renard, who had been leaning against his shield. The force made Renard stumble and lose his balance.

“Get out of my way!” Renard swung his sword, his face twisting in anger.

“I won’t!” Andrea slammed his shield into Renard even harder, putting him off-balance once more. Then, Andrea threw aside his shield and swung his sword. His shoulder hurt, but that didn’t matter. He let out a loud yell and brought down his blade, slashing Renard across his shoulder and the front of his cloak.

“Guoooooh!” Renard’s eyes shot wide open, and a powerful shock wave emanated from his whole body. The force of the wave hit Andrea and Suzanna, the latter of whom had just recovered and was running back to Andrea’s side, and they both staggered back.

“Haaah, haaah! Grrr... You insects! I will make you regret ever getting in my way!” Renard shouted. Then, his body started growing in size. His clothes ripped at the seams as his muscles expanded in bulk. His face twisted monstrously, fangs appearing in his mouth and horns growing on his head.

“Tch.” Andrea clicked his tongue and looked up at Renard. The great demon was now thrice his original size, and a thick aura of mana surrounded him. His injuries were buried under his massive muscles and no longer visible.

“So this is a great demon...” Andrea muttered.

“Andrea!” The other members of the Cerulean Dagger had finished cleaning up the fiend army stragglers and had caught up to Andrea and Suzanna.

“We’re getting *this* after all that?”

“That’s an insane amount of mana. Jean, do you think spells will work against him?”

“I don’t know. But we have to try,” Jean replied. The other adventurers readied their weapons. But Renard just laughed and slammed his hand onto the ground. The shock wave rippled through the ground and threw the adventurers off-balance.

“Weaklings! It doesn’t matter how many of you gather here! I will punish you all for the crime of defeating my army!” Renard roared.

“Crime? How dare you speak that word!” Andrea charged at Renard with his sword. His weak points should still be the same no matter his size—for that reason, he attacked Renard’s heels. However, Renard’s body repelled Andrea’s full-force attack.

“You fool! None of your attacks will work on me while I’m in this form!” Renard raised a fist and tried to crush Andrea underneath.

At that moment, a wolf’s howl echoed. The sound felt as if it were coming from the depths of hell. Everyone who heard it, even Renard, felt a chill down their back, and they all froze in fear.

“Wh— Wha—”

The adventurers turned, and their eyes landed on a gigantic wolf with gorgeous silver fur.

“A fenrir?”

“No way! Is it one of them?”

The adventurers nervously asked one another, but the fenrir paid them no heed and leaped above them, attacking Renard instead. The beast sank its fangs into Renard’s skin, which was tougher than any armor, and ripped through his flesh. Renard let out a loud wail of pain as dark blood spurted from his injured

flesh.

“I-It’s helping us?”

“Look!”

A clan member pointed at the sky. It appeared to have grown brighter, right before a gigantic, blazing crimson bird swooped down. It pierced through Renard’s shoulder like a spear with its sharp beak.

“It’s a phoenix!”

“Why are there *two* legendary beasts here?”

As the members of the Cerulean Dagger looked on in disbelief, Renard roared as he swatted at the two creatures accosting him.

“Shinozuki and Subaru? Impossible! Damn you all! Th-This place is—”

“Oh my, did you really think you could get away from us?”

Jean turned in the direction of the voice that sounded like Cecilia’s and gasped at what he saw. Cecilia was floating in the air, and the mana surrounding her was exceptional in both quality and volume. Her hair and clothes were billowing wildly as if caught in a powerful storm. Shadows enveloped her pale white skin, and the colors of her eyes were inverted. Right now, she looked truly inhuman.

“C-Cecilia?”

“She’s— Is she an archlich?!”

A black light began to envelop Renard. It wrapped around his limbs, restraining his movements. Renard struggled against it with all his might—so hard that veins bulged on his head—but his restraints didn’t budge.

“Cecilia too?! Why...? Why are the demon lord’s commanders here on the surface?!”

“They art mine familiars.”

A fearsome voice echoed. The White Witch stood with her arms crossed. Renard trembled in terror before her glare.

The White Witch held her right hand before her and clenched it into a fist.

“Gyaaaaah!” At that moment, Renard screamed in pain. His limbs bent in awkward directions and made audible cracking noises. His body began to shrink until it reverted into its original form. He was panting and out of breath, and drool dripped from his mouth, forming a puddle on the ground.

“Guh...” He coughed weakly. “F-Familiars, you say? And this power... You’re the demon lord’s—”

“Shush. You gotta learn your place, fool. This is why you’re suffering this fate.” Shinozuki the fenrir stomped on Renard’s face. Subaru the phoenix cackled.



“Did you really think you could be the demon lord when you’re *this* weak? So lame! What a pathetic demon!” she taunted.

“Subaru, it’s kind of weird when you act like that in that form,” Shinozuki quipped.

“Shut up! Fine, I’ll drop this form!” Phoenix feathers scattered all over, and soon, Subaru was standing in place of the phoenix, stretching her arms out. The members of the Cerulean Dagger whispered among themselves in confusion. Suzanna stared at Subaru, perplexed.

“Subaru... You’re a phoenix?”

“Yeah, that’s right! Oh, and that fenrir over there is Shino.”

Everyone turned to where Subaru pointed. Shinozuki was standing where the fenrir had just been, her foot still on Renard’s head.

“Man, it’s been a long time since I went back to my true form! I’m kinda feeling more comfy in human form these days,” Shinozuki said and let out a yawn.

“S-So that means Cecilia is—” Jean said as he turned to Cecilia, who was smiling. The shadows surrounding her had dispersed, and her skin and eye colors had reverted back to normal.

“That’s right, dear. I’m Cecilia, the archlich. Nice to meet you!” She poked a finger at her cheek and struck a cute pose. Everyone felt drained at this revelation.

Amid all the commotion, Andrea stood with a grim look on his face. He approached Renard. Shinozuki moved her foot from his face to his back.

“Do it,” she urged.

Andrea quietly raised his sword. Renard desperately tried to avoid the killing blow.

“N-No, don’t! D-Do you mean to kill a defenseless enemy like me?” he pleaded.

“You destroyed my homeland and killed my family. Do you mean to tell me

that none of those people begged for their lives?” Andrea said coldly.

“S-Stop! W-Wait, I know! Let’s work together! With your power and mine, conquering the surface would be like taking candy from a baby! Untold fame and fortune at your fingertips! Don’t you think revenge is so unambitious? Forget about it and work with me—”

“Be quiet. Your words disgust me.” Andrea’s cold glare pierced through Renard, who writhed on the ground like a worm.

“Aaah! H-Help me! I-I can’t die here. I can’t let these pathetic humans—”

Swoosh. With one swing, Renard went quiet. His detached head rolled to a stop, his face still transfixed in fear. Andrea breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s over...” he muttered.

“Andrea!” Suzanna ran over and embraced him. Andrea groaned as his face twisted in pain.

“Ow, owowowow!”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot you were injured,” she apologized.

“Yeah. I finally relaxed, so it’s starting to hit me... But now, it’s all over.”

Andrea turned around and saw the White Witch, still standing with arms crossed, behind him. In front of her were the other members of the Cerulean Dagger. Their gazes were all fixed on him. Andrea bowed before them.

“Everyone, thank you so much. I managed to avenge my family and homeland with all your help.”

Jean slapped Andrea’s back. “You did great, Andrea. It was a long and grueling fight.”

The adventurers started yelling and cheering.

“Wah ha ha! I can’t believe we beat a great demon!”

“More than that, I didn’t expect Subaru, Shinozuki, and Cecilia to all be—”

“A phoenix, fenrir, and archlich... Amazing.”

“Didn’t he say they were the demon lord’s commanders or something?”

“The White Witch really is out of this world! I can’t believe she has three incredible familiars under her!”

“Come on everyone! Let’s get smashed!”

“We shall take our leave here,” announced the White Witch. “Andrea, be sure to keep Renard’s head.”

The members of the Cerulean Dagger had spent much time with the White Witch and had gotten closer to her, but her voice still instilled fear in everyone who heard it.

Andrea picked up Renard’s severed head and wrapped it in cloth. “Let’s go home,” he said.

The White Witch waved her staff. Beneath the members’ feet, a magic circle formed, signaling the casting of the witch’s transportation spell.

12. Reunion and Reconciliation

Tori was preparing stew in a big pot. Shinozuki had warned him that she would eat an extra large helping tonight, so he was busy cooking up a big meal for everyone. He was sure there would be no leftovers.

She probably eats a lot because her original form is huge, but where does all that food go when she's in her human form? Tori wondered. He had no idea where to begin with that thought, so he stopped before he dug any deeper.

Tori kneaded some dough and set it aside. He planned to make omelets, so he sautéed some shredded meat and vegetables in preparation for the filling. He also paired marinated fish with vegetables as a salad. Earlier, he'd rubbed salt and herbs onto a solid chunk of meat, which was now cooling after being roasted. As long as they didn't cut it until later, the inside should stay nice and juicy. The cold soup he had prepared earlier was waiting in the fridge. He had also baked a cake filled with dried fruits and nuts, which he topped with plenty of fluffy whipped cream.

"That should be enough," he muttered as he looked over the fruits of his labor. It was starting to get dark. The days had grown longer, which was throwing off his sense of time. During winter, it would've been completely dark outside by this time.

Tori decided to prepare the bath. He filled the tub with water, then took some embers from the fireplace and tossed them into the furnace out back. He blew into the furnace with a bamboo tube to encourage the fire.

"We're home!" Just then, a voice rang out from inside the house. Tori could hear the presence of people walking around. It would seem that Euphemia and the others had returned.

"Oh, he's not here?"

"But there's some fresh stew right here!"

"And some roast meat! Hey, Tori! It's time for some grub! We're starving out

here!” Shinozuki yelled without any reserve. Tori grabbed a log and threw it into the furnace before heading back inside.

“All right, all right! Glad to see you all back. I’m in the middle of preparing dinner—” he started, then paused.

“Th-That’s the White Witch’s true form?”

“Wow! Wow, you’re so cute!”

“I’m stunned. It didn’t even cross my mind that you’d also been disguising your true form.”

Tori was stunned by the sight of the three people fussing over Euphemia. “Ah... H-Hey. I didn’t know you three were coming,” he mumbled, confused by the surprise visitors.

Andrea, Jean, and Suzanna fidgeted awkwardly upon seeing him.

Shinozuki, who had seated herself at the dining table, spoke for them. “They all kept insisting that they wanted to see you, so we brought them.”

“See *me*? Really?”

Euphemia walked over to Tori and clung to him. “Revenge accomplished,” she said.

“Oh, right, I see. You all hunted down Renard with Euphie and the others...”

“Yeah.”

Andrea walked forward and took a deep bow before Tori. “Tori, I apologize. I said awful things to you and kicked you out of the clan...”

“A-Ah, no, it’s okay! I’m already over it. Besides, you were all completely right about me,” Tori replied.

“That’s not true!” Suzanna interjected. “Cyril got better because of you... Hey, did you know Cyril still plays with all the toys you gave him? He still loves them even now that he’s all healed. He wants to thank you too. And I’m also really grateful for your help.”

“O-Oh, that’s really nice to hear...”

“Tori, my country was saved thanks to your help. Your bond with the White

Witch brought her to us. I can't thank you enough," Jean said.

"No, that was a complete coincidence..." Tori wasn't sure how to process what he was feeling. His eyes darted around uncomfortably. "W-Well, you know. Andrea, you managed to exact your revenge, right? Jean, you finished the spell you were developing. And Suzanna, your brother's fully healed. Aren't those all good things? You all shouldn't be looking so down! Let's celebrate! Hooray!"

Andrea, Jean, and Suzanna all watched Tori panic and fumble over his words, then laughed.

"In any case, we're all very grateful to you. Tori, thank you," Andrea said.

"Y-Yeah... Ahh, I feel all itchy! I'm not used to getting all the praise like this! Besides, I didn't do anything! You all should be thanking someone else! Euphie, come on and be thanked! Take all of their gratitude! And, uh, get all tingly and embarrassed from the praise!" Tori exclaimed and tried to push Euphemia forward.

"Boop." Euphemia scooted back over to Tori and clung to his arm once more.

Suzanna giggled at the sight. "She seems to have taken a liking to you. Tori, are you two dating?"

"Yeah, we are," said Euphemia matter-of-factly.

"We are *not*! Stop replying on the spot for these things!" Tori protested and poked Euphemia's cheek. She responded by pouting and tightening her grip on his arm.

Andrea scratched his head. "But you two sure look like you get along well. I was actually going to ask if you were interested in coming back to us, but..."

"Me? With the Cerulean Dagger? You've gotta be kidding. I'm still as weak and pathetic as always. I'd never fit in with a platinum clan like that."

"Huh? *You're* the one who's joking, right?" Andrea looked confused. "Weren't you taking care of some monster lair?"

"Monster lair? What are you talking about?"

"Shinozuki told us about it. She said the White Witch's house was a 'lair of

monsters' that even they couldn't do anything about, but you managed to clean it all up. It looks like a normal house now, but what was it like before?"

Tori felt the tension leave his body after watching Andrea say all that with a straight face. "Andrea, when she said that I cleaned it all up, she meant that literally," he said.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"As in, literally cleaning up the place!" Tori started explaining to his three former comrades the events that had transpired after he arrived at Euphemia's house. In doing so, he learned that Andrea and the others had gotten the mistaken idea that her house was a high-level dungeon, and that Tori came in and conquered it by himself, ensuring its safety afterward.

Shinozuki and Subaru were clutching their bellies in laughter.

"Ha ha ha! That's rich!" Shinozuki exclaimed.

"Aha ha ha! There's no way my pathetic weakling of a big brother would be able to clear a dungeon like that!" Subaru added.

"Subaru, no dessert for you."

"Gah! Wait, I was just teasing you like I always do! I'm sorry! Forgive me, big bro Tori!"

"I'm kidding, you dummy. You don't have to beg so much."

Andrea also started laughing after watching their exchange. Jean looked like he was trying hard to contain himself as well. Suzanna was leaning over and looked out of breath from laughing too hard.

"Jeez. Tori, you know I've never beaten Subaru even once!" Suzanna said.

"Ha ha. Tori, it's incredible that you've managed to form such trusting relationships with residents of the underworld like this," Jean remarked.

"Ah, it's no big deal, you know... Ah—" Tori let out a breath as he tried to peel Euphemia off himself, but she was hugging him too tightly and refused to budge. "How long do you plan on clinging to me like this?"

"Tori..."

“What is it?”

“I don’t want you to go back to the Cerulean Dagger. You promised you wouldn’t leave,” Euphemia pouted. Tori laughed and stroked her head.

“I’m not going back, okay? Besides, I’m too weak and unskilled for them. I’m more suited to doing the chores around here.”

“Yay.” Euphemia looked elated and squeezed Tori once more. He huffed and jostled her shoulder.

“So stop clinging to me already! I can’t finish cooking like this!”

“Boo.” Euphemia pouted.

“Don’t pout at me. Sit down and wait patiently, all right? How about you three? You guys hungry?” Tori offered.

Andrea, Jean, and Suzanna all looked at one another. “Oh, but we shouldn’t impose—”

“Oh my, don’t hold back and feel free to join us,” Cecilia interjected as she entered the room and wrapped her arms around Andrea. “It’s a great opportunity for everyone. Let’s all eat together. We don’t have to train anymore, so we won’t have many opportunities to see one another from now on.”

“I-I see. Um, Cecilia, I think you’re a bit too close...”

“My, are we feeling shy now? Heh heh, human men are so adorable! How’s your shoulder, Andrea dear?”

“Y-Yes, it feels a lot better after I took some medicine...”

“Oh my, may I see? It would be bad if it got any worse...”

“Cecilia, you better quit teasing Andrea, or I’ll serve you less food,” Tori warned.

“Tori dear, you’re such a spoilsport.” Cecilia pouted. “We won’t be seeing one another for quite a while, so I wish you’d let this pass for today!” She complained, but she slowly backed off from Andrea.

“U-Um, Cecilia, if you’re okay with it, I’d like to learn more about magic from

you,” Jean said, seemingly trying to lift her spirits.

Cecilia’s face lit up. “My, Jean, you’re such a good boy! Hey, Euphie, do you mind if I marry Jean here?”

“Huh? Well, u-um...” Jean looked flustered.

“Oho, I think we’re quite compatible, you know? What do you think, Jean? Do you like me?” Cecilia said as she hoisted Jean up in the air like she was carrying a child. Jean turned beet red, his eyes spinning wildly. He didn’t look like he was uncomfortable with the attention, though, so Tori decided to leave them alone. It was too much energy to protest against everything Cecilia did.

“Anyway, yes, you guys should join us for dinner. You haven’t eaten yet, right?” Tori urged Andrea again.

“Okay, if you insist. Suzanna, are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, as long as Tori and Euphie say it’s okay,” Suzanna replied.

“Of course. Let’s all have dinner together,” Euphemia gave her permission without any hesitation.

“Okay, then it’s settled. I’ll finish up the food, so you guys sit down and wait,” Tori said before going back to the kitchen. When he left the parlor, Cecilia was holding a bright red Jean in her arms, stroking him as if he were a cat. Meanwhile, Subaru invited Andrea and Suzanna to play a card game, with Shinozaki also joining in.

Tori rolled out some dough and poured some sauce and toppings onto it before putting it inside the oven. Next, he started cooking the omelets stuffed full with meat and vegetables.

“What’s wrong?” Tori asked Euphemia, who had been pacing around the room since she’d followed him inside. She fidgeted some before answering.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“You serious? Did pigs fall out of the sky today?” Tori said, incredulous.

“I-It’s the first time I’ve had visitors. I thought I should do something for them... You know, like hospitality. Right?” Euphemia admitted, looking abashed.

Tori giggled at Euphemia's cuteness. He placed his hand on her head. "Okay, I'll have you help me out. I'm about to make pasta, so you can help me make the toppings. Come here."

"Okay."

Euphemia looked pleased as she stood in front of the kitchen stove. Tori poured oil into the frying pan and tossed in some meat and vegetables. He handed the spatula over to Euphemia.

"Keep mixing these around so they don't burn. Don't stir too hard or you'll spill it all over."

"Okay."

"Didn't you have any visitors when you were living with your family?"

"They had a lot, but I never interacted with them. Father and mother's visitors were always high-ranking fiends."

"I see..." Tori muttered. *High-ranking fiends? Is her family...?* A strange image of Euphemia's family started to form in his mind, but he quickly dismissed the thought. His instincts told him it wasn't wise to pry.

Euphemia was nervously stirring the pan. She was taking the task seriously. It was such a rare expression for her to make that Tori couldn't help but watch her.

"Tori, what's next?"

"Huh? O-Oh, we have to get the soup ready next..."

"I like doing this. It's like we're husband and wife," Euphemia said.

"We're not at that point yet!" Tori protested.

"Yet?"

"Oh." Tori caught himself and covered his mouth. He wondered what expression he was making at that moment.

Euphemia let out a sly giggle. She was often quite expressionless and rarely showed any emotions, but right now, Tori could see that she had a wide and gentle smile on her face.

“Heh heh. So, what’s next?”

“O-Oh, right. Next is...”

A pleasant smell began wafting throughout the room. In just a few minutes, a lively banquet would be served at the dinner table. The sound of sparks popped and crackled warmly from inside the fireplace.

EX. Epilogue

Subaru swiped a scrap of meat from right under Shinozuki's nose.

"Gah! I was going to eat that!" Shinozuki shouted.

"Too bad! The early bird gets the worm!" Subaru teased.

"You birdbrain! I'll make roast turkey out of you!"

"Hah! As if you'd find a fire that could roast *me*!" Subaru retorted and stuck her tongue out at Shinozuki.

"Quit squabbling already!" Tori yelled.

A wide array of food was lined up at the dining table. Tonight's dinner was to celebrate Tori's reunion and reconciliation with his former comrades, but a commotion had already started right as dinner was being served. Shinozuki and Subaru were going wild over having more food on the table than usual, and the dishes between them were catching the brunt of the action as the two of them started swiping everything they wanted. Euphemia and Cecilia paid them no mind as they each took their own servings, while Andrea and the other two sat astonished at the ruckus.

"It's these two, every single time... Here you go." Tori handed Andrea a plate of food.

"O-Oh, thank you. Are your dinners always this noisy?" Andrea wondered.

"They're being especially annoying tonight. Maybe it's the amount of food on the table."

"I-I see..."

"We'd gotten so used to it, but you always made dinner for us like this, didn't you?" Jean said warmly.

Tori felt abashed and scratched his head. "You don't have to reminisce like that. I'm getting embarrassed here. Come on, eat up. You won't get full by talking like that."

“Okay, I’ll have some.”

“The omelet is so tasty! Ah, can I have some of that?” Subaru pointed at something on Jean’s plate.

“Huh? Oh, sure,” Jean replied.

“Don’t take food from our guests!” Tori grabbed Subaru’s head right as she was about to help herself to Jean’s plate.

“Why not?! He said I could have some!” Subaru complained.

“You were practically begging for it! If you keep this up, you really won’t be getting any dessert!”

“Why not?! What’s so fun about bullying a hungry Subaru, huh?” Subaru cried.

“T-Tori, it’s fine, really!” Jean interjected.

“It’s *not* fine! She’ll let it get to her head if you keep on indulging her! Anyway, no taking food from the guests! If you want seconds, I can always make some more, but get your food from the big plate first. Here, hand me your plate. I’ll serve you some.”

“*You* sure are quick to indulge her, though,” Shinozuki muttered.

“Andrea dear, could you please pass me the salt?” Cecilia requested.

“This shaker right here?”

“Tori, your cooking is amazing as always! I feel like it’s been a while since I’ve savored it like this,” Suzanna remarked.

Euphemia looked confused at Suzanna’s comment. “What do you mean?” she asked as she finished chewing.

“Huh? Oh, well, back when we were at the Muddy Four-Horns, we were all so busy that we didn’t have the time to sit down and enjoy our meals. We all felt like we’d get overtaken by other clans if we slacked off even a little. We were so swamped back then. Right, Andrea?”

“That’s right. That was around the time we caught wind of the plans to merge the clans. We were worried we might lose our seat at the table if we showed

any sign of weakness, so we were all tense and anxious. We all feel terrible about what we did to Tori.”

“Enough of that talk already and eat up. Aren’t you guys hungry after all that fighting?” Tori urged.

“We’re eating. And it tastes great,” Andrea said.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

It had been a long time since Tori last heard his friends praise his cooking. He turned to his food to try and hide his embarrassment. A dour expression formed on his face as he realized something was missing.

“Shino, where’s my meat?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Why do you think I’m asking you?”

“Why indeed!”

“Don’t play dumb with me! I *just* said to take from the big plate! Don’t take food from mine!”

“But the food on yours looked tastier!”

“They’re all the same! And I *knew* it! You *did* take from my plate!”

Andrea cackled as he watched Tori and Shinozuki squabble. “It sure is lively around here,” he said.

On the side of the table away from the commotion, Euphemia lifted a plate of pasta and offered it to Cecilia. “I made this. Give it a try,” she said.

“My, how unusual. Jean dear?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Here, say ‘ah.’” Cecilia twirled some pasta on a fork and offered it to Jean.

“U-Umm, I can eat it by myself!” Jean was flustered and started turning red.

“Heh heh, don’t be shy. Come on. Say ‘ah.’”

Jean reluctantly acquiesced and opened his mouth, seemingly overwhelmed by Cecilia’s insistence. It didn’t seem like he could escape her clutches. Cecilia

pushed the pasta into his mouth.

“Heh heh, how is it?” she asked.

“Ish good, fank you...” Jean’s face was red as a tomato as he chewed. Cecilia had a satisfied smile on her face.

“Hey, why don’t you feed your big sister a bite too?”

“O-Okay...”

“What a mess,” Tori muttered as he shoved a bite of the roast into his mouth. The sight of Cecilia and Jean feeding each other looked positively immoral. As he watched them, he felt the eyes of someone on him. Beside him, Euphemia was fixing him with an expectant gaze.

“What is it?” Tori asked her.

“Ahh.” Euphemia opened her mouth wide. Tori looked at her, then at his plate, then at the others. Jean was busy being toyed with by Cecilia, while the others were busy enjoying their food. No one was paying attention to him.

“Here you go.” Tori scooped up some omelet with his spoon and fed it to Euphemia.

“Nom.”

When Tori pulled the spoon from Euphemia’s mouth, a strange feeling washed over him as he watched it slide out from her closed lips.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Euphemia nodded, clearly satisfied.

Once dinner was over and everyone had finished their tea and dessert, everyone was feeling sleepy and full. A lazy atmosphere hung over the parlor. A fire was burning in the fireplace, illuminating the room and causing objects on the ceiling to cast hazy shadows of various shapes.

“Here, bring this to Cyril,” Tori said as he handed a box of leftovers to Suzanna.

“Thanks. And sorry, we really wanted to stay for a bit longer,” Suzanna said

apologetically.

“It’s fine. We’ll have more chances to meet up in the future,” Tori assured her.

“You should come visit us sometime. You’re always welcome,” Andrea invited.

At this, Tori finally let out a laugh and clapped Andrea’s shoulder. “Good luck, man. Don’t get overtaken by the other clans, now.”

“Ha ha, maybe I’ll book some training sessions with Shinozuki, then.”

Shinozuki and Subaru, who were lounging on the couch, heard this and replied to Andrea.

“Bring it on! You’re welcome to challenge me anytime.”

“I’ll join in too! Let’s play again, okay?”

Suzanna let out a wry laugh. “It’s a bit of a challenge to get here. But next time, can I bring Cyril with me?”

“Sure.” Euphemia, who had been clinging to Tori, nodded at her. With that, Andrea and the others turned to leave the house. Outside, thin clouds hung over the sky, but the weather was nice and pleasant. The moon wasn’t visible yet; instead, a myriad of stars shone bright above the trees.

After the battle with Renard, the three of them had traveled here by foot right after reporting Renard’s death to the guild. Andrea and the others hadn’t prepared for a sleepover, and Euphemia’s house wasn’t built to support guests. Suzanna also didn’t want to leave her brother alone all night. Though they all felt like the evening had passed too quickly, both Tori and his three former comrades had managed to speak their thoughts and regrets, and they all felt satisfied. Tori also visited Azrac often, so he was confident that even though they were parting for now, he would see them all again soon. There were no regrets to be had.

In contrast to this heartwarming atmosphere, Cecilia was clinging to Jean in front of the entrance doorway, crying and shaking her head. “Aww, why are you leaving? Jean dear, come back and sleep next to me! You haven’t taken a bath

yet, right? I'll wash your back for you! Okay?"

"U-Um, i-it's getting a bit late... Also, I'm a bit, um..." Jean stammered awkwardly.

"What's wrong? Don't you like your big sister?" Cecilia gave Jean a teary-eyed look. His face turned red and he hesitated to speak at first, but then he seemed to steel himself.

"I-I'd like for us to take it slowly and have a more proper relationship. Cecilia, I don't dislike you, but—"

"Oh, you are so adorable!" Cecilia giggled as she cuddled Jean. His face was buried in her massive breasts, and he was struggling to escape her grasp.

Tori looked exasperated as he watched this scene unfold. He turned to Euphemia. "Hey, can you do something about that? She's your familiar, so keep a leash on her, would you?"

"Okay." Euphemia raised her hand, and her staff, which had been resting inside the house, floated through the air and slammed straight into Cecilia's back. It looked like she had been hit with a spell. She let out a small shriek, becoming momentarily stunned, and dropped to the floor as if she had been shocked by electricity. Jean managed to escape Cecilia's clutches and stumbled back toward Andrea and Suzanna.

"You okay?" Tori asked.

"Y-Yes, I am," Jean replied.

"You gotta be more firm and clear when you get approached like that. Firm and clear, got it?"

"I-I see..." Jean looked perplexed.

Euphemia tugged on Tori's sleeve. "Firm and clear..." she echoed.

"I-I'm not talking about myself, okay?"

Euphemia pouted and looked dissatisfied, but didn't say anything more. She approached Andrea and the others and waved her staff. Soon enough, she and the three of them floated up into the air.

“See you guys soon!” Tori waved to the four as they flew away.

The spell on Cecilia seemed to have worn off, and she walked over to Tori. “Aww, too bad. I thought I’d be able to sully a pure and innocent boy this time,” she said.

“I *knew* you were up to no good,” Tori snapped. “Also, ‘pure and innocent boy’? You know Jean is in his thirties, right?”

“Why, he’s still so young!” Cecilia exclaimed.

“...Never mind.”

When Tori went back into the house, he found Shinozuki and Subaru still lounging around. Come to think of it, it was unusual that he was here with Euphemia’s familiars without Euphemia herself nearby. Regardless, it didn’t change what he had to do next. He had to wash the dishes, prepare tomorrow’s meals, tidy up the kitchen, and clean up after the fires he’d set.

Euphemia returned home while Tori was washing the dishes. She was rubbing her eyes, looking drowsy as she entered the kitchen. She went straight to Tori and hugged him tight, and rubbed her face against his back.

“Welcome back,” Tori greeted. “Were you able to send them home?”

“Yeah, I did,” she replied.

“Take a bath before you sleep, okay?”

“Let’s take one together.”

“I still have to clean up here.”

Euphemia pouted, but she seemed to understand that there was no arguing with him, and she headed toward the bath. Recently, she’d been listening to Tori more often, which was a huge burden off his shoulders.

All the food that Tori had carefully prepared was gone. It was nice that he didn’t have to find room to store any leftovers, but he found it a pain to have to think of what to prepare for tomorrow from scratch. He started to think about what to make for breakfast as he finished washing the dishes.

It was now almost midnight, and only Tori was left awake. The other four had already retreated into the bedroom and were asleep. Only smoldering embers were left in the fireplace, still glowing red-hot. Tori threw shredded ingredients into a bowl and covered it with cloth. He also left bread dough in the fridge to use for tomorrow's breakfast.

Tori always ended up staying up late after cleaning up and preparing for the next day's meals. Even back in his old clan, he would putter around doing miscellaneous chores at the end of the day. Staying up late had become a habit for him.

Tori sighed and pulled off the bandanna that was tied around his head. His hair fell down limply over his forehead.

"I'm pooped," he muttered. It was almost time for him to sleep, but he wanted to take a bath before that. A bath made all the difference when it came to how much fatigue he would feel in the morning.

There was less water in the tub than earlier, but the water was still steaming, which meant there was still fuel burning in the furnace. He took a log and threw it into the furnace to stoke the flames, then went back in and pumped water into the tub. It should warm back up while he was soaking.

The girls had used a copious amount of soap during their baths, resulting in a fragrant scent lingering in the bathroom. Cecilia had synthesized the perfumed soap using herbs and tree bark. Tori felt relaxed just by smelling the fragrance.

Tori stared at his palm as he waited for the water to heat up. During his days as an adventurer, his hand had held a sword. Now, all he'd been holding were axes for chopping wood and knives for chopping food. Thick calluses had formed on his hand, which was starting to turn pale from the heat of the steam.

Tori let out a relaxed sigh. His body now warmed up, he washed his face and got out of the tub. Before putting on clothes, he drained the water from the tub and gave it a quick scrub so he wouldn't have to wash it tomorrow.

"Sure is nice that I get to soak every day..." Tori murmured. He was humming a song while cleaning the tub, still completely in the nude. Suddenly, he heard a voice say his name.

“Tori?” He noticed the door opening slowly and saw Euphemia’s head peek inside.

“Whoa! Hey!” Tori shrieked.

“Why are you still awake?” Euphemia asked.

“I’m about to go to bed!” Tori hurriedly covered himself with a towel and shooed Euphemia away.

Damn it, why am I the one who’s getting embarrassed? Tori thought. *Is being naked normal in the underworld or something? There’s no way.*

Tori roughly dried himself before putting on clothes and exiting the bathroom.

Euphemia was sitting in front of the fireplace, staring at the smoldering embers. She was completely naked with only a cardigan covering her body. Tori sighed and shook his head, then took a freshly folded coat from the laundry and draped it over her.

“It’s rare that you’re up this late,” he said.

“I woke up,” Euphemia replied. She hugged her knees and rested her chin on them. Tori sat down next to her.

“Well, I guess there are nights like that. Sounds like you had a lot of excitement today.”

“Yeah. I made friends. And I had guests for the first time. I was nervous.”

“Really now.”

Hunting down a great demon must have been a piece of cake for Euphemia, but having guests over was apparently a once-in-a-lifetime event for her. It was difficult for Tori to tell because of her lack of facial expressions, but she’d apparently been very nervous, and it had been bothering her all this time. She had tried to lie down in bed and sleep, but she ended up waking up from the excitement.

“Do you think you can go back to sleep?” Tori asked.

“I don’t know,” Euphemia answered, and she leaned her head against Tori.

She appeared to be drowsy, but not enough to fall asleep. Her usual airheaded expression was lit a soft red by the smoldering embers in the fireplace, making her look flushed.

“Do you want some warm milk?” Tori offered.

“Yeah.”

Tori got up and poured milk and sugar into a saucepan, then simmered it over the fireplace embers. He transferred the hot milk into a cup right before it boiled, and handed the cup over to Euphemia.

“Here you go. It’s hot, so be careful,” he warned.

Euphemia took the cup with both hands. She blew on it repeatedly to cool it off, then took a sip.

“It tastes great,” she said.

“Good to hear.”

Euphemia looked like a small creature to Tori. She was curled up while holding the cup of warm milk with both hands. Even so, her face, lit by the glowing embers, was beautiful. Tori felt his heart skip a beat.

A breeze started blowing outside. The sound of rustling leaves echoed, and the windows rattled lightly. Euphemia put the cup down on the floor and massaged her cheeks.

“It’s a bit hot today,” she muttered.

“Seems like you’re quite worked up. Why don’t we take a walk outside so you can cool off?” Tori suggested, and Euphemia nodded.

The two of them put on coats and headed out. The midnight moon hung high in the sky, illuminating their surroundings with a pale blue light. Clouds still stretched thinly above, but the wind would soon blow them away. The clouds were also lit by the moonlight, causing them to cast odd shadows across the sky.

Euphemia leaned close against Tori and clung to his arm. Tori cast his gaze down on her, and had his breath taken away. Dew had settled over the grass, reflecting the moonlight and lighting up the yard with twinkling lights. The sight

of Euphemia walking through the yard was picturesque, with her beautiful white locks tinted blue by the pale moonlight. Her eyes glowed like jewels under the night sky.

“It still feels a bit cold at night,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, it does.” Tori felt his voice squeak a bit as he snapped out of his trance. He awkwardly averted his gaze. Euphemia sighed softly and stared at the night sky.

The bright moon cast enough light on their surroundings that they didn’t need a lamp to see their way. Despite this, the surrounding forest was made of pitch-black shadows, and felt almost as if it were about to swallow them in darkness.

The two of them walked around the yard. Both of them said nothing. The only sounds they could hear were the wind and the cries of frogs and insects. Despite the silence, neither of them felt awkward.

The wind started blowing harder, making the trees rustle even more. Euphemia broke the silence between them with a yawn.



“Are you getting sleepy?” Tori asked.

“Yeah,” she answered. The two of them sat on a bench. Euphemia rubbed her eyes and leaned her weight against Tori. “To be honest, I was a bit scared.”

“Hm? Scared of what?”

Euphemia drew him closer to her. “I was worried that you’d go back to Andrea and the others when you made up with them,” she confessed.

Tori snickered. “Glad to know that you have the same worries as normal people,” he said.

Euphemia pouted. “You got thrown out of your clan, but you were still worried about them. So I thought you still had regrets and wanted to go back to them.”

“But you still went out of your way to help them.”

“I just thought that would make you happy,” she admitted.

Tori laughed and ruffled Euphemia’s hair. Right now, he thought that this girl, who had been giving him grief every single day since he’d come to live here, was extremely adorable.

“I’m not so cruel as to abandon you after you showed me so much kindness. Besides, I like living here, and I promised I’d stick around, didn’t I? You don’t need to worry about me leaving,” he assured her.

Euphemia shut her eyes, seemingly enjoying the sensation of her hair being touched. She leaned against Tori once more.

“I’m happy,” she said.

“Really?” Tori asked.

“I’ve been alone ever since I left mom and dad’s side. I had Shino and the others, but they weren’t living with me. It was always quiet at my house.”

“I see. Were you lonely?”

Euphemia turned her gaze toward Tori at this question. “I wasn’t, but I was bored. My house was filthy, so Shino and the others would just go straight home after finishing their jobs. I couldn’t even imagine having anyone over for a

meal,” she said. She gently rubbed her cheek against Tori’s shoulder.

“But now, I’m having a lot of fun. It’s all thanks to you, Tori.”

“O-Oh, no problem,” a flustered Tori said, and he scratched his cheek. He still wasn’t used to being showered directly with words of affection.

Euphemia let out a big yawn. It looked like her excitement had waned, giving way to drowsiness.

“Looks like you’ll sleep soundly tonight,” Tori said to her.

“Yeah...” Euphemia mumbled with her eyes closed, still leaning against him.

“Wait, are you asleep?”

“Zzz...”

“Aren’t you cold out here?”

No response. He could only hear the gentle sounds of Euphemia’s breaths.

“You sure are a handful sometimes,” Tori muttered. He shifted his posture so Euphemia could lean against him more comfortably. She wriggled a bit and mumbled something, then leaned into him even farther.

I’ll take her to her bedroom later.

Tori wrapped his arm around Euphemia, attempting to shield her from the wind as he gazed at the night sky.

So many things had happened to him today. Tori had reconciled with his former comrades and had dinner with them. Everything happened so spontaneously, but looking back, today had been a turning point for him. His lingering regrets toward his days as an adventurer were now completely gone. Euphemia had worried that he would go back to his old friends, but on the contrary, it only solidified his decision to walk a different path from them. Perhaps the true source of his regrets had been his inability to help his friends achieve their goals.

The events since dinner had come and gone like a storm. It was almost as if Tori had been dreaming all this time. He had a silly thought—what if he woke up from the dream and into a completely different reality? But he dismissed

these thoughts upon seeing Euphemia sleeping next to him, exhaling gentle breaths as she leaned her weight against him.

She really is quite cute, Tori thought. A beauty out of his league, even.

Tori looked up again and felt that he was truly blessed. Several thoughts and memories went through his mind. Perhaps he was feeling sentimental after realizing he had entered a new chapter in his life.

Euphemia had brought him here immediately after his old clan—the Muddy Four-Horns—had disbanded. He had been shocked by the White Witch’s true identity, and even more so by the dire state of her house. For several days, he led a routine of cleaning and cooking. It was day after day of work for him. Euphemia and her familiars had been a constant source of grief and annoyance, but mysteriously, he didn’t feel like those had been awful times. He might be used to them by now, but strangely, he also felt that his relationship to the four of them was just the right kind. He felt familial ties to all of them, no matter how superficial that might seem.

Tori had no idea what awaited him in the future. Would he end up as a groom to Euphemia, or would his relationship with her grow into something completely different? He couldn’t even begin to imagine what was in store for him. When he’d left the countryside to pursue his goal of making it as an adventurer, he’d certainly never imagined he would be living the life he was now.

Tori let out a sigh. *Well, I just have to keep going like I always do*, he thought. Regardless of what he thought or felt, the sun would rise tomorrow, signaling the start of a new day. He would have to prepare food, do the laundry and cleaning, and do the daily chores that kept their lives in order. That was his new role.

Euphemia was mumbling and wiggling in her sleep. She curled up and hugged her knees. It would seem that she was getting cold. It was almost time to take her to her bedroom. With a pang of regret that this moment would soon come to an end, Tori gazed at the moonlit garden still twinkling from the midnight dew.

Afterword

Lately, the idea of a slow life in the countryside has been gaining popularity and is starting to show up in light novels being published online. I admit—tilling the fields, taking care of animals, and living a slow and comfy life certainly does sound appealing. But in reality, living in the countryside takes a lot of work, and it's anything but slow and comfy. In the modern era, we have all the conveniences of water, electricity, and gas, but if you construct your life around using artesian wells and firewood, living in the countryside becomes nothing but backbreaking hard labor. It would be fine if one is willing to put in all that work, but then you have to consider how it would work in modern society. When you start thinking about taxes and sources of income, the concept starts to sound absurd.

This is why I decided to indulge in this idyllic life in the fantasy genre. Magic is what makes fantasy stand out from all the rest. And if it's casual fantasy, you don't have to think too hard about all the anachronisms. This story borrows its setting from Europe in the Middle Ages but brings in some conveniences here and there from the modern era. All the oddities can be conveniently swept under the rug with the magic words: "It's all just fantasy."

I had started this story as a sort of break for myself, but at some point, it turned into a whole book. Though, it's not a published book yet at the time of writing, so I can't write my thoughts about the real thing just yet. Still, the text is pretty much done, and I've already gotten the character designs and inserts from syow, the illustrator for this novel. And I must say, seeing how cute Euphemia and the familiars turned out almost made my pen slip and kill off Tori out of envy. The power of art is terrifying. Thankfully, no such accidents happened, and the story reached its completion without incident.

Unlike writing for the internet where I could do whatever I wanted, I had to borrow the help of several people so this book could be published. I would like to thank my editors, O and W, who reached out to me for the publication, and I must also bow to syow, the illustrator, whose adorable drawings gave color to

the world of this story.

And finally, this novel would be nothing without its readers. Knowing that you have read this far fills me with joy. There is nothing particularly fresh or original about this story, but it would be my greatest pleasure as its author if it has provided you with momentary entertainment.

And if more volumes are to be published in the future, I would be honored if you would pick up my work once more.

MOJIKAKIYA

February 2023

A Cozy Life in the Woods with the White Witch

author: MOJIKAKIYA

illustrator: SYOW



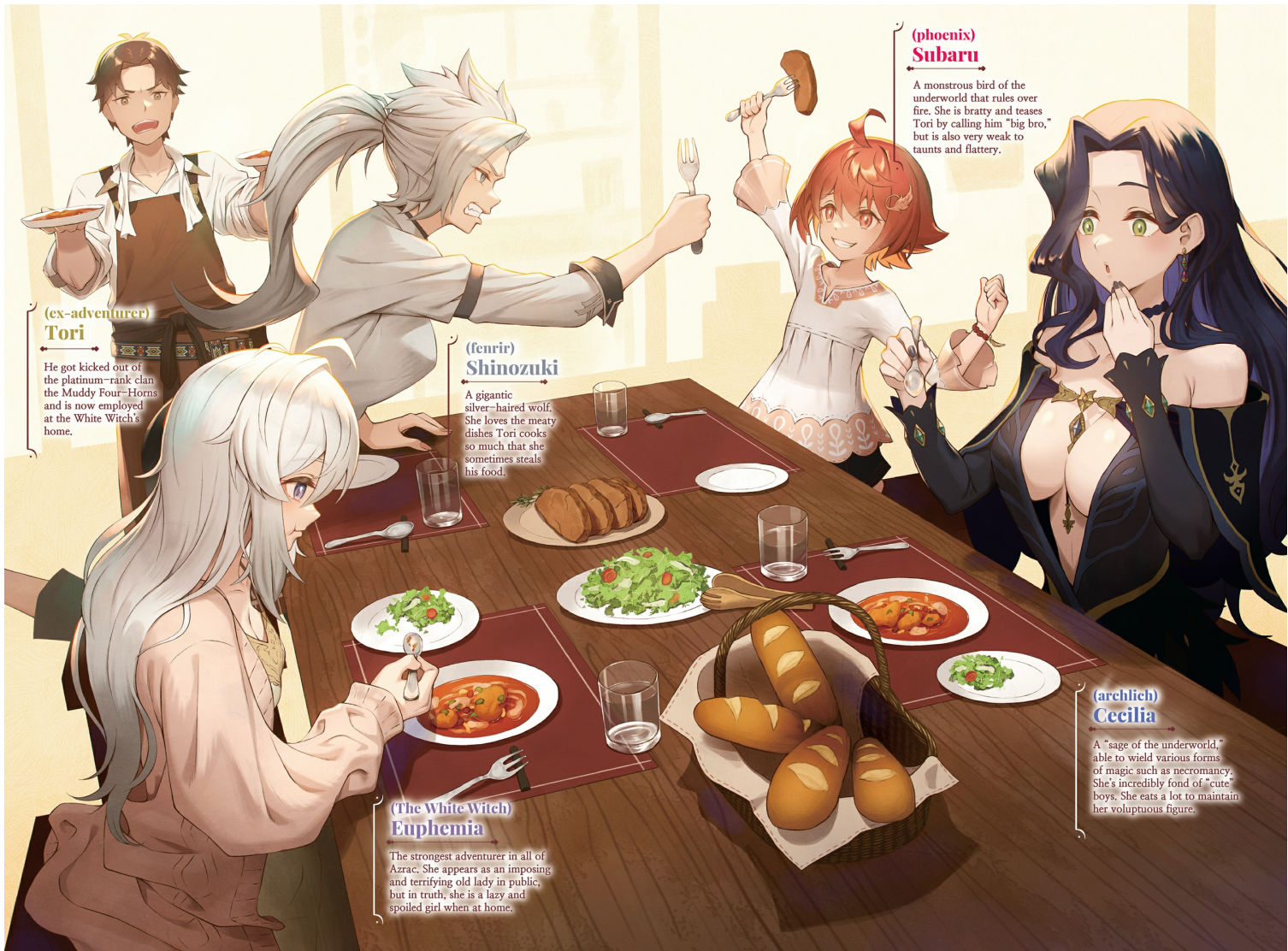
1



“Your
first job...
Please
clean all of
this up.”

Tori was utterly
shocked and
appalled at the
state of the house.
The clutter was
beyond his wildest
expectations.

A Cozy Life
in the
Woods
with the
White Witch



(ex-adventurer)
Tori

He got kicked out of the platinum-rank clan the Muddy Four-Horns and is now employed at the White Witch's home.

(fenrir)
Shinozuki

A gigantic silver-haired wolf. She loves the meaty dishes Tori cooks so much that she sometimes steals his food.

(phoenix)
Subaru

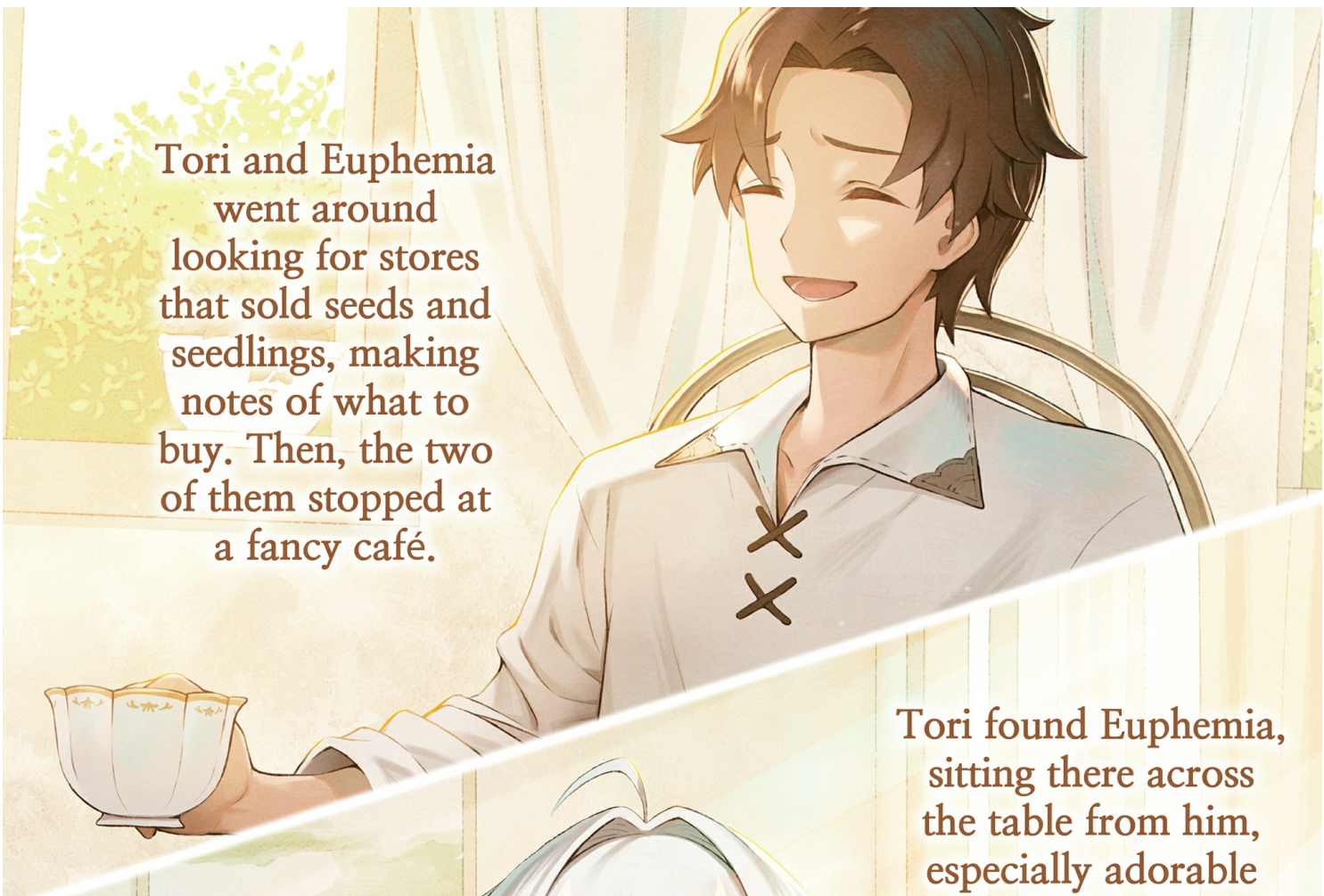
A monstrous bird of the underworld that rules over fire. She is bratty and teases Tori by calling him "big bro," but is also very weak to taunts and flattery.

(The White Witch)
Euphemia

The strongest adventurer in all of Azrac. She appears as an imposing and terrifying old lady in public, but in truth, she is a lazy and spoiled girl when at home.

(archlich)
Cecilia

A "sage of the underworld," able to wield various forms of magic such as necromancy. She's incredibly fond of "cute boys." She eats a lot to maintain her voluptuous figure.



Tori and Euphemia
went around
looking for stores
that sold seeds and
seedlings, making
notes of what to
buy. Then, the two
of them stopped at
a fancy café.



It was
a shame
about the
cream on
her face,
though.

Tori found Euphemia,
sitting there across
the table from him,
especially adorable
today. While she was
incredibly lazy and
unkempt at home, the
combination of a
proper set of clothes
and the fashionable
backdrop of the café
made her look like a
veritable beauty.



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A Cozy Life in the Woods with the White Witch: Volume 1

by MOJIKAKIYA

Translated by Amanogawa Tenri Edited by Alex Chiccola

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Illustrations by syow

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