



EXPEDITION COOKING

with the
**ENOCH
ROYAL
KNIGHTS**

2

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 2

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 2

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SLAVE TRADER'S GUARD
ZARA AHTO

SLAVE TRADER
CROW LUDTINK

ASSISTANT SLAVE TRADER
JUNE ULGUS

CAPTURED ELF SLAVE
MELL RISURISH

MERCENARY
ANNA VELREY

CAPTURED GRIFFIN
AMELIA

THE HEIRESS'S
CHAPERONE
GARR GARR

NEW MONEY HEIRESS
LISELOTTE LICHTENBERGER

**SECOND EXPEDITIONARY
SQUADRON INFILTRATION ROLES!**



Chapter 1: Medic Risurisu and Her Bread

A few months had already passed since I moved from the Fore Elf Forest to the royal capital. Work was starting to come more naturally to me. At first, I was sure there was no way I'd be able to make it through any expeditions, but I was surprised to find out how much my knowledge gained from a life in the woods came in handy. I even felt a sense of accomplishment by being able to contribute to the team. My life as a knight wasn't too shabby.

But I never would have dreamed that those expeditions would provide me with opportunities to cook. It was quite difficult to think up nutritious meals and cook them at the campsites with what limited ingredients I could find. But all those worries faded away whenever the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron tasted my meals and told me they were delicious.

The brilliant work of my squadmates was what allowed me to devote my time to cooking for them. Yes, they were indeed brilliant, although they were also quite the group of characters...

Captain Ludtink was always fearlessly cutting down monsters with his longsword. He had a rough way of speaking and the face of a bandit, but he was someone I knew I could trust.

Vice Captain Velrey was a woman, but she had a beautiful style of fighting that utilized her dual blades and impressive speed. She was like a caring older sister who always looked after me.

Garr, the wolfman, was the quiet sort of fellow, but he was kinder and more gentlemanly than any man I knew. He would always help me out and tell me to take breaks when I was running out of steam on expeditions.

Ulgus, the archer, was one year younger than me—an outgoing, energetic young man. He never failed to praise my cooking as soon as he took a bite. I thought of him like a little brother.

Finally, there was Zara. Despite his beautiful features, he cut down monsters

with a long ax, earning him the nickname of the “Ferocious Ax-Wielding Prince.” We shared interests in embroidery and cooking, so we often spent our days off together. He was a shockingly gorgeous man with a hobby (or is it a lifestyle?) of cross-dressing.

Together, these members made up the Second Expeditionary Squadron.



TODAY, once again, we were receiving orders from our glaring captain.

“We’re going to Mount Nitron to exterminate monsters. Prepare enough supplies for three whole days.”

Mount Nitron was a three-hour trip by horseback from the capital city. The landmark was sometimes called the “White Mountain” because of its many limestone deposits and white trees.

“Mount Nitron has plants called ‘streese’ that make up its forests. They’re full of magical energy, but something out there’s been stripping their bark, so it’s up to us to inspect the scene and exterminate the enemy,” he continued to explain.

It was said to be a primeval forest worshiped as a sacred ground throughout history—only now, some kind of thief was sneaking in to steal the bark.

“The bark of these streese supposedly get used in all sorts of enchanted tools, so it fetches a nice price on the black market, although another unit’s already looking into that.”

We were assigned this mission by the higher-ups of the Royal Order, who believed it was perfect for the “select elites of the Second Expeditionary Squadron.”

“Be ready to depart in thirty minutes, all of you.”

We saluted Captain Ludtink, accepting these orders, and separated to prepare for our journey.

I first went to grab my bag of necessities. I found it and slung the bag over my shoulder—inside were shirts, undergarments, handkerchiefs, and other things I kept packed away. Next, I headed to the food storage shed outside our barracks

and began to stuff a large sack full of food.

Three days' worth of rations was no easy feat to haul around.

Zara showed up during the process to lend me a hand.

"Oh, Melly! This looks so good."

He was holding a jar of shellfish soaking in a mixture of olive oil, chili peppers, alcohol, and spices.

"It tastes as good as it looks," I said with a smile.

"I can't wait to try it," he said longingly.

"It'll be worth the wait!"

But this wasn't the time for chit-chat. I closed my mouth and focused on my hands instead.

Finally, I brought my horse over and hitched my bags to its saddle.

Twenty-five minutes later, I managed to arrive at the meet-up spot just in time. I let out a sigh of relief.

"There will be monsters on Mount Nitron. Be prepared for battle."

We mounted our horses and took off for the destination.

The sun was out, and a pleasant breeze caressed us, but we had to remember that we were riding into danger. I couldn't find any enjoyment in the nice weather, although that was normal when we were on the clock.



THE road to Mount Nitron was a simple trip for us. Any monsters we met along the way were swiftly exterminated by my squadmates.

Eventually, we arrived safely at our destination.

As I peered up at the towering mountain before us, I couldn't help letting out a cry of awe. "Wow! It really is a white mountain!"

Its nickname was truly fitting—all the trees, flowers, and even the dirt and pebbles were entirely white. The captain had called this a sacred place, but the atmosphere was still much different from the forests that I knew. I felt the

strange urge to stand up tall and proud as a Fore Elf.

We followed Captain Ludtink up the cool, damp mountain trail.

Zara scowled as he took in the sights of Mount Nitron. “Why’s it so white here? It’s creepy.”

“You’re right about that...” I agreed.

Everything around us looked just like a snowy mountain. It made the place feel strangely inhuman.

“I bet a great spirit must have been responsible for making a place like this,” Zara remarked.

“The nature here does feel a bit different,” I said, looking around.

It was also harder to breathe in these woods—perhaps because of the thick magical energy in the air, and definitely not helped by the sharp incline of the mountain trail.

Suddenly, a shiver ran through my body. Garr let out a roar at the exact same time, warning us of approaching monsters.

“All hands, prepare for combat!” Captain Ludtink didn’t hesitate to bark out orders.

Ulgus dragged me up the hill by my arm while Captain Ludtink and Garr descended to take our place. I could hear the grass rustling as the monsters approached. My heart began to pound in my chest.

Having the high ground was an advantage during any normal battle. Ulgus, an archer, had positioned us here, meaning we’d definitely have the upper hand. I imagined the monsters instinctively knew that as well.

But the assailing monsters had come from behind us.

“These are either mid-tier monsters who thought they could beat us anyway, or low-tier monsters who don’t understand the terrain,” I said.

Ulgus let out a loud sigh. He drew an arrow from his quiver and drew it back in his bow.

The creatures that emerged from the trees were...herb monsters!

Flowers sprouted from their heads, with grass drooping down underneath like hair. Despite their human-like appearance, the monsters had no eyes or noses, and their mouths were more like slits—a deeply unnerving sight. From their torsos grew lengths of slithering vines.

The creatures were normally green, but those that lived in these woods appeared to be entirely white. Herb monsters also posed a constant threat to us Fore Elves who resided in the woods.

Just then, something very important hit me.

“Be careful!” I shouted loud enough for the others to hear. “Herb monsters secrete poison from their vines!”

Their skin would grow inflamed like a burn if they made contact with the monsters. They needed to stay away.

Herb monsters were classified as mid-tier monsters. It seemed that they chose to attack us because they believed we could be defeated. There were three monsters in total. Each stood about five feet tall—the same height as me.

Ulgus sent his first arrow flying, then a second, third, and forth in quick succession. His shots struck the herb monsters perfectly. The wounds weren't fatal, but it was enough to stop their momentum.

Garr followed up by striking its brow with his spear, while Captain Ludtink finished it off with his long sword. The head of the monster went flying.

It was Zara who took on the second monster. It wrapped its tentacle around the handle of Zara's battle ax, but he yanked it backwards, sending the monster flying toward him.

Vice Captain Velrey tore it to shreds with her pair of swords, while Captain Ludtink delivered the final blow again.

The third monster had already sustained multiple strikes from Ulgus's arrows. Impressively enough, he'd pinned its tentacles to the trunk of a tree with those arrows.

Garr finished the monster off with a strike from his spear. With that, the herb monsters had been exterminated.

The battle lasted a mere ten minutes.

But the relief I felt was short-lived.

“...Huh?”

Something had coiled around my foot. Immediately, I realized it was one of the severed vines from an herb monster—roughly one and a half feet in length. It trembled slightly as it attempted to slither up my thigh.

“Eek! Wh-What’s happening?!” I screamed.

How could the vines still move when the monster was dead?

I felt heat coming from the appendage. It began to burn hotter and hotter, melting away my leather boots. The sheer shock of the sensation caused me to fall on my butt.

I knew I needed to get it off of me, but I was too scared to move. *What do I do...?*

“N-NOOO...!”

“Medic Risurisu!!” Vice Captain Velrey rushed toward me, tore the vine from my leg, and started ripping it to pieces. “Ngh...!” she groaned with pain.

The vine tried to wrap itself around the vice captain’s hand, but she quickly tossed it to the ground where it met its end under Captain Ludtink’s boot. He stomped down the other vines too so that they couldn’t spring back to life.

“Are you all right, Medic Risurisu?” she asked me.

“Oh, um...I’m...all right. But what about you...?” I asked, worried.

My boot had survived with only a little damage, meaning there weren’t any actual holes in the material. But Vice Captain Velrey’s gloves weren’t nearly as thick as my boots.

“I’m just fine,” she said.

“May I take a look?”

I gently took the hands that had grabbed hold of the vine. Vice Captain Velrey looked away, embarrassed. Her gloves had dissolved to reveal red, swollen skin underneath.

“This needs to be treated immediately,” I said firmly.

“Sorry to make you go to the trouble.”

I cut away her gloves with my knife and poured water over her skin to cool it down. The wounds weren’t too serious. Fortunately, her hands had only grown red, but not quite reached the point of blistering. I covered them with a salve for burns I’d made with lavender.

Once they were dry, Captain Ludtink came to take a look for himself. “You sure you’re all right, Velrey?”

“I’m fine.”

“Can you still hold your swords?”

“Of course.”

As much as I wanted her to rest until the inflammation subsided, I knew that probably wouldn’t be possible.

Vice Captain Velrey put on a spare pair of gloves as if nothing had even happened. As she walked away, her gait steady and gallant, I chased after her to express my gratitude.

“Um, Vice Captain Velrey? Thank you for rescuing me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you’re safe, Medic Risurisu.”

I felt myself on the verge of tears. Vice Captain Velrey gave me a pat on the back, even though I knew her hand must still be stinging from the burns.

I was expecting a scolding from Captain Ludtink, but all he had to say was a simple “Be more careful.” It was almost a letdown.

But he was right. I did need to be careful. As a non-combatant, I couldn’t allow myself to be a burden to the others.

I patted my cheeks with a bit of force to get myself motivated.



AFTER the monster encounter, we walked for another hour without spotting any signs of civilization, although we did spot a number of streese with bark stripped away.

“The surface of the trunks still looks fresh and exposed. I don’t think much time has passed since the bark was taken.”

“I see.”

This meant that Garr’s nose would come in handy. He could pick up the scent of whoever was responsible for stealing the bark.

“What do you think, Garr?” I asked him.

He turned to look toward the base of the mountain. It appeared the culprits had doubled back and retreated in that direction.

“We’re gonna have to ambush them.” Captain Ludtink ordered us to follow the scent back down the mountain.

...Although, the way he said it really made it sound like we were the bad guys here. But perhaps that was just because of the scowl on Captain Ludtink’s face.

The first thing we did was take a break to rest up. I knew everyone must be tired after their battle earlier. Unfortunately, we couldn’t light a campfire, since it would alert the enemies to our presence. All we could do was fill our empty stomachs with water, bread, and jerky. We topped the bread with things like cheese, smoked meats, oil-poached shellfish, and candied fruits.

“I wish I could have made something warm for you...” I said, regretful.

“Don’t worry about it, Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus said. “You already make the best jerky and bread around, so we’re plenty happy with just this.”

Ulgus’s words nearly moved me to tears.

Next, I went to Vice Captain Velrey to check on her injury.

“Um, Vice Captain Velrey? May I take a look at your hands?”

“Of course. Sorry for all the trouble.”

I asked her to take off her gloves and saw that her hands were still just as red. I realized that maybe keeping the gloves chafing against her skin wasn’t good for the injury.

“I’m going to apply some more burn salve,” I told her.

“I appreciate it.”

Once I was finished, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thanks, Medic Risurisu.”

“You’re welcome.”

She was the one thanking me, despite it being my fault she ended up injured in the first place. She was such a kind person.

...Just then, something hit me.

“Oh, wait a minute. Did you already have your bread?” I asked.

“Ah, well, I was still working on it.”

“I’m sorry! Now your hands are covered in ointment!”

I’d applied burn salve to her right hand and a different ointment to her left hand, since the skin looked dry and rough. But that meant she couldn’t use either one until the medicine dried fully.

“Please let me feed you the bread instead,” I offered.

“Uh, that’s all right...”

“But your body won’t recover if you don’t eat properly!”

With that, I cut up strips of Vice Captain Velrey’s partially eaten bread.

“Do you want me to put any toppings on it? I personally recommend the oil-poached shellfish.”

“Sure, I’ll try that one then...”

I removed some of the shellfish from the jar, drained the excess oil, and placed them on top of the bread.

“There. All done. Say ‘aaah’!”

“...Thanks, Medic Risurisu.”

Vice Captain Velrey bit down on the bread I held out for her.



“These shellfish are delicious. They’re so plump and juicy,” she said, commenting on the taste.

“I’m glad to hear it!”

This was a dish I was proud of, so I was happy to receive her praise. Next, I held out her leather pouch of water for her to drink from.

“Whoa!”

“Mmph...”

Water was leaking from the corners of her mouth. Helping someone drink was proving to be difficult.

“I-I’m sorry...” I apologized.

“No, it’s fine.”

I wiped her mouth and returned to feeding her more bread.

“Would you like any jerky?”

“No, thanks. Can I have some more bread?”

“Sure thing.”

For her next slice, I decided to top it with candied fruit this time. I also managed to help her drink water again—this time without any trouble, which was a relief.

“Thanks, Medic Risurisu.”

“Of course.”

It felt reassuring to know I’d fulfilled my role as a combat medic.

Just then, a smirking Captain Ludtink called out to Ulgus. “Hey, Ulgus. If you want her to feed you too, why not just ask?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“You looked real jealous just now when you were watchin’ them.”

“Well, you’re not wrong...”

Ulgus wanted me to feed him? But he’s not even injured.

“Ulgus, I’ll feed you a treat if you can ‘shake.’”

I stuck out my hand like I was commanding a dog to perform a trick...only to have Ulgus actually reach out and place his hand on mine.

“Um, I was just kidding...” I said wryly.

“Sorry, I totally thought you were serious.”

But his unwavering expression was too funny not to follow through with it. I fed him bite after bite, since he looked so truly happy, but Zara stopped me in the act.

“Melly, he’ll be too full to move if you feed him that much.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Ulgus looked depressed when he saw me string the bag of bread back up to my horse’s saddle. He really did remind me of a dog. I almost wanted to give him some nice head pats.



ONCE our break was over, Garr led us back down the mountain.

We returned to the foot of the mountain in no time at all. Since we suspected that the enemies were traveling back and forth through this area, we decided to wait nearby.

I climbed up a tree at Captain Ludtink’s orders.

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr hid behind it, while Zara crouched low in the grass. Ulgus had climbed up another tree, ready to strike.

Captain Ludtink chose a spot near the entrance to the mountain trail to hide. Seeing him crouching in the shadows with his sword out, ready to attack, really made him look like a bandit, unfortunately.

We believed that the foes were probably sneaking in under the veil of night to steal the bark. The five of us took turns resting as we waited for their arrival after sundown.



THREE hours passed. Just then, I heard the sound of distant footsteps. Garr

seemed to hear it too. He let out a whistle that sounded like the chirp of a bug.

We all quieted our breathing and focused our nerves. All I could do was remain silent so as not to interrupt the others' work.

There were three enemies approaching—a lot less than I had expected. They would surely be no match for the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

However, there could be no greater foe than carelessness.

We couldn't simply arrest them as soon as they entered the mountain. First, we needed to witness them in the act.

Garr, Vice Captain Velrey, and Ulgus would be the ones tailing them.

My eyes were finally starting to get used to the dark of night.

Just then, the three criminals—or rather, suspects—entered the mountain trail. Our three members began to follow them, keeping a bit of distance as they moved. The rest of us would take the same path once they had a head start.

A few minutes later, I heard Captain Ludtink give the word, so I climbed back down from my tree.

"Don't you leave Zara's side, Medic Risurisu."

"Yes, sir."

"Zara, you grab her by the scruff of her neck."

"Captain, I don't think that's very—"

"Save it. Let's get movin'."

Captain Ludtink began to ascend rapidly up the trail. I had to jog to keep up with him. I was starting to run out of breath, but along the way, Zara began to pull me by the arm, which made it a lot easier to move.

"Are you okay. Melly?"

"I-I'm managing."

"Want me to carry you on my back?"

"No, since you might have to fight once we get there..."

“I could carry you just fine, Melly.”

Captain Ludtink’s speed continued to increase steadily.

“Um, Melly? You all right?”

“I-I can still...make it...”

Sweat trailed down my brow. I was nearing my limit, but I had to exert myself. I couldn’t fall behind the men.

Just then, I heard the whistle of a bug being made with a reed pipe. It was Garr.

We met up with him and received his report that just ahead, the enemies had begun to strip the bark of the holy trees. Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus were watching over them nearby.

“Sounds like we’ve got our targets.” Captain Ludtink headed toward the scene, cracking his fingers as he walked.

We met up with Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus next.

“Captain, we’ve confirmed that the people up ahead are the culprits.”

“They’re cutting off the bark with some sort of special knife.”

“Got it.”

From a distance, Ulgus and I watched them take step after careful step toward the enemy. The men were busy with their work. They didn’t seem to notice the approaching knights.

“You three! What are you doing there?!”

The culprits all jolted and turned to point their lanterns toward Captain Ludtink.

“Who’re y— EEEEEK!! A bandit!”

“W-We don’t have any valuables or anything!”

“P-Please, just spare our lives!”

The criminals were so scared by the sight of the bandit...I mean, the captain, that they immediately surrendered. They knew they couldn’t beat him.

“I’ll spare you. Just—”

“EEEEK!”

“We’ll do anything!”

“Don’t hurt us!”

Vice Captain Velrey and Captain Ludtink tied up the intruders, due to how agreeable they were being, then announced themselves as the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

“Huh? You’re not a bandit?”

“That’s hard to believe...”

“How can a knight look so much like a bandit?”

“Shut your traps!”

It only took one glare from Captain Ludtink’s terrifying face to get them to behave again.

We then led the tied-up men back down the mountain to the local village.



THE next day, a different squadron was scheduled to come transfer the captives back to the capital city. But our mission was complete. My squad members’ faces were sunny and happy, with the one exception being the captain.

“Did I really I look like a bandit to them?” he asked, serious.

The room fell silent. No one knew how to respond...except for Ulgus, who burst out laughing.

“Shut it, Ulgus!”

“S-Sorry, Captain!”

Ulgus took off running. Captain Ludtink chased after him.

Once they were both gone, the rest of us began to laugh too.

“Captain Ludtink’s bandit face was what allowed us to resolve things peacefully,” I said. “I wish he knew that.”

Zara agreed with that conclusion. “That’s so true. Not that we could ever say that to him.”

But in the end, the case was closed, and that was what really mattered.

As I watched Ulgus flee from the captain, I basked in the feeling of accomplishment gained from the success of our mission.

Chapter 2: Forest Crab Soup

THE sky was blue. The clouds were white. And the sea...it stretched on and on forever!

The six of us were currently embarking on a journey via ship.

“Look at all the seabirds, Captain Ludtink!” I exclaimed.

“I know, I know. Pipe down already,” he groaned.

Captain Ludtink was slumped against the side of the boat, his face looking particularly pale. I imagined he must have sensitive inner ears. He’d been battling seasickness ever since we first set sail.

The boat rocked slightly as we stared out at the ocean.

“Urp!” The teary-eyed captain pressed his hand to his mouth.

“Here, please have this scented bag to help with your nausea,” I said, offering him the bag.

I had made special preparations for my very first boat ride. I had prepared a mixture of chamomile, lavender, and frankincense filtered through a cloth and placed in a drawstring bag. Smelling the aromas would relieve seasickness.

Chamomile has a relaxing effect on both the body and the mind. Lavender is able to relieve headaches and nausea.

I made the bag based on the information I’d received from the village healer as a child.

“Is this medicine?” he asked weakly.

“No. It’s a scented bag.”

“I don’t want it.” He turned his head away. “I’ll puke if I smell anything too strong right now.”

“That’s impossible,” I refuted.

“You don’t get seasick, so you don’t understand it.”

“Hmm...”

All I could do was express my sympathies.

Seeing Captain Ludtink in such a delicate state was something new to me. But I felt a bit bad for him too.

“Oh, that’s right.” I clapped my hands together. “There’s a pressure point on the body that relieves seasickness!”

This was something I learned from my village healer too. When I lived in the forest, it didn’t feel like helpful information to me, but that turned out not to be the case. There’s always a right time for knowledge to shine.

“A pressure point for nausea...? Are you serious?”

“I am.”

Supposedly, when pushing on the pressure point on the inner wrist, all discomfort from the chest to the stomach disappears.

“Can you squeeze your fist and bend your wrist down?” I urged.

“Like this?”

“That’s it.”

Squeezing the fist and bending it causes two muscles to bulge upward in the arm. I learned that pressing in between those muscles was what stimulated the pressure point.

“It’s supposed to help with appetite problems, stomachaches, and hangovers as well,” I explained.

“You serious?” he grunted.

“Let’s give it a try,” I said.

I placed three fingers between his hand and wrist, pointing them toward his elbow. My third finger was resting between two muscles. Then I squeezed the spot with my thumb.

“Ow!”

“I’m really not pressing that hard...”

“Liar! That hurts!” he whined.

“I was taught that it needs a good bit of pressure.”

“That’s not a bit! You’re squeezing as hard as you can!”

His pain tolerance was surprisingly low. I couldn’t help but sigh.

Still, it was hard work to press a pressure point. I rolled up my sleeves, prepared to give it my all, but then I heard a voice from behind me.

“Want me to give it a whirl, Melly?” I turned to see Zara smiling as he offered me a hand. “Where exactly do I press?”

“Right here,” I said.

“Gotcha.”

“I appreciate it. It’s kind of exhausting.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling.”

Zara was so kind. I decided to take him up on his offer.

“Melly, why don’t you go grab some tea in the mess deck with Vice Captain Velrey?”

“Are you sure?”

“Totally. I’ve been slacking off all day, so it’s your turn now.”

“Thank you!”

I’d grown tired of tending to Captain Ludtink, so I decided to take Zara up on his offer and have tea with Vice Captain Velrey.

“Oh, that’s right.” I took a scented pouch out of my shoulder bag. “This one’s for you, Zara.”

“Ooh, look at how cute this is,” he said, sounding delighted. “What is it?”

“It’s a scented bag for nausea relief. I made enough for everyone, so it’s yours if you want it.”

Zara accepted the gift happily.

I fastened Captain Ludtink's rejected bag to my own belt.

"I'll be on my way then."

"Sure thing. Have fun!" Zara waved goodbye.

I turned on my heel. It wasn't long until I heard Captain Ludtink howling out again.

"O-Ow! Whatd'ya think you're doin', bastard?!"

"Hmm? This is a medical treatment, dear Captain."

"No, it's not! You're tryin' to kick my ass!"

I was glad to hear that the captain had regained some energy. The pressure point treatment sounded like it was a great success.

Relieved, I began to search for Vice Captain Velrey.

"Ah! There she is!"

Vice Captain Velrey was on the poop deck, staring out at the sea. I called out to her, despite knowing I was disturbing her picturesque scene.

"Vice Captain Velrey!"

She seemed to snap out of her trance when she heard me. Despite having been deep in thought, she was quick to smile and approach me.

"Hello, Medic Risurisu. Is something wrong?"

"Would you like to have tea with me in the mess deck?"

I tried to walk closer to her, but I slipped on a random piece of seaweed and nearly fell over.

"Look out!"

"Whoa!"

Vice Captain Velrey wrapped her arms around me just before I could slam my head into the deck.

"Are you all right, Medic Risurisu?" she asked, concerned.

"Yes, I am. Thank you."

She walked me to the mess hall with her arm around my waist just to be safe. “I’m glad you’re not hurt,” she murmured into my ear.

Vice Captain Velrey was so gallant and cool. Needless to say, this interaction had my heart racing.

We walked down the staircase that descended from the cabin area and headed to the mess deck.

I got myself a glass of juice made with fruit from the southern island. It was sweet, sour, and delicious.

“This mission sounds like it’ll be a tough one,” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“I agree...”

Our mission was to travel to a southern island which was a tourist destination for members of royalty. This ship had even been specially provided to us by the navy.

As for why we were headed to the island, well, it was all to clean up after the royal family.

The culprit was the seventh-born princess (a seven-year-old). She didn’t care for the baby griffin that His Majesty gave her for her birthday and refused to be on the same boat with it, so they ended up leaving it behind on the southern island where it had stayed for the past week.

“I wonder if that baby griffin is still alive...” I mused.

“Who knows? It shouldn’t be able to hunt its own food until it’s three months old or so.”

“I see.”

The griffin supposedly hadn’t entered into a contract with anyone yet.

The princess begged her father to let her raise a griffin after she saw one in a picture book, but the mythical beast they managed to procure for her was something of a brat.

The princess ended up refusing a contract with the griffin after seeing how untamed it was, so unlike the sweet depiction of the creature in her books. The

griffin made no attempts to approach her either.

“They say it’s easy enough to form a contract with a griffin, but mythical beasts choose their own masters,” Vice Captain Velrey explained. “Not just anyone can get a contract with one.”

“I see...”

Our goal was to capture the missing griffin.

The princess, apparently, didn’t want the creature anymore, but griffins were protected mythical beasts. The government was insistent that every last possible griffin be preserved.

But a week had already passed because Her Highness had ordered her servants and bodyguards not to tell anyone what she did. I could imagine the distress they must have been in, unable to disobey such an order.

It was His Majesty the King who discovered the missing griffin when he went to visit his daughter.

“I wonder if we’ll be able to find the creature,” Vice Captain Velrey said, sounding doubtful.

Griffins were said to be very sensitive animals, so I wasn’t sure it was possible myself. I just hoped it wouldn’t be scared when it saw Captain Ludtink’s face.

As Vice Captain Velrey and I chatted, evening fell, and it became time to eat dinner. I was looking forward to trying the source of the appetizing smell in the mess hall.

I went to call Captain Ludtink, Zara, Ulgus, and Garr to dinner.

“Um, are you all right, Captain Ludtink?” I asked.

The captain was looking much less pale when he sat down at the table.

“He sure is, thanks to your pressure point trick, Melly,” Zara said, grinning.

“What pressure point trick?” Ulgus, sitting next to me, piped up to ask me that.

“The technical term for it is an acupuncture point...” I said. “To put it simply, stimulating an acupuncture point that leads to the part of the body

experiencing problems results in increased blood flow that helps promote healing.”

“Wow, who knew there was such a cool healing method,” Ulgus said.

“Right? This is all what my village healer told me, of course.”

“What’s a village...healer?” Ulgus asked.

“He’s like a doctor. He heals people with magic.”

My village healer was a strange fellow who never recommended the act of healing physical problems with magic. Since I had no magical powers, he taught me things that anyone could do, like how to use medicinal herbs and pressure points. I never expected those things to be so helpful later in life. You truly never know where life will lead you. As I told my squad about all this, our dinner arrived.

“Wow... Wait, what?” My excitement was cut short by surprise.

There was something like a white rock set on top of the tray.

What could this be...?

The chef responded to my look of pure confusion.

“It’s salt-crusted fish.”

It appeared to be fish covered with a mix of meringue and salt, then roasted in an oven. This brand-new form of seafood dish was deeply impressive to me.

“How do you eat it?” I asked.

“You split it open with a mallet and eat the inside.” Vice Captain Velrey was the one to explain it to me. She had eaten salt-crusted fish many times, as she grew up in a town by the sea.

“Wow...”

Garr used the mallet to crack open the white salt meringue covering the fish for us. A red fish came into view on the plate. Zara cut it open with his knife, revealing vegetables stuffed inside its stomach.

“I see. So, you roast it with vegetables inside the stomach,” I observed.

It looked very delicious.

Zara cut up enough portions for all of us.

The crew also brought out bread, pickled fish, butter-roasted shellfish, and long-tailed prawns baked in cheese.

I said a prayer before digging in.

When I stabbed the fish with my fork, juices and fat oozed out from the white meat. I brought a bite up to my mouth.

I had expected it to be overly salty, but instead, I received a concentrated bite of umami flavor. The outer skin was salty, of course, but it was delicious when eaten on top of bread. Squeezing some lemon juice over the fish created an even more refreshing and tasty flavor.

The vegetables inside the belly were yummy too...! The leafy greens and root vegetables absorbed the fish's juices, giving them a much richer taste.

The fruits of the sea were truly delectable. That night was a great way to set the tone for the rest of our mission.



OUR pleasant sea voyage soon came to an end.

Not only did we get to eat delicious seafood on the ship, but our job was a simple one—stand by and enjoy a pleasant sail as we waited to arrive at the deserted island.

The sight of the vast ocean was an entirely new one to me, since I grew up in the forest, and I never got sick of gazing out at it.

Captain Ludtink had been freed from his seasickness thanks to Zara's pressure point treatment, but he was still on edge about the prospect of hitting a particularly stormy patch of sea. He looked truly relieved to step onto solid ground again.

The sailors had another job to head out on, so they departed after dropping us off on the island. All we had was the tiny raft we used to travel from the ship to the shore of the island. The sailors would return for us in two days.

If we managed to find the griffin right away, we had fireworks to light that would signal the sailors to come back and retrieve us. There was no other way for us to escape this deserted island, and yet for some reason, it was sort of exciting to me.

As an island owned by the royal family, the sandy beaches were white, and plants growing bounties of fruit painted the landscape.

How else could I describe it other than the perfect picture of paradise?

I was in a great mood, but when I got a look at Captain Ludtink's sour face, I remembered that we were here for a mission.

"We'll split into three groups to find the griffin," Captain Ludtink told us.

Captain Ludtink and Zara would start by searching the island from the right side. The left side was the responsibility of Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus. Garr and I were ordered to travel through the island's forest.

"All right! Let's do this, Garr!" I said to my partner on this mission.

Garr and I let out cheers of determination. We relaxed our straightened posture and crouched down to begin whispering to each other.

"You know, I heard we're allowed to pick whatever fruits and nuts we want from the forest," I said with a grin.

It was one of the sailors who told me we were allowed to eat freely on the island.

The fruit we had at the mess hall had been so incredibly juicy and sweet. I even heard that some fruit tasted even sweeter when cooked, so that sounded like a great challenge to take on for dinner. I knew I had to put effort into finding the best fruit I could.

Wait, no. That's not what we're here for, I had to remind myself.

With that, we set out to search for the griffin.

When I turned back toward the sand, I looked down at the green forest spread out on the other side. It was a strange sight.

"Shall we head out?" I asked.

Garr nodded his head.

“Woow... Woow!” I exclaimed once we made our way into the forest.

There was nothing else to say. The overwhelming presence of nature left me speechless. It was nothing at all like the forest village I was born and raised in.

The vivid green colors of the plant life could only be the result of growing under the brilliant rays of the sun. Even the leaves were unusual. They fanned out like outstretched fingers in brilliant colors of yellow and red. The sailors had informed me which fruits were edible, so we wouldn't run into any trouble there.

As soon as I stepped forward, I spotted a certain fruit.

“L-Look! Fruit with fur on it!” I cried.

The soldiers had told me about a certain fuzzy red fruit. Their description was accurate—there really was a fruit with a coat of fur growing on the outside.

“Gaaarr! Let's take these back with us!” I said loudly.

I happened to have been given a basket for fruit-picking and everything. Captain Ludtink seemed to think that was a suspicious item to take with me, but I lied and told him it was to carry the griffin in.

Garr was tall enough to reach the fruit growing from the tree.

“One person could probably eat about five of these, right?” I guessed.

Garr nodded and began to cut off enough fruit for everyone.

I decided to give one a try for myself. I stuck my knife into the surface and peeled away the skin. The fruit was slightly transparent and appeared to be high in water content. I bit in to taste the sweet and sour flavors of the crispy fruit.

“This is fantastic,” I said dreamily.

Supposedly, you couldn't buy this fruit in the capital city. It was so tasty, but the royal family never tried them because of the “gross” appearance. It was such a waste.

I felt much happier as we continued our march deeper into the forest.

After some time, I noticed something strange about these woods. Firstly, the

humidity was shocking, and the heat was intense. Sweat was starting to form on my brow. There were also a whole *lot* of bugs around.

“Eek!” I cried.

Garr swatted away the flies that were swarming me. There were insects in the Fore Elf Forest, but the large bugs of this forest were terrifying. I hated the creepy buzzing sound of their wings—it only made them scarier to me.

Silently urging myself to ignore the bugs, I continued to press onward.

“Eek!” I screamed again.

A striped yellow and red snake fell on me from above. As soon as it bared its fangs and hissed at me, Garr swiftly thrust his spear at it, killing the snake instantly.

Garr told me that the snakes with pretty colors weren’t poisonous. It was the plain-colored snakes, like brown and black ones, that you had to watch out for.

Despite all the wonderful fruits, this forest was actually quite dangerous.

The next fruit I spotted on our trip was called dragon’s eye. I had heard that it was a delicious fruit of a gelatinous texture. But they were growing so high up in the trees that not even Garr could reach them. I was ready to give up, but Garr told me he would climb the tree and pick them for me.

“No, that’s all right,” I said. “There are *snakes* up there... What? You really don’t mind?”

He explained that he was a great tree climber, so I decided to take him up on the offer.

Dragon eyes were large, round, and shaped like a bird’s egg. Even though they grew so high up, Garr easily scaled the tree and picked them for me. I was so excited to try them later.

The two of us went on to pick from the many other fruit trees we found. My basket was soon packed to the brim with fruit. In fact, it was really heavy now. But Garr even offered to carry it for me. He was so kind.

As I started to enjoy the feeling of my unencumbered stroll, it was then that I heard a cry off in the distance.

“Kreh! Kreeeeh!”

I turned to look at Garr. I could tell he heard it too.

We crept forward, careful not to be detected.

“Gyah! Gyah!”

“Kreh! Kreeeeh!”

Ahead of us was what appeared to be some kind of scuffle between strange animals.

Once we were close enough, we watched on from within a patch of tall grass.

One of them was a dark black bird. It was surprisingly large—maybe three feet tall or so.

The other was an eagle...no, a four-legged creature, no more than one and a half feet tall. Its head, wings, and front legs were those of a hawk, while its torso, back legs, and tail looked like those of a lion. Its entire body was white—a beautiful creature.

Could it be?! The baby griffin?!

“Whoa! That’s the griffin, right?! What should we do, Garr...?”

The two of us discussed what to do in hushed whispers.

Jumping out at it might scare the griffin into fleeing. Instead, we decided that Garr would throw his spear at the black bird while I would go grab the griffin.

When the moment was right and the bird had separated from the griffin just a little bit, Garr took the opportunity to throw his spear.

I rushed forward at the exact same time.

“Gyaaaah!”

“Kreh?”

Garr struck the black bird perfectly with his spear!



I tried to get the griffin inside a leather sack, but I noticed it was covered in scratches.

“Gyaaaah!”

The speared bird used the last of its power to charge at the griffin.

“Look out!”

I jumped forward to shield the griffin with my body. Gritting my teeth together, I prepared to feel the impact of the attacking bird, but that expected pain never arrived.

Confused, I raised my head.

Garr was standing there with his fist outstretched. A bit further away, the black bird was now dead on the ground.

Garr had managed to stop the attack with nothing but his bare fist!

“Whoa! Th-Thank goodness...!”

I let out a big sigh. The situation had been resolved without any injuries.

“K-Kreh?”

“Ah!”

I completely forgot about the griffin. It was staring up at me, cocking its head while still wrapped in my embrace.

I noticed that one of the wings on its back was crooked too, with black feathers stuck along its body. It was a very painful sight. I couldn't stash the creature away in a bag like this.

The griffin was surprisingly calm, so I decided it would be a good idea to do some first aid on it.

“Could you give me a hand, Garr?” I asked.

He nodded and started to hold the griffin, so it would be still.

“Kreh! Kreeeeeeeh!!”

“It's all right. This won't take long,” I said soothingly.

The griffin stomped its feet, but it wasn't acting like it was about to bite or anything like that.

I started by plucking the black feathers out with my tweezers.

"Kreeeeh!" the griffin cried out in pain.

"Don't worry. It will stop hurting soon," I soothed.

"Kreeeeh!"

I felt bad, like I was doing something I shouldn't, but this was all completely necessary.

Once I plucked all the stray feathers out, I washed the blood away with water.

It didn't seem like a good idea to use ointments meant for humans. For the griffin's bent wing, I tied it to a stick to keep it in the right position, then figured that was as much as I could do for the animal.

Fortunately, the griffin didn't seem to be malnourished. It began to sniff at the fruit in my basket, and I wondered if it was hungry.

"Do you eat fruit?"

I picked up one of the fuzzy fruits, peeled it with a knife, and held it out toward the griffin.

"Kreh!"

Thankfully, it had no trouble gobbling down the fruit right from my hand.

I had heard that griffins enjoyed sweet fruits. It was a relief to see that this one still had an appetite.

All that was left of our mission was to carry the griffin back out to the beach.



THE baby griffin was much more well-behaved than I was expecting.

I wondered if the black bird had really given her a fright. She was nuzzling up to me and everything. I ended up carrying her in my arms instead of the bag, since I didn't think she'd try to run.

At this point, lunchtime was upon us, so we decided to stop and eat. The

naval chef had made lunchboxes for us to take with us. Garr and I decided to take up shelter in the abundant vegetation of the forest.

I excitedly unwrapped my lunchbox. “Wow! A seafood sandwich!”

Inside the sandwich were pickled vegetables and long-tailed shrimp.

The long-tailed shrimp is soft and plump, but the pickled veggies are crunchy. I wonder what this spicy-sweet sauce is? It tastes like it has eggs and spices in it. Hmm...I don't know. I should ask the chef some other time.

“Kreh!”

The baby griffin was sniffing in my direction. I tore off a piece of bread to offer her, only for her to turn her head away in rejection. She didn't care for bread, by the look of it. I even tried to feed her a piece of jerky. But she made sure to show that she was dissatisfied.

“Kreh!” cried the griffin cheerfully when I showed her my fruit. She appeared to like naturally sweet fruits, just like the mountain cat that Zara had a contract with.

I wrapped the griffin in my jacket after we finished lunch. Garr picked her up, only to have her start squawking loudly and flapping around, putting her wounds at risk of worsening. With no other choice, I was forced to carry the griffin myself, and she finally calmed down again.

She didn't seem very comfortable with the sensation of Garr's fur. I wasn't sure why that might be. Perhaps he smelled like a predator to her?

But despite being just a baby, the creature was by no means an easy bundle to carry. I was practically out of breath as I trekked through the woods.

We arrived back at the sandy beaches just as the sun was starting to set and discovered that we were the first ones back from the search.

Captain Ludtink took the fireworks to signal the ship with him, so we had no choice but to stay there and wait for the rest of the squad before we could do more.

Garr volunteered to go find firewood when I suggested we make soup for dinner.

I thought we could get by with the nearby driftwood, but apparently, wet lumber wouldn't burn very well for a fire. Garr had to go out further and find the driest wood he could.

I glanced at my side and made eye contact with the baby griffin.

"Kreeeeh!" She cried out a little tune. I could tell she must be in a good mood. The griffin cocked her head and stared up at me.

Griffins are actually pretty cute, huh? I thought to myself as I scratched her under the chin.

"Kreh kreeeh!"

Does she like that? I can't really tell.

I wondered how the princess had treated this griffin exactly.

The animal didn't appear to be particularly fearful, nor was she wild and untamed. She felt a lot more like a dog or a cat. With that comparison on my mind, I reached into my bag and retrieved a water pouch.

Just then, I felt eyes like daggers on me.

I poured some water into my palm, offered it to the griffin, and watched her gulp it down. I realized she had needed more water, even after the fruit. Her gentle tongue tickled my hand.

Wow, she was really thirsty. I should have let her have water before anything else.

While I waited for Garr, I gathered stones in the area to build a simple oven.

The baby griffin watched me prepare for dinner with great interest.

Garr came back to the beach a little while later.

He was carrying a huge bundle of firewood under one arm, and in his opposite hand was a giant-shelled creature.

"Whoa! What's that thing, Garr?!"

He told me it was a type of crab that lived in the woods called a "forest crab."

"Wow... A crab from the forest? That's so incredible."

I only tried crab for the first time after I moved to the royal capital. The memory of the shock I sustained over experiencing such a delicious taste was still fresh in my mind. I was certain that the capital had to be heaven on earth, since I had the opportunity to eat creatures that didn't live in the woods. But now I knew that wasn't true—not for crabs, at least. I was so jealous of this island forest in particular.

“Then let's make forest crab soup for dinner!” I declared.

The forest crab had a strange blue tint to its shell.

It was a heavy-looking creature with a pair of big claws. The crab's shape didn't really remind me of the ones from the ocean.

I dunked the crab in the ocean to wash it clean of dirt. I chuckled a little when I watched how it spit up mud down there in the water. I left the crab there to get it clean and started a campfire in the meantime. The firewood Garr brought me burned perfectly.

After that, I prepared our sleeping bags.

One hour passed.

Garr washed up the forest crab in the ocean and began to cut it apart with his knife. He told me that the creature's shell was really hard to break. Coming from someone as strong as Garr, I knew it had to be true.

Next, I poured some olive oil into my pot and sprinkled garlic and spices onto the forest crab, heating it up until the shell turned red, at which point I poured in water. All that remained was to let it simmer and adjust the taste with salt as needed.

While it was simmering, the sun continued to sink until it vanished from the sky.

“Wow! How beautiful...!” I said in awe.

I looked up and saw that the night sky was covered in a blanket of stars. I reached my hand toward it and felt like I could almost touch them.

Garr and I stared up at that sky until we heard a voice calling us from the distance.

“Medic Risurisu!”

It was Ulgus. I stood up and waved at him.

Ulgus raced up to me like a puppy. I could have sworn I saw the wagging tail behind him as he approached.

“I’m sooo tired,” he groaned.

“You’ve had a long day. I made us some forest crab soup!” I told him.

Ulgus’s eyes lit up with glee when I told him that. “Medic Risurisu, you’re a godsend for having dinner ready for us when we come back!”

“Don’t be silly,” I laughed.

Vice Captain Velrey was next to return.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Thanks. Good work out there, Medic Risurisu, Garr.” She held something out to give to me. It was a cute, white flower. “I picked this for you. I thought it was pretty.”

“Wow!” I was surprised to see such a dainty flower on an island full of flashy vegetation that was impossible to ignore. “Thank you so much. I’ll press this flower to preserve it!”

“Good, I was hoping you would like it.”

“I love it!”

I was so happy. I never had any time to appreciate the flowers when we were in the forest.

As I grinned at the sight of my flower, Ulgus, who was sitting in front of the soup pot, let out a shocked cry.

“Gyah!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“G-... G-... G-...” he sputtered.

“What’s that?” I asked again, unsure of what he was trying to say.

“Griffin!”

“Ah!”

I was so focused on my forest crab soup and my flower, I completely forgot all about it. I had secured this mission’s target—the baby griffin.

“I’m sorry, Vice Captain Velrey, I forgot to report to you. Garr and I found the baby griffin late this morning.”

“Is that right? How lucky that you two found it.”

The griffin had been sound asleep, but the commotion from Ulgus finally roused her. Her feathers were puffed up a bit more than before due to the increase in strange humans.

I also had to report that she had been hurt.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t keep her in a bag, Medic Risurisu?” Ulgus asked.

“I am. She’s quite well-behaved. She also can’t move much, since she’s injured.”

“Really?” Ulgus, watching me stroke the griffin’s head, reached his own hand out.

But then...

“Kreh!”

“W-Watch out!!”

Shockingly, she snapped at his hand with her beak. The griffin glared at him, puffed up her feathers, and let out a low “Kreeeeh...”

“It looks like she’s scared of you,” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“Y-You’re kidding me...” Ulgus lamented.

I realized that I was the only one she really took a liking to, probably because I was the one who fed her earlier.

“Why don’t you feed her some fruit, Ulgus?” I suggested.

“Do you think that will calm her down?” Ulgus peeled one of the furry fruits and placed it in front of the griffin.

But all she did was stick her nose up at it. I figured she must not be hungry.

Ulgus handed the fruit to me next, only for the griffin to start crying “Kreh, kreh!” again.

She wants the fruit now? When I held it out to her, she dug right in.

“I think you’re the only one she’s taken to, Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus sighed.

“No way!” I denied.

That would be bad—very bad. How could I allow a mythical beast belonging to the country to grow attached to me? I had no contract with this creature.

Zara and Captain Ludtink returned in the middle of this conversation.

“Here we are!”

“Welcome back.”

“Don’t tell me we’re last...” Captain Ludtink muttered with a sigh. He seemed more worn out than usual.

“Great work out there, Captain Ludtink,” I said, greeting him with a smile.

“Thanks...”

I knew he must still be exhausted from the ship journey here.

Zara was clutching some pretty leaves. Gleefully, he told me he was going to use them to dye his fabrics.

“Pickin’ all that grass while we’re on the job...” Captain Ludtink shook his head disapprovingly.

“Don’t be silly. I grabbed them while I was cutting away vegetation, so we could keep looking for the griffin!”

Oh, that’s right. I need to tell them about the griffin.

“Captain, I successfully secured the griffin.”

“You what?!”

He was shocked when he spotted the griffin wrapped up in Garr’s jacket.

Ulgus continued on with more information. “She’s very fearful of others, just like you said in your report. She bites if you try to touch her.”

“Is that right...?”

“But she’s formed a bond with Medic Risurisu.”

“That...sounds bad.”

Indeed, it was bad. But there were sure to be griffin experts we could speak to once we returned home. Until then, all I had to do was keep feeding her.

Once I finished my report, I heard the growl of a stomach, only it didn’t belong to me.

“S-Sorry about that. I was too wiped out to have lunch today...”

It was Ulgus. By the sound of it, he was quite hungry.

“Let’s have dinner before anything else, Captain Ludtink,” I suggested.

“Sounds good to me.”

I poured each member of the unit a bowl of my special soup. The forest crab had been cooked in the shell along with the rest of the contents of the pot.

I cut the bread into thin slices and toasted it lightly over a flame.

Next, I set some cheese and jerky on a large leaf to use as a plate.

“This is such a feast, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus cheered.

“It sure is! It’s all thanks to Garr, who went and brought me the forest crab.”

“Then we’ll have to pray to both God and Garr to convey our gratitude.”

With that, I folded my hands together to give thanks in the form of prayer. Then I started by trying the soup.

“Wow! It’s so rich!” I exclaimed.

The intense flavor in the broth startled me. I only seasoned it with a bit of salt and spices, so it was a surprise that it turned out so rich.

I stuck my fork into the crab, dug the meat out of the shell, took a bite, and savored the tender texture.

Since I had removed the soup base from the broth, I was worried it wouldn’t turn out flavorful in the end, but I could still taste the sweetness seeping out from the crab meat as I chewed.

Forest crab turned out to be an incredibly delicious ingredient.

Thank you, I told it in my mind. The words of gratitude came to me naturally.

Garr told me we could even eat the glands inside the crab's shell, so I tried mixing them with garlic, alcohol, and olive oil to form a paste. It was supposed to be good when eaten with bread, but to Ulgus and I, the only discernable taste was bitter.

Captain Ludtink, Zara, Garr, and Vice Captain Velrey all seemed to like the paste. I knew the flavors must suit those with mature palates.



ONCE we finished eating, Captain Ludtink lit the firework to signal we were finished with our mission. It sailed through the sky like a comet, and just when I thought it had dissolved into the sky, a burst of light shot forth like a blooming flower.

Supposedly, this meant the ship would come to pick us up tomorrow.

"It's so pretty. I've never seen fireworks before," I said.

"You know something? They always light fireworks on the last day of the town festival," Zara told me.

"Wow, is that right?"

I had learned that fireworks were made by burning different metals to create a rainbow of colors. The fireworks craftsmen in the city lit up the night sky with brilliant, blooming colors during each festival.

"Aren't us knights supposed to be patrolling that festival?" I asked.

"That's right. We can't be focusing on fireworks."

It sounded so fun. There were going to be booths set up and everything. But work was work.

"If we're lucky, we might get an afternoon shift, so we can have the evening hours off," Zara explained.

"That would be nice..."

"It sure would. Let's go watch the fireworks together if we happen to get the

time.”

“I would love to!”

I was looking forward to it. The fireworks show was something I wanted to see at least once now that I lived in the capital. But the next thought that crossed my mind took me by surprise. *How long will I get to stay in the capital, anyway?*

“What’s the matter, Melly?”

“It’s nothing. I was just wondering how long it will take me to save up for my little sisters’ dowries...”

I already sent home last month’s pay along with a note that the money was for my sisters’ weddings, not an allowance for my mom.

“How many little sisters do you have?”

“Three.”

“And how much money do you need per wedding?”

“Probably about seven gold coins each...”

I was only paid one gold coin per month. Half of that went back home, since my room at the dorm and my cafeteria expenses were all covered by the Order. I would be able to cover one sister after a year of work, and all three of them after three years.

Right now, they were fifteen, fourteen, and twelve years old. We usually married around the age of eighteen, so I most likely had the time I’d need to save up for them.

“It kinda bums me out just hearing about it,” Zara said. “How can there be conditions like that for a marriage?”

“I agree, but nobody can defy such an old tradition,” I said wryly.

Just thinking about it was making me sad. The memories of the day my fiancé dumped me came rushing back. It wasn’t a huge shock when I first heard the news, but those emotions continued to linger inside of me. It wasn’t like me to get so upset by the memory.

“U-Um, Melly...”

“It’s all right! I’m going to work really hard!”

For now, I would focus on saving up those dowries and worry about the rest when the time came. But I wanted Zara to know that I appreciated his attempt to cheer me up.

“Thank you, Zara.”

He was always looking after me. But once I thanked him, I couldn’t quite read the look that appeared on his face.

Hmm? Wasn’t he trying to cheer me up?

I would have to ask Vice Captain Velrey about it later.



WE took turns as lookouts throughout the night, just like always. My shift started at dawn.

I rolled my sleeping bag out on the beach and used my bag as a pillow.

Vice Captain Velrey was at my side. As always, she had fallen asleep almost right away.

I knew I needed to sleep too.

The griffin rested above my head. I heard her soft, whistling breaths as she dozed.

I laid down in my sleeping bag and stared up at the endless starry sky above. A shooting star glinted past.

Back when I lived in my village, we were always told not to go out at night, which meant I was never able to see sights like these before. But now I got to sleep freely under the starry sky. The sounds of the waves and bugs were a bit distracting, though they enhanced the atmosphere too.

All of my days had been so fulfilling ever since I joined the Order. I was always experiencing brand-new things.

I closed my eyes to think.

What would our next adventures bring? I was so eager to find out.

Just as I was starting to drift off to sleep...

“Kreeeh!”

“Whoa!”

The sudden cry from next to my head sent me flying out of my sleeping bag. The baby griffin, who was sleeping soundly just a moment ago, was now staring at me with an intense gaze.

“Are you hungry? Or maybe you have to pee?”

The young griffin was still too young to urinate on her own. I was going to have to stimulate her urinary tract with something like a wet cloth.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Okay, okay.”

I got up on my feet and faced the standing griffin.

Despite the creature’s sharp cry, Vice Captain Velrey still showed no sign of waking. That was a relief.

I wet a cloth and gently picked the griffin up.

“Kreeeh!”

“Huh? You don’t have to pee?”

I wiped her behind with the cloth, only to see her glaring at me sharply. I apologized to her.

Not even a cup of water was enough to tempt her.

Finally, I tried offering her some fruit. I peeled the fuzzy skin away and held it out.

“Kreeeh!”

This looked to be the correct answer. She dug straight into the fruit with her beak.

I thought she would go back to sleep once she was full, but instead, she kept chirping next to my head. She even ignored me when I ordered her to go back

to sleep. I looked at my watch and saw that I'd been asleep for only two hours.

Maybe since she slept all afternoon, she's not tired now?

Since I was out of options, I picked up the griffin and carried her toward the campfire. Captain Ludtink was there on lookout duty.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"The griffin won't sleep, and I don't want her to wake Vice Captain Velrey."

After that, I spent some time staring at the campfire, since the two of us didn't have anything else to discuss.

Just then, I felt my stomach start to growl.

"I'm in the mood for a snack," I said, breaking the silence.

"Well, I'm not."

"Oh, all right. ...Would you mind if I made something sweet?"

"Do what you want."

With the captain's permission, I placed my pot over the campfire and heated it up.

I was going to use some of the bananas Garr picked for me earlier. They were long, skinny yellow fruits from the southern island that were sold as a delicacy in the capital city.

I used my knife to slice it vertically.

The next item I retrieved from my bag was a jar of granulated sugar. One of the chefs from the ship's mess deck gave it to me when he was teaching me fruit recipes from the southern regions.

I placed the granulated sugar in the pan, molding it into the outline of a banana, and waited for it to dissolve and simmer. Then I placed the banana on top with the slit down toward the pan.

Once the sugar developed a nice caramel color, I placed the banana on a plate—or rather, a leaf I picked up from nearby.

My caramelized banana was complete.

“Would you like to try some too, Captain Ludtink?”

Despite feeling his eyes on me the entire time, the captain simply told me that the smell of it alone was practically giving him heartburn. I decided to enjoy my caramelized banana without thinking about him anymore.

The outside was smooth and crunchy like a candied apple. It gave off an appetizing smell too. The inner fruit was rich in flavor, both sweet and sour.

This fruit was much less watery than the other southern fruits I’d tried. If anything, it was almost soft and flaky, and the heat from the pot brought out its rich sweetness.

“Kreh kreh!”

The griffin wanted to try it too. Caramel didn’t seem healthy for the animal, so I fed her some peeled banana instead. She chomped down on it excitedly.

“Do you think it’s all right for her to eat so much?” I asked.

“I’m sure it’s better than eating nothing,” the captain said.

“That’s true.”

“What I’m more concerned about is why she’s clinging to you like that.”

“Urk... Right...”

It wasn’t like I was showing her any special affection. My interactions with her were the bare minimum that the mission required, yet she would only let me pet and feed her.

Without thinking, I let my worries come out of my mouth. “They’re not going to make me raise this griffin when we get home, right?”

As soon as I met Captain Ludtink’s eyes, he turned his whole head away from me.

“You’re supposed to say ‘no way!’”

I had my hands full with life as it was. I could never care for an animal on top of all that. She cried at night too, which would disturb my dormitory neighbors.

“Why don’t you just move to Zara’s place?” Captain Ludtink suggested.

“But Zara has a mountain cat.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

How would a griffin and a mountain cat get along? They were a bird and a cat, after all. It was hard to imagine that being anything other than a rocky relationship.

“I’ll take care of her until we get back to the city, but once we’re home, I’ll have to leave her with a professional,” I said firmly.

“I know that.”

The griffin fell asleep while we were talking.

“What should I do? Do you think she’ll wake up if I move her?”

“Well, you don’t want to leave her by the fire and wake up to barbecued griffin, do you?” he asked with a grin.

“Please don’t say awful things like that!”

But truthfully, I didn’t want her to end up barbecued, so I gently picked her up in my arms. The baby griffin had a peaceful look on her face as she slept. I prayed that she wouldn’t wake during the night, but unfortunately, my prayers weren’t heard.

After that, she woke me three more times to pee, drink water, and have a snack.

But what I really wanted to give her in response were words of gratitude.

Thanks to her, I was able to watch the beautiful morning sunrise (or so I was forced to tell myself).



THE naval ship came to pick us up after seeing last night’s fireworks. I was feeling especially sleep-deprived after being woken up over and over again by the baby griffin.

“Rest up on the ship,” Vice Captain Velrey instructed me when she saw me yawn. It was embarrassing knowing she witnessed me making such a silly face.

The griffin was as energetic as ever. I only hoped her injured wing would heal

up nicely. It was something a mythical beast specialist needed to take care of.

“We’ll be going our separate ways soon, but let’s have a nice trip home together,” I told her.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Be sure to behave yourself on the ship, okay?” I insisted again.

We rode our rowboat back to the ship and climbed aboard.

Anchors aweigh!

The steam whistle sounded to signal the start of our journey. Gently at first, the ship began to sway back and forth on the waves.

It was then that Captain Ludtink’s face immediately drained of color. He rushed toward the side of the boat, and then...

“Ah... It finally happened...”

This wasn’t good. Things had taken an unfortunate turn for the captain.

I asked Garr to look after the griffin, since she seemed to tolerate Garr a little for some reason. Then I stood behind Captain Ludtink, who was leaning over the side of the boat, and stroked his back.

“Are you all right?”

“Do I...urk...look all right to you?!”

“Not at all...”

I tried asking him if he wanted a scented bag for his nausea, but he just shouted at me that he hated strong smells. He even refused pressure point treatment because it was painful.

“Then what am I supposed to—”

“Kreh! Kreh kreeeh!!”

I turned to see the griffin flapping around in Garr’s arms. *What’s the matter with her now?* I left the sulking captain behind to go take hold of the griffin again.

Immediately, she was calm again.

“What is it this time? Food? Potty? More water?” I sat on a barrel at one end of the ship and went through the list with her, but she refused all of them. *Then what’s the problem?!*

“I bet she got jealous.”

“What...does that mean?”

At my side, Zara explained his theory on the griffin’s motives.

“You were glued to Captain Ludtink over there, you know? She probably hated that, Melly.”

“Whaaat? I can’t believe that...”

Surely, it was just a whim.

“Please behave yourself. I’m begging you,” I asked her once again.

“Kreh!”

“Oooh, listen to that response.”

“She responds properly, but never listens to anything else I ask,” I sighed.

Captain Ludtink was still just sick as before, by the look of things. Garr was watching over him now in my place.

“Why do people get sick on things like boats and carriages in the first place?” Zara asked.

“They say it has to do with the autonomic nerves getting out of sync. They’re the ones that manage your body’s inner workings,” I explained.

The constant state of motion when riding on a ship or carriage disrupts the harmony of the autonomic nerves that perceive senses. This confuses the brain and causes the body to feel sick.

“Hmm, I see. So that’s why manning the rowboat didn’t get to him like this?”

“That’s right.”

I wondered if there were any foods around that could help him.

“I’ve heard that eating sweet things can cause your blood sugar to rise, which then helps the brain wake up again,” I said.

“But the captain hates sweets,” Zara reminded me.

“That does seem like him...”

We had to throw out that idea.

“What about ginger? That’s supposed to be good for hangovers,” Zara said.

“Oh, that might work! Ginger is said to have healing properties on the stomach. Pregnant women with bad morning sickness tend to eat sliced ginger too.”

“But doesn’t raw ginger have quite a kick?” Zara asked.

“It does.”

I was pretty sure those pregnant women consumed the ginger as a drink made with hot water and honey. But Captain Ludtink probably disliked honey too.

“I guess I’ll just have to make pickled ginger. I don’t see what else we can do.”

The mess deck almost certainly had ginger, and I imagined they would share it with me if I asked.

Zara, the griffin, and I moved to the cafeteria.

“I’ve never even heard of pickled ginger before,” Zara remarked.

“You haven’t? In my village, we preserve our fall crops by pickling them, drying them, or canning them with honey.”

That reminded me of how my dad used to go out drinking, and the next morning, he always asked for pickled ginger to be served at the table. He was definitely eating it to help with his hangovers.

“Pickled ginger has a crunch to it when you bite down, so we call it ‘the crunchies’ in my village,” I laughed.

“Huh. How about that?”

The mess hall workers were happy to give me the required ingredients when I explained the situation. However, they also wanted me to teach them the recipe, since some of the sailors got seasick as well.

“There’s not a whole lot to teach...”

The recipe called for raw ginger, vinegar, sugar, and salt.

I started by pouring vinegar into my pot, then added the salt and sugar. I cooked them together until the gritty texture was gone. While I was waiting for the mixture to cool down after extinguishing the flame, I prepared the ginger by peeling it and cutting it into thin slices.

“Kreh kreh!”

The baby griffin began to cry for some of the raw ginger. I assumed she shouldn’t be eating this stuff. I tried to pacify her with fruit instead, but she just turned her nose up at it.

“All right then. Don’t complain if you hate it.”

“Kreh!”

I offered her a thin slice of ginger. She excitedly bit into it, only to be hit by the spiciness and spit it back out with newly formed tears in her eyes.

“I tried to warn you...”

“Kreeeh!”

I fed her some fruit to cleanse her palate. After that, she watched over the cooking process without any complaints from then on.

My next step was to knead salt into the slices and let them sit for a few minutes. I squeezed them to remove any water that they released, then poured boiling water on top, dropped them into cold water to soak, and removed the foam that formed. With that, I filled the jar I was going to use with boiling water to sanitize it—this was one of the fundamentals of pickling.

Once I squeezed the rest of the water out of the ginger slices, I placed them in the jar of cooled sugar and vinegar. They would be complete after only a few hours of pickling.

I ended up waiting for two hours.

Zara, the griffin, and I all sympathetically watched over the seasick Captain Ludtink. When I decided the “crunchies” were probably pickled by now, we

headed back to the mess deck.

The chefs watched us curiously.

“They’re a lot more delicious when they’ve had two or three days to soak,” I explained.

The pickled ginger would last for a year or so when left in a cold, dark place.

We all decided to try it together. When I bit in, I could taste the subtle sweetness of the vinegar alongside the spicy kick that the ginger gave.

The texture of each slice was nice and crisp too. They had turned out delicious.

“Do you like it, Zara?” I asked.

“It’s such a nice refreshing taste. I’ll betcha even Captain Ludtink can eat this.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The mess hall chefs gave their approval too. They were even ready to add it to their menu.

The crew told me it made them sad to see fellow sailors unable to finish their meals due to seasickness. I was truly glad to think that my ginger might help bring their appetites back.

After that, we brought the crunchies straight to Captain Ludtink.

When I explained that it was ginger mixed with sugar, vinegar, and salt, he looked at me with suspicion.

“What is this? Candied ginger?” he said with disgust.

“No, it’s pickled in the vinegar. It’s not very sweet,” I told him.

“It’s sweet and salty, but also refreshing,” Zara added, tossing in his two cents. “I believe it’ll help you with your seasickness.”

Zara and I managed to convince him to try some. As he ate, the captain was still grumbling on about his lack of appetite.

“Well?”

In response to Zara’s question, Captain Ludtink murmured, “It’s not bad,” in a

voice that was barely audible.



AFTER that, the captain actually showed up at the mess deck to eat lunch. His face wasn't as pale as before, either. I was so relieved to see that his appetite was back.

"They're called crunchies? Really?" Ulgus was showing an interest in them, so Captain Ludtink shared a slice from his jar. "Whoa! I really love this!"

He begged for another slice, but the captain refused since it was meant as medicine for his seasickness.

"If you want some of your own, then ask Risurisu."

"No way. I would feel guilty doing that."

"I don't mind making you some, actually," I said.

"You don't? Woohoo!"

But it was Zara who stepped in to help me out of the promise I'd made without any consideration.

"Melly, you should be charging for services like this."

"Oh, I see. Then that'll be one silver coin, Ulgus."

"That's so expensive!"

Ulgus jumped out of his seat when he heard the ridiculous price I put on my pickled ginger.

Garr covered his mouth and shook a little with laughter. This exchange must have tickled his funny bone.

In the end, Captain Ludtink scolded me, saying that knights weren't allowed to have side jobs.



I spent the day taking care of the griffin, and in what felt like the blink of an eye, it was time for bed.

Vice Captain Velrey and I were sharing a cabin.

“The griffin might make noise tonight...” I warned her.

“I know. I don’t mind it.”

She explained that her body’s clock allowed her to fall asleep without waking up again until morning. However, amazingly enough, she did wake up in the event of an emergency or the sensing of hostility in the area. She was such a pro.

“Kreh kreeeh!”

The griffin was in as good of spirits as always. I bowed before her, begging her to go straight to sleep.

Vice Captain Velrey watched us from her bed, then struck up a conversation with me. “You know, I’ve been curious about something.”

“What’s that?”

Curious about what, exactly?

“It seems like something’s been weighing on your mind lately.”

Since I felt like I had to fess up, I told her that I *was* worried about the griffin and how she grew overly attached to me for some reason.

“Having a mythical beast take a liking to you without a contract just means you’re naturally gifted. I’m sure the government won’t be upset.”

“I hope that’s the case...”

If the vice captain said it would be all right, then I would have to stop worrying about it too. I was an optimistic person.

“And what else is bothering you?” she pressed.

“Huh?”

“You keep your emotions locked away inside you sometimes, don’t you?”

My heart skipped a beat when I heard her say that.

“I felt bad for not noticing how much you hated Captain Ludtink calling you Wild Rabbit,” she said. “I didn’t think anything of it until Zara pointed that out. Knights like to call each other nicknames. He called you Wild Rabbit because

you're cute like one, Medic Risurisu."

But that simply couldn't be true. Captain Ludtink called me Wild Rabbit because I had long elf ears. Although, I didn't really care about his motives for doing that. All that mattered was that he called me by my real name now. It was my fault for not going to anyone else to ask for help in that situation.

Vice Captain Velrey's eyebrows slumped as she apologized to me. I shook my head back at her to tell her it wasn't anything to feel bad about.

"I want you to keep coming to me if you need someone to talk to about things. I've been a knight for a while now, so it's hard for me to tell what parts of the culture might still seem strange to you."

I shook my head again. This wasn't something for her to concern herself with. Thinking back on it now, Captain Ludtink's relaxed treatment of me was a big help in adapting to the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

"You can talk to me about stuff outside of work too, you know?" she said. "You tend to give up on things before you can act, don't you, Medic Risurisu? I wondered if that was because you have so many siblings."

I didn't disagree with what she was saying. Often, I dismissed my own curiosity by convincing myself that it didn't really matter. My mom and dad were too busy every day to really speak with them like I wanted, and when I saw how exhausted they looked, I usually felt like it was better to give up on my questions than disrupt them by asking. I probably never managed to shake that old habit.

"Thank you very much," I said. "Um...hearing you say that makes me happy."

"I'm happy when you open up to me too."

I felt bad for taking her up on her generosity so soon, but I did have something I needed help with.

"Um, it's about Zara, actually..." I began. "He often gets a sad look on his face when he hears things I say without thinking. I only wish I knew the secret to prevent this sort of thing in the future."

"I see... Zara, well, he's a sensitive guy." Vice Captain Velrey used to command

Zara in a different squadron too. “He dresses in flashy outfits, he’s always bright and chipper, and he likes to have fun, but on the inside, he’s a mature and serious young man from a snowy hometown...”

“I know just what you mean.”

I remembered how he hugged people that first time I met him at the restaurant. I just assumed he was a flashy, energetic, outgoing person. But the more time I spent with him, the more I started to feel like Zara loved the quiet life too. He enjoyed activities at home like cooking, embroidering, and reading books.

“Our last squadron had a lot of female knights in it, which ended up causing some trouble for him...” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“Trouble?”

“Yeah, trouble... The women who got close to him always wanted more.”

“Wanted...more?”

“Right. They thought he was going to make their lives more exciting.”

“I see...”

They must have been disappointed to learn that Zara wasn’t the exact same person he dressed himself up to look like. Vice Captain Velrey explained that he was hurt by women thinking he was a boring hick once they learned he was from a snowy region to the north.

“I’d bet that Zara’s scared of revealing his feelings to new friends. He thinks they might start hating him.”

“I never thought about that.”

Vice Captain Velrey nodded her head at my realization. “So, it’s not your fault, Medic Risurisu. Zara’s just timid. The next time you don’t understand how he’s feeling, you should ask him yourself.”

“You’re right. I’m going to do that.”

I made the right choice in asking her for advice. Now I knew I should ask Zara when I was confused by his reactions.

“Thanks for saying so. Zara used to stump me too, but it’s not the kind of thing that’s easy to press him about...”

“That’s true.”

That was when something hit me.

“Should I not have asked you about his past?”

“You’re not going to tell anyone, right, Medic Risurisu?”

“Of course not. But it’s such a personal story.”

“Then let’s just say I was sleep-talking through this whole conversation. Goodnight then, Medic Risurisu.”

“Huh?! Ah, okay... Goodnight...”

“Kreeeh!”

With that one last cry from the griffin, my whole body relaxed.

I closed my eyes.

It finally felt like I was going to get a good night’s sleep...until...

“Kreh kreh!”

“Yeah. I knew it.”

The griffin’s eyes were lit up.

Vice Captain Velrey sat up in bed.

“I sure wish I could take care of her for you...” she said apologetically.

“No, that’s all right. She already tried to bite Ulgus once.”

Ulgus, who really wanted to befriend the griffin, had reached his hand out forcefully to pet her. She did end up biting him in the end, although she did it softly enough so as not to draw blood, thankfully.

“It’s very strange. The griffin seems to love you like a mother, Medic Risurisu.”

“I wish that wasn’t the case,” I groaned.

Maybe she saw me as a fellow forest dweller, and therefore, a friend. But this problem would be a thing of the past in a few more days, once we arrived at the

capital and I could hand her off to a griffin expert.

I placed the griffin on my belly to talk to her.

“Kreh!”

“Fine, fine.”

“Kreh!”

“Come now, let’s get you to bed.”

With that, the two of us slumbered through the night together in the ship’s cabin.



THE next morning, Captain Ludtink returned the empty pickled ginger jar to me.

“What?! You went through it so fast!” I cried.

“I ate it with my booze last night,” he said.

“You’re kidding me!”

I pickled five whole servings of raw ginger, and the captain went and finished it off in a single night.

“It’s a healthy food, but not if you eat this much of it,” I warned.

“Yeah. I could go without crunchies for a while now.”

So he made himself sick of them. Not that I cared either way.

But that wasn’t all. The captain was still feeling sick, so he asked if I had any other methods of relief.

“There’s a foreign land with a saying that goes like, ‘sickness and health are born of the mind,’” I told him.

“Are you sayin’ my seasickness is in my head?” he said with an accusing tone.

“Well, you’re always fine in carriages, right?”

The captain gritted his teeth when I pointed that out to him.

“Try shouting it out, Captain. Scream that you don’t get seasick.”

“What, like some sorta idiot?”

“Great healing requires great sacrifices.”

He was only going to be yelling at the vast ocean. No one would have anything bad to say about that...probably.

When I asked him if he was scared of his seasickness, he grimaced sadly.

“You have to conquer this sickness. Start by convincing yourself that it’s something trivial. It can’t beat you!” I said encouragingly.

Somehow, I managed to persuade Captain Ludtink to listen to me. I pointed out at the endless waters of the sea and told him to start.

“...I don’t get seasick.”

“Louder!”

“I don’t get seasick!”

“Too quiet!”

“I. Don’t. Get. Seasick!!”

“I can’t hear you!”

“I— Wait a damn minute. What’re you making me do here?!” He shouted in my ear so suddenly that I jumped backward.

“Kreh kreh! Kreh kreh!”

The griffin I’d left on top of a barrel was just as startled. She squawked her complaints at the captain. I walked over to her, scratched her head, and told her, “Don’t worry, he’s a nice bandit deep down,” to reassure her worries.

“How’s your seasickness now?” I asked.

“I’m just gonna ignore it for now.”

“Yeah, that’s the best thing you can do. Please let me know if anything else starts bothering you.”

With that, I left the area.

“Kreh kreh!”

I heard an angry cry from behind me and realized I had almost left the griffin there on top of the barrel. *Oops, that was close.*

“Is it just me, or did you get heavier?” I asked her.

“Kreh!”

I lifted the hefty griffin and carried her with me.

When I arrived at the mess hall, what I saw was a large-scale production factory of crunchies. The lightly pickled ginger they served for dinner had been a big hit, they explained.

I decided to help peel the ginger since I had nothing else to do.

The griffin was delighted to be served a platter of assorted southern fruits. When I showed her the ginger, she squinted and turned her head away, seeming to remember it from yesterday’s incident.

We wrapped up the work after another hour or so. The chefs expressed their gratitude for my help.

“Thank you, Medic Risurisu. It’s much appreciated.”

“Of course. I don’t have anything else on my hands at the moment.”

To show their appreciation, they shared a leftover dessert with me that was made for the superior officers.

“Wow! It’s a gelatin dessert!”

Gelatin desserts are made by combining fruit juice and powdered gelatin to form a solid mass. It was a treat I was used to seeing in picture books, but this was my very first time getting to try it for myself.

The chef explained the dish to me. “We added slices of thinly-sliced fruits to the inside too.”

“That sounds incredible.”

I didn’t hesitate to dig in.

The first scoop jiggled on top of my spoon. I stuck it in my mouth and felt the smooth, slippery texture that produced a subtle taste of sweetness.

The gelatin melted on my tongue and became a pleasant liquid to swallow. It was truly the perfect snack to show up in a fairy tale.

The chilled, refreshing sweetness of the gelatin dessert made the scorching sun feel like nothing more than a distant dream.

Chapter 3: The Dreadful Prison Cooking

I used my time on the ship to write up a report on the griffin—where we discovered her, what state she was in, and how she was doing now.

I made sure to note her disposition as well. She was only friendly with me, as the first person who found her, but she wasn't too hostile toward Garr either, who was the next person she met. As for the rest of my squadmates, the griffin was still afraid of them. She even snapped at Ulgus. I wrote down each and every detail of the mission.

Captain Ludtink accepted my report and told me that it was good to submit.

With that, my duties involving the griffin were finally over.

Her injuries had almost fully healed, and she seemed to be much more energetic. However, she was struggling to walk because of her unbalanced wings. That was my one remaining concern.

I needed to peel some fruit for her to eat.

“See? You sink your claws in and peel it back like this.”

“Kreh?”

I tried to teach her how to peel the fruit, thinking she might remember this method, but it was a futile exercise.

“Not getting it, are you?”

“Kreeeh!”

The griffin's cry was as carefree as ever.



FINALLY, we arrived at a port near the royal capital. It was snowing despite the season being on the verge of spring, so I pulled my overcoat tighter around my body. The transition from the southern region to the frigid capital was

anything but pleasant.

If only a squadron could be assigned to permanently guard the island. It was such a wonderful place—home to delicious forest crabs and all the fruit you could eat. The bugs weren't so great, though.

"Are you doing all right, Captain?" I asked.

A pale-faced bandit...no, the pale-faced Captain Ludtink turned to me. "Quit your worryin'. I already put my seasickness behind me."

"I know."

I decided not to worry about him any longer, since he clearly didn't want me to.

A crowd of people was standing at the port waiting for us. They were here to retrieve the griffin. An old man in his fifties stepped forward. Apparently, he was the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

The man looked like a proper gentleman, with neatly-styled purple hair, although I sensed no kindness from him whatsoever. His eyes were sharp at the corners and bent into a harsh glare, giving the old man a stern look to his face. Attached to his waist was a whip like the one you would use to control a carriage. Was that for taming mythical beasts? I had a bad feeling about it.

"Your new family is here to take you home, Griffin," I told her.

"Kreh?"

Mythical beasts who refused a contract were taken to a sanctuary in the west. There they were able to enjoy lives of leisure. She would also be able to meet other griffins too, which was a reassurance.

"You can't make trouble for the staff now," I said with a motherly tone.

"Kreh?"

She gazed up at me with puppy-dog eyes.

"Urk...!"

I was lost for words. The griffin came and nuzzled up to me.

It was impossible not to form a bond with her over the past few days we

spent together. But now we had to say goodbye.

The staircase came up to the side of the ship. First Captain Ludtink descended, followed by Vice Captain Velrey, then Garr and Ulgus. Zara turned around to give me some encouragement.

“You’ve worked hard, Melly. I know it must have been rough, taking care of a mythical beast for the very first time.”

“Not really... It wasn’t much different from taking care of my little brothers and sisters,” I said wryly.

“Is that right?”

Zara stroked my back gently. I felt my eyes start to get hot, and I needed to leave the ship quickly. I felt like the old director was glaring at me to say, “*Give me that griffin already!*”

I watched Zara disembark first. I then decided to bid the griffin a hasty farewell.

“Have a...good life out there.”

“Kreh kreh?”

She didn’t seem to understand that we were going our separate ways. She was still just a baby.

“I know this is sad...”

“Kreh...”

I squeezed my lips together and took a step forward, descending the staircase and joining the others in the line.

“Good job bringing the beast back with you,” the director praised us. Then he turned to speak to the griffin. “Welcome back, Griffin.”

But the griffin just turned her nose away from him and didn’t give any reply. For a second, I swore I saw the smile on the director’s face freeze up. I must have just imagined it.

“However...”

The director was taken aback to see the griffin behaving herself in my arms.

The seventh-born princess had reported that the griffin was too violent to touch.

Captain Ludtink handed over the report I wrote earlier and began to explain, “She seems to be more relaxed with the members who discovered and cared for her. Our report explains the rest in detail.”

“That can’t be! It just can’t be possible...”

But the director simply handed the documents over to his subordinates without even perusing them. He walked up to the griffin and his group of subordinates followed. Strangely enough, they appeared to be armed with spears and large leather bags...

“Now hand over the griffin,” he demanded.

“...Yes, sir,” I said weakly.

“Kreh?!”

I held her out to the man. When I tried to explain that she was injured, he got upset with me and demanded I not speak unless I was answering his questions.

“I’m an expert on mythical beasts. Are you mocking me?” he spat.

“N-No, that’s not what I—”

I wanted to explain that she was a nervous creature but good at heart, so he shouldn’t treat her badly. But I wasn’t allowed to speak.

One of the subordinates reached his hand out to the griffin.

“KREH!!”

“OW!!”

Immediately, she chomped down on his hand.

“What the hell are you doing?!” the director snapped at his subordinate. “I told you the griffin will bite if you reach out from the front of her.”

Oh, I see. So that’s why she snapped at Ulgus.

I was relieved to have a true expert here, although his oppressive attitude didn’t exactly make much sense to me.

The griffin began to let out deep, agitated chirps, noticing that something strange was going on. She leaned closer and looked up at me as if to ask, “Are we going to be okay?” I had to break eye contact with her. It was like a dagger straight to the heart.

“Bring out the blindfold hood!” the director ordered.

While she was still staring at me, they quickly pulled the hood over her head and eyes. The violent motion and the sudden loss of vision caused her to let out a distressed cry. Despite the confusion, she didn’t scratch me with her talons.

One of the men reached out to grab her body.

“KREEEEEEH!!”

I had never heard her scream so loud before. She flapped her limbs and dug her talons into the man, leaving deep cuts in his flesh.

“Gyah!” he cried out.

“Get her in the bag,” the director ordered again, not caring about the injured man.

“He’s injured, isn’t he?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter.”

It was hard to believe this cruel treatment was coming from the preservation bureau. They didn’t even know how to handle the griffin without getting hurt themselves.

“...They should just have Melly carry her there...” murmured Zara.

“They’re overly confident because they’re specialists,” Vice Captain Velrey responded to him sadly.

The men carried the struggling griffin away in the restraining leather bag.

I didn’t know when it started, but at some point, I had started to cry. Zara quietly handed me a handkerchief. She was going to a sanctuary where she would make friends. I had to be strong right now. While I was working this out in my head, the director started to approach me.

He stopped in front of me, raised his hand...and that was when I heard a sharp

clap and felt a pain shoot across my cheek.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” Zara stepped in to protest. It was only then that I realized the man had slapped my cheek.

“She’s acting out because of how you treated her!” he accused.

“I-I’m sorry...” I squeezed out between gritted teeth.

“What are you talking about?!” Zara shouted. “Did you even read the report?”

The director glared back at Zara. “How dare you speak to me like that, grunt. Tell me your name, rank, and hometown.”

“.....”

Zara fell silent. He turned his head away.

But then, the director took out the whip at his waist and struck Zara on the cheek with it. This forced him to turn back toward the director, who lifted Zara’s chin with his hand to make eye contact.

“Didn’t you hear me? Or do you even know how to speak?”

“Tell him, Zara.”

With Captain Ludtink’s orders, Zara gave his response.

“Zara Ahto. I’m from the north... Fortonara.”

The director furrowed his brow for a moment, then seemed to think of something. “Hmph. Never heard of it. You must be an uncivilized brute from a town they don’t even bother putting on maps. Zara Ahto. You better watch yourself.”

How could the director say those things? I wanted to stomp my feet on the ground. I absolutely despised the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. All I wanted was for him to go back to the city already.

As I trembled with anger, the director approached me next.

“Show me the back of your hands,” he ordered.

“Huh?”

“Quickly now.”

I stuck my hands out as ordered.

“U-Um...what are you...?”

“I told you not to speak unless spoken to! Do as you’re told already. Now show me your arms!”

I sensed Zara move slightly at my side, but Captain Ludtink called his name to stop him in his tracks. *“It’s all right,”* I told him with a glance.

I rolled my sleeves up to show him both sides of my arms. The director brought his face in close, examining them for something. It made me shudder.

“I see. So you hid the contract branding somewhere we couldn’t see it.”

“Excuse me?!”

I couldn’t believe it. Did he really think I’d formed a contract with the griffin?

How silly. Of course, I didn’t!

“We’ll have your whole body examined at the bureau. Come with me.”

Growing up, I was always taught that I couldn’t show my skin to anyone other than my husband. I was in shock.

He reached out for my arm, but the director’s hand didn’t connect.

Zara had pulled me toward him already.

The director’s eyes went wide as saucers. Then he flew into a rage. He raised his whip up in the air, but neither Zara nor I were struck.

I gasped. Something shocking was being carried out right before my eyes.

Captain Ludtink delivered a swift kick to the director’s body.

“GYAAAAH!!”

He screamed, flew backward, and hit the ground limply.



“Restrain him! By force if necessary!” the director’s aide shouted out next. He demanded the subordinates restrain Captain Ludtink, even if it meant the use of their weapons.

“Oh yeah? You feel like fightin’?” Captain Ludtink was making dangerous threats. He had his back to us now.

“Y-You’re insane!!”

Those words came from Ulgus. I couldn’t agree more.

There had to be thirty armed men from the bureau there. They all approached him at once. I knew they had to be trained in combat. They were wearing full body armor and pointing their weapons at us.

“Melly, I’m really glad I joined this squadron,” Zara murmured these words, then took off in a dash. He kicked away any man who got too close.

Next up was Garr.

All I could do was stand there in a panic, trying to figure out what to do.

Vice Captain Velrey looked unamused by this development too. She made the remark that they left her no option before joining the brawl herself.

By the look of it, they were all fighting off the men with their bare hands. The four of them alone were enough to hold off the armed foes.

I couldn’t stop the tears from falling. I had no idea what to do.

It was Ulgus who called out to me. “It’s all right, Medic Risurisu. Have faith in Captain Ludtink’s bandit strength.”

What’s his bandit strength...?

As for Ulgus, he wasn’t so good at close-quarters combat.

After a fierce struggle, another knights’ squadron raced over to stop the brawl.

The six of us calmly allowed them to restrain us without resisting.

We were transported to the capital city and placed in individual jail cells.

My mind never snapped out of its daze the whole time.

Once the sun set, we were brought dinners of diluted soup, hard bread, and water.

The soup contained a few puny vegetable skins. It was cloudy, probably because they hadn't removed the scum that formed while it was boiling.

The bread was like trying to eat a rock. I was sure it'd function properly if you used it as a hammer.

So, this was the rumored prison food I'd heard of.

"Urp...!"

I knew there would be no getting around it, but still, the sheer grossness of the meal made me want to die inside.



STURDY iron bars. The cold, hard stone floor. A windowless room that was dark throughout the entire day.

Every last meal brought to me was disgusting.

The cells had no desks, and the straw beds offered only rolled-up cloth for pillows. The toilets certainly didn't look hygienic to me.

At least the knights there to watch over me were women, but that didn't mean the situation was any less terrible. It was hard to imagine a worse environment to be in.

There wasn't a single sound to be heard from the surrounding cells. I knew I had to be the only prisoner in my vicinity.

I wondered where everyone else was taken. A whole day had passed since our arrest, but no one had come to question me yet.

I wondered if Captain Ludtink was doing all right. Despite his outer appearance, he was a sensitive man. He also grew up in a family of nobles. I just hoped this wasn't going to cause any trouble.

I suddenly started to imagine what this situation would be like if the six of us were normal adventurers.

One of us would definitely break free and rescue the rest. Then we'd sneak

into the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau to save the griffin. This was the scenario I started fantasizing about to kill time.

It must have happened on the second night. It was hard to sense time in that cell, since it was constantly pitch black.

That was when I heard two pairs of footsteps in the distance.

I stuck my body through the bars a little to see what was going on. The guards and people who brought me food always came by themselves, so I could tell this was different.

A female knight arrived with a young woman wearing glasses and a white coat, giving her the look of an academic. She had to be somewhere around twenty years old. The woman was tall, slender, and beautiful. Her long hair was light purple and her eyes were the color of jade.

The female knight casually delivered me some shocking news. "She's been asked to search you for a contract branding with the griffin."

I couldn't believe that they still suspected me. Anger started to bubble up inside of me. I decided to express my emotions honestly.

"How rude. I refuse to cooperate," I said flatly.

"Are you admitting you are guilty then?" the woman from the preservation bureau demanded I explain my reasoning.

"No, there's no branding on me whatsoever. This is all too arbitrary. Does the bureau have the right to force me to comply?"

"Well..."

They didn't. That was the impression I'd gotten, and it appeared I was correct.

"Could it be that the griffin isn't eating?" I asked.

The woman was silent. I assumed I was right again.

"Would it be possible to bring her here? I can feed her myself," I said.

"She'll eat on her own if the contract between you is dissolved," the woman said coldly.

This just wasn't working. She refused to listen to me.

“All right. I have no other choice then,” I said, sighing.

For the griffin’s sake, I was forced to agree to their demands. But I had a few of my own to make too.

“I’ll feel foolish if I’m the only one naked, so please get naked along with me. If I don’t have a branding, then I want the bureau director and his men to come apologize to me. They’ll have to let me and the rest of my squadron go free too.”

“You can’t be serious!” she shouted.

I looked at the female bureau member to see what she thought of all that. She stared down at me like she couldn’t believe her ears.

“Wh-Why do I have to agree to such ridiculous demands?” she cried.

“You don’t.” I shrugged. “But that’s the only way to stop the griffin from dying.”

“!”

Her eyes went wide with shock.

I knew the bureau members had to care much more about mythical beasts than we could imagine. They were greedy requests, but I was certain she would agree to them.

“If you do find a contract branding on me, then you’re free to deal with me how you like.”

I went as far as to tell her that I didn’t care if she used a branding iron to erase the seal of my contract.

In the end, the woman who was ordered to inspect me agreed to my demands.

But I had one last request to make.

“Um, would it be possible to do the body inspection in the bath?”



MY body inspection took place at the bathhouse for female knights.

There were a few knights inside, and every last one of them was naked.

The bureau worker agreed to come here, since she was going to feel embarrassed if the two of us were naked alone. I appreciated her consideration.

It had been a few days since my last bath. I was quite proud of how this whole plan of mine worked out.

The female knights, well, they had well-toned bodies. I wasn't surprised to see how defined their muscles were.

The woman from the bureau was curvy in the right places and slender in the rest. She really had the perfect body. I hoped that, if I was born again, I would have a figure like hers.

"Can you not look at me?" the woman said prissily.

"I'm sorry."

She was clearly embarrassed to have me staring at her naked body. She tried to hide it with both hands. That was only natural. I hoped she now understood why it was wrong of her to force her initial demand on me when I had done nothing wrong.

The baths in the dorm were shared, and even I was still embarrassed to have other people see me naked. On the other hand, the female knights were fearless. They made no attempt to hide their bodies as they observed us.

I envied their confidence. No, surely they acted that way because they were on the clock. *Great job, fellow knights.*

"May I wash my hair and body first? I haven't been able to take a bath in a while now," I said.

"...Fine then," she said, conceding to my request.

I took some soap powder and started to scrub my head. *Aah, this feels so good. How refreshing. Is this what heaven is like?*

My hair was coming back to life. I washed the rest of my body until it was squeaky clean. Finally, I poured water over my head to wash away all the soap, then invited her to inspect me.

I was exhausted and just wanted her to get it over with already.

The bureau woman scowled, seeming tired of all the waiting. She finally began the inspection. She checked every last nook of my body—behind my ears, my neck, tongue, groin, and even the soles of my feet.

After failing to discover anything, she ordered a female knight to search me next, only to arrive at the same conclusion.

“Are you satisfied?” I asked, eyebrows arched. “This is embarrassing, and the water’s starting to get cold.”

“Just wait and let me look you over one more... Achoo!”

Oh man... It looked like she had caught a cold. The knights were clearly freezing too.

It wasn’t good for women to let their body temperatures go down like this.

We finished things up by soaking in the bathtub, and once we were warmed to our cores, we exited the bathhouse.

I even found a spare change of clothes waiting for me. I was nice and cozy now.

But the biggest shock was that the knights had prepared fruit milk for us. It was meant to hydrate us after the long bath. I downed the whole bottle of sweet, refreshing, fruit-flavored milk.

It was heavenly delicious.

The hot bath left me dizzy and I staggered a little in my step. A knight grabbed my shoulder, steadying me, and quietly offered me some bread.

I was hungry, but when I thought of what the griffin was going through right now, I couldn’t bring myself to eat.



THE next place I was led to was some kind of meeting room. There I found the rest of my squadron waiting for me.

“Oh, you guys!”

I was so happy, I was about to rush toward them, but then I saw the Royal

Order's knight commander as well as the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

Next to them was something like a birdcage. The griffin was sitting inside of it.

"Griffin!" I cried.

"Kreh kreh!"

I dashed straight toward the griffin, ignoring the rest of the situation at hand.

"Are you hungry? Have you had any water to drink?"

"Kreeeh!"

I had no idea what she was saying. But she seemed to have more energy than I expected to see her with. The griffin wasn't bandaged anymore, and I realized her injuries had been treated with a healing spell.

"Ah, that's such a relief," I said with a relieved smile.

"Kreh!"

A bureau worker nearby handed me some fruit.

As soon as I took it, the griffin's eyes lit up. I struggled to peel the fruit with my nails, but then someone next to me held out a knife. I looked up to see that it came from the director.

"....."

I wasn't sure how to feel. It was all his fault that I ended up in such a mess. I didn't want to borrow a knife from someone like him.

"Hurry up and feed her," he said curtly.

"Okay."

Now wasn't the time to be stubborn. The griffin was starving.

I thanked him, took the knife, and peeled the fruit. She was quick to gobble up the snack. The griffin went on to drink lots of water and eat five more fist-sized fruits. Finally, she was satisfied.

"I guess you really didn't form a contract..."

It was the director muttering under his breath. It sounded like he was finally

ready to admit the truth. But what was going to come of this? We sat down on opposite sides of the table from each other and entered into a discussion.

“There was a miscommunication problem throughout this whole case, by the sound of it,” the knight commander spoke solemnly.

When a mythical beast was discovered, the report was supposed to go to the preservation bureau. But this time, it went to the Royal Order.

“I’m sure you know that people have been attacked and killed by mythical beasts before, right?” With a sour look on his face, the director began to speak. “It’s not uncommon for adventurers and the sort to mistake mythical beasts for monsters and wipe them out.”

Unlike monsters, mythical beasts were uncommon creatures, most of which were said to be endangered. The director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau committed himself to protecting those species.

He established the organization with money from his own pocket, but since they failed to produce major noticeable results, the government granted the bureau almost no funds whatsoever. They were called the “royal” preservation bureau as far as their name went, but reality was something entirely different. The director wore a pained look on his face.

“Over the past few days, I’ve been driving myself mad thinking about those mythical beasts being exterminated.”

He explained that the orders were to kill the griffin since she injured the princess. This was news to me.

The director knew all about the methods of capturing mythical beasts and was trained in combat as well. When he heard that a squadron of knights had been dispatched to the griffin’s island, he must have been nervous beyond belief.

“There are still very few people out there who really understand mythical beasts. They don’t get what separates them from monsters,” he continued solemnly.

I knew the bureau must be full of people who truly adored mythical beasts.

“Once we recovered the griffin safely, and I was able to calm down again, I started to wonder if I was the one in the wrong.”

Despite the subject of the mission being a mythical beast, the orders went past the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and straight to the knights. The kingdom itself had ignored them. I didn’t feel the director handled the situation well, but I also understood why he got so upset.

Not that I planned on forgiving him for the things he said to me, his insults toward Zara, or the fact that he *struck* us.

The director went on to explain that he was the cause of the fight that broke out too. “All the fault lies with me. I’ll accept whatever punishment I’m given. So please consider the circumstances I put these knights in.” He bowed his head deeply to the commander.

But the act of apologizing didn’t mean we would so easily be forgiven. I looked over at our commander. The expression on his face was just as stern as before.

My stomach was in knots, thinking about the punishment we were about to receive. All I could do was pray for mercy.

Finally...the commander handed down his ruling. “I understand the situation. But I can’t ignore a unit of Enoch resorting to violence.”

I glanced at Captain Ludtink.

He was listening to the commander without any particular expression showing on his face. He didn’t look angry to me.

“The government will deal with the director, while I’ll handle the punishment for the Second Expeditionary Squadron.”

My heart skipped a beat with dread. My blood ran cold at the word “punishment.”

The sound of him thumbing through documents was like a terrible thunder to my ears. Sweat formed on my brow. I was too nervous to regain my composure.

He began to read out the punishment. “After deliberations with the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, I hereby order Mell Risurisu to take on the

role of griffin caretaker.”

“Huh?!”

I looked over at the bureau director. The expression on his face was one of bitter regret. *Wait, no, that's not what matters right now!*

He handed me the cage with the griffin inside.

“Th-Thank you...”

I was instructed to start keeping a daily record for the griffin too.

“I still don't believe it myself. Forming a bond with a mythical beast before you've entered into a contract with them is the stuff of fairy tales,” the director said.

This was a shock to learn. I simply had to ask... “Why me?”

“You put your body on the line to protect her,” he said. “I think that had a great effect on the griffin.”

I see. That must be why she tolerates Garr too.

I took the griffin out of her cage and lifted her up in my arms. She nuzzled up against my cheek.

“She really does like you.” When I turned around, I saw the academic woman from the bureau who had given me the body inspection earlier. I could tell she felt awkward. “Um...I'm sorry about earlier.”

“You should be,” I said.

She put me through an embarrassing experience, although I did the same to her too.

“I believe this griffin sees you as her mother,” she said after an awkward pause.

“I...was wondering about that myself,” I admitted.

Sweet little gal. I scratched the griffin's neck with my fingers.

“By the way, how large do griffins grow?” I asked, curious.

“About the same size as horses, or perhaps a bit bigger.”

“What?!”

I had no idea they got so big. Was I really going to be able to care for her? I started to get nervous.

“The bureau will help you. You can come to us whenever you run into a problem.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Finally, the director had one last thing to say to us. “I was unable to control my emotions at the port and spoke disrespectfully to the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron. For that, I’d like to apologize. I’m very sorry.”

He apologized to each member of the unit. On the inside, I was breathing a sigh of relief. The griffin was back with me, and I was finally going to be freed from this dreadful prison.

I was quietly celebrating to myself...but that was before the commander announced one more addition to our punishment.

“The Second Expeditionary Squadron will also be suspended from duties and pay for one week.”

...Yeah, I knew that was coming.

Thus began our unit’s week of suspension.

Chapter 4: Expensive Fruit (For the Griffin)

AFTER the meeting, we went our separate ways but agreed to reunite at a restaurant that night for a celebration after the successful mission.

I asked if we were allowed to go out, despite our week-long suspension, and was told that we had special permission to leave our homes so long as we didn't leave the capital. The lax restrictions on us were startling to hear about.

"Don't worry about it," the captain said. "We can discuss the details tonight."

The rest of the squad hadn't been able to bathe, change clothes, or eat a proper meal yet. I was forced to remain silent about how I got the opportunity to do all those things during our imprisonment, and even drink some fruit milk on top of it.

"Ah, but I can't leave this griffin at the dorm. What should I do?" I asked.

"We'll be going to the restaurant where I used to work, so I'm sure it will be all right," Zara said. "That restaurant has private rooms that are hardly ever used, so they will most likely be available to us tonight."

"I'll swing by on my way home to make a reservation," Captain Ludtink said.

With that, our plans were finalized.

"Oh, I should head over and see Blanche," Zara said.

"Do it tomorrow. It's not like you'll have anything better to do," the captain said dryly.

"But I'm dying to go see her."

"Yeah? Well, do what ya want."

Zara's mythical beast, a mountain cat, was being cared for at the manor of a nobleman's family. She was an adorable cat with a beautiful white coat—she just happened to be incredibly large too.

"That reminds me," I said, interjecting into the conversation, "will I have to

take my griffin with me on expeditions now?”

“Probably. You can ride her around once she’s bigger,” Captain Ludtink said.

“Whaaat? But I would feel bad for the rest of you...”

“I’d feel worse for the horse that has to keep up with your griffin.”

“Th-That’s true...”

The griffin was going to grow even bigger than a horse. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau would provide her meals, but I was still uneasy about how this was going to work.

“Kreh?”

She stared up at me, wrapped in my arms. I squeezed her tighter.

The creature felt even heavier than the first day we captured her. She was surely going to grow up big and strong in no time at all. The two of us were never going to be separated again. That thought caused warmth to flood my chest.

“Um... Thank you for everything,” I said to the captain.

Despite our respective positions, Captain Ludtink stepped up to protect both the griffin and me.

That fact made me so incredibly happy.

Captain Ludtink simply gave me a few firm pats on the head, then flicked my forehead before turning away. Vice Captain Velrey apologized in his place, then followed him out.

Garr left too, though he kept a gentle gaze on the griffin in my arms. Ulgus waved both hands at her excitedly, only to slump his shoulders when she gave him a menacing cry in response.

“See you later!” Zara called, waving goodbye to us with a smile.

“Shall we head home, too?” I asked the griffin.

“Kreh kreh!”

With that, it was time to return to my dormitory for the first time in days.



I was so excited to dive into my soft bed and sleep, but before that, I had to go tell my dorm supervisor about the arrival of the griffin.

A messenger from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was there too. We both took turns explaining to the supervisor about the situation. The messenger was actually none other than the vice director of the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau himself. He did so much apologizing to me, I started to feel as guilty as he did.

I had to guide his apologies into an explanation about how to care for the griffin, since he wasn't stopping at all.

The vice director first handed over a mythical beast ownership permission certificate and told me this was very important. People were only supposed to receive these once they'd passed an exam, but I was allowed to have one due to special circumstances. I could use this certificate to come and go in the city with my griffin, and if I showed it to the clerk while making any mythical beast-related purchases, the receipts would be sent to the bureau instead. It came with some good perks. He told me the full list was available to read on the document itself.

"Now allow me to explain more about life with a griffin."

First, I was told that I couldn't raise a griffin to adulthood in a dormitory. I had no choice but to agree with this, now that I knew she would grow to the size of a horse.

I was going to have to change rooms due to the griffin's crying at night. There was said to be a free room with no neighbors on either direct side that I could move into.

The next topic was my daily life from here out. I would have to leave the dormitory and start renting a house once the griffin grew to the size of a horse.

"The bureau will cover all of your living expenses. We can also suggest some properties if you wish."

"I see."

He handed me one last bundle of documents. These were references on griffins as a species. It was a hundred pages long, so I decided to sit down and give it a thorough read in my room later.

“I also brought you some fruit that mythical beasts consume for meals.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

I had just been thinking that I needed to go shopping for griffin food now. The bureau truly loved their mythical beasts. Everything was already worked out perfectly for me. I didn’t have to search for a new house just yet, either.

“As for your mythical beast log...”

There was good news about the griffin’s log I had to submit to the bureau too. I was actually going to be paid for the records I kept.

Important information would earn me one gold coin. Somewhat helpful information was equal to one silver coin. If I wrote something that didn’t fit either category, it was an even payment of a silver half coin. As long as I was smart with my money, I’d be able to save up for my sisters’ marriages in no time at all.

On top of all that, there was a mythical beast supervisory fee I was to be paid. There was also hazard pay for the dangers of it.

I honestly felt like I could quit my job as a knight and live off the payments for raising the griffin alone. But even if that was the case, I had no intention of following through with it.

Now that the instructions were finished, the vice director left for the bureau, so the dorm supervisor and I began to prepare for my room swap.

I packed my travel bag full of my belongings. The griffin watched on curiously. The dorm supervisor worked on folding up my clothes for me.

By the end of it, I’d packed up all my things into one large bag, one small bag, and a single box.

The dorm supervisor brought me a cart, so I could push my luggage, as well as the griffin, all the way to my new room.

“Thank you for all your help,” I said to her.

“Of course. Just let me know if there’s anything else I can help you with.”

“I will. I really appreciate it.”

I bowed, then the two of us parted ways.

In front of my new room, I found a delivery of three boxes filled with fruit. I set the griffin on the bed and carried in each crate, one at a time. The sweet and sour scents of fruit began to fill my room.

I sat down on my bed and looked the griffin over. She was tottering around on her legs now. Growth was truly an amazing thing. However...

“Whoa! Look out!!”

The griffin almost went tumbling right off the bed. I grabbed her in a panic. Her newfound mobility wasn’t all good news. I wished I had a cage of some sort.

I set the griffin on my lap and began to read through the pile of documents.

The first thing I learned was that griffins were very clingy with family members. They tended to get lonely without attention too. Once they formed a contract with someone, it wasn’t a good idea to keep them outside anymore.

This probably meant I needed a house with lots of space—the kind of place where a family of nobles would live. Well, as long as the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was footing the bill, then that wasn’t something I needed to worry about.

But I wondered if I would be able to go out shopping at all once the griffin was full grown. This was one potential problem, for sure.

The further I read, the more it started to sink in that the griffin was not going to be an easy animal to care for. But when I read the last section of the documents, I was lost for words.

It was an adoption request from the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau—Marius Lichtenberger.

I also learned that the old man was none other than a marquess. That meant his family was on top of the food chain in terms of nobility.

How impressive of Captain Ludtink to deliver such a swift kick to a man like

that. I assumed he had to be familiar with a family like the Lichtenbergers.

I wanted to go back to the captain and thank him again. Of course, I knew that violence was terrible and wrong. But I was still happy he came to our rescue regardless.

Setting that aside...an adoption request? Is he that eager to claim a mythical beast for himself? I don't want some high-strung old man as my father. Request denied.

Although, it might be safer to be under someone's protection now that I was going to live alongside a griffin. I would have to be a fool to deny the fact that I was surely going to run into obstacles with my new circumstances. But with the director's help as a griffin expert and high-ranking member of society, maybe those hurdles would get easier to clear.

I just couldn't shake the feeling that the two of us were polar opposites in terms of personality. This was something I was going to have to think long and hard about.

While I was flipping through the pages, I heard the evening bell start to ring. The sun was setting, turning my new room dark. I put some wood in my fireplace to produce a bit of light.

I was about to make some tea, when it hit me—I needed to prepare for our celebratory dinner.

I promptly took out the navy dress Zara and I had picked out together last time. It was a very cute style, with lace trim around the bottom of the skirt.

The clock told me that our meeting time was rapidly approaching. I styled my hair as quickly as I could, which meant tying it up in one high ponytail just like Zara did.

"Kreh kreh."

"Oh, right!"

I also stuffed some fruit in my bag for the griffin. I peeled one for her, thinking she was hungry, but she only finished half of it.

"That's so wasteful," I chided her.

I decided to finish it myself instead of throwing it away.

This fruit was a strange one—the outer skin was bright red, but the inside was partially transparent. It was crisp and shockingly sweet. There was no mistaking how expensive this fruit must be. *What a luxury!*

Surely, this was yet another display of the bureau's love.



I raced over to the restaurant with the griffin in my arms, feeling glances in my direction all throughout town. It wasn't every day that people got to witness something as rare as a mythical beast. It made me realize that I probably needed a cap to put on her head to keep her hidden.

We arrived at the restaurant right on time.

"Melly."

Someone called out to me just as I was about to open the door. I turned around and... *Wait, what?*

"Good evening," the man greeted me.

"Oh, hello?"

The person standing there was a dashing young man. His shirt was embroidered with fancy silver thread around the sleeves and collar. His long golden hair was tied into a single braid with his bangs slicked back.

I finally managed to figure out his identity—it was Zara dressed like a young nobleman.



“Why are you all dressed up?” I asked.

“I just felt like trying something new for a change... Do I look weird?”

“Not at all. You look incredible.”

“That’s a relief!” Zara grinned at me.

His male attire made him look like someone else entirely. Or maybe that was because of his new hairstyle. Either way, Zara looked even more masculine than when he was wearing his knight’s uniform. It was also a relief to see that, at a glance, his time in prison hadn’t fatigued him.

“Let’s head in through the back,” he suggested. “There’ll be a lot of customers here at this hour.”

“Good idea.”

The griffin seemed a bit on edge around all the people in the city. I didn’t know how she might act out if the crowded restaurant frightened her even more. Zara’s suggestion was a smart one.

The workers in the alley behind the restaurant were busy hauling food and barrels of liquor back and forth. One young man was carrying a stack of three crates in his arms. But he wasn’t paying attention to what was in front of him. I tried to dodge him, but Zara reached out and pulled me close to him to avoid the man.

“Th-Thank you.”

“Of course. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

We made it through the alley and entered through the back. Zara, who knew the way to the private rooms from his time working there, strolled down the hall casually.

We finally arrived in the room we reserved—the last two members of our squadron to show up.

Captain Ludtink was pouring liquor from the table into his wooden mug. They had put in their orders already and were waiting for their food to arrive.

“Order whatever you like, Medic Risurisu.” Vice Captain Velrey handed me a menu. This restaurant’s specialty was meat, so they didn’t offer any seafood dishes.

Forest crab and long-tailed shrimp... Thinking about the foods of the southern island made me salivate. I simply had to remind myself that today was going to be a meat day.

The first page of the menu showed the day’s specials.

Specials of the day:

- *Thick-cut three-horned cow roast*
- *Tender three-horned cow beef simmered in red wine*
- *Juicy three-horned cow beef skewers with herbs*

My squadmates had already ordered a few portions of the dishes from the very top of the menu. I decided to get a forest mushroom and cheese soup for myself, along with some pickled vegetables.

The first entrée arrived right away. It was a plate of thick cuts of three-horned cow meat!

I was worried that the griffin on my lap might not care for these smells, but instead, she curled up and went to sleep. She hadn’t been sleeping well for the past few days, so that was understandable. Her rapid growth meant that she already barely fit on my lap.

“Isn’t that griffin heavy to carry around, Medic Risurisu?” Ulgus asked.

“She is, but now that her injuries are healed, she can walk on her own legs too.”

“I see.” Ulgus was staring at the griffin. “Must be nice...” he murmured.

“Ulgus, you’re making it sound like you wanna take a nap on Risurisu’s lap.”

“I-I don’t! What are you talking about, Captain?!”

How could Captain Ludtink bully a young man like that? He was so mean!

But when I took a closer look, I spotted an empty bottle on the floor by his feet. I realized he must already be drunk.

I said my prayer and dug into my first meat dish in quite some time.

“It’s been so long; I feel like my stomach’s gonna throw a fit.” Zara squinted at the hefty serving of beef in front of him.

I certainly understood. The only things to enter my stomach in the last two days were watery soup and stone-like bread. This poor diet gave me serious concerns about how my digestive system would hold up.

“You’re a sensitive person, aren’t you, Ahto?” Ulgus was cutting up the beef as he spoke.

“You’ll understand the pain of stomachaches someday, June.”

“Do you think so? Why do stomachs even have to ache in the first place?” Ulgus asked.

“Indigestion is the result of stomach function decline, preventing normal digestion and keeping food stuck in the stomach for too long,” I explained. “Oh, that reminds me, Zara. I know a food that can help you with stomachaches.”

“For real?”

“Yes!” I searched for it on the menu. If possible, I hoped to get it raw, before being cooked at all. “There it is! Forest apple juice!”

“That stuff works on stomachaches?” Zara asked, curious.

“It does. Forest apples help with digestion. They’re used as medicine to aid in the digestive process.”

“You don’t say! You know everything, Melly.”

I couldn’t use healing magic, so instead, I used to go to my village healer and demand he teach me about how to be healthy. Although, that didn’t feel like something I should share without ruining the fun mood of the room.

I called for a waiter and ordered five cups of forest apple juice. Captain Ludtink didn’t get stomachaches either, so I ordered only for the rest of us. *So, his stomach is as strong as the rest of him looks, huh? Except at sea...*

Our order showed up in no time at all.

The juice was more like grated forest apples with honey on top, so we

scooped it with spoons to eat it instead of drinking the juice like normal. The sourness of the apple mixed with the sweet honey to produce a delicate flavor.

“Shall we dig in?”

“Of course.”

I decided to indulge in the meat, now that I knew my stomach problems were probably solved.

The thick slices of meat were still simmering on the iron plate they came with. I liked my meat well-done, so I sliced it up and pressed red parts down on the iron plate.

Meanwhile, Captain Ludtink was gobbling down meat that was dripping with red juices. I wanted to ask if it was even cooked at all. He...really looked like a bandit. I had to question if he was truly the son of a nobleman. Honestly, I was really starting to doubt it.

I stuffed my cheeks with fully cooked beef.

The grill marks gave off a strong aroma, and the more I chewed, the more I felt the juices seep into my mouth. It was served with a refreshing citrus sauce too, which brought out the savory flavor of the beef.

After staring sweetly at my griffin for a while, Vice Captain Velrey had a question for me. “By the way, Medic Risurisu, did you ever pick a name for your griffin?”

“No, not yet.”

The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was kind enough to include a list of name suggestions. But they were all so long and impossible to remember. I rejected them on the spot.

“I feel like I want a name that’s short, but cute.”

The griffin was a girl, and there was even a chance of her being paired up with a male griffin at a sanctuary in the future, according to the documents I was given. But that depended on how she felt about it.

“Does anyone have any suggestions?” I asked the table.

Something seemed to come to Captain Ludtink's mind right away. "How about Fang? Since she likes to *bite* people."

"That's not cute at all."

But I wouldn't have expected anything else from Captain Ludtink.

"What about Lulu, Medic Risurisu? Don't you think that's cute?"

This suggestion came from Ulgus. Indeed, it was cute, but there was one problem.

"That's actually my mom's name," I said awkwardly.

"Y-Your mom...? I'm sorry..."

"It's fine."

Vice Captain Velrey was racking her brain to think of something, but her face remained frozen in an expression of deep focus.

Garr, who was sitting across the table from me, handed me a note with a name written on it.

"Amelia...? I...like that."

The name sounded so charming out loud. He explained that it meant "loved one" in an ancient language.

"Um...would it be all right to use this name for my griffin?" I asked him.

Garr nodded his head.

"Thank you so much. I'll start using it right away."

The griffin had just woken up and everything. I lifted her body up and spoke to her. "Your new name is Amelia."

"Kreh!" With that cry in response, I also heard a noise like something being snapped.

"Hey! Medic Risurisu! Look at the back of your hand!"

"What?"

Ulgus was pointing at the back of my right hand, telling me that a crest had just popped up on it. I looked down and saw what appeared to be a flower

blooming on my skin.

“What is this thing...?” I asked, startled.

“A contract branding?” Zara guessed.

Then, I thought back to the documents. They said there was a type of contract that was completed once a mythical beast approved of a given name.

“Who knew a contract could be formed so easily?” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“Right?” I agreed.

This was a surprise. I expected a contract to involve much more work.

“That’s not true, Melly. Contracts like yours are really, really rare.”

“Really?!”

“Most contracts are formed by making the mythical beast drink the blood of their master,” he explained. “A blood contract is a thing of force. But that won’t work on a noble beast like a griffin.”

“I see.”

“I formed a blood contract with my mountain cat when I adopted her,” he continued. “Oh, and most contract brandings appear on the back of the hand.”

I glanced at Zara’s hand. “Wait, where’s your branding, Zara?”

“It’s on my chest.”

“Oh, I see.”

I wondered what it looked like. I knew they were supposed to be different shapes depending on what mythical beast the contract was formed with.

“Ahto’s contract branding is really pretty,” Ulgus said.

Even Garr nodded in agreement.

The both of them had seen it in the shared baths before. That description piqued my interest, but I couldn’t exactly ask to see it for myself. I was forced to give up.

After dinner, we ordered a dessert of forest apple pie. The fruit was in season, so the restaurant was running something like a special forest apple campaign.

The menu was filled with all kinds of apple treats and meals.

The pie was decided on after a group discussion. While we waited for it to finish baking, we exchanged stories about our prison experiences.

“I had an old lady in the cell across from me,” Ulgus said. “She kept talking to me, and in the end, she said she thought fate brought us together.”

Hearing Ulgus’s tale made me sad. As a kind young man, I knew he must have been patient and listened to her every last word.

But then, Garr said he was taken to a cell for stray dogs.

“You’re kidding, Garr! That’s terrible!” I exclaimed.

Even Ulgus sympathized, despite his own terrible experience.

He was forced to listen to the dog cry the entire time. The worst part of it all was that it even got better food than Garr did. He was so sad, having to watch the dog gobble down real meat.

Vice Captain Velrey was taken to a women’s cell for minor offenses. It was a crowded place, but she was able to keep up a steady routine during her jailtime.

“I decided to think of it as a lesson, so I made sure to eat three meals a day, get plenty of sleep, and spend my free time meditating.”

I see. Vice Captain Velrey’s so strong. It’s impossible not to respect her.

Zara spent his time bickering with the madame of a bar who was arrested for smuggling drugs. “She asked me to hook her up with a guy, and my heart was telling me to give her Captain Ludtink’s name, but my brain was holding me back.”

Zara explained that the madame’s request was for a slender, pretty man with toned muscles. They couldn’t see each other in their cells, so she probably had no idea that Zara was her exact type.

“Why the hell would you tell her about me?!”

“I would feel too bad, siccing her on Garr or June like that. I just felt like you could handle it, Captain.”

“You’re a real brat, you know that?”

“What does it matter? He— I mean, she’s serving a life sentence as it is.”

“That’s not my damn problem with it!”

I listened to their conversation, taking in the stories of all the different people they met. I had been completely alone in my block.

“How were things for you, Captain Ludtink?” I asked.

“They chained my hands and feet and threw me in a group cell for murderers.”

Ulgus spit out his drink.

The captain explained that, once the knight in charge of him saw his face, he assumed he must be a terrible criminal and wouldn’t listen to any attempts at reasoning. Even I felt this was cruel, despite the captain’s bandit face.

Captain Ludtink scowled as he described his time in jail. “It all started with a showdown between prisoners to establish dominance.”

I feel like the captain’s experience was on a different level than ours...

He told us he’d been subjected to various trials in the cell filled with fearsome criminals. “But in the end, I claimed the title of the 32nd ruler of their ring.”

How did that happen, exactly?!

I was blown away that Captain Ludtink could achieve (if you can call it that) a coronation on death row of all places...

Our intense conversation was interrupted by the arrival of our forest apple pie. Its surface was glistening in the light due to the egg yolk they must have brushed over it. The waiter began to slice into it with his knife.

The crunch of the crust was audible from where I sat. A sweet fragrance wafted toward me. I thought the waiter was going to dish up plates with slices, but he asked me to wait one more moment.

He picked up some sort of iron bucket from his cart and reached inside with a spoon. *Wait, what’s this now?*

On each plate, he placed a scoop of something milky-white.

“This is called ice cream,” he explained. “It’s a cold dessert made from a frozen mixture of sugar, eggs, and milk.”

I could hardly believe it. It was ice cream!

Throughout my life, I only ever got to witness ice cream in my picture books. It was the dessert of legends. The books said it was cold and melted on your tongue. But was that really true? I ended up focusing more on the ice cream than the pie itself.

Forest apple pie with ice cream. I couldn’t wait another minute to try it. The latticed pie crust was perfectly crispy and gave off the rich aroma of butter. The seasonal forest apples were deliciously sweet with a hint of sourness. They were truly delicious and more refreshing than I expected.

I tried the ice cream next.

“...Whoa!”

The first thing that surprised me was its chilliness. But the longer I waited, the more the ice cream dissolved on my tongue, filling my mouth with such a rich sweetness.

This is it! The real deal...! Now I understand why something so delicious was always showing up in fairy tales.

“Melly, you should try it together with the pie!” Zara said.

“Really?”

They’re supposed to be eaten together? This surprised me, but I arranged a bite of ice cream and pie on my fork.

“...?!”

The warm pie and frigid ice cream were a combination to die for.

How is this possible?

The addition of the ice cream caused the butter taste of the pie crust to stand out even more. All the flavors were so much richer now. Whoever thought of this just *had* to be a genius.

Our pleasant evening of delicious food ended all too soon.

After that, Zara walked me back home to my dorm. His next stop was to visit the noble family's house and retrieve Blanche.

"You know..." he began.

"Yes?"

"The family that takes care of Blanche is the bureau director's wife's family."

"Wow, that's surprising!"

Zara said he decided to forget all the things the director said to him on the day of our arrest. I only wondered how the director felt about things between them now.

"Hopefully, it doesn't come back to bite me."

"Yes, me too."

We arrived at the dormitory gates. It was time to go our separate ways.

"Thank you for walking me home."

"It's no trouble. Be safe until you're back in your room."

"Of course."

With my heavy griffin wrapped in my arms, I bowed my head to him.

"See you next week!"

"You too."

Zara went on his way while I returned to my room.

Chapter 5: Fancy Shellfish Soup

I spent most of my suspension period recording logs pertaining to Amelia's care.

Amelia could walk around freely now that she was fully healed. That meant a lot of anxiety for me.

But the documents the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau provided gave me a good idea of what to expect when raising a young griffin.

I needed to be extremely patient with her.

With that, the one-week suspension was over in the blink of an eye. The few things I accomplished were making a head covering and pillow for Amelia. I used scraps of cloth that I had taken with me when I left home.

"Kreh kreh!"

She always hopped up and down excitedly when she donned the frilly bonnet I made for her. Maybe she liked it because she was a girl. She kept rushing over to the mirror to look at herself.



But griffins were still griffins, even with bonnets on. She wasn't exactly disguising herself well, even if she *was* adorable.

We'd only spent a week together so far, but Amelia had grown so much already. She was too heavy for me to lift anymore, even though she still looked the same on the outside.

As always, Amelia still tried to nuzzle up to me and let out sad chirps for me to lift her up, which forced me to give a sincere explanation that it was too difficult for me now. That seemed to resonate with her. The griffin didn't ask me to carry her around anymore after that.

She could even peel her own fruit now. It took her five days to master the skill. This was probably the result of my tears, sweat, and hard work.

Amelia didn't cry at night anymore, either—she slept straight through until morning once she was out. Forming a contract with her felt like a big part of that. I was relieved to know that I no longer had to fear sleep deprivation from here on out.

As always, she still loved to be spoiled rotten, and was constantly glued to me as a result. I was starting to worry about how I was going to leave for work every day.

I also doubted whether she was truly capable of flight. She flapped her wings sometimes, but it was nothing like the movements of a creature about to take off in flight.

Hmm. What should I do about that? Well, if she actually did start flying, that would only create even more problems for me.

Once our suspension was over, Zara and I set out for work together.

"Oh my goodness! Get out of here!" Zara gushed. "That bonnet's sooo cute, Amelia! Did you make it, Melly?"

"I sure did. I worked really hard on it."

"Kreh!" Amelia boasted, seeming to understand that Zara was praising her.

"I want to make her a cape for her back too, but it'll be difficult, considering her wings and all."

“True...” Zara started to work on solving this problem for me too. I could always count on him.

Life at work was the same as before...actually, not exactly.

We appeared to have a bit of a spotlight on us now that our squadron had been punished. I constantly sensed the rude glances coming from those around us. But everything we did, we did for the good of the griffin. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

It was our first morning meeting in a full week.

Captain Ludtink already sounded bored at the beginning of his announcement.

“Good news, everyone. The next expedition’s gonna be fun.”

We were to head to a place called the Carkuku Wetlands and exterminate the man-eating lizards there. Our mode of travel was by carriage. The wetlands were home to dense fog and patches of swamps, making them impossible for horses to traverse.

We set out to prepare without delay.

The mission’s rations would include newly pickled vegetables, dried noodles, roasted nuts and seeds, and salted pork. I stuffed the cans into my bag. Ulgus came to help me after he finished his own packing duties.

“Ulgus, let’s eat some delicious hot meals on our expedition,” I said.

“Definitely! I’m looking forward to it.”

We were going to be bringing camping tents with us this time. I planned on sleeping right next to Vice Captain Velrey.

“That reminds me. Are you really bringing Amelia along on this trip, Medic Risurisu?” Ulgus asked.

“I am. Sadly, she gets too lonely without me.”

I wished she was capable of waiting for me somewhere while I was away, just like Zara’s mountain cat. But I knew that wasn’t an easy request for a griffin, given their personalities.

“That must be hard to deal with.”

“It’s supposed to improve a bit once she matures, at least,” I said.

Still, I couldn’t believe we were assigned an expedition on our very first day back at work. The higher-ups were probably upset that we brought shame to the Order. It was hard not to sympathize with where they were coming from...

Fortunately, I already had special rations for my griffin, since I was planning to store them away in the food shed for future use.

“Wow, so griffins can eat dried fruit for rations?” Ulgus asked, surprised.

“Yes, these are the most expensive ones from the very back of the shop.”

“Aaaaah! I bet my lips would swell up if I ate those.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

I also brought one of the crates of raw fruit with me to leave here in the break room, but I decided to take it with us instead. I stuffed the fruit in my bag.

Amelia approached me, probably smelling the fruit, and peered into the bag.

“Kreh?”

“We’re getting ready to head out,” I explained to her.

Was Amelia really going to behave herself in the carriage? What about at the wetlands? I was definitely concerned.

I leaned in close to Amelia’s wings and gave her a sniff. I bathed her every day, but I just wanted to be safe. It was strange how she didn’t smell like an animal at all. In fact, her natural scent was a sweet one, since her diet consisted only of fruit.

“Amelia’s luggage alone is ridiculously heavy,” I sighed.

“I’ll help you carry all that,” Ulgus offered.

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

Ulgus was such a nice guy.

The two of us headed outside once we were finished packing. I pressed forward, occasionally turning to glance back at Amelia, when I suddenly heard

yells coming from the captain's office.

"You can't just show up here without warning!"

"I received permission, I'll have you know!"

These voices sounded strangely familiar to me.

Ulgus and I exchanged glances. We thought about ignoring it and going on our way, but then the office door flung open.

"You can't stop me...! Oh, it's you."

"H-Hello..."

The woman from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was the one bickering with Captain Ludtink in his office. She was the beautiful academic who'd inspected my body.

Instead of her white coat, she was dressed in a knight's uniform today... *Wait, why?*

"U-Um, what brings you here?" I had a bad feeling about this but decided to ask her anyway.

"I've joined the Royal Order to guard your griffin here," she declared without hesitation.

"Whaaat?!"

You have to be kidding me!

I really didn't expect her to care about the griffin to such an extent. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was a fearsome beast in itself.

The woman held a wand in her hand. I knew she must be a sorcerer.



“A-Are you a healing mage?” I ventured.

“What makes you say that?”

“Urk! Well...”

I could never admit the embarrassing truth—that I felt inferior to people who knew how to use healing spells.

“No, I’m not. I told you. I’m here to be a guard,” she said flatly.

That had to mean she used attack magic.

It was surprising to learn. But I started to think about it more. There had been moments on previous expeditions where I was left behind on my own. If a monster approached me in those situations, Amelia and I would have to run away together.

I had no means of fighting to protect myself. What could I do if we were attacked in a way that we couldn’t escape from?

It might make me feel a lot safer to have a guard around.

“Hey, get in here!” Captain Ludtink stuck his head out of the office and called for the others to join him.

Vice Captain Velrey, Garr, and Zara came into the room.

“...This is our new squadmate.” Captain Ludtink introduced the woman with a look of true contempt on his face.

“I’m Liselotte Lichtenberger, a combat sorcerer. My specialty is fire spells. I joined the squadron, so I could protect that griffin.” She adjusted her glasses as she introduced herself to us.

Lichtenberger? That name sounds familiar to me.

Liselotte squinted at me when she saw me cocking my head at her.

Even her needy gaze felt like something I’d been on the receiving end of before...

“...Ah!!” I cried.

Then it hit me. Marquess Lichtenberger! He was the director of the Royal

Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

“Are you the director’s daughter?” I asked, super curious.

“Yes, that’s right. The director of the bureau is my father.”

I almost shouted out, “You two are so alike!” But I managed to hold it in.

If the Lichtenberger family really did adopt me, that would make Liselotte my older sister and the director my father.

No, no, no. I could never. That house must be such a suffocating place to live.

But could such a typical young noblewoman really keep up on an expedition?

“Um, when we’re on expeditions, you have to go days without taking a bath, and there are no toilets either,” I explained gingerly. “Not to mention, the meals aren’t expensive or nice. Camping outside means being stung by bugs and having to take turns staying up at night as lookouts.”

“I know all that. I’m prepared to protect the griffin,” she said, sounding determined.

Hmm. I see. So she’s determined to tough it out.

Captain Ludtink warned her that he would remove her from the unit on the spot if she ever complained.

“I’ll keep up with you, whatever it takes.”

She even explained that she brought food rations along with her because she heard we had an expedition coming up. She was clever, that much was obvious.

“What’s your goal in all this?” Captain Ludtink questioned Lady Liselotte with a look of exasperation on his face.

“To spread information about mythical beasts and prove that coexistence with humans is possible.”

“So, you bureau folk want to use mythical beasts for your own ends?”

“No, what I want is to show that mythical beasts are gentle creatures and that humans can share an understanding with them.”

The director was a stubborn man who cared about nothing else besides the

preservation of mythical beasts. But instead of shutting them away in sanctuaries, Lady Liselotte believed in finding a way for mythical beasts to live alongside humans.

When the captain asked her what her father thought about such a thing, she said she didn't know. The two had apparently gotten into an argument, causing her to leave the bureau in a hurry and join the Royal Order instead. She was starting to sound like a troublesome young lady.

"So, you want to stick the Second Expeditionary Squadron in the middle of your little father-daughter spat?" Zara concluded.

"What did you just say?!" Lady Liselotte stomped up closer to Zara. The two beauties were having a showdown with their eyes. It was such an intense sight.

"I look forward to seeing you admit defeat," Zara said coolly.

"I'll never admit defeat!"

"Oh? I guess we'll see."

"Just you watch."

Vice Captain Velrey stood up and placed herself in between Zara and Lady Liselotte to mediate.

Captain Ludtink was scowling fiercely, bringing out the essence of bandit on his face.

Garr was staring off in the opposite direction with a sad expression.

Ulgus and I cradled our heads, trying to figure out how the situation ended up like this.

What did the future of our squadron look like now?

All I knew for sure was that having a combat mage was going to be a big help.

Sorcerers were already very rare throughout the world, and most of them chose to go into academia. The handful who joined the Royal Order were always able to choose their desired squadron, though they tended to become imperial guards, since the pay was much better.

There were some combat medics in the expeditionary squadrons who could

use a bit of healing magic, but Lady Liselotte would be the first combat mage that I knew of. Gaining a new member of the team was always a good thing.

I decided to properly introduce myself to Lady Liselotte.

“Um, I’m Mell Risurisu, a combat medic. I look forward to working with you.”

“R-Right...”

“I also gave this griffin the name Amelia.”

I informed her that Amelia and I had formed a contract through a naming ritual. She looked surprised to see the branding on the back of my hand.

“Ha-...”

“Ha?”

I tried to get a good look at her face, but as soon as our eyes met, she looked away. Her face was turning beet red.

“Um, is something wrong?” I asked.

“Have you forgiven me for what happened last week?” she asked meekly.

“Ah...”

The memories of my contract branding examination in the bath were still fresh in my mind. Lady Liselotte joined me in getting naked, going as far as to catch a cold just to complete my body inspection. Looking back, it was almost funny now.

Lady Liselotte told me that she had wanted to apologize to me ever since.

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all right. Let’s put it behind us.”

I decided to accept the apology.

The two of us shared the same goal. This wasn’t the time to hold on to any hostility.

“Let’s protect this griffin together.” I reached my hand out toward her. Lady Liselotte returned the gesture, and the two of us exchanged a handshake.



OUR carriage rattled down the path.

It was a lovely day—the perfect weather for an expedition. Although, it was supposed to be cloudy and rainy once we reached the wetlands.

Captain Ludtink sat closest to the doors, with Vice Captain Velrey across from him. Amelia was curled up at my feet with Lady Liselotte sitting directly across from me, while Zara was seated at my side, across from Ulgus. Garr was driving the carriage up front.

It took a day and a half to reach the Carkuku Wetlands. The unexpectedly long trip was a bit of an annoyance.

The atmosphere in the carriage was extremely awkward.

Lady Liselotte's sudden arrival in our squadron would be the cause of that.

Apparently, she and Zara were already acquainted. During expeditions, Zara left his mountain cat at the home of a noble family—the family of the bureau director's wife. In other words, they were Lady Liselotte's grandparents.

"The nerve of this girl!" Zara huffed. "As soon as she got one look at my mountain cat, she demanded I hand her over. We had a contract and everything, so it wasn't like she could separate us in the first place."

"Th-That was three years ago!!"

"And how old were you at that point, hmm?"

"I was...fifteen..."

This was an unexpected twist. The tall, mature-looking, glasses-wearing beauty was only eighteen—the same age as me. This came as a shocking blow to me. Just the other day, one of the cafeteria ladies told me she thought I was fifteen all this time!

I was wondering why Zara was being openly hostile toward her, so unlike how he normally acted, but now it all made sense.

"You're ruthless, bringing up old history like that," Lady Liselotte complained.

"I have every right to be. Who wouldn't be upset to have their family spoken of like a commodity for trade?" Zara shot back.

“Enough, you two.” Vice Captain Velrey seemed to have enough of their bickering at this point and interceded.

At the same time, Captain Ludtink was giving off an aura of anger all the while. I wasn’t looking at him much, since he was being scary, but I could sense his annoyance all the way from where I sat.

The one bit of good fortune was that Amelia knew how to behave herself in a carriage. I decided to give her some fruit during our next rest stop, since she was being such a good girl.

This was the longest trip we’d been on for an expedition yet. The plan was to stop off at a local village for lunch and spend the night in a lodge. Although, I had to wonder if we could find a lodge that allowed mythical beasts too.

If it didn’t work out, I supposed I could sleep in the carriage.

“Your griffin sure is well-behaved,” Lady Liselotte remarked.

“She is. She’s a very good girl.”

The princess’s maid had referred to Amelia as “Exceedingly violent” in her report. I was certain they must have been treating her poorly.

Lady Liselotte blushed as she stared down at the dozing griffin, curled up at my feet. “So cute...” I heard her whisper.

“She’s cute, but she only likes Medic Risurisu and Garr, so I don’t think you should try to pet her or anything.” Ulgus was the one to share that warning. He experienced a bite from Amelia himself, after all.

“I know that, of course.” Lady Liselotte was well-versed in the behavior of mythical beasts.

“Right. I’m sorry,” Ulgus apologized, though his voice lacked any real regret.

At lunchtime, we stopped to eat at a nearby village.

I couldn’t visit the restaurant with them because I had Amelia with me. Since the mission came so suddenly, I didn’t have time to prepare a lunchbox in advance.

While I tried to figure out what to do, Vice Captain Velrey came up with a

proposal.

“How about I buy something I can bring back to you?”

“I’m sorry for the trouble. But thank you!”

The vice captain decided she would go buy us both lunch and eat with me in the carriage.

The rest of the members ate in the restaurant.

While they were away, Lady Liselotte and I remained in the carriage alone. Now seemed like a good time to feed Amelia.

“Amelia! It’s time for lunch!”

Her eyes flew open when I called her name. I held out some fruit, and she grabbed it with her front legs. I also spread out a cloth so that she wouldn’t drip juice all over the carriage.

“Oh my. She learned how to peel fruit by herself?” Lady Liselotte asked, surprised.

“Yes, she managed to get it down.”

It took so long to teach her that skill. I smiled, thinking back to the days I still used to peel the fruit for her.

Next, I gave her water and took her on a short walk outside. That was probably enough to prepare her for the next portion of the trip.

With that, I headed back to the carriage.

The inside was completely quiet. I looked out the window and took in the sights of the abundant nature. There was even a windmill on the top of a distant hill. It was such a tranquil village.

Lady Liselotte finally spoke up—maybe she felt just as awkward as I did in all the silence.

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“I’m really getting in the way, aren’t I?”

Lady Liselotte was the current source of the awkward mood amongst our squadmates. I knew it was best to answer honestly.

“Well, my opinion as a combat medic and as Amelia’s owner would be that I’m really grateful you’re here. I’m embarrassed to say that I can’t do any fighting of my own at all,” I admitted.

It was surely going to be helpful to have her with us. I looked forward to seeing how she used her magic to contribute to the mission.

“Still, I always try to get a read on others’ moods,” she said.

“That’s a great thing.”

“But the only things that ever come out of my mouth are childish retorts,” she confessed.

“That’s not as great.”

“How can I better fit in as a member of this squadron?” she asked.

I realized this was a real trouble weighing on her mind.

“It’s not as difficult as you might think. You can easily become part of the team.”

“I...can?”

I nodded my head to show her she had nothing to worry about.

“But how do I do that?”

“Um, well...”

Now she was asking for specifics. Specifics I didn’t know how to give her. In my case, I’d become a member of the team without even trying, since everyone treated me so kindly.

“Despite his looks, Captain Ludtink is really kind, and Zara is so warm and friendly with—”

“Kind? Captain Ludtink and the mountain cat’s owner?” she asked, incredulous.

“His name is Zara Ahto,” I corrected her.

We then heard a knock come from the carriage door. I looked out the window and saw that Vice Captain Velrey was standing there.

“That was fast.” I greeted her with a bow. She handed over a paper bag that was still piping hot.

“Yeah, there were a lot of food stands right by the entrance to the village,” she explained.

“I see. Thank you for bringing this.”

“They’re minced meat and sweet bean steamed buns.”

She told me that, as a town with natural hot springs, they served lots of steamed foods here. The other foods she brought included steamed eggs, steamed chicken skewers, and baked potatoes. I was so glad that Vice Captain Velrey picked out such classic food stall specialties.

She handed Lady Liselotte a steamed chicken skewer. Lady Liselotte looked at the food hesitantly.

“Um, I’m sorry to ask, but do you have any dishes? A plate? Perhaps a fork?” Lady Liselotte asked, concern lacing her voice.

“I don’t. Just eat with your hands,” Vice Captain Velrey said bluntly.

“.....”

“Want to borrow my knife?” The vice captain swiftly unhooked her knife from her belt. But Lady Liselotte froze up and started to shake her head.

It wasn’t surprising that a marquess’s daughter was opposed to eating with her hands.

“This is how knights eat, Lady Liselotte,” I told her gently. “We eat like barbaric bandits. Expeditions don’t come with tables or silverware.”

We generally used leaves for plates and ate off our own laps.

“Barbaric...bandits...?” she repeated, seeming to choke on the words.

I tried to come up with a nicer way of putting it, but those were the only words I landed on that really felt like they applied.

“You should go home now if you don’t think you can eat like this,” Vice

Captain Velrey continued on for me. “There are carriages here that will take you to the capital.”

As harsh as her words sounded, I knew Vice Captain Velrey was actually showing her compassion. From here on out, Lady Liselotte wouldn’t be able to return home, no matter how much she wanted.

But she shook her head in response and grabbed the steamed chicken skewer with her hands.

The portion of chicken she received was the tips of the wings. She was scowling fiercely at the meat in front of her.

I decided to eat my own skewer first to show her how it’s done.

At first glance, I assumed the chicken was simply steamed and served plain, but once I bit in, I realized I was wrong. The aftertaste of the meat was full of hints of fruit vinegar, juices, and spices.

The meat was shockingly tender, too—sweet yet sour, rich yet refreshing.

“It’s really tasty.” I tried to tempt Lady Liselotte into trying her chicken instead of just glaring at it.

Hesitantly, she bit into the tips of the chicken wings.

She chewed, and then finally, she let out a sigh.

“Well? What do you think?” I asked.

“I feel like a barbaric bandit.”

Vice Captain Velrey and I couldn’t hold in our laughter after hearing such a conclusion come out of the mouth of a young noblewoman.



AFTER lunch, I asked Vice Captain Velrey for advice on how one could fit in with the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

“It’s nothing difficult.” She sounded like she knew the answer already. Lady Liselotte leaned forward, eager to hear it. “You have to rely on your squadmates. You can’t try to do everything on your own.”

“Is that...it?” Lady Liselotte sounded skeptical.

“Sure. But it’s harder to stick to than it sounds.”

No one was perfect, after all.

“That’s why it’s so important to work with your squadmates,” Vice Captain Velrey continued. “We’re not solo knights, we’re a team. You’ll fit in easily once that lesson sinks in.”

To put it simply, Vice Captain Velrey wanted her to resist the urge to be stubborn. What mattered most, surely, was working together as a group. What that meant specifically depended on the person.

“Don’t worry so much,” Vice Captain Velrey reassured. “We’re all on your side. Some of us may look scarier than others, but at our cores, we’re all good people. But for now, you might just have to forgive them for having attitudes. The Second Expeditionary Squadron is full of youngsters, and no one’s very good at reacting to unexpected changes.”

Lady Liselotte nodded her head firmly in response. The uneasiness in her eyes was gone, and in its place was determination.

Then she voiced her innermost feelings, “I understand. I’m going to work very hard and become a *barbaric bandit...!*”

Um, that’s not the right goal to work for...

I was starting to get a bit uneasy about our mission.



ONCE the rest of the members returned from lunch, we set out down the road again.

Captain Ludtink switched places with Garr to drive the carriage this time. I briefly considered asking him to prioritize safe driving.

“Aw, man... Meals are so dull when the women aren’t around...” Ulgus whined.

I reminded Ulgus that Zara was with them, but Ulgus just said that Zara had the soul of a man, whatever that meant. I also felt like Lady Liselotte was less nervous than before—perhaps because Captain Ludtink was gone now.

“Kreh!”

“Okay, okay.”

Amelia was rubbing the wings on her back together. I could tell she was itchy. All the time we spent together made it easy for me to tell when she wanted something. I reached out to scratch her wings.

“Here?”

“Kreh...”

Not quite right. I tried another spot next.

“How about here?”

“Kreh!”

“*Close.*” I moved my hand just slightly.

“Kreh kreh!!”

That seemed to do it. The more I scratched her, the more her lion’s tail started to wag. It smacked against my leg like a whip, a little bit more painful than I would have expected.

A single feather fell from her coat underneath my fingertips. It was a beautiful, white feather. The documents from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau had told me that young griffins shed their feathers quite frequently.

I cut off the tips of those fallen feathers to use as pens, but there were so many, I felt like I should start selling them off or something. Keeping even more of them wouldn’t do me any good.

When I looked up again, I locked eyes with Lady Liselotte. She was staring at Amelia’s feather, her gaze full of desire.

“Um, would you like a feather?” I ventured.

“Huh?!”

“I turn them into quills, but I already have a whole lot at home.”

The girl’s cheeks turned bright red. She shook her head, refusing to accept a

gift of something so valuable, but her eyes never shifted away from that feather. She left me with only one option.

“Then if you don’t want it, Ulgus can—”

“N-No, I’ll take it!” She stuck her hand out as soon as I suggested passing it on to Ulgus.

I stifled my laughter and handed over Amelia’s feather.

Lady Liselotte was enchanted. She gazed at the feather fondly. “Wow, how lovely...”

I was just glad she was happy with it. Lady Liselotte was a true lover of mythical beasts. That much was clear to me. I watched her, my heart feeling a bit warmer now, when I spotted the sad look on Ulgus’s face.

It occurred to me that perhaps Ulgus believed I really meant to offer him the feather.

“Ah, I’m sorry, Ulgus! You can have the next one.”

“It’s fine...Medic Risurisu...”

It’s clearly not, I thought to myself, noting the tears in Ulgus’s eyes.

But this was when something completely unexpected occurred. Lady Liselotte held out Amelia’s feather toward Ulgus.

“...Huh?!”

“I-I’ll take the next one instead.”

“B-But...”

“It’s all right. I-I’m a grown-up...” she said, although she was in tears too. Her hand trembled as she held the feather out. I wished she wouldn’t make such a heavy sacrifice like this.

“R-Really, it’s fine. It’s the thought that counts. I appreciate it, thank you.”

In the end, Ulgus turned out to be more of a grown-up out of the two. It was clear as day that Lady Liselotte was relieved by this outcome.

The whole interaction made me feel like Lady Liselotte had opened up to us a

bit more. *Good, this is what she needs.*

Once night fell, we arrived in the town where we would stay until morning.

“Wow, this town is pretty big.”

The lakeside town was known as Hurbart. It was a strange area, with a town built up in a way that followed the edge of the lake. The bustling town was famous for its rock salt deposits.

“They say this town has the most beautiful sunrise. The sun glistens on the surface of the water and makes the lake look just like something from a fairy tale.” The knowledgeable Zara shared this information with me.

“Wow. I’d love to see that,” I said.

“Want to view it with me tomorrow?”

“Definitely!”

I invited Ulgus to join us too, and he looked eager to go for a minute, before telling me, “No, I don’t like that sort of thing.”

“I’ll pass this time,” Vice Captain Velrey responded next.

“No, thanks.” Lady Liselotte wasn’t interested in seeing the sunrise at all. Her refusal was short and sweet.

Even Garr didn’t like to be active in the mornings.

“No one’s coming with us...” When I murmured those words out loud, I watched Captain Ludtink whip his head around and glare at me with a frightening face.

“Why am I the only one who doesn’t get an invite?” he barked.

“Huh? Because I thought you wouldn’t be interested.”

So, he wanted an invite too. This was news to me.

“All right, Captain. Would you care to join us?” I asked.

“Sure, I...”

I waited for him to answer, but just then, the captain glanced at Zara and froze up entirely. It was my very first time seeing a look of such pure shock on

his face.

I looked over at Zara too.

The smile on his face was as lovely as that of a goddess. Captain Ludtink must have found himself paralyzed by such beauty, although this particular moment was strange timing for that.

“Well? What do you say?” I pressed.

“Nah, actually, I’ll pass too.”

“Fine then...” I sighed.

Then why did you even ask?!

Captain Ludtink was such an indecisive man, changing his mind out of nowhere like that. *What’s wrong with him? Well, fine. It doesn’t really matter.*

“So it’s you, me, and Amelia, right? I’m excited for tomorrow, Melly,” Zara said with a beautiful smile.

“Me too. I hope the weather’s nice.”

The sky right now was perfectly sunny and cloudless. I was sure tomorrow’s weather would be just as lovely.

Amelia usually woke up before sunrise.

Just the other day, I happened to wake up early in the morning, only to be met with the sight of Amelia’s eyes staring back at me in the darkness. I almost shrieked. But she was only being polite and waiting for me to wake up on my own.

I wondered if Amelia would be allowed to stay in the lodge. I really wanted to sleep on a bed tonight.

Lady Liselotte, as a member of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, had an answer for that when I voiced my concern. “There’s no need to worry. Most lodges in the country have records of mythical beast ownership.”

“What are those?” I asked.

“You just show your ownership permission card, and they’ll allow you to stay with them. The bureau will cover the lodging expenses for you and your

mythical beast.”

“I didn’t know that!”

Thanks to the hidden efforts of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, most inns throughout the kingdom allowed mythical beasts to stay there as customers just like people. It was such a relief to know that my fears were unfounded.

We arrived at a five-story inn that looked especially fancy. I wondered if Captain Ludtink chose this place without thinking because he was a nobleman.

Now I was worrying about our unit’s budget.

“Um, Captain Ludtink? Is this really all right?” I asked.

“Is what all right?”

“This place seems expensive.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

What does that mean? I cocked my head. But Vice Captain Velrey was kind enough to explain.

“Captain Ludtink’s father owns all this land,” she whispered to me. “I’m sure they’ll be flexible on the price.”

“Oh, I see.”

The bandit stomped into the fancy inn. Or rather, Lord Crow, the son of Earl Ludtink, entered the lodge.

We were treated with tremendous hospitality by everyone in the front room.

Captain Ludtink spoke with a majestic-looking old man who appeared to be the manager. Then we were led to seats by the window and served complimentary tea and snacks.

It was my first time seeing desserts served on a three-tiered tray. The first plate was full of sandwiches, the second contained baked goods, and the third was topped with fruit cookies.

Lady Liselotte told me that we were supposed to start with the bottom plate on the stack. “You can’t go back for more sandwiches at the bottom, even if

eating the sweets makes you crave something salty.”

“The world can be cruel sometimes.”

The first tier of sandwiches included egg sandwiches with the sweet and sour sauce I’d tried before. But these also contained thin slices of melon too. The crisp texture it gave to the sandwich was undeniably tasty.

Lady Liselotte told me that the next plate contained baked goods called “scones.”

They were supposed to be eaten with toppings like buttercream or sugared fruits.

But first, I tried a bite of the plain scone by itself. The texture of it was quite hard, although I felt like it might taste better with a cup of black tea.

When I said this to Lady Liselotte, she told me I was eating it improperly. I tried again, this time slathering on buttercream and sugared fruits as first instructed.

“Wow! This is so good!”

“See?”

“It’s like a totally different food this way.”

The buttercream was distinctly rich, but the sweetness of the sugared fruit brought the flavors back into equilibrium. The scone itself must have been made with the assumption that it was supposed to be eaten together with certain toppings. How profound.

Finally, I took a bite of a fruit cookie. The dough was soft and fluffy, with the gentle taste of cream baked throughout. I picked a piece of fruit off to share with Amelia.

We dined on snacks and tea as we waited for our rooms. After some time, Captain Ludtink returned and handed over a few keys.

“This one’s for the three women.”

“Kreh!”

Amelia wasn’t going to let him get away with saying only three women.

“What’s with her?” he asked gruffly.

“She didn’t like that you forgot her in your count.”

“Ah. So... This one’s for the four women.”

“Kreeeh!”

“Is that better?”

“Yes, she’s happy now, thank you.”

I could see the relief in the captain’s expression. Surely, the last person he expected a scolding from was the griffin.

Naturally, I couldn’t help smiling secretly to myself.



THIS was my very first time staying at an inn meant for noble families.

The crystal chandelier, the cabriole legs of the table, the lovely flowers on the wallpaper, the soft, fluffy blankets on the beds—the only word I could find to sum it all up was “amazing.”

Lady Liselotte, as the daughter of a marquess, was used to this sort of environment, so she asked the staff to prepare a bath for us.

Amelia was looking over every inch of the unfamiliar room. Once she was satisfied, she jumped up on the sofa, now acting much calmer than before. She’d been getting much better at jumping lately, too.

Vice Captain Velrey gazed at her map. She was going to be our carriage driver tomorrow.

We each took turns taking our baths, chatted for a while, then decided it was time to go to sleep.

Amelia trotted up to my side and curled up in the bed. I was so afraid of the future point in time when she would be too large for me to sleep beside anymore. But I also knew she would probably obey if I told her she’d outgrown my bed.

“Okay, goodni— Whoa!!”

Just as I was about to go to sleep, I realized Lady Liselotte was standing right next to me, staring down with a look of pure jealousy on her face.

“Wh-What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I want to cuddle up with a griffin too...” she muttered.

“You do?”

Suddenly, she seemed to snap out of it. She took a few steps backward and turned beet red. I realized she must have been acting completely unconsciously.

“I-It’s nothing. Goodnight.”

...Yeah, her love of mythical beasts definitely makes her lose control of herself.

But I decided to keep that revelation to myself.



THE next morning, I headed out to watch the sunrise with Zara as promised. The world outside was still dark, so I took a lantern with me for the trip.

“Kreh!”

Amelia started the morning in a great mood. She was practically skipping around.

“Aren’t you cold, Melly?” Zara asked.

“I’m fine.”

I came with extra layers on, since I figured it would be chilly.

We walked to a spot where we could see the sunrise.

Climbing up the sloped street, we reached a clear, elevated area that was said to be built for sightseers. We stared out at the lake’s surface in the darkness. The fog was coming in, making the sight a bit eerie, but a strong wind cast the fog away, which was a relief.

Finally, the sun peered over the horizon, gradually brightening our surroundings.

“...Oh wow!” I exclaimed.

The rays of light illuminated the lake brilliantly. Both the water and sky grew

equally orange like a mirror. It was truly beautiful.

“Kreeeh! Kreh kreh!” Amelia let out a chorus of cries. Her eyes were sparkling. I never knew that mythical beasts were just as moved by beautiful sights.

Zara laughed, seeing how excited she was.

“Sorry, she’s quite loud this morning,” I apologized.

“It’s fine. I’m glad she’s having fun.”

We stared out until the sun had risen above the horizon. It was so beautiful and magical, I could hardly find the words to describe it.

We returned to the lodge after watching the sunrise.

I was sleepy after waking up so early, but it was still an outing worth going on.



WE made our way to the Carkuku Wetlands with Vice Captain Velrey up front to steer the carriage.

In my head, I was begging everyone else inside the carriage to get along. There would be no one to mediate if a fight broke out now. If one did, I’d have no choice but to shout “This is madness!” just like Ulgus.

The carriage rattled down the highway. But the inside was dead silent.

...This is certainly awkward.

Vice Captain Velrey was such a calming presence to the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

“U-Um, Captain Ludtink?” Lady Liselotte broke the silence to strike up a conversation with the captain. She was a brave soul.

I watched over her anxiously, worried that she was doing more than she needed to.

“What is it?” Captain Ludtink’s voice had a distinctly biting edge to it.

I turned to Ulgus, using my eyes to beg him to break this tension, however he could. But he just shook his head back at me. Garr was staring out the window with a sober look. Zara worked on filing his nails.

I would surely be unable to get in between the two like how Vice Captain Velrey did. There was nothing I could do now.

Lady Liselotte continued on with this tense air. "I'm sorry I showed up without any warning."

"It's a bit late for that, isn't it?"

Aaaah! Why say it like that?! What a casual use of snark! How cruel!

Surely he could have put it nicer than that. Captain Ludtink pulled no punches with his response. Fortunately, Lady Liselotte felt no fear.

"I'm sorry. I do regret it. Sometimes I simply can't see the bigger picture."

"Sounds like you're not fit to be a knight."

"That may be so...but when it comes to protecting mythical beasts—"

"Knights protect their countrymen, not mythical beasts."

The captain's words all stung. But he wasn't wrong either. I felt that Captain Ludtink and Lady Liselotte needed to confront each other once and for all in this moment.

"If that's the case, then I will fight too. Fight for my countrymen."

"You don't sound like you mean it at all. Have you ever fought a monster before?"

"No, I haven't..."

Captain Ludtink crossed his arms and snorted.

Lady Liselotte wore a bitter look on her face as her cheeks turned red.

I knew that at any other point in her life, she probably would have been voicing her complaints right now. But she kept them bottled up inside now.

While I tried to come up with a solution, an unexpected helping hand appeared to us.

"Captain, why not let her have a trial period?" That suggestion came from Zara. He wanted the captain to approve or disapprove of her based on this expedition. "This mission is going to be really humid and muddy since it's in the

wetlands. It's not the sort of thing a young noblewoman can probably stand."

It would be very significant for her to make it through this mission without throwing in the towel.

"Fine then. If you're more than just talk, I'll give you my approval."

With that challenge delivered from Captain Ludtink and his most terrifying face, Lady Liselotte expressed her resolve.

"...Very well. I refuse to give in."

Lady Liselotte had tears in her eyes. I pitied her for how far she was taking this. But half-heartedly deciding to walk the path of a knight would only mean trouble. Every knight fought with their life on the line. I knew Captain Ludtink's words weren't just meant to be strict. He must have said what he did because he knew exactly how noblewomen live.

After that, we arrived at the Carkuku Wetlands without so much as another word in the carriage. It was an extremely uncomfortable journey.



RAIN drizzled down from the sky.

It wasn't as cold as I had expected, but the humid environment made the whole place uncomfortable.

A large meadow stretched out in front of us. Supposedly, this specific kind of wetlands was called a peat bog. This meant that the vegetation had partially decomposed and accumulated as a layer of soil.

I also learned that peat was flammable and could be used as fuel when dried.

I tried stomping down on the peat. It was soft and bouncy due to the amount of water it contained.

I see why horses wouldn't be able to walk on this.

We left our carriage at a nearby village and made it this far on foot.

Amelia's feat sunk into the mud. She looked very displeased. Maybe she needed special shoes.

Our unit set up tents to make a camp.

I couldn't ignore how squishy the ground was even once we'd laid down tarps. I only hoped that the tent frames wouldn't sink in it.

Once camp was set up, all the members except for Lady Liselotte, Amelia, and myself went to exterminate the man-eating lizards, leaving us behind in the dark and damp swamps. However, I usually waited like this on my own, so I felt better having others with me this time.

"All right, Lady Liselotte. Shall we go looking for food?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Kreh?"

The eyes of both Lady Liselotte and Amelia widened at that suggestion.

"Why would we go out of our way to do that?" Lady Liselotte asked, astonished by the mere idea.

"So that we can eat delicious meals."

She looked at me like she couldn't believe it.

"Besides, it's not like we have anything else to do," I pointed out. It was a waste to spend this time spacing out while the others hunted monsters. "You'll join me, won't you, Amelia?"

"Kreh!"

"And you, Lady Liselotte?"

"If the griffin goes, then I'll have no choice but to follow."

With that conclusion, the three of us went out to look for food.

Wetlands meant water, and water typically meant fish were around.

Lady Liselotte looked truly displeased. She never kept her honest feelings hidden.

"Are you sure we'll be safe from monsters, walking all over the place like this?"

"We will. I have good ears, so if I pick anything up, we can run away."

I hoped she would trust the ears of a Fore Elf.

She agreed to follow me, although she looked rather reluctant.

Lady Liselotte took her wand out of a long, slender bag. My eyes fell on the crystal wand with a red gem inlay at the tip. The handle was gold with tiny jewels all around. The short wand wasn't even half a meter long.

"Wow, how cute."

This praise brought a smile to her face. It was the first time I ever saw her smile about a subject other than mythical beasts.

"Now, let's get going for real!" I said cheerfully.

"Kreh!"

"Let's search quickly and get it over with."

We pressed forward on the rough ground.

Amelia's paws sunk into the mud a few times, so Lady Liselotte and I had to pull her out together. Just walking around was such a chore. I worried that the others might struggle to fight in these conditions.

"Kyah!"

Just as I was pondering this, I heard a scream from behind me. I turned around to see that Lady Liselotte had fallen backward into the mud. Silently, I held out a hand to her, since she seemed like she needed my help. Even her beloved wand was covered in mud.

Lady Liselotte was biting her lip, her cheeks bright red. I knew she must be holding in her complaints. She seemed to really hate failure.

"Lady Liselotte, Captain Ludtink isn't around right now, so you can say what you like."

"N-No, I'm fine. Th-This is nothing!" Lady Liselotte took my hand and got right back on her feet.

"Kreh!"

Amelia picked the wand up in her mouth and handed it over to Lady Liselotte.

"Th-Thank you. You're...a very...good girl."

As soon as she took the wand from Amelia, Lady Liselotte suddenly burst into tears.

She's actually crying because a mythical beast was kind to her.

Well, it was understandable. It was unthinkable that a noblewoman would ever get so covered in mud.

We finally arrived at the wetlands.

Right away, I spotted bubbles forming from the mud between the ridges of dirt. I took out my knife and tried digging down.

"I-Is something in there?" Lady Liselotte asked nervously.

"I'm not sure. The kinds of aquatic animals that live in mud are things like freshwater crabs, land shrimp, and frogs," I explained.

"Fr-Frogs?!" she croaked.

"Yes. They're quite delicious."

"I can't believe it."

Once I dug down enough, I heard the sound of an impact. I scooped up some water and poured it in.

"Oh!"

I pulled out the creature, but Lady Liselotte shouted out in disgust.

"Kyah! Don't show it to me! How frightening!"

"It's all right. This isn't a frog," I informed her.

"Wh-What is it then?"

"A large, dark purple clam."

"No way... I don't want to eat muddy clams," she promptly rejected it.

"I believe these are the fancy kind, though. I've seen freshwater clams being sold for high prices. I think you've probably had these before, Lady Liselotte."

"I suppose, now that you've mentioned it. I think I've seen them as an appetizer."

The old man at the marketplace had told me about them, so I knew these purple clams had to be the same kind.

I washed the mud away in the lake and placed them in my leather pouch. My hope was that I could dig up enough for the whole squadron. While I was looking around the area...

“Kreh kreh!” Amelia cried out. It looked like she had found more clams lurking nearby.

As soon as I went over to look, I saw the bubbles forming in the mud.

“Well done, Amelia.”

“Kreh!”

Not only did she find the clams, but she began to dig for them too. What emerged was a clam even bigger than the one I found first.

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“Kreeeh!”

She was skilled at finding food. I washed my hands clean and patted her head.

I focused all of my efforts on digging for more clams. Luckily enough, they were abundant in this area.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Oh, found another one?”

Amelia used her nails to poke at the suspected site of a clam. Digging in, I always found a large clam buried in the mud. As I was digging, it sounded as if Amelia had found her next prey.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Wait just a moment.”

It was too deep for her to dig out alone.

“Kreh!”

“Huh?! Me?!”

Amelia was asking Lady Liselotte to dig up the next clam. Some of the spots

were too sludgy for her to dig her claws into. It was most certainly impossible for a young noblewoman like Lady Liselotte to dig for clams. But just as that thought crossed my mind...

“Kreh! Kreh!”

“Urk...”

“Kreh kreh?”

“There’s a clam here! Will you please dig?” she seemed to be asking. Lady Liselotte’s face turned red with Amelia’s puppy dog eyes turned up at her.

“Kreh!”

“F-Fine. I’ll dig!”

With that, Lady Liselotte crouched down, digging into the mud with her wand. The beautiful golden wand grew more and more obscured with mud. I felt bad that she had to resort to this, but I wanted to return with every clam we could find, so I was glad for her help.

The clam didn’t appear to be very far down, so she reached it in no time at all.

“Found it!” she exclaimed.

“Kreeeh!”

Lady Liselotte is covered in mud...

I felt bad for her, but she was grinning back at Amelia’s proud expression, so I figured it was for the best.

I’d been so worried that Amelia would never care for anyone other than me, but it was such a relief to see that wasn’t the case. I hoped she would continue to get along with other people too.

There was no time to waste dilly-dallying. I returned to work.

I was finally able to get my hands on a clam too. It was the biggest one we’d dug up today. As I washed off the mud, I noticed some big bubbles coming from the center of the lake.

Could this be a giant clam?

When I looked into the lake...

“Kreeeh!!”

Amelia let out a deep cry. As soon as I heard it, I snapped back to my senses. This was no clam. But it was too late. A huge tower of water shot out of the lake.

“Eeeeeek!”

Water rained down on us, soaking us to the bone. But the sight before my eyes was much more shocking.

What emerged from a lake was a gigantic mud catfish.

It was long and skinny like a snake, with a wide mouth and long whiskers, as well as round, black eyes. I imagined they grew this large due to having no natural predators. No, this wasn't the time for analysis.

The mud catfish looked at us with its blank face.

Did we make it mad with all our clam digging?

“W-We don't need the clams! You can have them!” I tossed the clams we'd only just caught into the lake. But the mud catfish didn't react at all.

It lifted its long tail out of the water and slammed it down toward me.

It was all over. But just as I was ready to give in, a shocking twist came.

“Kreh!”

Amelia jumped out in front of me, swiping the attacking tail away with her claws.

The catfish wasn't wounded, but it slipped its tail back into the water due to the sudden attack.

But it didn't retreat. This time, it opened its mouth and swam our way.

Amelia's going to be eaten!

I immediately covered Amelia with my body. It was an instinctive reaction to protect her, despite my own terror. I gritted my teeth and prepared for the impact. But the pain never followed.

A light suddenly flashed before my eyes.

“Raging inferno that thaws the icy grounds.”

A noble voice reached my ears. A magic circle arose, producing a ball of fire that roasted the mud catfish to a crisp. It sank back down into the lake.

Once I knew it was safe, I felt my shoulders instantly relax.

What a shock. I never expected a giant mud catfish to be dwelling in this lake.

It sank down without a struggle, but bubbles were starting to appear in the water. I surely would have been swallowed whole by a mouth that big. It made me shiver. *Although, the smell is a bit appetizing...no, no, that's something to be ignored.*

I felt the strength return to my legs and knew it was time to thank Lady Liselotte.

“You cast a spell to kill it, didn’t you, Lady Liselotte? Thank you very much.”

“.....”

“Lady Liselotte?” When I looked at her face, I saw that Lady Liselotte was crying. “Um, are you—”

“I-I was so scared!” She dropped her wand and ran up to cling to me. “What was that thing? It was huge and ready to kill! How disgusting!”

“I-I’m sorry...”

She had seemed so mighty before, but now I knew how frightened she was. I stroked her back and waited for her to calm down again.

“I’m so glad I got the spell off in time,” Lady Liselotte was murmuring to herself now that her tears had finally stopped.

“Thank you very much. You saved me.”

“I-It was nothing...”

I was so confident in my ability to sense monsters in advance that I never even noticed the beast’s approach, probably because I’d been so focused on digging for clams. *How terrifying.*

“Please don’t tell me we’re going to eat that thing,” Lady Liselotte pleaded.

“Right, we don’t eat monsters.”

My mom always told me not to eat low-quality foods.

Lady Liselotte breathed a sigh of relief when she heard that.

I decided to end the food hunt there.

We needed to return to base and prepare dinner.



“**THAT** was just truly awful.”

“I agree.”

Lady Liselotte and I were both covered in mud, despite our outing being only for the purpose of gathering food. But this was no time to be concerned with appearances. I needed to prepare a meal. Although, I did of course remove my soaking, heavy coat.

I picked up the nearby rocks and built a simple oven. Then I filled it with solid fuel so that I could light it with a flint. But the air was too humid, and I couldn’t make a good spark.

“You can leave that to me.” Lady Liselotte was going to start the fire with a spell...but... “Kyah!”

“Wah!”

The spell was too strong. It sent a column of fire shooting up. Eventually, it died down after some time.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m not used to little spells like these,” she said.

“It’s all right. Spells aren’t something you use every day.”

I decided to begin working on dinner so that we didn’t dwell on things.

We managed to dig twenty-seven clams in total. I started by rubbing them with salt to clean them. I found myself breathing more heavily due to the force it took to clean them.

“Should I help you too?” she asked.

“No, that’s all right.”

Despite my refusal, Lady Liselotte joined me in the job.

“Ew, my hands are all cold and red.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine.”

A noblewoman had definitely never taken on a job like this before.

She cleaned the clams without holding anything back. Once we were done, we had to remove the mud from the inside. I poured lukewarm water into a bucket and mixed the clams around inside it. Leaving them like that for a while would cause the mud to be spit out.

“So warm water gets mud out?” she asked.

“Correct. The warm water surprises the clams, so they stick their faces out of the shell. If you mix the shells around so that they collide, they spit up the mud for you.”

“Hmm, I didn’t know that.”

Garr had once taught me this method before.

We took a break for a while, indulging in my personal supply of biscuits and medicinal herb tea.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know if you’ll care for these cheap biscuits and homemade tea,” I said. I ate a biscuit and drank my tea, feeling my body warm up from the inside out.

“They’re delicious,” Lady Liselotte said. “Although, that might be because I worked up an appetite from all that activity.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

I munched on biscuits and washed them down with medicinal herb tea. I also gave Amelia some fruit as a reward.

It was starting to get dark out, so I lit a lantern and returned to work.

I took about twenty of the cleaned clams and threw them into boiling water

whole. Then I added some alcohol and let them cook a bit more. I waited for the water to turn cloudy and then tasted the flavor.

It took me by surprise. The broth was so rich. Our hard work really paid off.

Finally, I added some spices to adjust the flavor.

“Kreh?”

Amelia was looking off into the distance. It appeared that the other members had returned.

It was perfect timing. I threw some dried noodles into the pot.

Ulgus was the first person to arrive, and he looked absolutely exhausted. “We’re baaack!”

“Good work out there.”

He recoiled when he saw that we were covered in mud.

“Whoa, Medic Risurisu, what happened?”

“We ran into a bit of trouble.”

Lady Liselotte and I were even dirtier than the group who went to hunt man-eating lizards. What a confusing outcome.

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

Before that, it was time for dinner. Garr returned too and lifted the pot to the ground for me.

The rest of the clams would be steamed with alcohol. I laid a leaf I found nearby on the lid, then added clams, Captain Ludtink’s expensive alcohol, and a sprinkling of fennel to the clams. Then I placed the large leaf on top to let them steam for a while.

“Hey, isn’t that my booze?” Captain Ludtink asked.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Wasn’t thinking about what was mine?”

He confiscated the bottle of alcohol out of my hands.

I let my shoulders fall sadly, but then Lady Liselotte interrupted. “Why can’t she use a little?”

“It wasn’t a little. She was pouring it in just now.”

“Fine, I’ll replace it with Father’s liquor some other time,” Lady Liselotte said. “He has lots in his cellar.”

“No, that’s not necessary.”

Not even Captain Ludtink could accept alcohol belonging to the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau—Marquess Lichtenberger.

During this conversation, the clams finished steaming.

It was time for dinner. I poured clam noodle soup into bowls and distributed them to the members.

We prayed before the meal and then dug in.

I wrapped some noodles around my fork and watched the steam rise off of them. They were still piping hot.

I blew on the noodles before taking a bite.

The refreshing clam soup paired very well with the noodles. It was a delicious broth, indeed. It was my first time eating dried noodles. They had an interesting doughy texture and a smooth sensation when swallowed.

The clams had shrunk when cooked for the broth, but they were still good on their own too.

I glanced at Lady Liselotte, wondering how she was handling it. She ate elegantly with her bowl on her lap, though I worried she might stain her clothes.

As soon as she took a bite of noodles off of her fork, her eyes went wide.

“How is it, Lady Liselotte?” I asked.

“Th-They’re mud clams...but they’re so good.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

I was relieved that she liked the soup. Next up was the steamed clams with

alcohol.

I stuck my fork into one and removed the shell. Sadly, I was unable to take the adductor muscle, even though they were so delicious. But I dug in anyway.

Unlike the clams used for the soup broth, the steamed clams were plump, juicy, and incredibly savory. Their smooth texture was proof that the mud extraction had been successful.

It was a most satisfying dinner indeed.

“By the way, were you able to finish the man-eating lizard extermination?” I asked the others.

Captain Ludtink shook his head with a grim look. Everyone seemed rather solemn, perhaps because we would have to spend another day here for our mission tomorrow.

“It’s strange that there would be lizards in a swamp in the first place,” Vice Captain Velrey said. “Lizard monsters normally reside in hilly areas and places with good sunlight. They aren’t normally found in dark, damp places like this.”

“Well, they’re monsters, so maybe they’ve built some resistance to this place,” Zara added, commenting on the strangeness of this situation. “But we never actually found a single lizard. We only fought frog, crustacean, and rat monsters today.

“I feel like maybe there were never any lizards here in the first place.”

That was Ulgus’s analysis. *I see. So maybe the victim’s statement was mistaken.*

“H-Hey. What if the mud catfish I killed today was actually the man-eating lizard?” Lady Liselotte interjected.

“Ah!” It hit me all of a sudden. I never reported our run-in to the others. My mind had been solely focused on dinner.

“What’s this, Risurisu? Do you know something?” Captain Ludtink asked.

“U-Um, well...”

When I explained the events of the day, he roared, “You should have told me

earlier!” It was my fault, after all. I needed to reflect on my actions.

Captain Ludtink sure gave me a scolding. Not even Vice Captain Velrey stepped in to save me, although that made sense, because this was about a life-or-death situation.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful next time,” I said.

“No more food hunting.”

“You can’t be serious...”

I protested that this would mean we couldn’t eat delicious meals anymore, but he just glared at me as if I hadn’t learned my lesson. He was right, I felt, so I didn’t say anything else.

“Anyway, we’ll go check it out tomorrow,” he said.

“Okay.”

“You’re coming with us, Risurisu.”

“Okay.”

I felt awful. On top of that, I would have to sleep in this muddy state.

Vice Captain Velrey patted my back and told me to grin and bear it for a little while.

Water was a precious resource, so I could do nothing more than wipe my body down as much as I could.

Lady Liselotte was lying next to me. She turned over a few times, and I knew she probably couldn’t sleep.

I sat up and headed for the firewood. I poured a cup of hot water and drizzled some honey in it.

“Lady Liselotte.”

“...What is it?”

“Take this, if you like.”

It was just hot water with honey, but it had the effect of relieving emotional stress.

“Thank you...”

“Of course.”

After she drank the honey water, I could hear her gentle, steady breaths. I was relieved to hear she was asleep.

The problem was solved. But then I realized something—I couldn’t sleep either.

In the end, I dozed off after my own cup of honey water and repetitive orders to myself to go to sleep.



THE next morning, we headed out to confirm the existence of any man-eating lizard. Amelia tried to join us, but I didn’t want to take her along when the paths were so difficult to traverse.

“Amelia, will you wait here with Garr?”

“Kreh! Kreh kreh!” She protested. But I refused to relent.

“If you wait here like a good girl, I’ll play with you later.”

“Kreh...”

It took some time to persuade her until she agreed to obey, although with a gloomy look on her face. She went to Garr’s side and curled up dejectedly.

I joined Captain Ludtink, Zara, and Ulgus on their trip to the same lake where we dug up clams. We arrived an hour later, however...

“This is...”

“Would you look at that?”

“Whoa!”

They were all speechless at the sight of the dead mud catfish floating on the lake’s surface.

After some time spent in silence, Captain Ludtink determined that this fish must indeed be the man-eating lizard.

“But how did the young lady manage to take it out all on her own?”

Captain Ludtink wrinkled his face at Ulgus's question.

"She must be really powerful then," Zara followed up with praise for Lady Liselotte. He suggested that even Captain Ludtink would struggle to take down this mud catfish.

According to him, its skin is soft but thick, making it very hard to cut into with a blade. I was so very grateful to Lady Liselotte for saving my life.

Zara was smiling as he continued his conversation with Captain Ludtink. "Sorcerer Lichtenberger puts in a lot of effort. She's eating properly and even camping out with us. Plus, she's a powerful fighter. What choice do you have but to give her your approval?"

Captain Ludtink could do nothing but snort in response to Zara's evaluation of Lady Liselotte's firepower.



THE plan was to cut off a portion of the mud catfish's head and take it back with us.

That job took about two hours in the end. If Lady Liselotte hadn't burned it to a crisp, it surely would have taken even longer.

It took another hour to return to camp after that. I was exhausted.

When we returned, Vice Captain Velrey praised me for my hard work. She also had a much-appreciated offer for me.

"I found a hot spring yesterday. Do you want to come with me?" She explained that it was a non-volcanic hot spring. It was formed by underground water sources made from rainwater that warmed with geothermal heat. "I saw steam coming out of a field, so when I went to check it out, I realized it was a hot spring."

"Wow...!"

What a fantastic discovery.

It was sunny outside unlike the day before. I knew a warm bath under a clear sky would feel incredible.

“You’ll join us, won’t you, Lady Liselotte?” I asked.

“A hot spring is a natural bath, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Is there any kind of partition between the water and the outside?”

“Not at all.”

Lady Liselotte’s face twitched.

“But a hot spring will give you clear skin, and you’ll feel much better once all that mud’s washed off.”

“But it’s improper.”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

Amelia agreed to go as soon as I asked her.

Just as I was about to turn around, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was a red-faced Lady Liselotte who’d approached me from behind.

“If Amelia’s going, then I’ll go too.”

“Understood.”

For some reason, she asked me to bring honey.

“Are you going to use it as a beauty product?”

“Of course not.”

I had thought it was some type of rejuvenating skin care product, but she told me I was wrong.

“I’m going to make a barrier with honey.”

Apparently, honey was used as a medium for magic. She would need something that was related to the natural environment here in the fields. Once she formed the barrier, it would be impossible for anyone to look in on us from the outside. It was incredibly handy.

“We won’t need a lookout while we’re in the bath, then,” Vice Captain Velrey said. “I’d been planning on asking one of the others to do that for us.”

“Too bad,” Ulgus remarked. It was strange how the boldness of his voice left the comment feeling perfectly appropriate.

With that, we headed to the hot spring.

“You’re all muddy, Amelia.”

“Kreh!”

She had never been in a bath before, but she was dirty all the way down to the base of her coat, so I wanted to give her a full wash if possible. I asked what Lady Liselotte thought of the proposal.

“I think that’s fine. She should be able to handle it, as long as she doesn’t resist.”

“I see. Thank you.”

That was a specialist, all right. I really appreciated how she eased a mother’s worries in a single instant.

We walked for an hour until we reached the steaming field. The hot spring itself was a milky white and smelled like medicinal herbs. The water was smooth, causing no irritation to the skin.

Lady Liselotte wasted no time in taking out the honey and drawing a magic circle.

She didn’t hesitate to drizzle honey all over the ground. Not that I minded, since she promised to buy me more later.

The barrier formed with the sound of the chanted spell. Pillars of light expanded from around the hot spring and grew up toward the sky. The barrier looked clear to me, but supposedly, it was solid when viewed from the outside.

“This should do the trick.”

“Great work, Lady Liselotte.”

“It was nothing.”

The preparations were complete. First thing’s first, I needed to wash all the mud off my body.

Vice Captain Velrey stripped down without a second thought, while Lady

Liselotte was hesitating. They were polar opposites. I undressed quickly too, since I didn't want to waste any time.

"What's so embarrassing, Lady Liselotte?" I asked her. "We took a bath together before, right?"

"Th-That was work..."

Vice Captain Velrey continued to remove her clothes as Lady Liselotte dawdled.

I glanced over and saw Vice Captain Velrey's chest was wrapped up in bandages, which caused me to jump. I asked if she was hurt, but she explained a different reason for it.

"I do this so they don't get in the way. I'm not injured or anything."

"Get in the way...?" I didn't understand, so I ended up watching as she unwrapped the bandages.

Underneath them was... *Ah.*

I see... So that's how it is, Vice Captain Velrey... Who knew you were so blessed...?

While I was distracted, she sunk straight into the water.

"Mmm."

"How is it?"

"Very interesting."

She told me that the bottom of the hot spring was just bubbling mud. The surface of the water seemed so undisturbed, but the deeper you went, the thicker it became. I decided that meant I didn't need to wash off the mud first, so I went straight in.

"Hyaaaah! It feels so nice and warm."

"Sure does. This will bring you back to life."

But what about Amelia? She was staring at the water, so I tried dripping some on her claws.

“Kreh?”

“How’s the temperature?”

“Kreeeh!”

She didn’t have a problem with it. I stuck my hand out, and she jumped right into the spring.

“Kreh! Kreh!”

Amelia found the water to be pleasant. She swam around, enjoying the hot spring to the fullest.

Once she saw Amelia in the water, Lady Liselotte began to undress too. Her body remained as brilliant as before—curvy in all the right places.

Lady Liselotte timidly entered the hot spring, her body wrapped in a towel.

“...Ah.” Her cheeks reddened slightly. She let out a sigh.

I could tell she liked it.

When I turned my eyes down to the water, I made a surprising discovery.

So breasts float in hot water, huh...?

I never noticed with my own. I was never able to bathe in hot water in the Fore Elf village, and in the dorm bath, I was always too embarrassed to be seen naked by the others, so I didn’t spend much time there.

The world was full of mysteries.

That was the thought occupying my head as I stared at the chests of Vice Captain Velrey and Lady Liselotte.



I scooped up water in my hands and stared at it. It smelled like medicinal herbs. This was probably like a natural medicinal herb tea formed by the vegetation dissolving into the water. I made sure to soak my hands properly to heal the rough skin.

I heard the splashing of Amelia swimming around in the water.

Everyone wordlessly soaked in the experience of the hot spring.

Once my body was thoroughly warmed, I exited the water. I dried the water off and changed into clean clothes, then wiped Amelia down too.

“That was so refreshing,” I said.

Nothing beats a good hot spring. I would visit one every day if there was one nearby. Lady Liselotte had told her family that she wanted to build a hot spring. It was scary to think how the desire of a marquess’s daughter could so easily come true.

“I could build a spa here. A mythical beast hot spring... Mythical beast mochi for a tourist spot that teaches everyone about how wonderful mythical beasts are...” Lady Liselotte was ranting passionately. It seemed as if her ambitions never ran dry.



NOW that my body was clean, I decided to have a meal. I’d brought all sorts of ingredients with me for food.

I stacked rocks to make an oven. I would have wanted to place a pot on it, but I forgot to pack the solid fuel it required.

“I goofed!” I cried.

Lady Liselotte couldn’t use her spells for cooking. She told me it was hard for her to maintain a small fire. I was starving. I had bread and that sort of thing, but I’d been really eager to eat a hot meal.

“That reminds me, didn’t Zara say this mud could be used as fuel?” the vice captain pointed out.

“That’s right!”

But the mud was wet and soft from all the water. I glanced at Lady Liselotte.

“You want me to blow the water away with a spell?” she guessed.

“If possible.” I asked her to give it a light touch.

The generous Lady Liselotte readily accepted the request. She gripped her wand and rapidly chanted a spell.

Ka-boom!

From far away, an explosion erupted. My eyes went wide at the unexpected scope of it.

“Is that good enough?” she asked.

“...More than enough...”

In the end, we had to travel far away to harvest the peat.



I decided to tackle some cooking to lighten my mood.

The peat Lady Liselotte made for us burned nicely.

Today’s meal was a simple soup.

I made a broth out of brined boar-pig meat and added some herbs I harvested from the area. Along the way, I threw in roasted beans, adjusted the flavors, and let it sit to boil. Once the beans turned soft, the soup was ready. I poured it into bowls and handed out thin slices of bread to everyone.

I set some fruits out in front of Amelia.

After my prayer, I dug in.

Amelia readily dug her claws in and began to peel the fruit. I was impressed by how much she’d improved. When she noticed Lady Liselotte staring at her, Amelia cried a “Kreh?” as if to offer her a fruit. She was such a kind girl.

“Let’s eat, Lady Liselotte.”

“R-Right...”

I took a spoonful of soup. The boar-pig broth was rich. The taste seemed to seep into my tired body.

I even got the perfect level of saltiness. The gelatinous fat of the boar-pig meat melted on my tongue. The soft beans made for a delicious addition too.

Lady Liselotte’s fuel contributed to a wonderful meal in the end.

I was entirely satisfied with it all.



NOT wanting to waste all the peat fuel we made, I took some back with us. I

could save money if I didn't have to buy solid fuel later. I'd stuffed them all into a leather bag, but when the sheer weight caused me to stagger, Vice Captain Velrey ended up carrying it for me.

"Sorry for the trouble, Vice Captain."

"Don't worry about it. It's a good way to train."

As always, Vice Captain Velrey was a heartthrob.

Lady Liselotte gazed at Amelia as if in a trance while we walked.

"Um, Lady Liselotte, if you don't watch where you're going, you might—"

"Kyah!"

It was like fate. Lady Liselotte, once again, tripped and almost fell in the mud. But this time, Vice Captain Velrey managed to grab her arm in time.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Y-Yes... Th-Thank you."

Vice Captain Velrey had the skillful judgment and quick reaction to toss the bag of peat aside and grab Lady Liselotte. I hoped to learn such skills from her.

"Try to keep an eye on your surroundings while you're on the move. You never know when a monster might ambush you," she warned.

"I'm sorry." Lady Liselotte's face fell to hear a warning from Vice Captain Velrey.

I only wished I had said something as soon as I noticed her staring at Amelia. At least she didn't end up in the mud this time.



AN hour later, we arrived back at camp.

The men told us they'd had bread, jerky, and pickled veggies for lunch. Ulgus seemed jealous when he heard about our soup.

"We'll be staying at the village nearby, so you'll get a good meal tonight."

That retort came from Captain Ludtink. He informed us that he'd taken a part of the mud catfish's head, and we now needed to return with it to ask the

victim if it was the correct monster.

I see. This sort of thing must have been important when there was the possibility of a misunderstanding.

We returned to the village where our carriage was waiting.

It was a small town about a thirty-minute walk away from the Carkuku Wetlands known as Crescent.

The houses were raised off the ground amongst the many tall trees surrounding the town. Its women wore clothes that showed lots of skin, perhaps because of the heat.

We walked to the home of the mayor, with Captain Ludtink carrying the fish head in a bag slung over his shoulder. The giant bag itself was made just for the purpose of carrying the monster's head home after the captain received those orders. I hadn't expected it to come in handy so soon. It was also a leather bag which Captain Ludtink was responsible for paying for.

There weren't many villagers around when we first left the carriage here, but today, I spotted them all over. Some were even bent toward us to get a better look. Maybe knights were an unusual sight here.

"Whooooa! Look at the knights! Awesome!"

The kids looked on from a distance and pointed at us as they shouted.

"Look at the tall, pretty blonde girl! I've never seen such a beautiful woman!"

The kids were pointing at...Zara.

That's a beautiful boy, not a girl. I decided not to correct them so as not to crush their dreams.

"A big doggy! Arf arf!"

A little kid was getting excited over the sight of Garr. He was actually a wolf-man, not a dog-man. But the kind-hearted Garr wagged his tail for them, causing the kids to cheer.

"What's that? A little horse?"

Someone had spotted Amelia.

“No, it’s a hawk.”

“It’s not a hawk. It’s got four legs.”

I wondered if griffins weren’t well-known. The villagers were murmuring excitedly amongst themselves. But the person who approached them was none other than Lady Liselotte.

“That is none other than a gallant mythical beast known as a griffin,” Lady Liselotte pointed at Amelia and boasted proudly about her.

“A griffin...?”

“That’s called a griffin?”

“Yes! They were once kept by the royal family and revered as messengers of God. They’re kind, noble, miraculous creatures. They’re also a symbol of the Enoch Knights.”

Amelia looked unnerved by all the stares she was receiving from the villagers, thanks to Lady Liselotte’s introduction. But she seemed to understand the situation, so she spread her impressive wings and let out a hesitant “K-Kreh!”

This sent a cry of shock through the villagers. They pressed their hands together in prayer. Lady Liselotte looked pleased to see that her mythical beast propagation had been a success.

The sound of the cheering seemed to attract even more villagers. When someone mentioned that we had slain the man-eating lizard in the Carkuku Wetlands, applause broke out amongst them. It was like we’d returned victorious from war. *How did it come to this?*

“Mom, they have a little girl with them!”

“Oh, you’re right. Good for her. We should cheer for her.”

“You can do it!!”

Are they talking about me? I pulled my cap over my face, embarrassed to be cheered on by a ten-year-old boy.

Fortunately, Captain Ludtink was also wearing the hood attached to his coat, so no one cried out in fear over the sight of a bandit. Apparently, he’d been too

lazy to shave his beard, so he covered it up with the hood instead.

One young man from our own ranks expressed his disapproval. “Must be nice to have all the attention.”

“No, it’s just embarrassing.”

It sounded like Ulgus wanted to receive some love too. I was sure the village girls would fawn over him if they saw his archery skills, but he probably wanted their attention to be on his looks.

The girls in the crowd suddenly all squealed at once. I looked over and saw that Vice Captain Velrey was raising one hand to greet them back.

“Why does it feel like I’ve lost to Vice Captain Velrey?” Ulgus groaned.

“It’s all right. You’re cool and fantastic too, Ulgus.”

“Thank you, Medic Risurisu. Your tone of voice was very flat, but I still appreciate it.”

As we chatted, we finally reached the mayor’s house. I felt relief to know that we were no longer a spectacle for a crowd.

The house was pretty spacious on the inside. The carpet had a unique ivy pattern woven into it, and the walls were mounted with the bones of animals that had been hunted. There were no tables or chairs, as it was customary for men to sit cross-legged on the ground.

The mayor appeared to be about forty years old—younger than I expected. There were also small children in the home who cried out “A fairy!” when they saw me. Not wanting to crush their hopes, I replied, “Yes, I’m a fairy.”

Ulgus was the only one who couldn’t contain his laughter. I made a mental note to scold him for it later.

After greeting the family, we chatted with the mayor for a while. He was very impressed that we’d come all this way to exterminate the monster. Then we got down to business. First, we called the victim’s family to have them confirm the monster.

The man who arrived was the victim’s grandson and looked to be in his late twenties.

Captain Ludtink opened the bag to reveal the undamaged head of the mud catfish.

“This is it! The man-eating lizard!! This is the one that...” It appeared that he really had mistaken the catfish for a lizard due to the panic of the whole situation. He wept and bowed his head to us. “Thank you... Now...I can be at peace...”

He had gone to the Carkuku Wetlands with his grandfather and father to fish. They made their living fishing in the swamps. The mayor patted the man on the shoulder to cheer him up.

He told us there had only been the one victim from the village. There was no explanation other than bad luck for them to run into the giant mud catfish as they did.

The mood had turned melancholic, but the mayor stepped in to suggest we have dinner. “You must be hungry. We’ve got some food for you here.” He clapped his hands and a group of women carrying food entered the room one by one.

They set a carpet out on the floor and laid out some platters. Each one contained a meat dish I’d never seen before. There was lake fowl cooked with herbs, skewers, steamed bread, and large roasted fish. I even saw the clams we ate yesterday. The big pot had to be for soup. I wondered what it would taste like.

They’d prepared us a dinner full of fish and meat caught fresh from the Carkuku Wetlands.

The mayor’s wife poured us bowls of soup from the pot and passed them out. “This is mud catfish soup.”

I-It’s what?!

Apparently, this village was famous for its mud catfish dishes.

“I-Isn’t that a monster?” I asked.

“No, it’s not.”

The one we’d killed yesterday turned out to be a catfish that had suddenly

mutated and grown large and violent. Normally, they were just palm-sized fish.

“It’s a very valuable ingredient.”

I glanced at Lady Liselotte in the seat next to me. Her eyes were wide as saucers.

When the mayor noticed our stiff reactions, he told us we didn’t have to eat anything we didn’t want to once his wife had left the room.

But I couldn’t let food go to waste. I decided to work up the courage to try it.

I used my spoon to stir the soup and saw the catfish, which had been boiled whole in the broth, float to the surface. It was roughly the size of my pinky. We were supposed to eat the entire thing.

Lady Liselotte, who had been watching me the whole time, let out a little shriek.

I decided to drink the broth first, pushing the catfish down to the bottom of the bowl. Mounting all my courage, I took a sip.

It didn’t reek of mud at all. In fact, the broth was tasty, probably because it was full of herbs. Next, I scooped up the mud catfish that had sunk to the bottom. Bravely, I bit into its torso.

“Nooo!” Lady Liselotte screamed when the catfish surfaced in her own bowl.

It was shockingly tender. Even the bones had been cooked thoroughly.

“Oh, I see the meat is white. It’s light in flavor, but there’s lots of fat, which makes it delicious,” I noted.

The meat was so tender. It melted in my mouth.

For some reason, Lady Liselotte took this as a challenge.

“It was delicious,” she told the mayor afterward, her eyes full of tears.

I knew she’d swallowed the whole thing without so much as chewing.



Chapter 6: A Giver of Chocolate

THAT night, I took my second bath of the day. The baths were in a separate building that was built around a hot spring. The mayor even said that my griffin could bathe with me. It was considered a great honor to the town.

Amelia seemed extremely pleased with the bathing experience. I just hoped she wouldn't start making unreasonable demands of me, since she wasn't allowed in my dorm bath.

I knew I needed to start thinking about finding a house for real now. Amelia was getting bigger by the day. As her owner, I needed to be sure she was able to live a comfortable life.

After our bath, I decided to ask Lady Liselotte for advice.

The village's only boarding house had prepared a place for us to spend the night. There were three separate buildings, with a special one just for the women.

Our room contained only beds and a simple washroom. Mosquito nets hung from the ceilings above. The washroom even had some kind of mudfish face mask. It was probably a local product from the village.

Vice Captain Velrey went to sleep before us. She reminded me that tomorrow was another workday.

The lantern in the corner of the room was brighter than the ones in the capital city. I knew it must have had something to do with the fuel. I was going to ask someone about it the next time I got the chance.

I felt bad about disrupting Vice Captain Velrey's sleep, but I took the opportunity to ask Lady Liselotte for advice on Amelia.

"A house where you can live with your griffin?"

"That's right."

“Why don’t you live at my place?” she asked me, her eyes wide. I told her I didn’t want that, but she pressed me further. “We have big rooms, a garden, and our own baths. What else are you looking for?”

“It’s not that...”

The problem was none other than the old man at the top of the Lichtenberger family. I just knew he would be looking for things to criticize me about. It would be like living with a mother-in-law. But I couldn’t say such a thing to Lady Liselotte, his daughter.

“My parents already know lots about mythical beasts and my servants know how to behave around them too,” she stressed. “I don’t think you’ll find a better place in all the capital city.”

“I see. But...”

Fine. You leave me no choice!

I decided it was time to tell her how I really felt.

“I’m sorry. I really appreciate the offer, but I don’t like your father.”

Lady Liselotte’s eyes went wide. An awkward silence filled the room for a while. Once I couldn’t take it anymore, I tried apologizing to her again. “Sorry...”

“No, that’s all right. I was surprised, but I understand. Father was cruel to you...and the others too. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw the fight break out in front of me.”

I learned that Lady Lisolette was actually there on that day at the port too. She said that the lack of judgment shown by the bureau was due to the tension between their organization and the Royal Order.

“I’m sorry about all that fuss,” she apologized.

“It’s okay.”

They had their own reasons to be so upset. Those reasons just weren’t the fault of the Second Expeditionary Squadron. But the director apologized for that, so I had already moved past it all.

We returned to the topic of my future home with Amelia.

“Then what about staying with my mother’s family?” Lady Liselotte suggested.

“That’s where Zara keeps his mountain cat, right?”

“Oh, of course. You know of it already. That makes this easier.”

Her mother’s family was said to be full of lovers of mythical beasts. They were one of the five most prominent families in the kingdom, putting them on the top of the social ladder as well.

“But Grandmother doesn’t really care for visitors in her home...” she murmured.

I see.

The head of their household was Lady Liselotte’s uncle, an earl. Her grandfather passed away ten years ago. Her uncle, grandmother, and the mountain cat all lived together in the manor.

“Uncle already inherited a villa and other assets from Grandfather when he was still alive. The villa has a history of two hundred years, but my uncle only loves new things, so he was happy to give the house away to his family. I don’t think my uncle liked that the villa was outside the capital city. It was too inconvenient.”

“I see.”

“It takes an hour to reach the manor in the forest by carriage.”

“An hour, huh?”

“Yes, but once the griffin is big enough, it should be able to fly to the city in under half of that.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Amelia had wings. She just didn’t seem like a creature who could fly at all in her current state. This puzzled me.

I tried asking her, since she was curled up at my feet. “Do you think you can fly, Amelia?”

“Kreh...”

That sounded like an “I don’t know” to me. I knew she would probably be flying around if she was able to.

“But will you let me ride on your back if you learn?”

“Kreh!”

That definitely seemed like a “Yes.”

I stroked her head and asked her to let me fly with her when that day came.

“It sounds like your grandmother would have a problem with it, though, Lady Liselotte.”

“Yes... She’s very kind to me, but very stern with other relatives and strangers...”

“Your family really gives you plenty of trouble.”

“Indeed...”

But Zara must be an exception. He told me about how, after he moved to the capital, he always left his mountain cat with that family when he was busy or found himself having to work at night.

“Allow me to bring up the subject with Grandmother first,” she said. “I may ask Zara to help me too.”

“All right. Thank you for doing all this.”

I thought the topic would end there, but Lady Liselotte continued to stare at me. “You sure are strange. I’ve been curious about you all this time.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re an elf, but you can’t even use magic.”

I was totally lost for words. Elves were rumored throughout the world to possess incredible knowledge and magic.

“I’m not a normal elf. I’m like an outsider elf. An enigma,” I said dryly.

“What...does that mean?”

“I can’t use spells because I have no magical energy.”

“That can’t be!”

“It very much can.”

All elves in the Fore Elf village had their magical energy examined by a medical mage when they were born. My reading, unusually enough, showed that I had none of the energy at all.

“Are you sure they measured correctly?” Lady Liselotte asked, doubtful.

“They did. It was carried out by a very trustworthy master.”

“I see.”

I told her it didn’t bother me, but the mood between us had suddenly become much gloomier. This was probably a mistake to discuss.

We fell silent after that. More and more time was passing.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said abruptly.

“Hm?”

Lady Liselotte remembered something and began to search inside her bag. What she pulled out and handed me was a round sweet wrapped in foil.

“What’s this?”

“It’s chocolate. Or rather, a special chocolate cooked in a way so that it won’t melt, even when carried around in the heat. It’s the rations I brought with me. It’s very tasty. There’s a slight citrus flavor in there.”

“Thank you so much.”

I planned on eating it later, but she demanded I try it now.

“Oh, but I’ll get fat if I eat something so sweet at ni—”

“Just eat it, won’t you?”

“Urk! Okay...” Too scared to refuse her, I decided to try it.

I unwrapped the foil and saw a piece of glossy chocolate sitting there. It was heavier than I would have expected for something of its size.

“Wow...”

It felt like a waste to eat the whole chocolate at once, so I tried to bite off half, only to find that it was too hard to bite through. I had to put the whole thing in my mouth. I rolled it over on my tongue to melt the chocolate that was too tough to chew, but it remained in its original shape.

I had to break it apart with my teeth little by little.

The chocolate was crisp and flaky—not smooth like normal chocolate at all. But the hint of citrus throughout told me this was a fancy treat. It wasn't too sweet either, which wasn't something I was used to with chocolate.

"This is very strange chocolate," I commented.

"It is, isn't it? There's no dairy inside to give it a smooth texture. I adore chocolate without those additives in it."

"Wow, that's fascinating."

She explained that chocolate only melted when it had dairy content, and if you removed those ingredients completely, the finished product wouldn't melt at all with the heat.

The chocolate being so hard to chew surprised me at first, but the flavor was something I felt like I could get hooked on. I loved its rich aroma too. She told me they sold it in a chocolate shop in the capital city, so the two of us made plans to go shop there some other time.

"What a relief..." Lady Liselotte murmured.

"Huh?"

"You're back to yourself now."

Then it hit me—Lady Liselotte gave me chocolate to cheer me up.

I was happy about that, but I also wanted to cry.

Lady Liselotte told me that the unmelting chocolate was something nostalgic for her. She explained that there was a person who gave it to her as a present whenever she went through a negative experience.

"He must have remembered how much I loved it as a child, so he would buy it for me whenever I was feeling drained or upset."

She told me that he was an awkward person when it came to emotions, so instead of handing the chocolate to her, he simply left it on her desk without a word. It was only recently that Lady Liselotte realized they were meant to cheer her up.

“It sounds like you have another difficult, closed-off person in your life,” I said.

“Most certainly.”

Emotions have to be put into words to be conveyed. That’s true between family, friends, and lovers too.

“Although, that person has unfortunate circumstances of his own...”

Lady Liselotte’s chocolate gifter was the most talented healing mage in the whole capital. He joined the Royal Order at fourteen and became an imperial guard two years later. His successful career and prominent family allowed him to climb the ranks with ease.

“He was quite famous as the Royal Order’s sorcerer prodigy, but he didn’t care for that reputation...”

With no friends to share his burdens with, he was used by the Order as a pawn for his magic, and the lack of time off from work left his body and heart in tatters.

“That’s why having magical energy isn’t always a blessing,” she said sadly.

“I don’t know what to say...”

At this point in time, I was actually glad that I lacked magical energy. I would never have known how wonderful life in the city was if I had spent the rest of my life in my village. It was the whole reason I got to meet Amelia and the Second Expeditionary Squadron in the first place.

“What happened to that man in the end?” I asked.

“He left the Order.”

“I thought so.”

As a result, he spent five years refusing to leave the house because of the

mental illness he developed. He had lots of savings, since he started working at the age of fourteen, and his family was wealthy too, so this didn't cause him any difficulty.

"But everything changed when he met his future wife," Lady Liselotte said. "His parents set him up with a young woman, forcing him to give up his shut-in lifestyle. She was a young woman with a pet mountain cat...and after a bit of this and that, he married her."

It was then that the identity of Lady Liselotte's chocolate gifter hit me.

"Is this man your father...Lord Lichtenberger?" I guessed.

She nodded, but I could tell she felt awkward. She told me that she hid his identity in her story because I said I didn't like him.

"If he's the best healing mage in the city...then he must have healed Amelia's injuries...?"

"Yes, that was Father."

"Ah, I thought so."

When times were hard, he had his mythical beast and his wife to support him. I realized that those experiences must be why he was capable of ignoring common sense when it came to his passion for mythical beasts. He was starting to make sense to me. I knew he must be a devoted husband too.

He also had a reason for taking out his anger on knights like us.

"I'm sorry for bringing this up," Lady Liselotte said weakly.

"No, I'm the one who asked. Besides, only the best sorcerer in the city could have healed Amelia's wing like that."

I had once heard that a bird with a broken wing would never be able to fly again.

Even when I looked at her injury, I was sure she would never be capable of flight. That was how severe it was. The fact that she made a full recovery and could flap her wings again was a miracle.

"Amelia and I should go thank him when this is all over," I said.

“Only if you want to.”

“It’s no trouble. Although, I don’t think I can do it anytime soon.”

It would take some time before I completely forgave him. But once I did, I wanted to give him a proper “Thank you.” I hoped that the marquess would be a bit more relaxed by then. Although, people didn’t usually change so dramatically, as a rule.

“Thank you for staying up so late with me, Lady Liselotte. I appreciate it.”

“No... I should be thanking you too.”

I cocked my head, wondering what she could possibly have to thank me for. She looked away bashfully.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah... It’s just... U-Um, I’ve...never done this before...”

Lady Liselotte was a mythical beast devotee, a skilled sorcerer from a good family, and a proud soul. Much like her father (for better or worse), she spent her days locked inside her house to study magic. Aside from that, she stayed out of high society almost completely, since it interfered with her mythical beast work.

“It’s my first time talking about myself and my family like this,” she admitted. “I was really happy that you wanted to listen to it all.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It’s such a strange feeling... But now I want to talk even more.”

“I’d be happy to listen to you any time.”

She reached out and squeezed my hands. Then she thanked me one more time.

“Um, could I call you Mell?”

“Of course. Please do.”

“Thank you. Please call me Liselotte too.”

“Very well.”

She demanded I call her name right away.

“This is strangely embarrassing.”

“Just do it.”

“...Liselotte.”

I blushed, feeling overly intimate using her first name on its own. She told me I would just have to keep using it until it felt natural.

“I never thought I would make a friend like this,” she said.

“A...*friend*?”

“Oh dear. You disagree?”

“No, I think I’m happy.”

“You think? That’s rather vague.”

“Um... I’m happy!”

Liselotte gave a satisfied nod.

Despite everything that happened, I was glad to make my very first friend from the capital city. I hoped the two of us could get along, regardless of who her father was.



WE returned to the capital the next day.

The journey home by carriage took a day and a half, and the mood in the vehicle was heavy all throughout.

Captain Ludtink was the first member to drive the carriage, however, which lightened that mood significantly.

We played some fun games of cards, listened to Ulgus’s legendary tales about the bandit known as Captain Ludtink, and I exchanged ideas for a cape for Amelia with Zara and Liselotte.

We stopped for lunch along the way.

The carriage door opened up with a harsh squeak. The glassy-eyed Captain Ludtink stuck his head inside, causing me to almost let out a shriek at his

fearsome face.

“...Stop foolin’ around just because the mission’s over!” the captain roared at us. Ulgus and I screamed playfully.

It was the start of a brand-new legend of banditry.



WITH that, we finally arrived back at the royal capital.

Our expedition had been grueling. I was eager to get back to my dorm and go to sleep.

Captain Ludtink and Vice Captain Velrey had to return to the barracks to submit their reports. The superior officers truly had the most difficult jobs. The rest of us were dismissed to go home...but then Captain Ludtink called out to Liselotte and stopped her.

“What is it?”

“Uh, it’s just...you kept up with us better than I expected...”

Oh, that’s right. Captain Ludtink was opposed to her joining our unit.

“You did well,” he said.

“Well, I managed to get by with the help of my squadmates.”

“Is that right?”

Liselotte never complained—not when she fell in the mud, battled with monsters, and camped outside overnight. It was impossible not to acknowledge all the effort she put into the mission.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” the captain questioned if she was determined to stay on as a knight.

“Of course. Now that I’ve found something I’m capable of, I want this to become my focus, even if it isn’t directly connected to mythical beasts.”

“All right. Then I welcome you to the unit.”

Liselotte blushed. She looked pleased to hear that. *I’m pleased too!*

The captain simply yelled “Dismissed!” and spun around to leave, perhaps

feeling bashful about it too.

Zara then clapped his hands and made a suggestion. “We should go eat some yummy food on our way home!”

“That sounds lovely,” I said.

We ended up going out to eat, since the dorm cafeteria was busy at this time of day.

“Can Amelia come too?” I asked.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, if you don’t mind taking her to the usual restaurant,” Zara said.

“Sure. Let’s get going.” I invited the other members too. Ulgus and Garr agreed to join us. “Would you like to come along, Liselotte?”

“If you’re going, Mell.”

“I am. Glad to have you with us.”

It wasn’t a fancy restaurant, but the food was delicious. I just hoped she would like it.

We headed there without any further delay.

The evening hour meant that the restaurant was crowded. We had to get there quickly before it filled up.

When I turned around to look at Zara, our eyes met, and I realized he’d been staring at my back.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, I was just surprised how quickly you made friends with the rich girl.”

“Well, we got to chatting. I actually wanted to ask you about something we discussed.”

“Your mythical beast?”

“Exactly.”

I decided to visit Zara’s place for a chat tomorrow, since we had the day off. He didn’t mind if I brought Amelia over either. I wondered how she would do

with the mountain cat.

“Why don’t we head to a café to chat if it doesn’t work out at my place? I’m sure we can find another place that allows mythical beasts inside.”

“That’s true. The capital is home to the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, after all.”

I decided I would have to ask Liselotte if she knew of any such cafés.



THE next day, I wrapped my arms around the warm creature at my side and pulled her close. She was soft and fluffy, although something was poking me in the cheek. It actually hurt a little.

“Kreeeeeh...”

Her relaxed chirp snapped me out of my daze. It was morning. It looked like I had fallen asleep with Amelia in my arms. The culprit of my cheek pain was Amelia’s beak.

Today was my day off. I opened the curtains and looked out at the brilliant blue sky.

I checked the clock and saw that the cafeteria was closing in ten minutes. I could make it if I ran, but I didn’t want to prioritize my breakfast over Amelia’s.

Outside my door was a brand-new delivery of fruit. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was, as always, on top of things.

The crate contained three kinds of seasonal fruit. I fed her two of each.

“Kreh!”

“You like it? That’s great.”

Amelia wagged her tail cheerfully. I wiped the remaining fruit juice off her beak.

I really felt like she’d grown again, even if she wasn’t a full three feet yet. She was just approaching that mark. It was starting to get difficult to share my tiny bed with her at night too. The dorm room itself would probably start to feel cramped very soon.

I was prepared for this development already, but I knew I needed to find a place to move.

While I was thinking about this issue, I heard my stomach growl. I needed to get ready to visit Zara's house, where I could ask him for advice about my moving plans.

Liselotte gave me the name of a café that allowed mythical beasts. That was going to be my first stop for breakfast.

I took out some clothes from my drawer and changed into an undyed dress, then tied my hair up into a high ponytail. I went to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth.

Amelia seemed to be reaching an age where she was very particular about her looks. She chirped at my feet, asking me to doll her up too.

I combed her feathers with the special comb the bureau provided for her. When I asked her if she would like some citrus oil as a perfume, she wagged her tail to tell me she loved that scent, so I diluted the oil and massaged it into her feathers from head to tail. This seemed to be the perfect product for her—it turned her feathers glossy and smoothed her lion's coat.

Thus, my girly griffin was ready for a day out.

I usually saved the skins of Amelia's fruit to dry and preserve, but now I started to wonder if I could use them to make essential oils too.

I once asked my village healer to teach me how to make essential oils.

He explained that you started by putting the ingredients in a distillation tank and letting steam rise up into it from below. Once the steam was mixed with the ingredients, you chilled it to separate the water. The whole process sounded like a pain, so I never tried it myself.

First of all, I would need specialized tools like a distillation tank. But the healer said I could use the steamer we had at home. Snow or ice was also required, since the process involved rapidly cooling steam. Leaving out water in the current weather might give me ice if I waited overnight. I would have to give it a try sometime.

I put Amelia's bonnet on her head once I finished changing. I liked to ask her which bonnet she wanted depending on how she felt that day, even if there were only three to choose from.

The first was a white bonnet with yellow flowers, the second was a solid red color with frills, and the last was covered with green and white shapes. She chose the red one for today. I donned my overcoat, and with that, we were ready to go.

"Shall we head out?"

"Kreh!"

The sky was clear today and the temperature felt lovely. I passed traders, tourists, patrolling knights, adventurers, and all sorts of people throughout town.

As always, my griffin companion drew the eyes of everyone.

My first stop was the shopping district. I was going to pick up a gift to take to Zara's house.

The food stores were just starting to open.

The appetizing smell of bread mixed with the aroma of baked sweets in the air. Someone was roasting sweet beans with honey outside. When I got closer, the chef gave me a free sample of the piping hot confection.

"Ow! That's hot...!"

The outside was crispy and caramelized, while the roasted beans inside gave off an intense fragrance. It was a treat of simple flavors. The chef told me that his shop only opened two days ago. I decided to buy a full serving, since Zara probably hadn't tried this dish before.

Now that I had my gift for him, I headed to the café that allowed mythical beasts so that I could order a late breakfast. The place was somewhat hidden—nestled away at the top of a staircase on an alleyway off the main road. It was such an adorable little café with its red brick walls and orange roof.

I entered the café, showed them my permission card from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, and a smiling staff member led me to a private

room in the back. I got to dine in a place meant for distinguished guests.

The staff member handed me menus for both humans and mythical beasts.

I ordered hot water with honey for Amelia.

Most of the items for mythical beasts were free. I wondered just how much money they were being given in grants. The financial doings of the rich were a mystery to me.

On top of that, the prices on the human menu were less than half of what would be the normal amount. It was just one shock after another.

I began to look for a dish that caught my eye, but it was almost time for me to go to Zara's house already, so I knew I had to choose quickly.

Egg sandwiches, melon sandwiches, fruit sandwiches, buttered toast, cheese toast, vegetable toast. Chocolate pancakes, forest apple pancakes, honey pancakes.

Since I didn't know what to pick, I ended up ordering the simplest combination of buttered toast and coffee.

I gazed out the window at the beautiful townscape and clock tower. The people came and went in a rush down below. I was able to look over the city from above due to the height of the café itself. It was a lovely, brand-new view to me.

Our food arrived a little while later. I took the honey tea from the waiter and set it at Amelia's feet. She lapped it up while her tail hit the floor over and over again in a wag. She was clearly pleased with her drink.

I moved on to my buttered toast right after that.

It came with two rectangular cuts of toast and an extra salad too. The slices of bread were thick and already buttered. It melted into the notches that were cut in the toast's surface, allowing for even more absorption.

I picked up the first slice and took a bite.

Once I bit down, the rich flavor of butter filled my mouth. The thick slice of bread was soft and puffy on the inside.

This was my first time ever tasting coffee. My heart was racing as I took my first sip.

...Bitter!

I added milk and sugar, knowing that this flavor was too much for me on its own. But it was still a little bitter. *Yeah...this is a flavor for grown-ups.*

But I had no time to sit there and savor it. It was almost time to meet Zara.

I paid my bill and exited the café.

Once I descended the staircase, I left the shopping district and headed for the residential homes in the center of town.

I managed to arrive right on time.

“Amelia, there’s a mountain cat in Zara’s house. I want you to get along with her, okay?” I told her.

“Kreh?”

She cocked her head, not understanding what I meant by “mountain cat.”

“Um... She’s fluffy like Garr, with a white coat like snow, and she goes ‘Meow!’”

“Kreh?”

It was no use. She didn’t get it all. My only option was to let her meet Blanche directly.

I knocked on the front door. Zara appeared in no time at all.

“Welcome, Melly. You too, Amelia.”

I bowed in greeting, and Amelia let out a “Kreeeh!” at my feet. I praised her for such a polite greeting. I asked Zara if Blanche was in a good mood, when I saw the white cat stick her head out from the other end of the hallway.

“Meow.”

She meowed once and looked back and forth between Amelia and me. Amelia rushed behind my back to hide.

“It’s all right, Amelia. Zara’s cat is named ‘Blanche.’”

“K-Kreh?”

“Don’t be scared.”

Zara introduced Blanche to Amelia too. Blanche didn’t appear scared, but she stared at Amelia with pure curiosity in her eyes.

Amelia took a single step forward.

“Kreh.”

“Meow.”

They had to be greeting each other. The two creatures had a stare-off. *Will they be able to get along?*

But Blanche did something surprising as we watched over them. She licked Amelia’s beak with her tongue. Amelia puffed her feathers up. Of course, she was shocked.

“Stop that!” Zara demanded. Blanche backed away. “I’m sorry about her.”

“No, I think it’s okay.”

Amelia was frozen, her eyes now wet. When I asked her if she was all right, she seemed to snap out of it.

“Kreeeh!” She was crying to me, teary-eyed, about the completely unexpected licking.

“I know, I know. That was scary, huh? You did great staying calm.” I stroked Amelia’s head.

This was her very first encounter with Blanche. I was still concerned about the future of their relationship.

Zara asked us to wait at the front door for a while. Five minutes later, he returned. “Sorry about that. I put Blanche upstairs, so I think everything will be fine now.”

“Thank you...”

I felt bad, but Amelia needed to interact with Blanche a little bit at a time. Their first introduction was enough for today.

With that, I let myself into Zara's house.

"Kreh kreh!"

"Thank you for having us," Amelia chirped politely.

Zara was wearing his hair in a single braid today. It draped over his shoulder and down to his chest. He wore a gray collared shirt and black pants.

"You're wearing men's clothes again today," I commented.

"Sure am. I've been feeling more relaxed this way lately."

"I see."

Crossdressing must have been a form of putting up mental armor for Zara. Or maybe not. That was just my own imagination.

"Does it look weird?"

"No, it's wonderful."

"Yeah? That's good."

He led me into a room in his house that was, unsurprisingly, as neat and organized as always. His entire house was without so much as a single speck of dust. I smelled flowers along with some kind of incense.

We sat in the living room. The walls were painted white and the carpet under our feet was bright red. He had a chocolate-brown table with white chairs. A kettle was put on the hearth, and I could already hear its water bubbling.

"This is such a stylish room," I said.

"Thanks!"

Zara told me that all his furniture was purchased second-hand, and he put lots of thought into each piece. The tablecloth came from Zara's hometown. It was made from blue and white fabric woven together to create snowflake patterns.

I handed him his present—the sweet honey beans I had bought after tasting them.

"Oh my! These are sweets from my hometown," he told me.

"Is that right?"

What a coincidence. Zara smiled and said they were nostalgic for him. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it or not, but it looked like he was tearing up.

The kettle started to whistle—it had come to a boil already. Zara made some tea that gave off the nice scent of flowers.

We snacked on sweets and began to discuss the main topic of conversation.

"I've been thinking that I should move to a new place soon," I started.

"I'll bet that dorm room's getting tiny, huh?"

"It really is."

Zara once asked me to live with him, but Amelia definitely couldn't stay at this house. I needed to look for somewhere else.

"Actually, Marquess Lichtenberger asked me if I wanted him to adopt me..."

"Personally...I think that's a bad idea," Zara said.

"Right? I don't want to do it either."

But this involved Amelia's future. I couldn't be selfish.

"Why don't I consult with Countess Eberhard?" Zara offered. "She's the person I leave Blanche with."

"That's Liselotte's grandmother, right?"

"Yep. She can be pretty hard to please."

I cradled my head in my hands. Zara was already so good with people, but even *he* was calling Countess Eberhard hard to please...

"On my next day off, I'll pay her a visit and ask her if she wouldn't mind meeting you. Sound good?"

"Yes, that would be great, thank you."

Now that my initial topic had come to an end, Zara asked me if I wanted to make lunch with him.

"Sorry about this. I meant to whip something up before you got here..."

"It's fine!"

I had been thinking of going out for lunch somewhere, but I didn't want to drag Amelia to another restaurant either, so this was actually a helpful suggestion.

We got up and went to his beautiful kitchen. Once again, it was shiny and clean.

"I was thinking we could do minced meat wraps today," he said.

"Whoa, that sounds wonderful."

Minced meat wraps were, of course, food from Zara's hometown. The wrap was made with flour, then stuffed with minced meat, boiled, and eaten in soup.

"The wraps come first," he instructed.

We mixed together wheat, water, eggs, and salt until it had an even consistency. The dough turned out slick and glossy. We wrapped it in a wet cloth and let it sit for thirty minutes.

"Next up is the stuffing."

Zara dropped a hunk of boar-pig meat on the countertop with a loud thump. He wanted to chop off little pieces from it directly.

"Minced meat tastes best when it's made from the original cut," I said.

"Oh, you get it, don't you, Melly!"

Zara minced the boar-pig meat in the blink of an eye. This wasn't the first time I had this thought, but he was truly talented in the kitchen.

"Next up is the veggies."

He was going to add both grated and diced onions to the wraps.

Cutting onions always made me cry.

"They say that onions make you cry because you're breaking down its cells, which lets out an irritating substance to the eyes," Zara told me.

"Is that right?"

"The trick is to freeze the onion before you cut into it. It also helps to have a good knife."

“Oh, I see.”

Zara told me he hung the onions outside this morning, meaning they were already nice and prepared for us to use. We began to chop up our onions. But then...

“...Ngh!”

“...Oh dear.”

For some reason, both Zara and I were tearing up.

“I’m sorry, Melly. I guess I messed it up today.”

“I-It happens sometimes.”

Tears were streaming down my face as I helped grate and dice the onions. We also added garlic, salt, and pepper to the minced meat, mixed it up well, and added seasoning as needed.

Next up was to make the wraps themselves.

We cut off bite-sized pieces of dough and flattened them with rolling pins. This made about thirty wraps. Then we filled them with the minced meat we had finished earlier. The minced meat wraps, about two bites each in size, were finished.

The next step was to boil the completed wraps. Once they floated up to the top of the water, they were ready to eat, so we scooped them out.

We drained the hot water, set them in bowls, and poured the clear vegetable soup over the top of them. The minced meat wraps were complete.

Zara and I moved to the kitchen table to dig in.

As for Amelia, I fed her the fruit I had brought with me from home. Blanche only ate breakfast and dinner.

“That reminds me. You told me that Blanche’s food costs you a lot of money before. Does the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau not pay for it?” I asked.

“I don’t provide them with logs and research stuff. That’s why they leave most of the costs to me.”

“Oh, I see.”

I learned that the bureau’s generous compensation came with conditions. If I wasn’t submitting a daily log to them, I wouldn’t fall under their protection.

“It’s not like she became an expensive pet out of nowhere. I’m just too lazy to start up the whole log process.”

“That makes sense.”

Everyone has different backgrounds and circumstances.

“Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

“Okay.”

This was my first time eating a dish consisting of boiled flour wraps. How was it going to end up tasting? I scooped one out of the soup and bit into it.

“Ah! It’s hot...”

It was my second scorching bite of the day. I never seemed to learn. Once I felt the wrap with my tongue to confirm that it had cooled down, I bit into the bundle.

“...!”

My mouth was too full to speak, but it was incredibly delicious!!

The wrap itself was the perfect thickness with a squishy texture. It split open and filled my mouth with tasty, savory meat juices. The onions were nice and crisp with a sweetness I could taste too.

“How is it, Melly?”

“It’s incredible!”

This dish from the land of snow was even tastier than I ever could have imagined.



BEFORE I left Zara’s house, I spotted a crystal near his front door. It was a jagged crystal a bit smaller than the palm of my hand.

“What’s this...?” I asked.

“Ah, it’s for measuring magical energy.”

He explained that knights who joined the Order and didn’t have their magical energy measured by the doctor could use it to learn their own energy levels. It was invented by the Magical Research Department.

I joined my unit with a medical certificate from the doctor, so I was excused from the energy scan. The crystal didn’t glow if you didn’t have any magical energy, but a small amount produced a yellow light, a moderate amount glowed green, and a large amount glowed blue.

“I think they said if it glows red, you’re supposed to visit the research department,” Zara told me.

“What does red mean?”

“That they want to observe you because you have such a crazy high magical energy level.”

“Whoa, that sounds scary.”

Zara said that his crystal glowed light yellow when he first enlisted. “Not many people can use magic in this world, you know? So, they told me to contact them if my crystal light ever turned bright yellow.”

A yellow light meant that the person needed to receive magic education.

“They gave the crystal to me and told me to use it every day.”

“Huh, I see. This thing looks pretty expensive,” I said, eyeing the crystal.

“Just like the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, the Magical Research Department is supported by wealthy people, or so I hear,” Zara said.

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Zara picked up the crystal. A faint yellow light began to glow from it. “You can live your life just fine without magic, so why is everyone so obsessed with it?” he murmured.

“.....”

That was something I couldn’t really speak to. My emotions on the subject were complicated.

He placed it back on the table next to his front door. The crystal turned clear again.

“Um, would you mind if I touched it?” I asked.

“Sure, go ahead. Feel free to break it, if you want.”

“No, I’m not going to do that...”

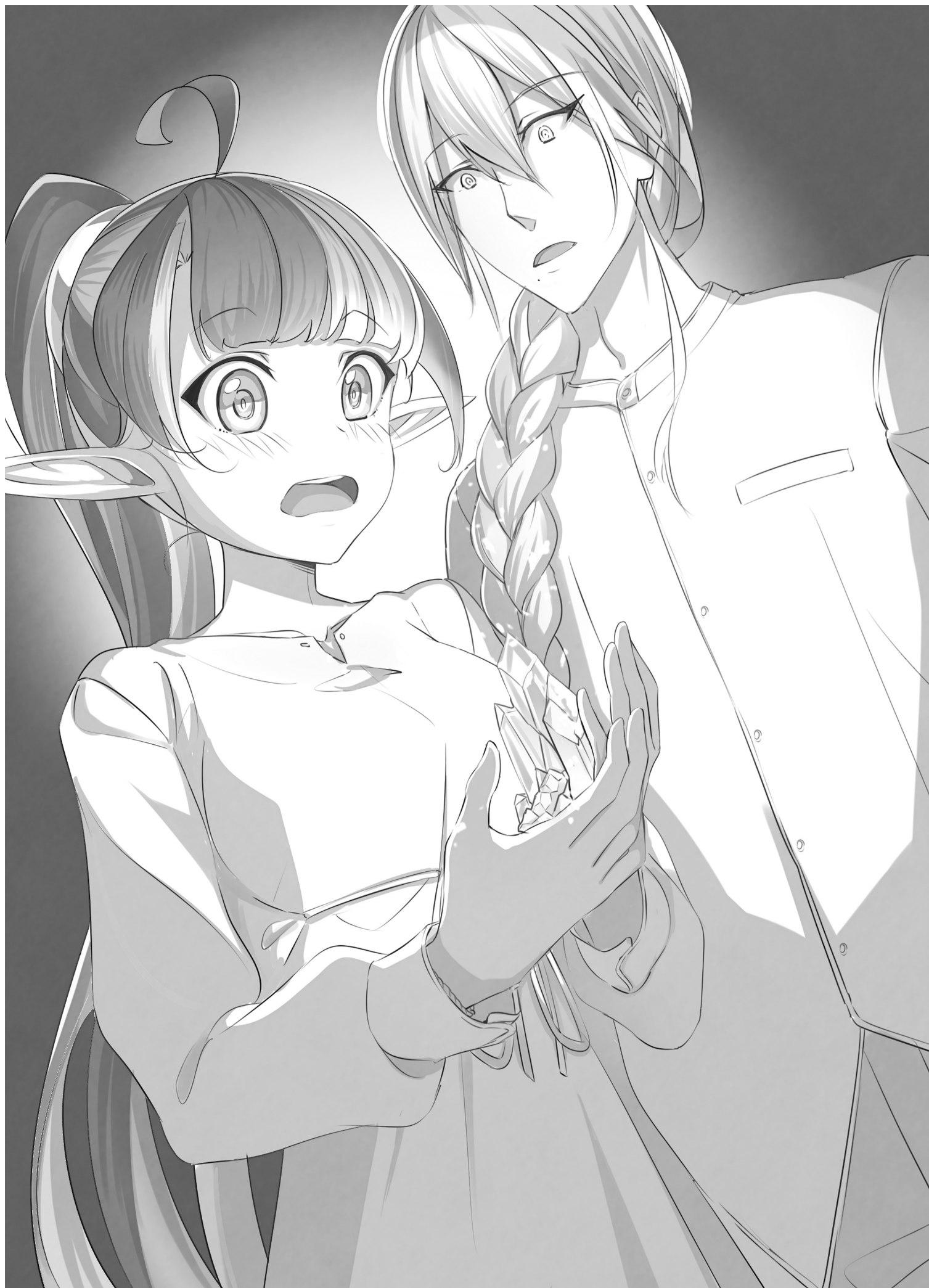
I just wanted to touch it because it was so pretty. I definitely *wasn’t* hoping that it would glow yellow like it did for Zara. Absolutely not.

I took the crystal in my hand. I enjoyed the smooth sensation against my skin, and was about to place it back on the table, when just then...

“...What the?”

“Melly... No way!”

The crystal was starting to light up.



It turned yellow, then green, then grew into blue. Finally...

“Let go of it, Melly!”

“Hyah!”

Just as the crystal turned red, a crack formed in the surface.

Zara whisked the crystal out of my hand and threw it on the floor. As soon as it landed, it exploded into bits and pieces. He pulled me close to him so that I wouldn't get struck with the crystal shards.

“A-Are you hurt, Zara?!”

“I'm fine. They didn't go that far.”

That much was a relief. Amelia was behind me and didn't look to be hurt either.

“What just happened?” I asked.

Zara was still holding me. He whispered into my ear, “You can't tell anyone about this.”

“But what...was that?”

“Your magical energy turned it red.”

“No, we had to have just seen it wrong.” I tried to deny his words, but Zara shook his head.

“Your village healer told you he found no magical energy in your exam, but it looks like it was the opposite, actually.”

“That's impossible.”

“I'm sorry to say this, but the measurement crystal is accurate.”

“Th-That can't be...! That would mean...I really do have magical energy, after all?”

Zara nodded his head.

“I can't believe this!” The sheer shock of this revelation caused me to raise my voice.

My heart was racing. *How? Why?* On the inside, I was launching all kinds of questions at my village healer.

“Zara...what do I do...? I...”

“It’s okay. Everything’s going to be all right.” Zara hugged me again and stroked my back like he was soothing a baby.

Some sort of anguish—or maybe it was anger—welled up inside my body, causing tears to spill over from my eyes.

What has my entire life meant all this time? It felt so empty now.

But there was one good thing about this revelation. Zara didn’t change how he acted with me, no matter how different things were now. Aside from that fact, there was nothing else about having magical energy that made me feel happy.

All that crying made me feel better in the end, though.

We went back to the living room, where Zara told me to have a seat on the couch.

I felt bad for how much of his time I was taking up, but Zara insisted.

He handed me a cup of tea filled with milk and sugar. The feeling of a warm drink melted away some of the weight I was carrying.

What I needed to do was sit down and sort out the mess of information in my head.

“So my village healer must have made a mistake when examining me?” I guessed.

“I don’t think so. I would bet he saw the results and decided it was better to say that you had no magical energy at all.” Zara then began to explain how people with magical energy lived lives of tragedy. “Long ago, people used to perform human sacrifices to appease the gods and spirits during natural disasters like storms, heavy snow, and droughts. The chosen victims were always children with magical energy. In return, those gods and spirits handed down their blessings in exchange for the large amount of energy offered to them. My own village had the same custom. Though I sure hope they don’t do

that stuff anymore...”

It was an old tradition found throughout the world. The more closed-off the society, the more they believed blindly in these sacrifices.

“It sounds like your village healer taught you lots of things, but he didn’t stop you from leaving the forest, right?” Zara asked.

“No, he didn’t. He just told me to live a healthy life out here.”

“There must have been something going on in your village after all...”

“I think...you’re right.”

That was when I remembered something. Our village healer wasn’t a Fore Elf, with the usual lifespan of 100 years, but a High Elf—those who could live up to 1,000 years. He must have seen all kinds of things throughout his life. But his decision was what gave me the life I had today, so it was hard to complain.

It was very possible that my village cared so much about magical energy because of their past involvement in various sacrificial rituals.

My grandma once told me an old folk tale.

Fifty years ago, the Fore Elf Forest almost died. The very fact that the woods were lush and green now was almost impossible to believe. As for how the forest withered and was revived, well, Grandma never told me. I just remembered her saying that they thanked the forest gods every single day without fail.

“Do you think the reason my village prioritizes magical energy in marriages is so that they can produce children with lots of that energy, to be used as sacrifices to the forest gods?” I asked in a whisper.

“...I couldn’t say. But I feel like there’s been research about how the magical energy of the parents is a big factor in the energy the kids are born with.”

“Hmm...”

I racked my brain but couldn’t put the pieces of the puzzle together. I decided to write a letter to my village healer to ask him about how magical energy worked.

I patted my cheeks to snap myself out of this mood.

“Thank you for everything, Zara.”

“But I didn’t even do anything. All I did was give you something to worry about now. I feel awful about it.”

“That’s not true. I’m really happy that I learned something new about myself.”

I knew I’d always had feelings of inferiority as a result of my lack of magic. I had no confidence in anything I did and falsely blamed it on the fact that I didn’t have magical energy.

“I can’t believe I had this energy all along. It’s so silly,” I laughed at myself. “All this time, I blamed my lack of magic when I messed something up, beat myself up over it, and started to question if I had any worthwhile skills at all.”

But I was still me—with or without magic. Only today did that fact finally sink in. It was a wonderful development.

“So, thank you, Zara.”

“Melly...”

Strangely, it was like all the lingering resentment in my heart was gone. I decided to think about the rest of my concerns later. For now, I would go home and rest up.

“I’ll walk you back to the dorm.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I decided to take him up on the kind offer.

It was then that I realized how often I felt guilty in accepting the favor of others all my life. It was hard to believe just how rude I’d been behaving, rejecting compassion shown to me by other people like that.

Maybe I never had the time to even come to a conclusion like that.

We walked back to the dorm together. The two of us hardly said a word.

“See you tomorrow,” Zara said. With that, I entered through the gates.



I heard the evening bell chiming. After I fed Amelia her dinner, I walked down to the cafeteria for myself.

Amelia was now at the point where she could stay in the dorm without me for short periods of time. Although, part of that was because she hated the loud cafeteria packed with knights.

My new dorm room was closer to the cafeteria too. Supposedly, it was supposed to be a room for commanding officers in the Order. I shuddered from the disrespect I was showing to the upper knights. I really needed to move, and fast.

With those thoughts in my head, I entered the cafeteria.

I decided to order the cafeteria lady's recommendation of the day—the salt-grilled chicken.

“Which do you want? Normal bread? Or thin-sliced?” she asked.

There appeared to be two types of bread today. The thin-sliced bread was meant to be wrapped around other foods and eaten all together. It kind of reminded me of the food I made for those bandit brothers who kidnapped me on the mountain.

I wonder if they're doing well? Well, I guess the knights did arrest them...

But that didn't matter right now.

Since it was something new, I decided to give the thin bread a try. I also took salad, cheese, and vegetable soup as part of my meal.

It was still a bit early for dinner, so I got to dine in a cafeteria that was almost empty today.

I said my prayer and began to eat.

“It tastes the best when you wrap it around vegetables or cheese,” the knight sitting across from me spoke up to give me a pointer. *Oh, I see.* “There's sauce in that jar. It's a salty-sweet sauce.”

“Thank you.”

As instructed, I cut up my chicken and salad, added a bit of cheese, wrapped

them with the bread, and poured the sauce on top.

I opened up wide to take a bite.

The thin bread was gentle with a slight hint of sweetness. The salt-grilled chicken was tender and juicy, but not overly salty like it could have been. It paired perfectly with the crispy vegetables in the wrap. The sweet and salty sauce was a great addition too.

I gobbled down two of them in no time at all.

But the knight across from me had six of them. Being able to consume so much food was a good thing. I wished I could eat more too.

After dinner, I went to take a bath, then I returned to my room.

“Kreh kreeeh!”

“I’m home.”

Amelia always loved to sniff me when I came home.

“Kreeeh!”

She glared at me a little. *“You took a bath, didn’t you?”* she pressed me. I was forced to admit the truth under the pressure.

“You can’t use the dorm baths, Amelia. You’ll have to wait for us to move.”

“Kreh!”

“How deplorable it is that I cannot bathe,” she seemed to be saying. She cracked her tail against the floor like a whip.

“Hmm, let’s see then...”

It might be possible to buy a large bucket and warm it up with the fireplace. But that sounded difficult on my own, so I would have to find some help.

“Oh, I have an idea! Let’s make soaps, Amelia!”

“Kreh?”

I came up with a way to use the leftover fruit skins.

I started by grinding up the dried citrus skins in my mortar and pestle to turn them into powder. Then I put a pot on the fire, boiled the powdered skins, and

waited for them to turn bright orange.

Next, I filtered the wet powder, combined it with soap powder, and kneaded it together. I poured it into a rectangular mold I bought for baking. It should firm up nicely after I left it for a week or so.

Amelia wagged her tail when she sniffed the soap. I could tell she liked it.

Citrus fruit skins were supposed to be good germ killers too. Eating them was said to bring beauty.

“This is your soap, Amelia. You can use it when we move, okay?”

“Kreeeh!”

That seemed to persuade her this time. For now, I hoped she would be patient and stick it out with simple body wipes for now.



THAT morning, I was in the barrack’s simple kitchen to make salted boar-pig meat.

“Kreh! Kreeeh!”

Amelia seemed to be having a blast in the cage that Liselotte had brought for me. She liked how it swung whenever she moved her body.

The next day, Liselotte told me the cage was one she owned when she was a child. It seemed to be a very carefully crafted, expensive item, so I suspected as much myself.

Amelia was growing by the day—she had to be about three feet by now, just slightly smaller than the cage. She would surely outgrow it in just a few days.

Mythical beasts grew incredibly fast, perhaps because they left their parents very early on. They were said to grow to adulthood within half a year.

Days kept passing, and Amelia kept getting bigger. It was hard to lift her up now. Despite her size, she still loved to be spoiled, just like always. I was starting to get very nervous that something as simple as an attempt at cuddling would send me flying backward from the impact.

She had become the center of all my attention. But I needed to get to work. I

took some salt and herbs and rubbed them into the boar-pig meat. Then I wrapped it in a cotton cloth to allow it some time to marinate.

I decided to bake some biscuits too. As I was making my plans, someone called for me.

“Are you here, Mell?”

“Yes?”

Liselotte poked her head into the kitchen.

Liselotte Lichtenberger—the newest member of the Second Expeditionary Squadron. She was the only daughter of a marquess and a member of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

I thought a noblewoman would never be able to hold her own as a knight, but she was able to complete challenging expedition missions, wielding her courage and her self-respect as her greatest weapons.

She seemed to adapt to things better than I expected. She sat on the ground and ate without a table like it was no trouble at all now.

But was the rich girl really happy with that?

Either way, her skills in fighting made her very valuable. Everyone was glad to have someone else who could attack from long distances. I hoped she would continue to put in her best efforts.

Anyway, what’s she here for now?

“Is something wrong?”

“Captain Ludtink told me to watch the other members and learn from them.”

“I see.”

She’d come to watch me first, it sounded like.

“What are you making?”

“Biscuits.”

Biscuits were priceless treasures that could be eaten at any time during an expedition. They usually lasted about half a month, and since we usually had

one or two expeditions during that time period, I could make large batches of biscuits, and they would always get eaten.

For today, I was going to make biscuits with grains in them to provide even extra nutrition.

I started by mixing flour, sugar, baking soda, and roasted grains together in a bowl. Then I added melted butter, egg yolks, and skim milk, kneading them all together thoroughly. The dough needed to rest for a while at this point.

“That reminds me, Mell. Is there a difference between biscuits, cookies, and sablés?”

“Yes, there is.”

I had my own way of separating the distinctions between biscuits, cookies, and sablés.

“First of all, biscuits are baked until they’re hard. Baking them twice allows them to be preserved longer. Cookies have more butter than biscuits, so they’re a bit more of an indulgence.”

About forty percent of cookies were made of butter, meaning I rarely ever got to eat them when I lived in the forest.

“Sablé refers to things that are crunchier than other cookies.”

They were an expensive treat, so I had hardly tried them myself. All that butter meant a short shelf life too.

“However, the definitions of all these sweets aren’t too rigid.”

Just recently, I asked a baker in the city for “biscuits” only to be handed over some sort of sweet bread. That was unexpected.

“Hmm, is that right? Fascinating.”

Naturally, the snacks served at Liselotte’s home were cookies and sablés, I was certain.

“Do you have any favorite meals, Liselotte?”

I might not be capable of reproducing the foods that nobles ate, but I could probably whip up something close.

“Hmm... I prefer wild fowl over poultry, personally.”

Wow, that's not what I expected at all.

“Birds have better quality meat when they can fly freely.”

“That's true. We eat wild birds in the Second Expeditionary Squadron sometimes.”

That was when Liselotte's gaze sharpened.

“Wh-What is it?”

“I figured you ate monsters,” she accused.

“Of course, we don't!”

Grandma always told me that eating monsters would make me sick. No matter how badly I was starving, that was the last thing I could ever eat.

“Why not?”

“Monsters are evil beings, so not only do they cause misfortune, but their body contains lots of magical energy. Consuming that much in such a short amount of time can hurt your health...”

“Is that right? I've never heard that before.”

“Long ago, when the earth was home to many sorcerers, there was said to be a group of mages called the ‘Monster Eaters.’ The bad sorcerers were the monster eaters. They were detested by all, and now monster eating is very much taboo,” I explained.

“All the bad sorcerers in stories have pointy ears,” she pointed out.

“Urk!”

“Couldn't it be that monster eaters were actually elves?”

She was right. Most monster eaters were said to be one race of elves or another, although I didn't know which one.

“There are all sorts of elf races in this world,” I said.

“Hm, I see. What else are there, aside from Fore Elves?”

“I'm not completely sure, but I think there's about ten races or so.”

Us Fore Elves lived in the forests, but there were also Hill Elves of the hills, Vulcans who lived at the base of volcanoes, the Erimos Elves who inhabited deserts, and more.

The most famous elves were High Elves—well known for their long lifespans and impressive intellect.

“You have a shorter lifespan, right, Mell?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

It was really only about the same length as a human’s.

“I’m glad that’s the case, Mell.”

“Why’s that?”

“I would be really sad if I became an old lady, and you didn’t.”

I blinked my eyes when I heard that.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, um, I guess you just surprised me.” I never imagined having someone in my life who would ever say that to me.

“We’re friends, right?” she asked.

“Yes, but, um, are you sure you want me as a friend?”

“Well, I always have a lot of fun talking to you.”

“That’s a real honor.”

It was kind of hard to imagine that she would still like me so much if I wasn’t Amelia’s master.

“I guess I’m like a nice accessory that comes with Amelia,” I said wryly.

“That’s not it. I would still want to be friends with you, even without Amelia. I haven’t even talked about her since I came here, right?”

It was true that she never asked about her.

“I’m sorry. I just...don’t have a lot of experience talking to other women like this,” I confessed.

I had friends in the Fore Elf village, but it was hard to form strong bonds with anyone when I was so busy every single day.

“Liselotte...what do you think it means to have a friend?”

“It’s someone you enjoy spending time with, is it not? I don’t think you should overthink a thing like that.”

She said there was no need to act like someone else around a friend. If you wanted to speak about something casual, you could do that. It was important to enjoy yourself.

“That’s why you’re my friend, Mell. Understand?”

“Yes! I really do.”

Liselotte smiled when she heard my answer. “Would you like to come over to my house for a visit?”

“I-I don’t...”

I didn’t mind the idea of visiting her house—I was just scared of the marquess.

“Father’s busy, so he’s hardly ever home,” she said, sensing my concern.

“Really? You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. The last time I saw him was a full week ago, I’m quite certain.”

“Wow, I see!”

That was a relief. I definitely wanted to stop by in that case.

The biscuit dough finished resting while the two of us chatted.

I cut up the dough, baked them, waited for them to cool, then baked them again.

My “Twice-Baked Biscuits” were complete.

“Would you like to try one, Liselotte?”

“Yes, thanks.”

She bit into a freshly baked biscuit. Then she wrinkled her brow, as if the biscuit was really hard.

“Sorry. Was it too hard?” I asked.

Flustered, I handed her the tea I had left out to drink for myself. She gulped it all down, her face still looking grim.

“...No, it’s all right.” She had tears in her eyes.

It appeared that I let my biscuits bake a little too long. These would have to go to the men. Us women might prefer our biscuits with dried fruit baked inside.

But I was starting to see how Liselotte inherited her father’s stubbornness. I was glad that she was so transparent.

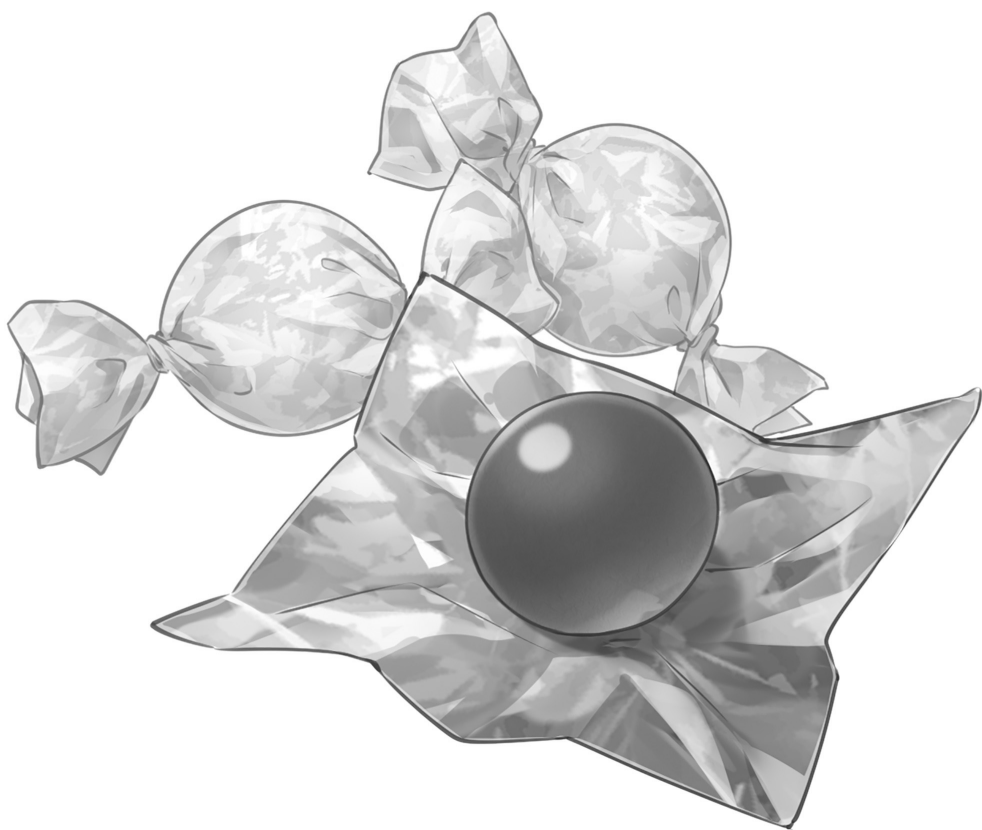
“What’s wrong, Mell?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I needed to become even better friends with Liselotte if I wanted her to feel comfortable telling me things.

It was too sad, seeing how she couldn’t open up to me just yet...

My very first friend in the capital city was a stubborn, sheltered rich girl.



Chapter 7: The Slave Elf and Mythical Beast Steamed Buns

ZARA and I were heading to work together as usual. It was a beautiful morning outside.

“Amelia sure has grown, hasn’t she?” he said.

“Oh, definitely.”

Amelia was still teetering around on her legs until recently, but she’d grown to develop a much steadier gait. She had to be over three feet tall by now. The griffin spent her days eating fruit, sleeping, and building up more weight.

“Kreh kreh!”

“It’s great, isn’t it?” I responded to Amelia.

“Oooh, what did she say?” Zara asked.

“She said the weather is so lovely today.”

“So mythical beasts enjoy nice weather too! But I’m so jealous, Melly. I never know what Blanche is saying at all.”

“You don’t?!”

“Not a single word.”

This was a surprising thing to learn.

I couldn’t understand Amelia at all when I first met her—that part seemed to only come after I formed a contract with her. At first, I only got a general sense of what she was saying. But as time passed, my brain started to automatically translate her cries.

“Translating a mythical beast with your brain... Talk about strange!” Zara said.

“It certainly is. But I just assumed everyone with contracts understood their mythical beast.”

“I can pick up Blanche’s cries and body language after living with her for so long, but I don’t get any actual words from her.”

“I see.”

There were many kinds of contracts when it came to mythical beasts.

“Blanche and I only have a blood contract.”

In a blood contract, the mythical beast consumed its owner’s blood to form a contract between them. For Amelia and me, the contract came about by me naming her.

“Maybe your contract with Amelia is special,” Zara guessed.

“You...think so?”

“I’d bet on it. Amelia sees you as her mother, Melly.”

“I can’t believe I’m a mom now...”

Moving to the capital city and becoming a knight was enough of a shock as it was, but now I was the mother of a mythical beast on top of that? Life was truly full of the most unexpected twists and turns.

We arrived at the captain’s office for our morning meeting. Captain Ludtink, as always, had a look of banditry on his face...no, a look of grim severity.

“There’s word that a human trafficking ring has started to act up,” he said gruffly. “They’re thought to be selling off slaves, but we don’t know where or to who yet. The Order has been looking into it for a long time, but has never managed to trace the ring back to its source. Now it’s our turn to start digging up dirt.”

Our mission was to infiltrate the ring and gather information.

“We’re heading to the port first,” the captain said. “There we’ll meet the shady fella who our sources sniffed out.”

Those sources were the elite knights who made up the intelligence network of the Order. Their specialty was said to be hunting down information about criminals.

“After that... Tell ‘em, Velrey.” Captain Ludtink looked like he didn’t want to

continue. He barked orders for the vice captain to continue.

She nodded stiffly. "I'll announce the role of each member, starting from the most important."

So all of us had our own parts to play in infiltrating the ring. Vice Captain Velrey continued on.

"Playing the parts of captured elf slave and mythical beast: Mell Risurisu and Amelia."

"Whaaat?!"

I didn't mean to yell, but it was just so unexpected. Even Amelia's beak fell open in shock.

"U-Um, are saying that Amelia and I are going to be sold off?" I sputtered.

"...I'm sorry." Vice Captain Velrey apologized with a sad look on her face.

"Um, there's no chance that the mission will fail...and we'll be sold for real...right?" I asked, fearful.

"No, we'll take care of it. Sorcerer Lichtenberger will be in charge of that area."

"Oh? I have a role too?"

Liselotte had her assignment announced next.

"Playing the part of the young noblewoman from a new money family: Liselotte Lichtenberger."

She was going to play a rich heiress who decided to participate in the slave trade. It was an important factor in leading us to other criminals from the upper classes of society. But it didn't feel right to have Liselotte, an actual noblewoman, play a role like this...

Liselotte was a shut-in who never once participated in high society, which meant there was little risk of anyone recognizing her face. Thus, the unexpected casting.

I felt bad for her, even if my role as an elf slave was much worse than hers.

She seemed displeased by this assignment, but Captain Ludtink reminded her

that this was part of the job. She was clearly upset, but she kept her mouth shut and didn't complain about it.

"Playing the next part of the young noblewoman's chaperone: Garr Garr."

Oh, Garr's going to be a servant? I'm sure he'll look good in a suit.

"Next up is June Ulgus, playing the assistant of a slave trader."

"Okay. I'll do my best." Ulgus had a much more standard role than Liselotte or me. He was eager to play his part too.

"Slave trader's guard: Zara Ahto." The vice captain told Zara that he would have to wear a helmet to hide his delicate beauty. He couldn't risk standing out during an undercover operation. "And I'll be playing a mercenary."

Vice Captain Velrey's role was to disguise herself as a wandering mercenary who happened to arrive at this port town.

"Finally..."

That left only one person without a part. I bit down on my lip and waited to hear what she was going to say.

"...Role of slave trader: Captain Ludtink."

The room fell totally silent.

I was trying to grit my teeth together to keep my composure, but once Ulgus burst into laughter, I couldn't hold mine in either. Captain Ludtink must have made Vice Captain Velrey give the announcement because he didn't want to so much as speak his role out loud.

But I agreed with this casting. The captain was the only one of us who could play a role like that.

"There are outfits prepared for each of you. Get changed and meet up at the back exit," Vice Captain Velrey ordered.

I was handed my "elf slave costume." I didn't have the slightest clue what it might look like when I took it out to change.

We walked down to the changing rooms.

"You *must* be kidding me!" Liselotte let out a cry as soon as she saw the

clothes in her bag.

That looks just like a princess dress. I wonder what the problem is?

“A noblewoman would never wear such an old-fashioned dress with cheap stitching like this!”

Now I understood. It looked like a fancy dress to me, but an actual aristocrat like Liselotte saw it for what it was—*cheap*.

Vice Captain Velrey explained that it was probably borrowed from a clothing rental store.

But Liselotte also pointed out the dress was meant to wear in the afternoon, not the evening. “Afternoon dresses have closed collars, while evening gowns expose more of the chest.”

“Really? I see,” I said.

Liselotte stuck her nose up in the air and glared down at her dress. “They’ll notice I’m not who I say I am if they see me wearing such a dress.”

“It sounds like it. Then what should we do?” I asked.

“I’ll send a message home and have them bring me a dress of my own. It’s not like we know where the auction’s taking place yet, right? There’s still time before I get to make my debut.”

I would expect nothing less of Liselotte. She was the only one of us qualified to play the young noblewoman from a new money family.

But now wasn’t the time to chat. Vice Captain Velrey had already finished changing.

“Wow...!” I exclaimed when I saw her. She wore all-black clothes, leather armor, and a black cap for her transformation into a mercenary. “That looks great on you, Vice Captain Velrey.”

“Thanks.”

I needed to put on my own elf slave outfit. I reached into the bag...

“What the?!” The dress I pulled out was ragged and dirty. Parts of the fabric were torn, and the skirt was incredibly short. “Wh-Why...is it like this?”

“This is supposed to be what the average slave outfit looks like,” Vice Captain Velrey said.

What’s an “average slave outfit”...? This *had* to be a generalization from the intelligence department.

“Th-This is going to be so embarrassing to wear...” I moaned.

“I’m sorry about this, Medic Risurisu.” Vice Captain Velrey looked quite guilty now. Since I was on the verge of passing out, she reached out and clutched my hand with both of hers. “I’ll be sure to take responsibility.”

I didn’t know what she meant by that, but I knew this was all necessary as part of the mission.

In addition to the ripped-up dress in my bag was a leather pouch of soot. The message inside read: “Cover yourself in soot to look more like an elf slave. If possible, cover the griffin too.”

“S-Seriously...?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to do anything, Medic Risurisu,” Vice Captain Velrey told me.

“No, I’ll do it.”

I needed to really devote myself to this role. Just like Liselotte.

Watching myself in the mirror, I started to rub soot over my cheeks, neck, and legs.

Amelia called out to me curiously. “Kreh kreh?”

“Really?!” I couldn’t believe it. Amelia wanted to put on the soot too. “But I would feel so bad, doing that to you...”

“Kreh, kreh kreh.”

“Amelia...”

She explained that she would look too suspicious if she was perfectly clean, so for the sake of the mission, she wanted to cooperate too.

“Thank you, Amelia.”

“Kreh kreh!”

Since I was quite dirty by now, I decided it was time to start covering Amelia in soot next. I made sure to get her brow, cheeks, beak, and wings...

“Ah! I’m sorry, Amelia.”

“Kreh kreh!”

“It’s fine!” she seemed to be telling me, not that I felt comforted at all.

“I promise I’ll take responsibility.”

Again, I didn’t know what responsibility was being taken exactly, but I found myself repeating what Vice Captain Velrey had to say.

With Amelia’s help, I felt motivated to do an even better job on this mission.

I let my hair down and took off my shoes. Surely, this made me look more like an elf slave.

The finishing touch was an iron collar around my neck with a chain attached to it.



“How do I look, Vice Captain Velrey?” I asked.

“Right... I’m sorry.”

I was only asking if I looked like a proper elf slave, but what I received in return was an apology. Maybe I *really fit* the role perfectly.

...Well, that wasn’t a bad thing.

Now that we’d finished preparing, we headed outside. Vice Captain Velrey wrapped me in a cloak to conceal my revealing outfit.

The rear exit was surrounded by a group of shady-looking men.

Ulgus, playing the slave trader’s assistant, wore a head covering and an overcoat that hung all the way down to his feet. Zara was equipped with dented armor and a helmet. Garr’s suit and tailcoat made him look like a handsome butler. Then...there was the bearded slave trader.

The facial hair had to be fake. But Captain Ludtink also wore a long, brown wig, a long beard, and a black cloak. There was no seeing him as anything other than a frightening slave trader—far from an upstanding nobleman.

“Captain Ludtink, that slave trader outfit is perfect for you,” I told him truthfully.

“Shut it!”

Ulgus burst out laughing. I couldn’t hold my own laughter in anymore either. Naturally, the captain scolded both of us. It was strange how the rest of the members were able to keep a straight face.

“All right. Let’s go!” the captain said, his tone sharp.

We traveled to our destination by carriage. Even the driver was another knight wearing a disguise.

The cast of characters in the carriage included a slave trader crossing his arms and scowling, the slave trader’s guard, who was filing his nails, and the young assistant who was at the age where everything was funny, still holding in his laughter, by the look of it. The chaperone was sitting up straight without making a peep. He was playing the role of a capable servant.

The new-money noblewoman was pouting at her own dress. A servant from the Lichtenberger home was going to arrive at the port town with a proper evening gown.

Vice Captain Velrey pressed her sword to the ground like a cane. Her face was focused and serious.

I sat with my feet up on the seat with me, since my feet were bare. Amelia was busy eating fruit. She looked up at me when she sensed my eyes on her.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Really? That’s great.”

“*This fruit is yummy!*” she told me with her soot-covered face. Seeing her in such a state brought tears to my eyes.

“Amelia, I’m going to give you a nice, long bath once the mission’s over!”

“Kreeeh!”

I would wash her with some of the fragrant soaps we made together. Liselotte would probably let us use the big bath at her house if we asked, since we couldn’t bathe in the dormitory baths together. I made a mental note to ask her about it once the mission was over.

We stopped to take a break along the way, letting the horses rest next to a lake in the forest and deciding it was a good time for lunch. Ulgus agreed to prepare rations for us.

“Oh, these are...” I spotted a large bunch of thick, semicircular mushrooms growing by a collapsed tree alongside the lake.

“What are those, Mell?” asked Liselotte.

“They’re kataha mushrooms. They’re sometimes called ‘blade mushrooms’ too, since they are cut with a blade before eating. I’ll use them for a nice soup.”

“Do you need any help, Melly?” Zara asked.

“Thanks, Zara. I appreciate it.”

Zara assisted in preparing the ingredients.

I started by stacking up stones to build a simple oven and lit a campfire. I

placed my pot there, filled it with water, and let it get warm.

“Could you strip the kataha mushrooms for me?” I asked.

“You got it.”

Autumn was kataha season, which would have meant we could eat them plain, but in early spring, they tended to develop a bitter taste to their rind. That was why I asked Zara to strip them.

“Wow, would you look at these?” Zara said in awe.

The rind peeled away easily and cleanly, revealing the white mushroom inside.

I started to work on the soup while he dealt with the mushrooms. Instead of a proper broth, I boiled smoked meats, dried vegetables, and spices together.

Once Zara was finished peeling the mushrooms, I diced them up and added them to the pot. All it took was a bit of a boil before my kataha mushroom soup was finished.

Everyone gathered around the pot for lunch. I had bread and biscuits ready for them too.

I said my prayer to God and began to eat.

First up was a spoonful of soup. The savory taste of mushrooms had perfectly permeated the broth of the soup. I tried a piece of mushroom next. The texture was squishy under my teeth, almost like gelatin.

“Whoa...! It’s so good!”

They weren’t bitter at all, even though they would only be in season months from now. It was the proper mushroom taste I was hoping for.

“Do you like it, Liselotte?” I asked her.

“I’m shocked. It’s good.” She had been staring at the wild mushrooms with obvious suspicion in her eyes. “Mushrooms have an interesting texture to them.”

“These mushrooms are tasty, even if they’re not the sort of thing you would line up to order in town.”

“Hmm. Now I know.”

I was just happy that she seemed to like them. The others echoed her approval of the dish.

The knight who joined us from another unit to drive our carriage murmured to himself as he ate his soup, “Does the Second Expeditionary Squadron eat such delicious meals every day...?”

Curious about what kind of rations he could possibly be eating, I asked for more details and learned that the other expeditionary squadrons were having to deal with truly dreadful meals.

“Hard biscuits, grainy chocolate, and dry cheese. That’s what we have to look forward to.” He explained that they prioritized sturdy foods that were easy to transport and wouldn’t become damaged during travel. The knight said that our meals would be considered a feast on their own expeditions. “I’d like to ask for your recipes, but I’m sure it’s hard to prepare ingredients and cook for a lot of people.”

He knew that my cooking was possible due to the small size of our squadron.

“I’m really jealous...” he sighed.

The mood was rapidly turning gloomy.

We decided to take off for the port town before things got even more depressing. After another hour, we arrived at our destination.

Our first stop was going to involve linking up with an intelligence officer. We headed toward the inn we were told to visit.

When we reached the room in question, we found a chubby, plain-looking tradesman. He was probably somewhere in his forties.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Second Expeditionary Squadron!” As he approached, he rubbed his hands together exactly like a trader would. Was he really an intelligence knight as we were told? “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Izil Marty of the Second Intelligence Squadron.”

So, this old man really *was* a knight, even though he didn’t look like one at all. It was hard to imagine him ever donning a knight’s uniform at all.

“Disguises are the only true uniform a man like me wears,” he said, winking at me.

“I see.”

Captain Ludtink addressed the man as he sat down on a sofa as directed. We stood behind him and listened to their conversation. “So, how does this work?”

“Right. The ship full of slaves will arrive at the port in an hour, sources tell me. I’d like you to meet with the head trader.” Agent Izil turned his eyes toward the rest of us. “I’m glad to see you have such a wonderful elf in your squad. I’m sure the buyers will love you.”

Elves used to make the most sought-after slaves back when human trafficking was running rampant. Now that the slave trade was in decline, it was difficult for anyone to get their hands on an elf anymore.

“You make the perfect elf slave,” he said.

“...Thanks.”

I didn’t know how to feel, exactly. I mentally apologized to Captain Ludtink for laughing at his outfit earlier.

“If anyone talks to you, try to speak in broken sentences,” Agent Izil instructed me.

“All right. I’ll do my best.”

“It would be even better if you looked like you were frightened!”

“Sure...”

Unexpectedly, I was given lots of details to make the situation more realistic. I only hoped he didn’t expect any stunning acting on my part.

“The ship will arrive soon,” Agent Izil said. “Let’s get you ready.”

Liselotte and Garr were going to stay at the inn for now, while Amelia and I were locked in a cage for shipping. Captain Ludtink, Ulgus, and Zara were going to carry us as slave traders themselves. Vice Captain Velrey would patrol the area just in case we needed backup.

Amelia and I wasted no time getting into the cage prepared for us out back

behind the lodge. The inside was surprisingly spacious.

“We’ll just have to be patient in here for a while, Amelia.”

“Kreh!”

My squadmates closed the cage door, locked it shut, and draped a blanket over the top. It was starting to feel like the real deal.

“We’re gonna lift you up now, Risurisu,” Captain Ludtink told me.

“Ah, okay. Go ahead.”

I wrapped my arms around Amelia and waited until I felt the cage rise up in the air. We were placed on a cart, but my squadmates were gentle enough with the process that it didn’t even make a sound. I kept Amelia up against me and waited for the mission to begin.

The cart fell still a little while later, and I started to smell the ocean. I knew we had arrived at the ship.

“Are you all right, Amelia? You’re not hurt, are you?” I asked her in a whisper.

“Kreh!”

She was perfectly fine. Amelia was so strong. I was starting to feel on edge at the prospect of having to nail the role of elf slave.

The surrounding area started to get louder. I knew the occupants of the ship must have disembarked. But there were lots of lively voices too—those of newspaper and fruit salesmen and the like.

“Who wants a mythical beast steamed bun? These are all the rage in the capital city! We have dragons, mountain cats, and griffins too!”

Someone was selling something strange. What, exactly, was a mythical beast steamed bun...?

“Excuse me. Could I have four of those?” Ulgus asked the seller. He was purchasing some of the steamed buns.

“What design would you like?”

“Four griffins, please.”

“Coming right up!”

Ulgus then lifted my blanket and handed me a steamed bun. “Here, Medic Risurisu.”

“Wow! Thank you so much!”

I didn’t realize he was buying one for me too. It made me really happy.

The buns were still piping hot—freshly steamed, I was sure of it. Mine gave off a subtle, sweet aroma.

The paper bag had the mark of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau stamped on it. There was text that also stated that a portion of all steamed bun profits were donated to the care of mythical beasts.

I see. So this is the work of the bureau.

Once I took the steamed bun out of the bag, I saw that an adorable drawing of a griffin had been grilled into the surface. It looked delicious. I felt guilty being the only occupant of the cage to eat, so I took some dried fruit out of my pocket and fed it to Amelia.

“Let’s dig in.”

“Kreh!”

I started by splitting the steamed bun in half and saw that the inside was some sort of yellow paste. The aroma alone wasn’t enough for me to identify it.

I decided to give it a taste.

“Hm... Ah!”

This is wild chestnut paste!

The warm chestnut had a sophisticated flavor. It was smooth against my tongue and tasted exactly like what I would expect of a famous capital city treat. The bun itself was fluffy and delicious too. I was curious about all the flavors I was tasting, so I decided to ask Liselotte about it after the mission.

I stuck the second half in my dress pocket to eat later.

That was when Ulgus lifted my blanket one more time and peeked his head through the bars. “It looks like our target just got off the ship.”

“Got it.”

The mission was finally starting. I pressed my hand to my racing heart.

Suddenly, our cart started to move. I squeezed Amelia close to me.

“Kreh kreh!”

“I’m all right!” Even Amelia was cheering me up. She was such a brave girl... It was hard to believe she was the same griffin who used to wake up at night and cry until recently.

“Who are you?”

I heard voices. Captain Ludtink was starting to converse with the slave trader.

“A...elf?” The slave trader’s speech was broken. I realized he must be a foreigner. “Where you get elf?”

“In the royal capital. Elves wander into town sometimes,” Captain Ludtink said.

“Hmm. Silly elf you have.”

What?! But I couldn’t retort, since I wasn’t supposed to be able to speak.

“Are there...more?”

“Don’t know. We found her alone.”

“Hmm. Is it cute elf? Or mature beauty?”

“.....”

Captain Ludtink fell silent, unsure of how to respond. I wished he would have called me cute, even if it was a lie. He would be hearing about this later.

“Even ugly elves do not sell!”

It was then that the slave trader yanked the blanket off my cage.

I squinted at the sudden blast of sunlight.

The slave trader had a shaved head, tan skin, eyes that glared sharply, and a large nose and lips. He was brawny too.

“Eek!” Between him and Captain Ludtink, I had two terrifying men staring in

at me. I almost let out a full-on shriek.

“Oh, she cute. Haha. She scared,” the slave trader chuckled.

“You like her?”

“Like her. Lookz obedient. A good elf slave.”

Wait, I’m more valuable than I thought?

I was glad my brilliant acting managed to lure him in.

After that, we had to move again to complete the deal. I felt the wagon moving underneath me for a while

“Now we go underground,” the slave trader said.

“Got it.”

I heard a door open, and a flood of rowdy voices reached my ears. The smell of booze hit me like a wave. I wondered if we were in a bar somewhere in town.

I remembered hearing that there was a long-established tavern here, but I never expected it to be involved in the slave trade...

I felt my cage lift up so that we could go underground.

“One, two. One, two...”

“You okay, June?” Zara asked.

“Yes.”

Ulgus and Zara seemed to be the ones carrying me. I had no choice but to stop myself from apologizing for the weight.

The deal began as soon as we descended into the basement.

“Ten gold coins for elf. Accept?” the slave trader started.

“I want twenty for all the trouble we went through.”

“Hmm...”

“She’s been trained in certain *arts* too.”

“What?!”

I didn’t know what “arts” those were supposed to be, although I had a feeling

it would be smarter not to ask.

The slave trader stared in at me. "I see... Your face so cute!" He was grinning at me. I really felt like screaming again.

I squeezed my arms around Amelia.

"Hey, whatz this bird?" the slave trader asked.

"She's a mythical beast. A griffin. She costs extra," Captain Ludtink explained.

"Hm?"

"She's obedient, smart, and beautiful. It's sixty gold coins for a creature as rare as a griffin."

"Whaaat?!" I wanted to scream.

Not only was Amelia more expensive than me, but the captain even felt the need to praise her beauty.

"Griffins grow even bigger than horses, and they fly too. She'll probably bond with you since she's still young."

"A...mythical beast..."

"Kreeeh..."

Amelia let out a quiet chirp when she locked eyes with the slave trader. She was playing the role of the obedient griffin. It was incredible acting.

It wasn't untrue that her all-white feathers were beautiful, and she was cute and clever too. I understood why she fetched such a high price.

"She's a lot rarer than any elf," the captain insisted.

"She...might be nice..."

In the end, the slave trader paid sixteen gold coins for me (at a discount) and sixty-five gold coins for Amelia (at a raised price). He prepared the money in no time at all.

"By the way, I know someone who's looking to come to your auction," Captain Ludtink said after the money exchanged hands.

"Ah, I sorry. Lots of knights sniffing around. Can't accept new customers."

“She’s a noblewoman whose family comes from new money.”

“New money...”

“She has connections to high society, so even if you get arrested by knights, she can probably bail you out right away.”

“I see...connections...”

“She wants two or three slaves for herself. I can’t reveal her family name, but they’re real prominent.”

“Hmm...”

Captain Ludtink was doing a great job convincing him.

“I’m sure she can help you with financial matters if you need it. She knows a lot of people in the criminal world.”

He just kept adding more and more information to Liselotte’s backstory. I wondered if that was going to be a problem. This was getting a little too convenient to be believed.

As I was busy worrying about all this...

“All right. I meet her, just once.”

I-It worked? Well, I’m sure it will work out, since she’s a real noblewoman and all...

The men carried me to a corner of the room. I had officially been sold off.

It was then that I sensed someone close to me. I started to hear them crying softly by my side. It had to be another person who was bought by the slave trader. I felt so bad for them.

With that, I could tell by Captain Ludtink’s increasingly distant voice that he was leaving already. Then I heard a door slam shut.

“Ehehe! Elf giiirl!”

Someone was here. I felt a chill run down my spine. The scary-faced trader lifted the blanket off my cage and peered in at me.

“Lemme see more of you.”

He stuck his hand in between the bars of my cage. But then Amelia flew out in front of me.

“Kreeeh!!” She spread her wings menacingly.

“Wh-What’s this?! You were calm earlier!” He pulled his hand away when she tried to bite him. “V-Very well. Just stay quiet during auction.”

“Kreeeeeee!!”

Amelia rushed up to the bars with a loud squawk, sending the trader stumbling backward.

He told us he would be back again later. Then he left the room.

For now...the danger seemed to have passed?

Since the blanket was still off our cage, I took the opportunity to look around the room.

One lantern was casting a faint glow from a corner of the dim room. There were a few round tables and chairs scattered around.

There was also some kind of risen stage at the very front of the room. *That must be where they hold the auction?*

There was another iron cage next to me with someone inside. Judging by her quiet sobs, I knew she had to be a young girl.

Concerned, I decided to call out to her. “Excuse me...”

“Eek!”

Whoops, I scared her. I tried to speak as gently as possible.

“My name is Mell. What’s yours?”

Instead of a response, I heard the loud growl of a stomach. She was hungry. I decided to give her the other half of my mythical beast steamed bun from earlier.

I extended my hand, pulled off her blanket, and saw a trembling girl inside the cage next to mine.

She looked to be a year or two younger than me. She had dark skin and silver

hair, unlike the people one would typically see in this area. But that wasn't all. A pair of canine ears were sticking out from the top of her head. Behind her, I saw a fluffy tail too.

To my surprise, I realized that she was a fox girl. She was looking in my direction with wide, amber eyes—a pretty girl indeed.

Her clothes were still nice and tidy, meaning she may have only been brought here just recently. I realized that my thin, filthy rags might have been a bit too much. But that didn't matter now.

Her ears perked up when I held out the steamed bun.

“You can have this, if you like.”

“.....”

“It's really good.”

I crawled to the edge of my cage and reached my hand out. Little by little, the pretty fox girl approached me and started to sniff the air.

Her eyes opened up wide. She could tell it smelled tasty.

“...XXXX, XXXX?”

She was saying something to me, but it had to be a foreign language, since I couldn't make out a single word I recognized.

“Please, take it and enjoy.”

I stuck up my thumb with my free hand to show her it was all right. Finally, she took the steamed bun from me.

The girl began to cry as soon as she took the first bite. She must've been *starving*.



“Kreh kreh!”

Amelia told me she wanted me to hand over some of her dried fruit too. She felt just as bad for the fox girl as I did. She was such a kind creature. As requested, I held out the fruit to the fox-eared captive.

“Here, have this too.”

This was expensive fruit from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, meaning it was delicious, of course. She took it from my hand right away this time.

“XX, XX!”

Her gloomy expression had lit up with newfound life. She loved it.

“XXX!”

I assumed she was thanking me. *I’m so glad she’s not sad anymore!*

At this point, she started desperately trying to convey something to me.

“XXXX Charlotte.”

“Hm?”

“Charlotte. Charlotte.”

She was pointing her finger at herself and repeating the word “Charlotte.”
That must be her name?

“My name is Mell. Mell.” I pointed at myself too and emphasized the word “Mell.”

“Mell! XXX!”

It sounded like she was thanking me again, so I bowed back at her. Then I introduced her to Amelia.

“Mell, XX, Amelia, XXXXX!” she exclaimed.

Hmm...I really wish we could understand each other. I don’t know why, but I feel like she’s calling Amelia cute or something like that...

That was when the door opened up again. Charlotte jumped and pulled the blanket back over her cage. I heard her crawl to the very back again.

The same slave trader as before had returned. He really must have traumatized her. It was truly upsetting.

When the man looked in our direction, Amelia ran up in front of me and spread her wings. “Kreeeh...” She didn’t forget to give him a menacing squawk, not that this was a surprise to me.

“Be quiet. Customer coming.”

It sounded like it was finally time for Liselotte’s debut as a new money noblewoman. My heart was racing with anxiety.

The basement door opened again five minutes later. There stood Liselotte, clad in a brilliant scarlet dress and a butterfly mask.

“Good day.”

“Welcome, Lady Butterfly!”

That must be the name she gave herself. It was the perfect alias for such a dignified woman.

“Greetings to Lord Butterfly too.”

Lord? Who’s that?

At first, I thought he must be talking about Garr, playing the role of her chaperone. But then another person wearing a butterfly mask stepped into the room. He was a tall man with the exact same purple hair as Liselotte.

I-Isn’t that Marquess Lichtenberger?!

Liselotte’s father was the last person I ever expected to get roped into this mission. He must have shown up along with her dress delivery.

Garr was the last person to join them.

“Sit, sit. Please.”

The Lichtenbergers sank down into the sofa. They were much more subdued than normal—perfectly capturing their role as a new-money family. The slave trader was acting more formal than before too. But that, I completely understood. The two customers had a captivating aura about them.

“Our mutual friend told me you have some rare creatures in stock.” The

marquess's deep voice echoed through the room. It was a menacing tone that sent a chill down my spine.

"Y-Yes, there is elf...and fox girl too. At night, more products arrive."

"I see."

The trader gave a detailed explanation of his slaves. It sounded like he'd gathered a small group to sell off. After this, the marquess began to speak about finances and the criminal underworld. Liselotte was seated at his side, nodding elegantly as she listened.

The slave trader listened to his stories eagerly. He didn't doubt a single word.

Lord Lichtenberger and Liselotte were entirely convincing in their roles as overconfident, arrogant, new-money nobles. *Their acting is so amazing!*

I was glad they were cast for a role they fit in so perfectly.

Finally, they walked over to see me—the expensive and highly sought-after elf slave.

"Here you 'ave very rare griffin!"

He's showing them Amelia before me...! Well, Amelia was adorable and smart, so I understood why he wanted to flaunt her.

The marquess looked inside the cage.

"Oh, you have a griffin?" Amelia took a step backward. She still didn't like the marquess, I could tell. "And who's the elf?"

"She is bonus item. The griffin very attached to her," the slave trader explained. "She understand some words and speak a little."

Somewhere in this whole process, I became nothing more than an elf who Amelia was attached to. *Grr...*

Liselotte coughed suddenly. She was probably stifling a laugh at the situation. I just prayed the slave trader wouldn't notice.

"The starting price for griffin is 150 gold coins."

"I see... I look forward to the auction."

“Hey, who’s this?” Liselotte was pointing at Charlotte’s cage.

“Ah, that is fox girl from south of my homeland. She cannot speak, so she starts at twenty gold coins.”

That price had to come from her good looks, since she couldn’t communicate.

“There will be beauties of all ages at auction tonight, so hope you enjoy it.” The sharp-eyed trader spotted Garr standing in the back behind Liselotte and Lord Lichtenberger. “Oh, wolfman! How rare!”

I remembered Garr telling me the story of how he was brought to our country against his will. I was sure he must have complicated feelings about participating in this mission.

“You have a fine eye for products! Where did you buy wolfman?” the slave trader asked, his eyes shining.

“I’ll...tell you that after tonight’s auction.”

“Yes, my lord!”

The marquess managed to avoid answering that question, much to my relief.

The slave trader and noble family left the room after that.

Another hour later, Vice Captain Velrey arrived in her mercenary disguise to bring me candy and fruit. “Hold on a little while longer, Medic Risurisu.”

“Of course. You be careful too, Vice Captain.”

“Thanks. I will.”

Once she left, Charlotte and I shared the candy until night came.

It was time for the auction to begin.

Our cages were carried up to the stage, where we were covered with blankets again and blinded to the outside world.

Voices started to fill the room as more customers arrived. I could only wonder just how many people were out there.

Since Charlotte was sniffing again in the cage next to me, I called out to her. “It’s okay, Charlotte. Please don’t cry.”

I heard a loud clang. She must have flinched when I started talking to her out of nowhere like that.

“Mell, XX, XXX, XX...”

I had no idea what she wanted to tell me. But I kept talking to her anyway.

“You can do this, Charlotte. Now’s the time to be strong.”

“Kreh kreh!” Amelia was cheering for her too.

“Mell, Amelia, XXX!”

Those words probably meant “Thank you.” She knew that we were trying to comfort her.

Our only job left was to wait for my squadmates to rescue us.

The auction started up in no time at all.

“First up is a beautiful fair-skinned woman from a nearby land! She won’t understand you, but she’s an obedient one. Let’s start the bidding at five gold coins!”

The auctioneer wasn’t the slave trader from before, by the sound of things. I wondered how many people made up this ring. It was impossible to get a read on their scale. At the very least, I assumed they weren’t a very large operation.

“Ten coins!”

“Fifteen coins!”

“Twenty!”

The auction was picking up fast already. The bidding went right up to fifty gold coins in the blink of an eye. Judging by the voices I could overhear, it sounded like there were more than ten customers in the room.

The next bid was eighty gold coins. It came from a deep voice that carried a gravity to it—Lord Lichtenberger.

The room fell completely silent.

“Eighty gold coins! Going once! Going twice! Sold! The fair-skinned beauty goes to the gentleman for eighty gold coins!”

A murmur ran through the room. I could tell there were definitely more than ten people there.

One by one, the auctioning of slaves continued in order. The audience started to express their disapproval at how the marquess was snatching up every last slave that came up. I didn't feel like he would let their remarks get to him, but with Liselotte right there next to him, I definitely had some concerns. Hopefully, Garr would keep her in check...

But then, I heard someone approaching. It had to be one of the slave traders.

"...XX!" Charlotte was next up. "XX, XX, Mell! Amelia!"

"Charlotte!!" I shouted Charlotte's name.

"Kreh kreh!!"

It'll be all right. That man with the scary face...the marquess will be the one to buy you.

From the bottom of my heart, I prayed that she wouldn't cry anymore.

Charlotte's auction began.

"Next up is tonight's first real eye-catcher. She's a most unusual fox girl, somewhere in the age range of fourteen to sixteen. She's the calm, reserved type of girl, with a beautiful coat! Let's start the bidding at twenty gold coins!"

The auctioneer's salesmanship meant that the bidding ramped up to 100 gold coins in the blink of an eye.

The price increased so sharply due to one person being particularly stubborn. I heard more and more frustration forming in the man's voice, but as someone only playing the part of a customer, Lord Lichtenberger had no trouble at all keeping up with the bidding.

"One hundred and fifteen gold coins."

"...Urk!"

That was the end of the bidding.

"Sold! The fox girl goes for one hundred and fifteen gold coins."

Charlotte ended up fetching the highest price of the day.

Someone tried to start a fight with the marquess at that point. It sounded like the auction guards put a stop to it, but there was an atmosphere of unease in the room that refused to settle back down.

Finally, it was our turn.

They carried our cage up to the center of the stage.

“This last product is the star of the night, ladies and gentlemen. We’ve never sold anything so rare in all of our auctions.”

The blanket was yanked off our cage. Amelia walked out in front of me and spread her wings to hide me from the audience. She probably remembered how embarrassed I was before.

Amelia’s kindness was so touching.

“Take a look at this beautiful griffin!”

As I expected, Amelia was the main point of focus between the two of us.

“Do you see those gorgeous white feathers? Most griffins only have white heads, but this one’s entire body is white. And such gallant eyes! You can really tell what a sublime soul she is.”

With that, the auctioneer launched into a blatantly forced explanation about me too.

“The griffin also comes with her elf buddy. Cute, isn’t she?”

I’m nothing but a bonus! Not that I really care...

“A beast this rare starts at one hundred and fifty gold coins.”

“Five hundred gold coins!” The marquess didn’t waste a single moment in raising his hand. The price he named sent shockwaves through the room.

It was quickly followed up with cries of fury from the audience. Clearly, no one could top a bid of five hundred gold coins.

“Five hundred gold coins going once...twice...”

No one in the audience made the slightest peep.

“All right then...! Sold for a total of five hundred gold coins!”

This meant the end of the auction, but everyone in the crowd stood straight up and rushed toward the marquess.

“You scoundrel! How dare a newbie like you crash our auction!”

“Of course new money wants to hog everything for themselves!”

“Who are you? Where are you from? Do you know what happens when you interrupt the business of the underworld?!”

I watched these exchanges nervously, but the smile on Lord Lichtenberger’s face was undeniable. He replied to them, the tone of his voice rather knowing. “It sounds like you folks don’t understand what happens when you come to places like these either.”

“What did you just say?!”

“Bastard!”

Just when I feared a full-on brawl was approaching, the door to the room opened up again.

A fearsome slave trader and his associates burst into the auction...! No, these were, of course, the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron!

Vice Captain Velrey, Zara, and Ulgus were all there behind the captain. Garr moved forward to protect the Lichtenbergers.

“Wh-Who’s that man with the terrifying face?!”

“He’s obviously a criminal!”

The customers shouted back at him. Despite being dressed in knight’s armor, no one seemed to recognize him for who he was.

“That’s a knight!”

“A what?!”

“I thought we were supposed to be safe here!”

The auction customers fled toward the back of the room—where the stage was located.

The one problem in my squadmates’ path was the auction guards. They drew

their swords and approached the knights.

“Hold still, and let us arrest you. If you don’t feel like cooperating, we’re happy to fight. What do you feel like?” As soon as Captain Ludtink egged them on, the guards rushed forward to attack.

The captain drew his long sword and held it up to block the oncoming slashes.

I heard the heavy clang of metal colliding, the sound of a body blow, and an enraged cry.

Zara used the handle of his ax to knock away a guard’s sword and delivered a kick to his defenseless stomach. He went flying backward nearly seven feet, knocking chairs over in his path.

Vice Captain Velrey didn’t even need to draw a weapon. She nimbly rushed forward and restrained the fallen foes.

Ulgus was running away from three guards at once. Maybe he didn’t need to do more than that.

“Get on with it, boy!”

“But I’m an archer!”

Yeah. Poor Ulgus.

Garr managed to grab one of the guards by the scruff of the neck. He hoisted him off the ground and sent him flying with superhuman strength.

“Save the griffin, if not anything else!”

Someone grabbed hold of my cage. I almost jumped out of my skin, but instead, I simply smacked my head on the top of the cage. I was so focused on the battle, I didn’t even notice the person approaching me. Judging by the order he gave, he had to be a slave trader.

I felt my cage get lifted into the air.

Oh no!

“S-Save us!”

“Kreh kreeeh!”

Amelia and I cried out to be rescued. Captain Ludtink punched out the guard he was fighting with and chased after us—the look on his face filled me with sheer dread.

“Whoa!”

“Eek!”

Our cage went flying down to the ground while the slave trader took off in the opposite direction.

“Stay right there!”

“P-Please forgive...!”

“Uuurgh...!”

“You’re not gettin’ away with this!”

It was getting harder and harder to tell which one of them was the slave trader and which was the knight. Captain Ludtink swiftly overpowered two men and put them in restraints. I wouldn’t have expected anything less.

Now that I looked around, I saw that every last audience member and guard was tied up with rope on the ground. My squadmates made swift work of them all.

“Are you all right, Medic Risurisu?” Vice Captain Velrey called out to me kindly. I almost teared up on the spot. “Are you hurt? Did they say cruel things to you?”

“No...”

I knew I was unharmed, but I’d been so scared throughout the entire mission. The same was even truer for the rest of the slaves, I was certain.

“Oh, that’s right. What happens to the other slaves now?” I asked.

“The Royal Order will provide them with care. We have female knights to help them, so there’s nothing to fear.”

“I see. That’s a relief...”

I was worried about Charlotte. I hoped she wouldn’t have to cry anymore.

The knights proceeded to arrest all the slave traders in the venue.

The ring we were after turned out to be a small operation of only five men who had been bribing the owner of the tavern with large sums. All the noblemen and women auction customers were taken into custody too.

They all seemed like such peaceful people, but little did anyone know that they were secretly involved in human trafficking... How frightening.

The hard work of the knights would play a big part in making sure this never happened again.

After that, I learned that Charlotte couldn't return to her homeland for some reason, so she was going to stay in the royal capital for a little while. She was spending her days trying her hardest to learn our language.

I hoped to meet her again one day. And when I did, Amelia, Charlotte, and I would enjoy a pleasant tea party, just the three of us.

I was truly excited at the prospect of our reuniting.



Chapter 8: The Unexpected Hunting Trip and Grilled Meat with Cheese

THE members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron were barely hanging on after conducting six different expeditions in one month.

Ulgus told me that the most they'd ever had until now were two expeditions in a month. Our recent string of successful missions was causing us to become recognized as an elite squadron in the Order.

It was an honor, but it also felt like abuse.

Captain Ludtink seemed to have the same impression, which is why he took action for us.

"Good news, everyone. As a reward for our last successful mission, we're all being given a week off and travel coupons for a vacation. The destination is Rucifan."

A vacation?!

The captain told us there was something called an ethereal spring five hours away from the capital by carriage. It was said to relieve the fatigue of anyone who bathed in its waters.

"Have you heard of the ethereal spring, Liselotte?" I asked her.

"Indeed, I have. It's supposed to be filled with mysterious water that's neither hot nor cold."

"Wow..."

The water was rich with magical energy, giving it restorative powers when it came to fatigue. It was enough to rejuvenate your body in the blink of an eye—the perfect spot for those of us who'd become so fatigued by work.

"We leave in two days," Captain Ludtink said. "Meet up at the rear entrance of the Order headquarters and be there before the work bell rings."

We would be staying there for one night and two days, while the rest of our vacation was free to spend as we pleased.

Our workday ended there, and I headed home with excitement in my heart.

I was going to have to go clothes shopping tomorrow.



ON the day of our trip, I brought my luggage and met up with Zara outside the dorm.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said.

“Oh my goodness, Melly! That’s a cute outfit!”

“Thanks for saying so.”

I ended up buying a dress yesterday. It was a bit of a splurge, but since I had a trip to look forward to, I decided it was fine just this once. The dress was made with yellow fabric and a big bow on the chest. I wanted something a little fancier for this vacation.

“You’ve got an adorable bag and cap there too, Amelia,” Zara said to her.

I made sure to make a special bag and cap for Amelia too. Her bag was made of leather and styled after the kind of bag a human would use, with a long belt to wrap around her back. The cap was her bonnet—the perfect accessory to shade her from the sun.

“Kreeeh!” Amelia gave a proud chirp.

Zara was wearing male attire today, consisting of a leather jacket and black pants. His hair was pulled back into a low ponytail.

“You look great too, Zara.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you like it. I thought this outfit was a little plain.”

A simpler outfit actually suited his flashy good looks. The more eye-catching his clothes, the more he transformed into a handsome prince from a fairy tale.

“I’ll carry your bags, Melly.”

“No, that’s okay. They’re heavy...”

“Oh, don’t you mind that.”

“Thank you so much.”

Zara was such a gentleman. I decided to take him up on his kindness.

“The weather’s perfect for a trip today,” I said, smiling.

“Totally. It feels so nice out.”

We chatted together until we reached the rear entrance of the Order headquarters. On the way, Zara ran into a female acquaintance of his.

“Oh, if it isn’t Ahto. Are you two going on a trip?”

“We sure are.”

“One last trip before your wedding day? That sort of thing?” she teased.

“Hehe! What makes you say that?” Zara laughed.

“That’s what it looks like to me...” she said.

“N-No, it’s a work trip for the Second Expeditionary Squadron!” I corrected loudly. But then I gasped. I didn’t mean to interrupt a conversation between friends. It was so embarrassing.

“It’s just a joke, Melly,” Zara told me.

“S-Sorry, that went over my head...” I bowed my head deeply to the female knight too.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“Thank you...”

As we separated, she patted Zara on the shoulder and told him, “Good luck.”

Good luck? Good luck with what?

The rest of our squadmates were already gathered outside of headquarters when we got there. Captain Ludtink prepared a carriage that was parked there for us too. The driver was someone he’d hired. Not having to drive ourselves there was a big luxury in itself.

My heart was racing. This was a brand-new experience for me.

Captain Ludtink wore a velvet jacket, leather pants, and black boots. All of his clothes were well-tailored, although his face made him look more like a mercenary than anything else. He kept a small sword strapped to his hip today.

Vice Captain Velrey was wearing a white shirt, vest, and trousers. She looked so cool in a masculine outfit like that.

Garr wore a long black coat and beret today. It was a very stylish ensemble.

As for Ulgus, he had on a shirt, jacket, trousers, and long boots—the perfect outfit for a day off.

But Liselotte was the most impressive of them all. She wore a silk afternoon dress and a short woolen cape on her back. Her straw bonnet was decorated with ribbons and fake flowers.

Captain Ludtink grumbled to himself, “Lichtenberger brought three whole bags for herself.”

“Well, I have lots of dresses,” she retorted.

The captain fastened her bags to the top of the carriage.

“Liselotte, do you put on your dresses by yourself?” I asked.

“No, that’s much too difficult.”

“Then how are you going to wear them?”

“Two of my servants will join us at the spring.”

“I see.”

“Then why not have your servants take your bags?!” Captain Ludtink snapped.

“Because it doesn’t feel like a proper trip without luggage, does it?”

Liselotte decided not to bring her family servants with her because she wanted to experience the feeling of a true getaway. Not that she could even carry her own luggage...

I glanced over at Captain Ludtink. He had a strained grip on her three bags.

“Quit your chattin’. We’re heading out!”

“Yes, Captain!”

Thus began the official vacation of the Second Expeditionary Squadron.



OUR carriage rolled along over the cobblestone road. It felt so strange to be traveling with my squadmates like this when we didn't even have a mission to attend.

Amelia curled up in a ball, behaving herself as always. She was happy when Liselotte praised her little bonnet. I was glad I worked so hard to make it.

"Oh, that's right. I made us some baked goods for the trip." Zara retrieved a paper bag from the basket on his lap. "They're black tea sablés."

Oooh, sablés! He really put some effort into baking for us.

The carriage had a collapsible table that he set up to arrange the sablés on.

"Ah, I brought smoked meat and cheese too!" Ulgus pulled some food out of his bag too. Our tea party was rapidly turning into something more like a drinking party.

The rest of the members pulled out even more food for us to eat. We now had an arrangement of oil-poached fish, bread, chocolate, and candy. I pulled out the baked meringue I bought yesterday from my own bag.

I prepared Amelia's dried fruit too.

"What should we have to drink? Tea?" I asked.

"How about this?" Captain Ludtink pulled up a bottle of wine from the ground near his feet.

Zara squinted at him, pressing for an explanation. "Booze? In the afternoon?"

"What's the matter with that? We're on vacation," the captain shot back.

"I guess so..."

He treated everyone in the carriage to cups of his wine. Judging by the bottle, it didn't appear to be anything too expensive. I was going to pour my own cup, but Captain Ludtink actually filled my cup for me.

"Th-Thank you. Sorry for making you do that."

“Don’t worry about formalities today,” he told me. With our cups all filled, Captain Ludtink led us in a toast. “Good work last month, everyone. Rest up and enjoy the vacation.”

We clinked our cups together and tried the wine. It had a sharp, mature taste to it—probably something I was too young to appreciate. I tried one of Zara’s sablés to cleanse my palate.

The cookies were light and crunchy, and the fragrant flavor of black tea filled my mouth. It was a subtle taste that melted all the tension away from my heart.

“Do you like them, Melly?” Zara asked.

“They’re delicious! I can taste the butter and tea leaves in them.”

“Yeah? I’m so glad to hear it.”

Vice Captain Velrey warned us to stick to one cup of wine for now, which forced Captain Ludtink to pace himself with his sips.

He looked down at his nearly empty cup and sighed. “...How sad.”

“You should have held out until we got to town.”

There was always the possibility of encountering monsters along the way, so we had to be sure we didn’t consume too much alcohol.

“How’s your fruit, Amelia?”

“Kreh!!”

Liselotte was busy feeding Amelia fruit on the floor of the carriage. I felt like she had to be getting sore, leaning down to reach her all this time. But this was probably just a form of her love for mythical beasts.

Eventually, we arrived at our destination.

The home of the ethereal spring was none other than a small village inside a forest. Their houses were made with straw-thatched roofs, and all had beautiful flower beds out front. I really expected this area to be packed full of tourists, but instead, this was a peaceful town with very few people around at all.

“Um, Captain, is this the town with the ethereal spring?” I asked.

“It sure is. The village limits visitors to preserve the quality of water in the

ethereal spring. As a result, it's a quiet, peaceful area."

"How nice. We'll really get to relax here!" Ulgus's words didn't sound like something I would expect from a seventeen-year-old. But I understood how he felt. All of us were completely exhausted—both our bodies and our minds.

Liselotte's eyes were sparkling as she took in the sights of the village. "I've always wanted to come here. Sorcerers long to visit this place, but it's too hard to get a reservation."

It appeared that Captain Ludtink already knew the town mayor. We learned that the mayor used to work for Captain Ludtink's family. He came back to the village a few years ago after inheriting his own parents' home.

"I'm gonna go find the mayor and say—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, a group of men from the village rushed right up to us. They were armed with swords and spears. *What's going on?*

Finally, a gray-haired old man in his sixties passed through them.

"Oh, if it isn't Young Master Crow!"

"What's with you, Old Man Jillore?"

"I'm in a bit of trouble, you see..."

I figured it had to be monsters, but the mayor shook his head.

"A great boar has shown up near the village."

A gigantic hog, who had spent years damaging their fields and even attacking villagers and traders, was spotted in the forest.

"Um, isn't that a monster?"

"No, it's not."

That was why it was pointless for them to contact the Royal Order for help with extermination. They tried building fences and traps, but it was useless when their foe was a seven feet-long boar.

Still, I was taken aback to learn that the knights refused to exterminate anything other than monsters.

“I’ll tell the higher-ups about this,” Captain Ludtink said.

“This sure is a tricky problem, huh?” Zara explained that the Royal Order was short-staffed at the moment. Apparently, we had our hands full as it was with monster extermination.

“So that’s why we’re so overworked and exhausted?”

“That’s right.”

I looked at Captain Ludtink. His blazing eyes seemed to be full of newfound determination.

“Velrey.”

“No objections here.”

“Garr?”

He gave one big nod in response to the captain’s question.

“Ulgus?”

“Ah, sure! Sounds good to me.”

“Zara.”

“Sure. I’m good to go.”

“Lichtenberger?”

“Very well.”

It sounded like everyone was ready for battle. They had brought their weapons with them too. Despite their vigor, my squadmates were still a little tipsy from the wine. Was this really going to be okay...?

Well, it was only one cup, so it couldn’t be so bad. Or so I hoped, at least.

“What about you, Risurisu?”

“The villagers might get injured, so I’ll come with you,” I said.

I was glad I brought first aid equipment with me, even if it was my own personal stock.

Captain Ludtink officially volunteered us to exterminate the great boar.

“Are you quite sure?” the mayor asked.

“Yeah. It’s not a mission, we’re just gonna go hunt our dinner.”

“Young Master Crow... We owe you a great debt.”

Thus began the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s boar hunting trip. However, a problem arose immediately.

“Can you wait here in the village, Amelia?”

“Kreeeh!” Her cry sounded anxious, but this really wasn’t something I could bring her to.

“I’ll ask my wife to keep her safe for you,” the mayor offered.

“If you could, that would be great, thank you.” I set Amelia on top of our nearby luggage and fed her a piece of fruit. “I’ll be back before you even know it.”

“Kreeeh!!”

The young man next to the mayor carried her away.

“Kreeeeeeeeeh!!”

I would probably be able to take her on expeditions with me once she was bigger. But for now, I needed her to be patient and wait. It was too painful to watch her get separated from me, so I had to look away.

“All right, let’s move out.” With his sword in his hand, Captain Ludtink ordered us to proceed. This was the start of our great boar hunt.



THE forest surrounding the village was a peaceful place, with gentle rays of sunlight filtering through the leaves. It was nothing like the dense forests where we hunted for monsters on our expeditions.

The Second Hunting Unit from the village, a group of only ten, had already come here from the village and were currently engaged in a fearsome battle, by the sound of things. Five more of their men were on their way now as backup.

A young man from the village led us to the area where the great boar was lurking.

“Grrrrraaaaah!”

The animal let out a horrific roar as it charged one of the spear-wielding men.

“Argh!” He absorbed the hit and went flying backward.

“What the hell’s that thing?!” Captain Ludtink let out a cry of shock when he laid eyes on the boar.

The beast was seven feet long, just like the mayor told us, with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. It was an enormous pig with a coat of black fur.

“You’re sure that isn’t a monster...?”

I didn’t sense the same sinister aura that monsters usually gave off. This pig must have grown as large as it did from eating forest nuts and berries alone. But its size certainly rivaled that of any monster.

“All hands, prepare for combat!” Captain Ludtink ordered.

“Medic Risurisu, take the injured men to a safe place and treat them as much as you can.”

“Of course.”

I rushed over to the injured men at Vice Captain Velrey’s orders.

“Are you all right?” I was asking the man I watched go flying just a moment ago.

“Urgh... I...”

He appeared to still be conscious, and his heart rate felt normal when I checked his pulse. As for external injuries...I saw he was clutching his abdomen. I rolled up his shirt and saw signs of internal bleeding, so I took my water out of my bag, wet a cloth, and placed it against his injury to cool.

“Excuse me. This man should be taken to a doctor as soon as possible.”

The men had brought stretchers with their hunting party, so they were able to carry him back to the village in no time at all.

Fortunately, the others seemed to be suffering from no more than scrapes and cuts. I washed their wounds clean and covered them with homemade ointment I made from medicinal herbs.

Once I finished treating the villagers and watched them evacuate, I turned to look at the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron in battle instead.

Garr struck the boar in its foot, while Zara sliced into that wound with his ax. It went tumbling over, allowing Ulgus to strike it in the eye with an arrow. Vice Captain Velrey cut the boar's throat and Liselotte burned the wound with a fire spell.

Finally...

"I'm not lettin' you get away!" Captain Ludtink let out an intimidating roar as he engaged in battle with the boar. His sword was smaller than the one he usually used, but since this wasn't a monster, it was unlikely to be a problem. "DIIIIIEEE!"

When he sliced into its brow, a spray of blood went gushing out like a fountain.

The boar collapsed. The extermination was successful.

"Good. Well done, you guys." Captain Ludtink then began to prepare to take the boar back to the village. "Lend me your ax, Zara. Tie Garr's spear up to two of its legs so that you can drag it."

"Whaaat? No, thank you."

"Quit whinin' and gimme that ax."

These were hardly words that I would ever expect to hear out of a nobleman's mouth. Zara reluctantly held his ax out. It was hard to even estimate how heavy the great boar might be. It was incredibly thick and muscular.

Before taking it back to the village, we leaned the boar on a slant so that we could drain all the blood out.

"It was moving around so much, I'm not sure if the quality of the meat will be any good now..."

"Can't you just have a little hope?"

Meat that came from an active animal generally had an unpleasant taste due to the heat generated from motion. The intense battle, unfortunately, probably

meant bad news for the boar meat we were planning to eat.

“That’s probably good enough.”

We decided all the blood was drained now.

Captain Ludtink, Garr, and Zara hauled the boar back to the village.

Zara wore a gloomy look on his face. “This isn’t why I came to this village... I was planning on taking therapeutic walks in this forest...but instead, it’s the scene of a bloody battle...”

“What else were we supposed to do about it? Leave the boar to wreck the village?” Captain Ludtink snapped.

“Boo...”

Poor Zara. I wanted to help them, but my orders were to “Stay away” when I tried.

Liselotte, who was walking at my side, had similar complaints. “...I can’t believe I was forced to go into the forest while wearing a dress.”

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed wholly.

The bottom of her dress was covered in mud, and her pretty hair arrangement was in total disarray. I tore the sleeve of my own dress on a branch too. It was a brand-new outfit and everything...

“Liselotte, let’s bathe our troubles away in the ethereal spring,” I suggested.

“Yes! Let’s do it!” She seemed a little less down in spirits when she heard my mention of the ethereal spring.

The men laid out the great boar in the town square. Everyone from little kids to elderly men and women showed up to take in the shocking sight.

“Wow, look at that!”

“A kind thief hunted it for us.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“They say that man was as big as a bear.”

“How scary...”

Actually, he's not a thief...and he's not as big as a bear, either...

I could only be thankful that Captain Ludtink wasn't hearing any of this.

"Oh! They're cutting it apart already?" Captain Ludtink said.

"What a sight! Look at that!" the vice captain said.

I saw that it was time to start taking apart the body. The men from the village were arriving with their various blades.

"Oh no! Ew! They're cutting it apart right here?!" Liselotte cried.

"So, it seems," I said.

"Ew, ew, ewwww!"

Liselotte threw her arms around me and looked away.



Um, Liselotte, my pointy ear is poking you right in the cheek...

But she seemed more concerned with avoiding the sights of blood than anything else. On the other hand, the villagers themselves seemed thrilled by the exciting spectacle before them.

They started by sticking their knives into the stomach, where the hide was much thinner. Then the men peeled that hide away from the entire body to expose everything but the boar's back.

After that came the chopping of the neck. They opened up the rib cage and carefully removed all the organs inside, then began to divide up the meat. Every villager there in the town square was given a cut. Us knights received a hunk of shoulder meat.

Although, raw meat wasn't exactly a gift I expected to receive on a relaxing getaway...

"We may as well try it."

"I agree."

With Captain Ludtink's suggestion, we decided to try the great boar meat for ourselves. The village mayor agreed to lend us his kitchen.

"Oh, that's right. Amelia!" I rushed forward to be reunited with her.

"Kreeeeh! Kreeeeeh!"

"Ah, um, yes, I'm sorry..."

She told me she was really, really lonely while I was gone. She spent her whole stay at the mayor's house crying for me.

"I'm never leaving you again, Amelia."

"Kreh!!"

Despite that promise, I knew there would probably be more missions in the future where she had to stay behind and wait for my return.

Forgive me, Amelia. I apologized to her in my head. I also apologized to the mayor's wife. I thanked her too.

“I’m sorry, was Amelia too noisy while I was away?”

“Not at all. There’s no baby in the world who doesn’t cry.”

“Thank you for taking care of her.”

She gave me a gentle smile in return. It was a relief to know she was a kind person.

“I’m sorry, but could I also borrow your kitchen?” I requested.

“Of course. Would you like some tea first?”

“Sure, thank you... Ah, do you need any help?”

“Don’t you worry about that. You must be exhausted, so rest up in the living room, okay?”

I accepted the kind offer and joined the rest of my squadmates in the living room. After a short break to drink tea, I moved back to the kitchen, rolled up my sleeves, and got fired up to do some cooking. Although, at the same time, I didn’t want to bother our kind hosts by staying here for too long, so I got straight to work on today’s meal.

I started by washing the meat in Captain Ludtink’s wine to remove any foul odors, hoping the great beast wouldn’t smell like one, at the very least.

The mayor’s wife told me I could use any food in the kitchen I wanted, so I helped myself to her stock of ingredients. I poured some olive oil into a pot and fried some thinly sliced black pepper mushrooms in it. Once they were cooked, I added thin cuts of the boar meat and listened to how it sizzled.

“Oh!” The aroma that was beginning to form smelled pretty nice. Delicious, in fact.

“Kreh?”

“Ah, be careful, Amelia.”

She casually strolled up to me to see what I was doing, despite the lit stove right there on the ground. I didn’t want her to turn into fried chicken...or rather, fried *griffin*, so I wished she would keep a safer distance.

“Please just wait a little longer.”

“Kreh!”

It was time for the finishing touches.

I poured some fancy wine into the pot, causing the flames to shoot up higher. Next, I added salt, pepper, and spices to give it more flavor, then topped the boar meat with slices of cheese and waited for them to melt. The final step was to sprinkle dried basil on top, and with that, my “Cheesy Boar Roast” was complete.

I wasn’t going to taste it just yet. I picked up the entire pot and brought it out to my squadmates.

“Thanks for waiting.”

“Sure thing.”

The knights were already indulging in liquor there in the living room. The table was full of delicious foods the neighbors had brought for them. I started to feel anxious about this recipe I completely improvised. I placed my pot on top of its stand.

“Um... I’m not sure if it tastes any good...”

Captain Ludtink came forward to try it first. He took one gigantic bite of cheese, mushroom, and boar meat. “...Mm?!” He scrunched up his face and physically jolted.

What’s with that reaction? Is it good or bad? I can’t tell at all.

“Well? How is it?” I asked.

“It’s great! I’m surprised. I didn’t expect much, but this meat’s really tender and doesn’t even stink.”

The others began to dig in once they heard the captain’s reaction.

“Um, you two are welcome to try it too,” I told the mayor and his wife.

“Sure, thanks.”

“I’d love some.”

I tried my first bite next, making sure the boar meat was covered with a good helping of cheese.

“Mm! It’s so good!”

Captain Ludtink was right—it didn’t stink at all. That struck me as strange, considering how much the boar moved around in battle. But the meat was juicy with fat. I always heard that large game was supposed to be bland, but that turned out not to be the case. The jiggly portions of fat added a sweetness to the meat, which paired well with the salty cheese.

“Wow, this is delicious.”

“It really is.”

This was everyone’s first time eating boar meat with cheese, but thankfully, they enjoyed the dish.

“But why doesn’t it taste bad?”

“That would be... Thanks to Captain Ludtink’s fancy wine that turned up in my bag for some reason.”

“Hey! What the hell?!” he shouted.

“I-I just used a little!”

I saw it as a fee for being forced to carry the wine around with me.

“So, this is what happens when you wash it with wine?”

“Um, I think so.”

It was hard to confidently tell him that this entire dish was just a test... But I was all the happier to hear the crowd praise it, since I was so worried about how the boar meat would turn out.

“Now the only thing left is to get a good rest in,” I said. The sun was already in the process of setting. I let out a yawn. “Oh, that reminds me. Where exactly is the ethereal spring?”

The mayor’s wife was the one to answer me. She explained that it was like a hot spring that ran throughout the village. Vice Captain Velrey and Liselotte said they were eager to get in a warm bath too.

“Please prepare the spring at once.” The mayor stood up and gave an order to a young man in the room.

We were finally, *finally*, going to experience the ethereal spring!

The Second Expeditionary Squadron paused their drinking party to head out for the ethereal spring.

The mayor told us that the spring ran through a long, single-storied row house. “There are separate sections for men and women, so please don’t worry.”

“Is that right...?” Ulgus sounded a little disappointed at the mayor’s remark.

He wanted us to all bathe together?

“Kreh kreh!”

“Ah, sorry, Amelia,” Ulgus said.

Amelia let out a squawk to scold him, not that I didn’t understand.

The building had separate entrances for men and women. Once we were in the baths, we could move as we pleased.

“We’re allowed to visit the mayor’s house, eat at the lodge, drink at the tavern, or do whatever we want now. But we’re heading back tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Vice Captain Velrey, Liselotte, Amelia, and I entered the women’s changing room.

The generous mayor even gave permission for Amelia to join us in the bath.

I took the soap we made together out of my bag.

“We should use this today, don’t you think?” I asked her.

“Kreeeh!” She wagged her tail happily, seeming to remember the time we spent together.

“What’s that, Mell?” Liselotte asked.

“Amelia and I made it together.”

“Wow, how impressive.”

“Kreh!” Amelia clearly didn’t hate the praise she received from Liselotte.

We undressed and headed for the bath.

The interior of the room consisted of stone floors and tubs. There were three spots on the side where we could wash up before bathing. It was smaller than the bath at my dormitory, but just looking at the ethereal spring in front of us gave me goosebumps.

“Wow, it’s beautiful!”

The water of the ethereal spring was a pure, sparkling blue.

“What a strange color for a hot spring.”

“The magical energy must be what brings out the color like that.”

I began to scrub my body. Once I was done, Liselotte, Vice Captain Velrey, and I all scrubbed Amelia together.

“Kreh kreh kreh! Kreh kreh kreh!” she sang. Amelia was in high spirits too. She hadn’t been given a bath in some time.

“Are you itchy, Amelia?”

“Kreh!!” She really sounded happy. I was so glad I brought her along.

Once Amelia was nice and clean, it was time to wash our hair, although I noticed Liselotte seemed to be having a hard time with it.

“Do you need a hand, Liselotte?”

“I-I’m quite all right.”

I knew her maids probably took care of this part at home. But since she was determined to tough it out, I decided to silently cheer her on instead.

“I’ll wash your back, Vice Captain,” I offered.

“Oh, thanks.”

I took the opportunity to massage her back in return for all the kindness she always showed me.

The vice captain had a beautiful, slender build. Despite her muscles, her body still had feminine curves, and her dazzling pale skin was untouched by the sun from the neck down.

No, no, this isn't the time to stare at her body! I focused on making sure her back was nice and clean.

"Does that hurt, Vice Captain Velrey?"

"No, that's just perfect."

"Good."

My grandpa and dad used to give me pocket money to wash their backs for them, so I felt confident in my skills. The vice captain's praise made me happy.

"Thanks, Medic Risurisu."

"Of course."

Finally, I lowered my body down into the ethereal spring.

"Ahhhh..."

Amelia was doggy paddling around with a look of bliss on her face.

Liselotte's eyes went wide as she scooped up the water with her hand. "This is...incredible..."

"It really is." Vice Captain Velrey had a towel on her head as she lounged back against the wall of the tub.

My body grew warmer and warmer the longer I soaked in the ethereal spring. It felt like it was melting away every last ounce of fatigue.

"I think I'm going to sleep well tonight," I said.

"Yeah, me too," Vice Captain Velrey agreed.

We soaked in the bath for a long time, and once we felt rejuvenated, Amelia, Liselotte, and I headed to the inn.

Vice Captain Velrey was returning to the mayor's home. I felt bad that she still had more socializing to do.

"Kreh kreh!"

"Look at the beautiful sky!" Amelia cried. I looked up and saw...

"Wow!"

The night sky was lit up with glittering stars. I felt like I could reach them with my own hand.

“What is it, Mell?” Liselotte asked.

“The stars! They’re so lovely!”

“Oh my!”

The two of us stared up at the breathtaking starry sky.

“I feel like I’ve been too busy to even take in the sights like this...” I said.

What did the night sky look like in the Fore Elf Forest again? I didn’t remember at all anymore, since my life there was so hectic. We weren’t even allowed to go out at night in the first place.

“I’m sure they’re beautiful in the Fore Elf Forest,” Liselotte said.

“I hope so.”

“I would love to visit someday,” she told me.

“There’s nothing interesting there at all...”

“But it’s where you grew up, isn’t it? I’d still like to see it.”

“Um, thank you for saying so, even though it’s in the middle of nowhere...”

I wondered if my family was doing well. Thinking about my village made me long to return. *If we ever receive an extended break like this again, it might be a good idea to go home and visit everyone.*

“There are all sorts of interesting places in the world, huh?” Liselotte said.

“I’ve started to feel the same way ever since I joined the expeditionary squadron.”

“I hope to see even more of those places in the future.”

“So do I.”

This world was surely filled with beauty in all of its corners.

I hoped to learn even more things about it through my expedition journeys in the future.

After that, we spent our remaining stay in the village in perfect peace. It was nothing if not a fantastic experience. The food was delicious, and the people were kind.

My body and mind were filled with life once more.

Once our vacation was over, I knew I was going to be ready to serve as a devoted knight again.

Bonus Chapter: Expedition Cooking with Mell and Ulgus

“**HUH?** We’re doing this again, Ulgus?”

“We sure are, even though no one asked for it or anything.”

“But why...?”

“It’s a page count issue.”

“A what?”

“Oh, sorry. That’s way too behind the scenes for this... Actually, what *did* I even mean by that...?”

“I don’t think it matters. Let’s get straight into our recipe for today.”

“You’re so light on your feet. That’s Medic Risurisu for you!”

“Thanks for the compliment. Let’s get started.”

“Here are all the ingredients.”

“Right. Please prepare some minced pork, salt, black pepper, spices, and sugar.”

“There’s both finely ground minced pork and the normal kind, right?”

“Correct. First, mix all the ingredients together, and once they’re consistent, mold them into long, narrow strips.”

“Then you let them chill for a while, right?”

“A day or so should be plenty. Then you cook them until they’re dry in the middle and smoke them to add flavor.”

“Wow, that smells good!”

“We’re not done just yet. Now we have to store them in a cool place to chill and evaporate the moisture.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty cool!”

“The moisture will be gone after letting them rest for a week.”

“They turned out...really dark.”

“Definitely. Really...black.”

“By the way, what do we call this food?”

“It’s salami. This salami doesn’t go bad at room temperature.”

“Wowie! This expedition cooking recipe seems like it’ll come in handy.”

“Exactly. I wasn’t happy with the last one we put together. But anyway, please go ahead and give it a try.”

“Sure, thanks... Wow, the taste gets stronger the more you chew it, and it’s packed full of umami! That’s delicious. I don’t think I can go back to eating normal salami!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Sure thing.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Uhhh...”

“You don’t know how to wrap this up, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“I figured.”

“.....”

“.....”

“I hope you all look forward to our next episode!”

“Oh, that’s perfect!”

Afterword

HELLO, this is Mashimesa Emoto. Thank you so much for purchasing volume 2 of *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights*.

This volume had a lot of new content included in it!

I have some surprising news to share as well. *Expedition Cooking* is having a manga version released! It's available in Japanese on platforms such as ComicWalker and Niconico Seiga.

In the manga, Mell's expression is always changing from one adorable look to the next. Captain Ludtink captures the essence of a bandit. Vice Captain Velrey is heroic-looking, Garr is strong and burly, Zara is beautiful, and Ulgus has a youthful innocence. The mangaka, Renji Fukuhara-sensei, captured the charms of every single character.

You'll see delicious expedition cooking, of course, but I hope you also pay attention to the incredibly intense battle scenes as well.

Tera Akai-sensei also provided some lovely illustrations for this volume of the novel too! The cover has a wonderful tropical feel to it. The two-page color spread at the front is taken from the slave elf chapter, while the other illustration turned out just as delightful.

I had been begging my editor to include a color illustration where a character shows a lot of skin ever since the series debuted, and three years later, my wish was finally granted.

I want to thank GC Novels and Akai-sensei for everything.

I would also like to thank everyone who contributed to this book and my editor for their help. They're the reason volume 2 turned out to be so wonderful. I hope to work with you all again in the future.

Finally, to my readers: thank you so much for reading this far.

I have faith that we'll meet again in the third volume.



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