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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 4
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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 4

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## Chapter 1: The Mystery of the Valley and Cheesy Steamed Fish

**NO** abilities, no fortune, and no magical energy. That was the state of my life when I, a Fore Elf, arrived in the royal capital half a year ago. City life was full of stimulation for someone who'd only ever lived in a forest before. The time I spent in the capital was so hectic, it practically passed in the blink of an eye.

Fore Elves generally enjoy quiet lives in the woods. Very few would ever think of leaving the forest and starting up a new life in a capital city like me.

In other words, elves who lived in the city were considered weirdos.

Humans seemed to see elves as unsociable, stubborn, and very picky creatures. They also didn't think of us as suited for manual labor. That was why everyone looked at me like I was strange when I reached the city. I had no work opportunities and found myself at a dead end.

The sole group willing to employ me was the Enoch Royal Knights.

Since I was an elf who couldn't even use magic, I never once suspected they would give me anything other than desk work. But I was wrong. They assigned me to one of the expeditionary squadrons. Our job was to travel out of the city, exterminate monsters, and search for missing people.

My assigned role in the Second Expeditionary Squadron was that of a combat medic. They seemed to think my knowledge of medicinal herbs from growing up in a forest would be of use. It wasn't until I met my squadmates that I figured out why a Fore Elf would be sent to join them.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron was full of strange characters.

Captain Ludtink had a successful career thanks to his family's status as nobility. He was a young man, but rough around the edges and hard to deal with. But the captain was a great fighter and good leader too. Despite having all the skills needed of a captain, he was disliked by the other knights, who were

used to promotions being given out by seniority.

Vice Captain Velrey was a young, commoner woman, and an incredibly talented knight. Advancing in the Royal Order was done through a combination of years served and family status, and the vice captain had now reached her limit with both. She was from the lower class, so despite her many abilities, her former squadron didn't know what to do with her.

Garr was beastfolk—an unusual and intimidating presence in the capital city. Despite his looks, Garr was a very gentle person, but he didn't fit in well with squadrons filled with a lot of other knights.

Ulgus was a brilliant archer who was once part of the squadron that directly guarded the king. But he was transferred to the second squadron once his commoner upbringing was brought to light. The imperial knights were an elite unit made up entirely of nobility—he wasn't allowed there anymore.

In other words, being transferred to the second squadron meant that you were weird, and people didn't know what to do with you. They must have been just as uncertain about how to deal with me, a Fore Elf. In the end, that was how I joined the expeditionary squadron tasked with going on expeditions to various regions.

After me, another unique knight named Zara joined us. Maybe birds of a feather really did flock together. He wielded a battle ax taller than himself and always lived up to his nickname of "Ferocious Ax-Wielding Prince" when he fought. But his true nature was that of a domestic-minded man who enjoyed cooking and sewing.

The next person to join us was Liselotte.

Liselotte was a noblewoman who worked at the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and specialized in fire magic. She was a free-spirited girl who adored mythical beasts but wasn't interested in much else.

These were the very unique squadmates I worked with.

Another important figure was Amelia, the mythical beast. She was a griffin we met on a deserted island, and once she became attached to me, the two of us entered into a contract. Amelia was also very concerned with aesthetics. She

had a keen eye for fashion.

It was Lord Lichtenberger, director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and Liselotte's father, who supported my life with Amelia. Our first interaction was a downright terrible one, but I'd changed my mind about him recently. Although, Amelia still seemed pretty upset with him. I only hoped she would slowly come to understand him better.

The other members of the squadron included Charlotte, a fox girl the Royal Order was caring for, Sly, an artificial slime, and Album, the gluttonous fairy. We were always gaining new friends.

Captain Ludtink said that the environment surrounding the unit changed a lot after I joined them. Thinking back, it was entirely possible he was right. The reputation of the second squadron transformed somewhere along the way, and we became known as a group of elites.

That was to be expected, though. Everyone other than me was incredibly talented.

However, I'd heard that the second squadron wasn't the best at their job when the unit was first formed.

The reason for that was obvious.

To use a cooking comparison, it was like a soup that used meat from boarpigs, three-horned cows, and feathered poultry. It was almost impossible to make a good soup out of all three. A soup was best when made with a single choice of meat. Mixing meats like that resulted in a battle of clashing flavors that amounted to nothing in the end. However, removing the impurities from the broth and adding vegetables to cover up bad odors would turn the soup into something exquisite.

Good cooking was a combination of planning and effort.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron was no different. They had to take the time to train, understand each other's strengths, and use teamwork in battle.

Those results were starting to become visible only recently.

All I could do, as the combat medic, was support the rest of the members. It

was a job I carried out proudly.



**HALF** a year had already passed since I joined the Enoch Second Expeditionary Squadron. The snowy city I saw when I first came here had transformed with spring. Now, we were nearing the start of summer.

I looked out at the green scenery as Amelia and I walked to work like normal. Zara and I used to go together, but that came to an end once Amelia got to a certain size. Amelia stopped the other knights from bothering me just fine. I always felt bad about making Zara escort me, so I was a little relieved that I had another option now.

"Kreh kreh kreeeh!" Amelia was already excited early in the morning. I, on the other hand, still felt fatigued from the last expedition. "Kreeeh!"

"I'm glad you seem to have a lot of energy," I said.

"Kreh kreh?"

Amelia was asking me if I wanted to sit on her back. I turned her down, since I didn't want to stand out. I dragged my tired body along until I could make out the roof of the barracks. I spotted a large figure moving around in the plaza in front of the building.

That has to be...Garr! It looks like he's exercising.

He stood up tall, flexed his back a few times, then circled his arms around. I knew he had to be stretching his muscles.

"Good morning, Garr!"

He greeted me back and then pointed at his feet. Amelia and I looked down.

"What about the ground...? ...Ah!"

A slightly transparent orange blob sat at Garr's feet. This creature's name was Sly. She outstretched her tentacles to wave up at us.

Sly stretched up tall, flexed her back, and circled her arms around just like Garr. She had to be doing her own little "slime calisthenics" too.

Garr invited me to join them, so I decided to give it a try. I stretched my back

as tall as it could go and exhaled. Then I bent my knees to stretch them. Finally, I rotated my arms. I repeated the process a few times.

My body gradually started to grow warm, and I even felt a bit lighter on my feet.

"That was really refreshing," I said. "I feel like I can move twice as fast now. Thanks so much for showing me how to do that, Garr and Sly."

The pair smiled back at me with perfect synchronization.



**WE** gathered in the captain's office once the work hours started.

Captain Ludtink's face was as bandit-like as ever. He stood with his hands on his hips while he waited for us.

"You're all here. Let's start the meeting."

Recently, I'd learned how to tell if we received a new expedition mission just by reading Captain Ludtink's face in the morning meeting. His brow contained a single wrinkle on days without an expedition. When we were assigned an expedition, he got two or more wrinkles. That went up to three or higher when the job seemed like it was going to be really difficult. Three wrinkles was the highest I'd ever seen it until today. But he was up to four now!

There was no other explanation—our mission had to be a dreadful one.

"...Good work on the last mission." Captain Ludtink praised us with a deep, irritated tone that didn't sound very grateful at all. Even poor Ulgus was intimidated to the point of tears despite how early in the day it still was. "I'm sure you're tired. No one expected to run into spirits."

That was true. The monster we thought we were fighting turned out to be a great spirit. The Second Expeditionary Squadron was almost wiped out in the face of the unexpected foe, but we managed to return to the city thanks to Zara's incredible contribution.

"I doubt you've recovered much after only a day and a half..."

He was right about that, too. The bruises I got from rolling down the hill with Zara still stung. I was, even now, applying medicine to my cuts. My muscles

ached, and there were dark circles under my eyes.

But I knew the others had to be in similar states.

Vice Captain Velrey looked a little pale. Ulgus seemed gloomy in general. Garr's fur was a bit scruffy. Zara had complained that his skin was breaking out, and Liselotte's eyes were bloodshot.

Only Sly, Amelia, and Captain Ludtink seemed perfectly healthy.

"So I'm sorry about this, but..."

Ulgus gulped next to me when he heard Captain Ludtink start like that. He only just realized that we were probably about to go on another expedition.

"We have a new assignment."

Ulgus's knees went weak. Garr grabbed his arm before he could collapse to the floor.

"What's the matter, Ulgus?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"N-Nothing, sir." His eyes were watering up like he was just about to start crying.

Captain Ludtink read from the mission documents as if he were cursing someone. "It sounds like monsters keep showing up in Elder Valley, which is to the south of the capital. A lot of traders pass through there, and there's been major damage done. The Sixth Expedition Squadron already went down there and didn't see any monsters. Since it's possible they only attack small groups, our unit's gotta head out and see what we find."

It took half a day to reach Elder Valley by carriage. We would spend three days investigating the area, then head home if we didn't see any monsters. It was shaping up to be a horrible job, coming so soon after our last expedition.

"All units, prepare in thirty minutes. We're leaving right away."

We saluted him and gave halfhearted acknowledgments.

The members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron scattered to begin preparing.



"MELL! What are you doing today?"

"Charlotte!"

The fox girl maid who scampered up to me was named Charlotte. She was in charge of cleaning the second squadron's barracks and making rations for us.

"We have another expedition today," I said.

"Whaaat?!" Charlotte's head slumped. Her ears tipped downward and her tail began to droop. "I was so excited to make expedition cooking with you..."

"I'm really sorry."

"Hmph..." She puffed out her cheeks. I poked them, but that only caused them to expand more.

"I was excited too..." I told her. "Let's cook together when I get back, okay?"

"Okay." Charlotte's mouth untensed and formed a smile when I stroked her head. "I know that Mell has to choose between Charlotte and work, and work is more important. I learn from stories."

"...Have you been reading strange books?" I asked.

I knew she was borrowing books from the other maids, but this seemed like something she shouldn't be learning about yet. I would have to look into this when I came home.

"I made bread and jerky while Mell was on last expedition."

"Well done, Charlotte! I'm so proud!"

"Eheheh!"

It had always been a real chore to restock the empty food storage after an expedition. Charlotte was so productive, using her time alone to replace our rations like that.

"Good girl, Charlotte."

"Yes. I am very good girl!"

"Lucky kid..." A voice like a faint wind came from behind me. I flinched and turned to see Ulgus. "I work really hard too, but I don't get called a good boy..."

It was only natural for adults to go without such praise for doing their jobs. I didn't understand what Ulgus was complaining about.

But Charlotte must have sympathized with him, since she began to cheer Ulgus up. "June works so hard every day! Good boy! I am proud!"

"Eheheh!"

She even stood up on her tiptoes to pat his head. "Good boy, good boy."

"I'm so happy..."

Ulgus was simply exhausted and without any ulterior motive. He was desperate for Charlotte to soothe him, and I understood how he felt. I would probably need to rest for an entire week before I fully recovered.

"Charlotte, please help me pack some food," I said. "Are you done preparing already, Ulgus?"

"No, not yet."

"You should hurry up then."

"Understood."

Charlotte and I headed to the food storage together.

"Ah, it's Amelia."

She was stuffing jars of dried fruit into her personal bag. I realized Amelia was a faster worker than me. She'd brought out the perfect number of jars for a three-day journey. I was so moved by my clever, talented griffin.

But then something else came to mind.

"Amelia, your ribbon will get dirty on the expedition," I said. She had a colorful ribbon tucked away in her bag's pocket. It was lined with the lace Zara gave her. "The hat is too fancy too."

"K-Kreeeeeeh..."

"You don't want to catch the eye of monsters. Please go with the brown hat instead."

"Kreeeeh!"

She didn't want to wear such a plain hat, but I had to put my foot down. This was a matter of life and death.

"I think it's wonderful how much you care about your looks, Amelia, but we're going to a valley brimming with monsters," I cautioned.

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"Kreh."
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"You can dress up, but no one will be around to see it."

"Kreh!"

"Your ribbon and hat might get dirty too."

*"…"* 

I finally persuaded her by carefully laying out the facts. I went to Amelia's shelf and took out her hat for expeditions.

"Let's dress up and go somewhere nice after the expedition, okay?"

"Kreh!"

Amelia was in her sensitive years, which posed plenty of problems. I sighed and wiped the sweat from my brow. Charlotte had been busy packing my bag during all this.

"Ah, thank you so much, Charlotte."

"You're welcome. I shop while you are away and make more bread and jerky."

"That would be a big help."

After I finished preparing food and packing clothes, I placed my luggage in the carriage.

Charlotte, left there on her own, was looking at the ground sadly.

"See you soon, Charlotte."

*"…"* 

Her whole body slumped when I said that. Even her ears drooped. Before I could come up with anything better to tell her, Amelia took a step forward and started to speak.

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"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh."
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"Huh?"

"Amelia says she wants to play with you a lot when we get back," I interpreted.

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"Really? You play with me?"
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"Kreh!"

Charlotte's face lit back up.

"I excited to play, Amelia!"

"Kreh kreh!"

Seeing the two of them like that made me feel warm and fuzzy inside. It was almost like Amelia was Charlotte's big sister. Now that Charlotte had regained her energy, she waved her hand to bid us farewell.

"Bye-bye everyone! Work hard!"

The members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron boarded the carriage, with Charlotte sending us off.

Only a day and a half later, we were back on an expedition.

Captain Ludtink would be our first driver. Amelia flew comfortably alongside the carriage and occasionally ran too. She really seemed to enjoy keeping her body active.

I could tell that no one inside the carriage had yet recovered from their exhaustion.

Upon searching through my bag for something that could help them, I spotted something I'd brought with me from my dorm.

"Ah, that's right. I made sweets yesterday," I muttered.

We were able to request use of the kitchen after they finished serving meals in the cafeteria. I'd spent most of my day off sleeping, so I thought I'd do a bit of baking for a change of pace.

"This is biscotti with soybeans," I said. Soybeans were nutritious enough to be

referred to as a meat grown from soil. They helped promote muscle and blood health. "I wanted to see if I could include soybeans in our rations somehow."

I expected the biscotti to have a more interesting texture since I'd really filled them with soybeans. I passed them out to my squadmates. But the smashing and crunching sounds I heard as they ate weren't exactly reminiscent of biscuits.

"I think they're a little hard," I noted. "Do you like them, Vice Captain?"

"It's like a workout for my jaw. Yeah, I like them," she approved.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Vice Captain Velrey was enjoying them. Ulgus and Garr gave me thumbs-ups too. Liselotte, on the other hand, couldn't seem to handle the firmness.

"You don't have to force yourself, Liselotte," I said.

"I-I'm fine. It's not too hard at all!" She nibbled on the biscotti as if it were a battle to be won.

"There's still room for improvement, then," I said. "Do you have any suggestions, Zara?"

"Well, let's see. You could also mix some powdered soybeans into the dough," he suggested.

"I see."

"Or you could steam the beans to give them a nice, cake-like texture."

"I like the sound of that."

"Though, they won't keep as long that way," he warned.

"Is that right?"

Foods to bring on expeditions were best when they could survive the travel itself. I couldn't help but be reminded of just how difficult it was to make field rations.



WE arrived on location in the evening. Since it was so late, we ended up

staying in a lodge used by merchants in the Elder Valley. The first floor was a dining hall and the second floor was for bedrooms. Amelia was able to stay with us too, since fortunately, the lodge allowed mythical beasts. There was also a single large bath that allowed men and women at different times. Us ladies decided to eat dinner while the men bathed.

"What should I have? Everything sounds delicious," I said.

Despite the surrounding area being heavily wooded, the passing traders coming from the harbor meant that the inn served plenty of seafood dishes.

I'd laughed when Garr left Sly on the table with us upon hearing that men and women were supposed to bathe separately. Not that Sly wasn't a fine young lady too, of course.

I turned my gaze from Sly back to the menu.

"I don't know what to pick," I sighed.

"I think I'll try the steamed white fish with herbs."

"I'll go with the fish with mushroom sauce."

Liselotte and Vice Captain Velrey's orders sounded delicious. After a lot of thought, I decided to go with the grilled fish.

Our food was served without delay.

I squeezed citrus juice over the fish and dug into the white meat.

"Mm! It's so good!" I gushed.

Chewing on the fish caused the sweet juices to fill my mouth. It was a fresh catch, which made it extra delicious.

"Want some of mine too, Medic Risurisu?" Vice Captain Velrey asked.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Of course. Here you go."

Vice Captain Velrey brought a bite of fish on her fork up to my mouth. I never expected her to actually try feeding it to me.

"I'll drop it if you don't eat it quick," she urged.

"Ah, right. Thank you."

I took a bite of the fish and sauce she was offering me.

"This one's really good too!" I exclaimed.

The sweet and spicy sauce combined with the fish itself to form a tasty assortment of flavors.

"Mell, will you try mine too?" Liselotte asked.

"Sure!"



Liselotte fed me a bite of steamed fish with herbs on a piece of bread.

"Ah, this one's delicious too!"

My mouth was filled with the refreshing mixture of herbs. I shared some of my grilled fish with Liselotte and Vice Captain Velrey too.

Our pleasant dinner together came to a close in the blink of an eye.



**WE** all took our baths together, of course. I was shocked to see a much bigger tub than I expected. We sure were lucky to get to take a bath on an expedition.

The floor was tiled with stone and the wooden tub itself looked big enough to fit ten people at once. But this was no time to celebrate such a lovely bath. We were only allowed an hour to bathe, so we needed to get a move on.

"Allow me to wash your back, Vice Captain!" I said.

"Sure, thanks."

I scrubbed Vice Captain Velrey's back clean. The whole time, Liselotte was staring at us closely.

"Wh-What is it, Liselotte?" I asked.

"Why are you doing that when you're not a servant, Mell?" she asked.

Now I understood. Nobles saw this sort of work as the job of servants.

"Commoners wash the backs of people who take care of us," I explained.

"You do?"

Of course we did.

"Then I'd like to wash her back too," she said.

"Um... Is that all right, Vice Captain?"

"I'm fine with it."

With that, it was time for Liselotte to experience her very first back washing. She timidly began to apply pressure to Vice Captain Velrey's back. But it looked like she was barely touching her.

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"Put a little more muscle into it, Liselotte," I instructed.

"Wh-What does that mean?"

"Push down harder and scrub her."

"L-Like this?"

"Harder!"

"Pfft!"
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Vice Captain Velrey burst into laughter. Liselotte's limp attempt at scrubbing appeared to do nothing but tickle the vice captain.

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"Thanks, Sorcerer Lichtenberger. But that's plenty," she said.
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"I'm sorry. I'll do better next time."

"I look forward to it."

Then it was time for the three of us to enter the tub. Relaxing in the hot water felt like it was melting away the whole day's worth of fatigue. I made sure to savor the experience, since we wouldn't get to bathe again tomorrow.

After the bath, I drank some milk out of a chilled bottle.

"Wow! How delicious...!"

We even got to sleep on mattresses that night. It was such a luxury. We almost always camped outside on expeditions.

"I assumed we would be camping on the scene like normal for this mission," I commented.

"Captain Ludtink must have decided to have us stay at an inn when he saw that we weren't back to full health," the vice captain said.

"Oh my. I can't believe the captain was considerate enough to look out for us like that." Liselotte's praise for him was a bit condescending.

Captain Ludtink had probably agreed to stay here because there happened to be an inn right by our destination.

"I think Captain Ludtink was angry this morning because we were dispatched again so soon after the last expedition," Vice Captain Velrey explained.

So he wasn't just reluctant to go on an expedition himself. He was more concerned with pushing the rest of us too far.

"So that's why his face was so frightening first thing in the morning," I concluded.

"How on earth were we supposed to know that?" Liselotte sighed.

"I'd agree that the captain is the more curt type. It's hard to tell when he's being kind," Vice Captain Velrey agreed.

Still, he was keeping us in his thoughts and looking out for us.

"Suddenly, I feel like I see Captain Ludtink in a new light," I said.

"I agree."

Despite this conversation...we later spotted Captain Ludtink getting drunk with unfamiliar traders in the dining hall. I nearly fell to my knees when I saw the sheer amount of alcohol he was downing on a work night.

Liselotte let out a deep sigh. Vice Captain Velrey's eyes glazed over.

"Gahahaha! This inn's famous white wine is a damn treat!" Captain Ludtink boomed.

"You know what you're talking about, sir!"

"C'mon, drink up, drink up!"

It was an utter party.

Surely Captain Ludtink didn't have us stay here because he wanted to try their white wine, right? Surely he knows that we have work tomorrow, right?

As much as I wanted to ask him this, my whole body felt limp. I decided to go upstairs and rest instead.



**THE** next morning, we headed to the area where monsters had been reported.

The Elder Valley was a natural ravine surrounded by hills. It had a small river running through its base. Supposedly, monsters had only been appearing once

or twice a month, but it had recently become an everyday occurrence.

The real problem was the monsters themselves. Wolf types had been confirmed until this point, but the new monsters being spotted were reported as tree people—a plant type of monster. Tree people lived deep inside forests. They were rarely ever spotted in valleys like this.

The Monster Research Bureau suggested that perhaps the monsters' ecosystem had collapsed, but they wouldn't know for sure until they had a body to examine. That was how the job was handed down to our expeditionary squadron.

"Watch your step. The ground's muddy in some spots."

Despite Captain Ludtink's drinking last night, he showed no signs of a hangover. His tolerance for alcohol had to be part of his bandit powers too. It was downright frightening.

"Hey, Risurisu. What's that?" He was pointing at the thread wrapped around Gula, my magical pole and personal weapon.

"I heard you can catch delicious fish here," I said. "I was hoping to go fishing during our breaks."

"Of course you were..."

Last night, the old lady who worked in the dining hall told me that the delicious white fish I ate came from the nearby river. However, the arrival of the monsters meant that they could only catch less than half of the usual amount now.

"We have to do something about this!"

I was hoping the others would agree with me, but no one seemed to react very strongly. I seemed to be the only one who loved eating fish.

We began to traverse the bumpy valley path. The sky above us was sunny and blue.

"I'm surprised traders take such a difficult route," I remarked.

Carriages couldn't come this way, and I doubted horses wanted to walk the path either. Zara was the one to explain it to me.

"I heard there's a shortcut to the royal capital once you pass through this road."

"Wow, is that right?"

He told me that traders traveled with guards, since monsters were appearing on the road now, but the route through Elder Valley to the capital existed all the same.

"I suppose you can't buy time, no matter how much money you have," I said.

"Yep, exactly."

Once it was time for a break, everyone separated to do their own things.

Captain Ludtink sprawled out on the ground and went to sleep. That was his usual way of spending our breaks. Vice Captain Velrey was writing something in her logs. It was a proper use of time for a superior officer, but I did wish she would get some rest like Captain Ludtink too.

Garr and Sly were drinking water. Watching the two of them always warmed my heart. Ulgus was munching on the soybean biscotti I gave him yesterday. I could only see part of his face, but he looked really happy.

Zara was filing his nails, his feminine skills shining through like always. Liselotte was clinging to Amelia, nodding gleefully along to each cry of "Kreh kreh." Amelia happened to be sharing tales of griffin folklore with Liselotte. I would have to hear her repeat it later and submit a translation to the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

As for me, I was fishing in the surprisingly deep river. The woman from the dining hall had taught me to use bread as bait. With the sinker and bread wrapped up around Gula, I lowered them into the river.

I was staring at the water's surface when a large shadow suddenly appeared behind me. I spun around to see Captain Ludtink standing there.

"I'm sitting next to you, Risurisu."

"Huh?! Ah, of course. Please do."

Instead of talking to me, the captain kept staring straight at the rippling water. Maybe he was sick of sleeping. I didn't understand the heart of a bandit

at all.

My fishing line wasn't moving at all either.

Captain Ludtink and I shared a few silent moments together. It was pretty awkward, but I managed to pull through it. I was still in a daze when I felt a tug on my line. I reeled it in as fast as I could, but the fish got away.

"You were too fast there," he said.

"Was I? I've never actually fished before."

"Not with rivers in your forest?"

"There were only small fish in the nearby rivers, not big ones."

"Hmm."

"Have you ever fished before, Captain Ludtink?"

"Just a little."

Since he had experience, I put some more bread on the hook and passed Gula to Captain Ludtink. He cast the line out with ease. Just then...

"Oh?"

"Got one!"

The line twitched right away. Captain Ludtink waited for the right moment before pulling Gula back in. He sent the fish flying right out of the water. I could tell it was the same kind of fish I had for dinner last night.

"Wow! Look at that!" I exclaimed.

Captain Ludtink reeled the fish in almost instantly. It was a bit bigger than the palm of his hand and was flopping around with energy. But this wasn't the last of it—he continued to catch fish after fish until he'd reeled in fourteen of them.

Each person could eat two whole fish. I couldn't stop giggling.

"I see you're a talented fisherman, Captain."

"I've never caught so many in such a short time," he said.

"They were really biting today."

Now everyone could fill up on fish.

"It's a little early, but how about we have lunch?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"I'm all for it!"

Amelia came over to us when she heard that I'd be cooking.

"Kreh kreh?"

"Ah, yes, please."

She'd offered to gather stones for me to make a stove.

"Amelia, I'd like to help too."

Amelia went off to look for stones, with Liselotte following behind her. Garr and Sly offered to go look for branches I could use as firewood. Sly stuck her chest out and pounded it, as if to tell me that I could count on her.

As for the cooking itself, I would be assisted by Zara and Ulgus.

"How do you cook this, Melly?" Zara asked.

"I want to make skewers with half and prepare something with the other half," I said.

"In that case, should we take out all the bones and organs?"

"Yes, that would be great."

Zara and Ulgus took on the job of gutting all the fish.

"June, take the organs out like this," Zara instructed.

"Uuuurgh! It's all slimy!" Ulgus whined.

I spent that time preparing the skewers...not that it took a lot of work. All I had to do was stick fish meat onto the metal skewers, sprinkle some salt on them, and grill them up.

I asked Amelia and Liselotte to keep an eye on them for me. "Please turn the skewers over before they can burn."

"Kreh!"

"Very well."

Then I began to prepare the fish that Zara and Ulgus cleaned for me. I started by adding salt, pepper, and flour, then patted them lightly. I poured olive oil into a pot and simmered up some peppers and medicinal garlic. Once the oil was hot enough, I added the fish.

We heard a loud sizzle and began to smell an appetizing scent. Ulgus looked into the pot to see its source.

"These look delicious, Medic Risurisu!"

"Don't they? I'm sure they'd taste great like this, but..."

Once both sides were cooked, I added some white wine and put the lid on the pot. The wine I was borrowing belonged to Captain Ludtink. I made sure to get permission this time. He wasn't happy about it until I pointed out that he would be able to bring alcohol on missions with him this way. Then he allowed me to use it.

The sound of the white wine crackling slowed to a stop, at which point I sprinkled shredded cheese over the fish and covered it with the lid again. After a few more minutes, I opened it back up and found...

"Whoa!"

I looked at Ulgus, who'd become the watchman of the cooking pot, and saw his eyes were lit up.

"My steamed white fish with cheese is complete!" I brought the whole pot over to eat out of.

"Mell, I think our fish is done cooking, too," Liselotte said.

The fish had turned a nice color when I went over to check. It looked delicious.

"Thank you so much, Amelia and Liselotte."

They both seemed pleased with my praise.

"All right, let's eat."

I started off with one of the fish skewers Liselotte and Amelia cooked for me. It was seasoned with nothing more than salt. I picked up a skewer and found it

to be even heavier than it looked, tilting it to the side to watch the fat drip off. It was incredibly appetizing to watch.

"Time to eat!"

I bit into the fish. The skin was crispy, but the meat was tender and soft. Each time I chewed, I tasted more fat seeping into my mouth. It was pure heaven. I ended up eating the guts too. They were bitter, but the flavor was strangely addictive.

"This is really good."

I overheard Vice Captain Velrey murmuring to herself. Everyone else was chewing silently. Liselotte was eating the fish off the skewer too. Since she wasn't cutting it with a knife, I could tell how she was getting comfortable with expedition meals. I could only imagine how Lord Lichtenberger would probably faint if he saw her like this.

"Do you like it, Liselotte?" I asked.

"Yes! It tastes even more delicious when you've cooked it yourself."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Zara was skillfully removing the organs before he ate his fish. Yes, he was a very dainty person indeed. The sharp-eyed Ulgus spotted this and called out to him.

"Um, you're not going to eat the innards, Ahto?"

"Uh-uh. They're bitter and gross."

"Then can I have them?"

"Of course. Here you are."

"Thanks a bunch!"

Ulgus crushed the innards with the back of his spoon and poured them over his fish skin like a sauce. Then he eagerly bit in.

"Is that good, June?" Zara asked.

"Yep!"

"Lovely. I'm glad it didn't go to waste."

Then it was time to try the steamed fish with cheese. Garr and Sly passed out large leaves with servings for all the members.

I scooped out a bite of fish on my fork, watching the cheese stretch beneath it. I used my knife to cut it free from the cheese and took my first bite.

"Mmm!"

Steaming the meat in wine had only concentrated the umami flavors. Sweetness filled my mouth the more I chewed, which was perfectly balanced with the salty cheese.

Garr's tail was wagging as he ate and I knew these flavors must be exactly to his taste. Captain Ludtink was nodding with each bite too.

Zara ate his steamed fish with bread. "Oh, my! It's so good with bread too."

"I wanna try that." Ulgus quickly put a piece on some bread and ate it. The big grin that formed on his face told me that he liked it.

"Makes me want some booze."

Despite Captain Ludtink's remark, he definitely wasn't allowed to drink while we were on a mission. He told me he was just joking when I shot him a glare. But I'd witnessed his little party last night, so I wasn't particularly convinced.

In the end, it was thanks to Captain Ludtink that we were able to eat such delicious fish. I decided to pretend I never saw anything in that dining hall.



**WE** rested a little while longer before returning to the mission.

"It's so nice and peaceful here." Ulgus sounded plenty relaxed now that his stomach was full.

"Hey, Ulgus! Don't let your guard down!" Captain Ludtink barked orders at him.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"But it's not like there's any monsters around, from what I've seen," Zara said. "It's hard to walk around all tense like this."

I nodded in agreement. "Um, Zara, could that mean the monsters watch the people who pass by?"

"That would be such a pain!" he groaned.

Maybe we would have to disguise ourselves as traders for tomorrow's survey. Just as I was thinking about that, something strange happened.

A loud boom came from the distance, followed by a rumbling sound.

"Wh-What is that?" I asked.

"Sounds like a landslide," Zara said.

"Let's head that way!"

We broke off in a run toward the sound. The sight we arrived at shocked us all.

"I-It's...!"

The sloped land on either side of the valley had crumbled simultaneously, blocking the path with fallen trees, boulders, and dirt. It really did look like the landslide Zara suggested.

"How on earth did this happen?!"

It wasn't raining and we never felt an earthquake. Just what could have caused such a substantial landslide? That answer soon became clear. The fallen trees began to squirm underneath the dirt and soil.

"Wh-What's happening?!" I asked.

"All units, prepare for battle!"

Captain Ludtink's shout brought me back to my senses. I retreated to the back and squeezed Gula.

The buried trees rose up on their roots, which were functioning like legs.

"It's the tree people!" I cried.

"Sure looks like it." Ulgus readied an arrow as he responded to me.

It was clear that the tree people had been the cause of that landslide.

"They're coming from above too. Be careful!" Captain Ludtink warned. There

were tree people coming down the slopes toward us—more than thirty in total. "Sorcerer Lichtenberger, you have permission to use magic. Burn those trees down!"

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"Roger!"
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It was the first time Captain Ludtink ever started a battle by giving Liselotte permission to cast spells. That had to be proof of what a bad situation we were in.

The tree people glared with their golden-brown eyes, which looked like inlaid amber. They shot familiar red berries at us over and over again—berries I remembered as being poisonous.

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"Ulgus, Liselotte. Their berries might be poisonous," I said.
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"For real?!"

"For real!"

Ulgus quickly passed this information to Captain Ludtink.

"Risurisu! Tell us beforehand next time!!!" Captain Ludtink shouted.

"I'm sorry!"

Seeing those red berries instantly reminded me of a picture book I read years ago about an evil tree monster. The name "tree people" never tipped me off until now. But if Captain Ludtink still had enough energy to shout at me, then he was probably all right. Although, there were still a lot of tree people attacking.

Captain Ludtink took out his sword and stepped forward. But it was at that exact moment that a tree person launched its attack. It lifted up a boulder and threw it straight at us. This boulder was followed by one after another from the other tree people.

"All units, dodge the rocks!"

Turning around and running back the way we came would just send us straight into more enemies. Captain Ludtink could only order us to dodge each boulder as it came toward us.

I'd never heard of a monster that used long-range attacks like this. On top of

that, there was a whole group of them using the same attack simultaneously. It was almost like something else was controlling them.

"Here they come! Look out!"

I snapped out of my thoughts when Captain Ludtink shouted. This was no time to zone out. The boulders plummeted down on us like rain. One the size of my head flew gracefully toward me, landing right in front of my eyes.

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"Whoa!" I squeaked.

"They're still coming, Medic Risurisu!"

"What?!"
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The boulder Ulgus warned me of landed right behind me. As I turned to get a look at it, another boulder came soaring toward my head.

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"Oh no!"

"Mell!"

"Medic Risurisu!"

I thought I was done for. But then...

"Kreh!"
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Amelia grabbed the scruff of my neck with her beak and yanked me back. The boulder went slamming into the ground where I had just been standing.

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"That was close..."

"Kreh kreh!"

"Ah, that's right!"
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Amelia scolded me, telling me not to let my guard down for a second. She was absolutely right.

Liselotte's face was starting to glisten with sweat as she ran. Ulgus was nimble enough to maneuver around the boulders without much trouble.

In the front, Captain Ludtink was swatting boulders away with his greatsword. His strength was terrifying. Zara was using the handle of his ax to dodge the boulders, while Vice Captain Velrey spun around gracefully like she was

dancing. Garr was able to evade each boulder as it came too. They all had exceptional reflexes, so while there was no danger of being hit, I feared for their stamina.

The tree people seemed to realize that their attacks weren't landing at some point. I knew they must be capable of learning. They stopped with the boulders and changed to a different attack.

This time, they were gathering mud, covering boulders with it, and hurling giant mud bombs at us. They could make these mud bombs in what felt like the blink of an eye. Their tentacle-like vine arms rounded the mud around the boulders and packed them tight.

Once one of them landed near me, I noticed something shocking. There were crushed berries mixed up in the mud too.

"Everyone, be careful not to let the mud touch you!" I shouted. "They've poisoned those mud bombs!" The poison wasn't lethal, but getting the berry's juice would cause numbness of the limbs and difficulty breathing. "Please stay safe!"

"You be safe!" Captain Ludtink barked a forceful order at me. He was right—as the slowest, I was in the most danger. I continued to dodge each mud bomb that came toward me.

"Kyah!"

"Liselotte!"

With her minimal stamina, Liselotte was reaching the end of her rope.

"Captain Ludtink! Please order Liselotte to evacuate so—"

"Kreh kreh!"

Amelia crouched low in front of Liselotte.

"Huh? Amelia?"

"She wants you to get on her back, Liselotte," I explained.

"B-But Amelia isn't fully grown yet!"

Liselotte was right about that. An adult griffin would grow to about eight feet

long, roughly the size of a horse.

Amelia was currently only about five feet—a bit bigger than a large dog. I understood why Liselotte was hesitating, but that was much less important than the mud bomb soaring toward her head.

"Amelia is strong, Liselotte, so it will be okay," I reassured her. "Hurry and get on her back!"

"O-Okay..."

She used the last of her strength to mount Amelia.

Amelia spread her wings, kicked off the ground, and escaped the trajectory of the mud bomb. That was when Captain Ludtink noticed the situation and shouted orders.

"Hey, Lichtenberger! Shoot spells at them from up there!"

"Roger!"

Liselotte raised her staff and began to chant. A bright red magic circle materialized and shot forth three balls of fire. The tree people on the receiving end burst into flames and collapsed.

I thought Liselotte's spells had turned the tide of the battle...but I was wrong.

Once their comrades were killed, the tree people all began to focus their attacks on Liselotte. They hurled mud bombs up at her.

Amelia dodged them with big twirls in the air. Liselotte tried to fire spells at the distant enemies, but didn't manage to hit any of them. That was when I remembered Liselotte's magic style. She was a pitcher, but had little control over her projectiles. She could concentrate her fire against the tree people at close range. But from afar, her spells didn't hit.

Liselotte was a powerful sorcerer—her foe this time was simply the worst-case scenario.

"I-I'm sorry I can't be of any use..." she said.

"Don't worry, Lichtenberger. I didn't expect much in the first place. Just stay up there with Amelia and watch them, and don't do anything stupid." Captain Ludtink sounded so carefree, but he'd basically just insulted her. He didn't have to say all that. "Even without your spells, I can beat 'em on my own."

Captain Ludtink had a heart of steel to say something like that. He was staring down more than thirty tree people right in front of him, still pelting him with a rain of mud bombs.

I didn't know if the tree people would run out of mud and boulders first, or if we would run out of energy and become unable to run before that.

"I've got somethin' to say. We're nothin' like any cowardly monster who attacks us from far away, not willin' to actually put their lives on the line!" As soon as he finished shouting, a black magic circle materialized out of Superbia, the captain's magic sword.

Raising the sword caused a shroud of mist to encircle it. A gust of wind sent it shooting forward, taking the shape of many individual blades and soaring straight toward the tree people.

The tree people's branches and vines were torn straight off, as if they'd been pruned by a gardener. Captain Ludtink gave another slash of his sword. More black mist formed, transforming into blades that cut down the tree people's trunks.



The monsters were mowed down in the blink of an eye. All Captain Ludtink did was swing his sword five times, but it was enough to wipe out every last tree person.

Everyone was dumbfounded at Captain Ludtink's unexpected display.

Ulgus was the first to speak up, his voice trembling. "Medic Risurisu, did Captain Ludtink just turn into a sorcerer bandit swordsman?"

"No, I don't think that was part of Captain Ludtink's bandit side... I think it was his sword's special power," I said.

Garr's magic spear, Ira, had once produced a strange power when Garr became enraged.

This "Seven Deadly Sins" series of weapons was a cocreation between the Magic Research Bureau and Monster Research Bureau, utilizing monster bones, magic ores, and magic metals to create these unique items. Experiencing the emotion that the weapon was named after caused a special power to activate.

My magic pole, Gula, was able to create food out of thin air whenever I was too hungry to go on. Zara's magic ax, Luxuria, was capable of causing tremors in the ground. Maybe the other members' weapons possessed their own mysterious powers too. Not that I could predict them based on the names alone.

Captain Ludtink's magic sword, Superbia, meant "pride." Declaring that he was able to defeat so many enemies at once must have counted as an expression of pride. It was incredible.

As I stood there in a daze, Liselotte and Amelia returned from the sky.

"I wouldn't expect anything less of Captain Ludtink," Liselotte said.

"Are you all right now, Liselotte?" I asked.

"Yes, I am, thanks to Amelia."

She reminded me of how Amelia came to my rescue too. I gave the griffin a big hug to express my gratitude. "Thank you, Amelia. You really saved me."

"Kreh!"

Amelia never feared the tree people—she was resolute and heroic the whole time. Maybe I was blind with love as her parent, but I felt like she just *had* to be the strongest griffin of them all.

"Are any of you hurt, Medic Risurisu?"

"No, we're fine, Vice Captain. What about the others?" I asked.

"Miraculously, no one suffered a scratch."

"That's great news."

Everyone had managed to evade all of the monsters' attacks, despite the absolute onslaught of boulders. It was the first time our regular practice of marathon training ever paid off.

I turned to look at Captain Ludtink and witnessed something startling. He was straddling one of the fallen tree people and stabbing his sword into the trunk.

"Wh-What is he doing...?" I stammered.

"He says something's buried inside their trunks," the vice captain said.

"What...?"

Monsters' bodies were powered by monster stones buried deep inside them. However, these were said to be contaminated and problematic for humans to touch. I didn't know what problems they would cause, exactly, but everyone knew that it was bad news to touch a monster's corpse.

Now there appeared to be something other than a monster stone deep inside this tree person.

"Got it!" The captain had finally found what he was looking for. He retrieved it from inside the tree person's trunk with his sword, just to be safe. "You know what this is, Lichtenberger?"

"It looks like a magic stone to me," she said.

"Me too. If anyone sees anything other than a magic stone, speak up."

I didn't know what he meant by that. It looked like a magic stone to me too. No one else disagreed.

"Magic stones are man-made," he said. "You'd never find a finished one out

in nature."

He was right. Magic stones came from magic ores, which were mined and refined to make a finished product. Only humans could make them. If one of those stones was inside a monster...

"It's possible that these tree people are man-made," he suggested.

A chill ran through me. The thought of humans being the ones to cause that landslide was a frightening prospect.

"Does that also mean that humans arranged for the tree people to appear here?" Vice Captain Velrey asked.

"It's possible. But we're not experts, so I don't think we'll get to the bottom of this."

We needed to do what we were actually capable of.

"Velrey, go back to the inn and make your reports. Then take a horse back to the capital to contact the Royal Order."

"Understood."

"As for the rest of you..." Captain Ludtink was staring off at the collapsed dirt and the corpses of all the tree people. "...clean this place up."

It went without saying that Ulgus and I instantly fell to our knees.

The expeditionary squadron was reduced to a cleanup crew.



**THE** next day, our unit met up with the survey team consisting of Magic Research Bureau and Monster Research Bureau members. The scene of the battle was a mess of mud and boulders—no longer a usable road.

"Our orders are to help out until the afternoon, then return to the city," the captain said.

We were still wiped out from yesterday. A new day was upon us, but the faces of the Second Expeditionary Squadron were anything but cheery. Liselotte and Zara were upset about having mud under their fingernails. Ulgus's eyes were wide open and frozen like that. Garr's tail drooped sadly.

Captain Ludtink, aside from Amelia and Sly, was the only one who seemed full of energy. I wished I could copy that endless bandit energy he exuded.

It was a relief when Vice Captain Velrey returned to us.

"Are you okay, Medic Risurisu?" she asked.

"Yes! I can keep going."

"Don't work too hard. Let me know if it ever gets to be too much."

"Thank you, I will."

As always, the vice captain managed to give a boost to my sense of peace. Liselotte, Amelia, and I were assigned to remove boulders that weren't muddy. I could hardly believe how heavy they were to lift.

"Getting hit with one of these could have easily been fatal," I observed.

"Right?"

"Kreh!"

I kept thinking about how glad I was that everyone made it out.

Just before noon, Captain Ludtink ordered me to start preparing lunch. I forced my sluggish body to get up and start cooking. Although there wasn't much I could cook with such little time. I threw some jerky and dried veggies in my pot, then added herbs. I seasoned it with salt and pepper to create a simple jerky soup.

"Second Expeditionary Squadron! Lunch is ready!" I called.

Everyone set their jobs aside to gather around me. I made sure they all washed their hands properly, since the mud had been poisoned by the tree people.

"I'm sorry that lunch is nothing more than jerky soup..." I murmured.

"It's plenty. I'm just glad to have a hot meal."

I handed the uncharacteristically humble Captain Ludtink his soup and bread.

I said my prayer, thanking this world for its blessings of life.

"Aaaah! Your soups are always the best, Medic Risurisu!"

"He's right. Your cooking just warms my tired bones, Melly."

"I'm glad to hear that."

The other members saw that it was lunchtime. They came over to join us.

"This jerky makes a nice stock for soup. Did you make this too, Medic Risurisu?"

"Actually, Charlotte made it for us."

"Really? It's delicious."

Vice Captain Velrey sounded earnest in her praise. The pot of soup was gone in an instant. Now that my stomach was full, I felt like I could keep going a little longer. Garr's drooping tail had regained its usual shape and began to wag again. I hoped that meant he liked the meal.

"Captain Ludtink was right. Eating a hot meal made me feel more energetic," I said.

My fingers had gone numb from the cold, but were finally starting to warm up again. I ate my bread and soup until my belly was nice and full. That was when I started to feel eyes on us.

"Um... What are the other people looking at?" I asked.

They didn't appear to be staring at the beautiful Liselotte and Vice Captain Velrey. They weren't looking my way either, of course.

"I think they're jealous of your home-cooked soup, Melly." Zara went on to explain that the other units were only eating hard bread and flavorless jerky. "Thanks to you, we get to have extravagant meals on our expeditions."

"I'm glad you like them."

I'd come to learn how delicious meals were tied to having energy. I hoped to keep being able to provide them with good food from here on out.

"All right! Let's head back!" Captain Ludtink ordered.

We were finally going to return to the royal capital. The mission itself was quick this time, but it came right after a previous exhausting mission. As a result, I was wiped out. From the bottom of my heart, I hoped for plenty of time

to take it nice and easy.							

## Chapter 2: Pancakes and the Long-Awaited New Home

MY worst fear had just become a reality.

"Kreeeeeh!"

Amelia could no longer get inside my dorm room. She must have grown again during the expedition. This wasn't exactly a surprise. She was small enough to carry her in my arms when we first met, but now she was approaching about six or seven feet—making her bigger than a large dog. Her wings gave her significant width too. Amelia had finally reached the point that she could no longer fit through doors built for humans.

"Kreeeh, kreeeh!"

"I can't get inside!" she cried at me with teary eyes.

I'd always known that I would have to look for a house where Amelia and I could live together someday. But I used my days off after expeditions to rest up or work on making Amelia's hats and bows with Zara. I was overly confident that it would all work out somehow. I didn't exactly want to meet with Lord Lichtenberger so that the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau could find us a house either. Between those two factors, I just kept putting it off.

"I-I'm sorry, Amelia. Um... Let's go look for houses tomorrow, okay?"

"Kreeeeh!"

But what was I supposed to do? Amelia was a young lady in her own right. I couldn't just leave her to fend for herself. There wasn't any danger in the dorm for unmarried female knights, but I knew Amelia would be upset. I went to the dorm superintendent, who agreed to lend us a common room for the night. Amelia would definitely be able to fit through its double doors.

I decided to bring in a blanket for Amelia and me to sleep cuddled up underneath.

It was pretty cold in the common room. Despite the early summer season,

nights were still chilly. But at least we wouldn't be sleeping separately. We would probably be just fine, or so I thought...

"A-Achoo!"

"Kreh!"

"Th-Thank you."

Amelia spread her wings to cover my body. A griffin's natural feather blanket was incredibly light and warm. The soft fluff felt so nice against my skin too.

It wasn't long before I was fast asleep.



THE next day, Amelia and I headed to Lord Lichtenberger's house.

"Oh, if it isn't the griffin and Pancake Girl!"

It was none other than Album, the forest fairy, who greeted us. He was an adorable little ferret on the outside, but nothing more than a gluttonous, chatty creature on the inside. He referred to me as "Pancake Girl" because I was cooking pancakes when we first met.

We'd captured Album on an expedition, but didn't know what to do with him after that. Lord Lichtenberger ended up taking the fairy in. The two had even formed a contract. Album had a bottomless pit for a stomach. It was unbelievable.

"Pancake Girl! Make me up some panc— Argh!"

I accidentally stepped on him while he was coiling around my feet.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Album threw his limbs up and collapsed, belly up. He flapped around to get his point across.

"Ow! I'm hurt!"

"You are? Where?" I crouched down to take a look, but he didn't seem injured to me.

"Eating pancakes might just cure me!"

"…"

I didn't think he was hurt at all. I hadn't stepped on him very hard, so he had to be fine. Probably, anyway. I ignored him and continued down the hallway. But then I heard Album trotting up to me again.

"Hang on a minute! Where are my pancakes?"

"I can't make them today. I'm here for something else."

"Awwww!" He chased after me again, this time with a proposition. He must really want those pancakes. "Will you make me pancakes if I bring you fruit from the forest?"

Does he think he can strike a deal with me because we're forest buddies?

"I'm busy today."

"N-No way! Why are you being so— Gyah!"

Amelia had finally had enough. She picked up Album in her beak and brought him to a nearby maid.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh." She asked the maid to throw him outside.

"Aaaah! Pancake Giiiiirl!"

Album's voice faded away as the maid left us with him. Peace had returned to the house.

About time, too.

I'd showed up at the manor without warning, my own mission meaning I couldn't let anyone else get in the way. Fortunately, Lord Lichtenberger happened to be home that day too. However, I wasn't out of the woods just yet.

"Kreeeeeh!"

Amelia was lying down in the parlor with an upset expression. She still hadn't forgiven Lord Lichtenberger. I knew regaining any trust in him would be difficult. I stroked her head and told her to calm down, but her feathers remained puffed up. She was *not* happy.

"You can't snap at the marquess, Amelia."

Amelia closed her beak and puffed up her cheeks. Then she looked away from me, pouting.

"He's going to look for a house for us."

"Kreh!"

I'd never heard her be so defiant toward me. She likely hated him for stuffing her in a bag and then hitting me. But Lord Lichtenberger had apologized for both actions already. It wasn't something so easily forgiven, certainly, but nothing good could come of this. I needed to have a real talk with Amelia.

"Amelia, listen closely to me."

"Kreh?"

"I know that Lord Lichtenberger did bad things to you and me."

"Kreeeeh!"

That caused her to jump up and let out a shrill cry of anger. Maybe she was having flashbacks to those exact moments.

"No, Amelia. You have to behave!"

"Kreh kreeeeh!"

I pet her back, urging her to calm down. She gradually began to relax, little by little.

"I understand that you're angry. But you have to learn how to forgive and forget, Amelia. If you don't, those negative emotions will just fester, hurting you and the people around you."

*"…."* 

Anger was a powerful emotion. Holding on to anger hurt yourself, the person you were angry at, and everyone else who witnessed it.

"Nothing good comes from anger. No matter how unforgivable something is to you, you have to clear your head and quiet those emotions in your heart. It's very difficult, and it can't always be done, but..."

If you can do that, you'll be able to notice the small joys and delights already around you. Amelia needed to learn to forgive, even if it was difficult for her. I

pleaded with her.

"His Lordship is the one who healed your wing, Amelia. He's been working hard to make sure the two of us can live together comfortably. That fruit you eat every day? He gathers it from around the country just for you."

The life Amelia and I had found together was all thanks to Lord Lichtenberger. We wouldn't be able to get by without the support of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. I wanted her to get this point through her head.

Amelia, in all her anger, had forgotten those facts.

"People aren't perfect," I continued. "They make mistakes in their judgment, maybe because they were too emotional, or maybe they just didn't know any better. Everyone makes mistakes. What's most important is what they do next."

If Lord Lichtenberger retained that arrogance from the first time we met, I probably wouldn't have been able to forgive him either.

"His Lordship has kept meeting with us all this time in good faith. Please don't forget that."

"Kreeeh..."

My words seemed to have reached her, as her feathers smoothed back down again. Then she sunk down to the floor. She probably needed some time to think things through for herself.

The room was silent for a while until the doors to the parlor opened up. Lord Lichtenberger and Liselotte entered the room.

"It's nice to see you again, Your Lordship." I tried to stand to greet him, but he waved me away.

"You can sit."

"O-Okay."

Amelia remained calm despite my fears. She was probably still struggling to contain her feelings, since she wouldn't look Lord Lichtenberger in the eyes. I couldn't really tell what sort of expression the marquess was wearing on his face. He seemed strangely nervous.

Amelia, on the other hand, wanted to speak up. I made eye contact with her and nodded.

"Um, Lord Lichtenberger, would you mind having a conversation with Amelia?" I requested.

"You're sure she wants to?"

"I am."

"Well, I've got things I want to say to her too." Lord Lichtenberger stood up and let his head hang low. "Griffin... Amelia. I don't really know what to say. But I'm sorry. All I wanted was to keep a mythical beast safe, but I went too far. I'll never do anything like that again. From here on out, I'll do whatever I can do to protect you and your master, Mell Risurisu."

Amelia's eyes grew watery as she listened to Lord Lichtenberger's apology. "Kreh, kreh kreh." She was expressing her current feelings for the marquess.

"Um, allow me to translate," I interjected. "Amelia said, 'Thank you for everything.'"

Lord Lichtenberger had tears in his eyes too.

"That's all from Amelia, but, well, I think it's a big step forward to have both put your emotions out on the table like that," I said.

It would take some time for them to be open with each other, in all likelihood. They'd made plenty of progress today. Now, it was time to move on to the main topic at hand.

"Lord Lichtenberger, there's something I need to discuss with you," I began.

It was that moment when the maids brought in tea and snacks for us. There were plump scones made with wheat flour and milk tea for us to enjoy together. They even prepared honey water and an assortment of fruit for Amelia, peeling the skins to feed pieces to her directly. They really went above and beyond for both of us. Each and every bite of fruit looked so delicious.

"What is it, Mell?"

"Ah, I'm sorry." The high-quality fruit had stolen my attention. I totally forgot to keep speaking. I cleared my throat and continued. "You see, Amelia has

grown too big to fit in my dorm room anymore, so I'd like to look for a new place to move."

"I see."

The royal capital contained a few homes built for mythical beasts. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau referred people to houses where masters with contracts could live alongside their mythical beasts.

"Do you want to go out looking right now?"

"Would that be all right?"

"It's not a problem on my end."

"Thank you very much. I appreciate your help."

I bowed deeply to Lord Lichtenberger.

We decided to head out an hour later. After Lord Lichtenberger left the room, I reached for a scone.

"I'm sorry, Mell," Liselotte said.

"Huh? What for?"

"For Father. He should have apologized to Amelia the last time they were together." She was referring to the day Lord Lichtenberger, Album, and I went out to the forest to measure my magical energy. "I think Amelia's still upset that he dragged you away from her without a word."

"Ah, that's right. That did happen."

"I'm sure he knew he should apologize, but was too scared to do it because he thought Amelia wouldn't forgive him. That's how I felt about you, Mell."

"Liselotte..." I suddenly felt a little sad. I split my scone in half and gave the other piece to Liselotte.

"Thanks, Mell."

"Of course."

Eating something sweet was a way to get your spirits back up. I greedily piled clotted cream and raspberries on top of my scone. The outside of the scone was

crunchy, but the inside melted in my mouth. The rich clotted cream and soursweet raspberries brought out the hints of butter in the scone dough.

"Delicious, isn't it, Liselotte?"

"Indeed."

The two of us indulged in tea and sweets until it was time to leave.



**AMELIA** agreed to follow our carriage in the sky, since she couldn't fit inside it.

The first house was a lovely two-story home in the center of town. It was painted a beautiful, crisp white all the way up to the roof.

"Wow, how pretty," I commented.

"A family of nobles who lost their fortune tried to sell this place, but no one would buy it. So now they rent it out," Lord Lichtenberger explained.

"Oh my..."

The first home was beautiful in appearance. It even had a garden—plenty of room for Amelia to live in.

However... However...

"Your Lordship, wouldn't this be considered a mansion?" I asked.

The Lichtenbergers lived in a much larger house, but to a commoner like me, this was far too extravagant. The first floor consisted of a living room, kitchen, and parlor. This alone would have been fine. But then there was a music room and three whole storerooms on top of that. The second floor had three bedrooms, a study, and two spare rooms. It was just too much for me. But then I almost fainted when I heard the rent. One month of rent was the same amount I earned in half a year of work.

"Don't worry about the rent. The bureau will cover it," Lord Lichtenberger said.

"B-But I do worry..."

The rent payment was such a massive expense. I couldn't ask them to pay for

something like that.

"There's no need to be humble, Mell," Liselotte said. "We've made a lot of progress researching griffins thanks to Amelia."

It appeared my daily log of observations had been of great use to them.

"Now that we know what fruits she likes on rainy days, what fruits she likes on cold days, and all of those details, we've been able to improve the lives of the griffins in our care."

"Is that right?"

I remembered Liselotte saying that the bureau was looking after a few griffins.

"Of course. They didn't even eat fruit sometimes, but now they eat every single day," she said.

"That's really amazing."

Amelia always told me what fruit she wanted and what her specific preferences were. But such a thing wasn't possible between griffins and humans who didn't share that mental connection.

"We're really grateful for the two of you. Right, Father?" Liselotte said.

"Yes, that's right. So don't worry about covering the rent."

"But I won't be able to take care of a house like this," I protested. "I'd like something a little smaller."

Of course, it would still have to be big enough for Amelia to live in.

"Very well. Father, let's see the next one," Liselotte said.

"All right."

The next place we visited was something closer to a stable. The first floor was a large space meant for horses, while the second floor was a home you could sleep in.

The Lichtenbergers explained that it was a facility for servants employed by nobility. However, with shared carriages becoming more commonly used, few upper-class homes needed places to keep the horses, resulting in these stables going unused.

The first story had floors made of stone and a large water trough that the horses could drink out of. The second floor had a kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bathroom—the perfect place for a person to live alone. The rent was fair too, at one-third of my monthly wages.

"This is plenty big enough for Amelia to live here, and the second floor has the perfect number of rooms, but..." I hesitated.

"Kreh kreeeh!"

Amelia didn't like the prospect of living on that first floor. She told me that the room wasn't cute enough, what with the walls and floor being made entirely of stone.

"I'd also like rooms where Amelia and I can be together at all times." I couldn't bear to live on separate floors. "My ideal house would be one where I can sleep next to Amelia."

"I completely understand!!!" Liselotte enthusiastically agreed.

Lord Lichtenberger crossed his arms and scowled. "So you don't just want a cheap, big house, then?"

"I'm sorry..."

"No, it's fine. But the only houses I know of are either like that big one, or they're stables like this one." He concluded that I probably wouldn't like any of them.

"Very well. I'll head to a realtor myself and look at some other homes," I decided.

"Sorry we couldn't help," he apologized.

"Not at all. Thank you very much for showing me around."

He could have asked a subordinate to take me out like this. But Lord Lichtenberger took the time to accompany me personally.

"You mentioned you couldn't get into your dorm, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then would you like to stay at my home?" he offered.

"What?! I couldn't!"

"Yes! That's a great idea, Father!" Liselotte cheered.

They were insisting I take them up on the offer. But could I really accept such generosity?

"You won't be able to rest and recuperate by sleeping outside of a bedroom, Mell. You don't even have a fireplace, do you?" Liselotte pressed.

"Um, well..."

It was early summer, but the nights and mornings still got chilly. I decided to ask Amelia to help me make a decision.

"What do you think, Amelia?"

"Kreh kreh, kreh."

"Are you sure?"

"Kreh!"

Amelia told me that she wanted me to take the Lichtenbergers up on their offer because she was scared I'd catch a cold. What a kind griffin to worry about me like that.

"What did she say, Mell?" Liselotte asked.

"If it's not too much trouble, we'd love to stay with you," I said.

"It's not any trouble at all!"

"Then I'd like to take you up on the offer."

I was going to be staying with the Lichtenbergers until I had a house of my own to move into.

"I'm going to head to a realtor now, then grab whatever I absolutely need from my dorm," I said. "Amelia, can you go home with Liselotte?"

"Kreh?!" I could tell she was shocked. She must have been prepared to come with me.

"You're a big girl now, so you'll be okay, right?" I said.

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"K-Kreeeeh..."
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I knew that putting it like that would make it hard for Amelia to argue. It was the same with my little sisters. They were so cute. They always chased after me, insisting they'd follow me anywhere. These days, they'd grown into huntresses and sorcerers—true adult elf women.

I, on the other hand...had recently started to feel like I might not be so bad. I went to the royal capital, joined the Enoch Royal Knights, and became a combat medic. I discovered my own skills and had fun every single day.

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"Kreh kreh?"
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"Ah, I'm sorry. I was spacing out. You can go home with Liselotte, right?"

"Kreh!"

She gave a brave response, of course. I knew she would probably be fine.

I left them there and headed to the realtor first. As I remember it, they were located in the shopping district in the center of town. After about five minutes, I arrived at a strange shop with paper covering all its doors and windows. I couldn't see inside at all. The handwriting on the paper was peculiar and a bit hard to read. I wanted to enter the shop and hear what they had to say, but I hesitated since I couldn't even see inside.

After some thought, I decided to turn around and head to the residential district.

I arrived at a street of row houses. My destination was Zara's place. He'd told me I could come whenever I wanted, so I decided there was no reason not to stop by. I was too nervous to enter that realtor's office on my own and wanted to ask Zara if he'd join me.

I knocked on the door and heard Zara, who sounded groggy. I wondered if he'd been asleep.

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"...Who's there?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Sorry to drop by so suddenly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What?! Melly?!"

The door flung open. Zara, looking startled, poked his head out. His bangs were a little messy, and I knew I must have woken him. I could see the pale skin of his chest since two of his shirt buttons were open. Seeing a beautiful man from a snowy country so defenseless felt wrong. I looked away from him.

"Ah, I'm sorry." He noticed my gaze and buttoned his shirt up, flustered.

"It's my fault for showing up without any warning."

"I-It's just fine. I wasn't doing anything! Ah, come in, won't you?" he invited.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. It's a little messy, though."

Standing around wouldn't do any good, so I accepted the offer.

"Meooow!"

As soon as I set foot inside the house, Blanche, the mountain cat mythical beast, rushed toward me.

"Bad, Blanche! Behave yourself!" Zara scolded.

"Meow meow!"

She was as friendly as ever. Blanche was longer than I was tall, so I'd probably go tumbling over if she jumped up on me. I stroked her head, still staying on guard, and watched her tail swing from side to side. She was just like a dog!

"Here, Melly."

"Thank you for having me."

Zara's house was as beautiful as ever. I found a half-finished tablecloth resting on the living room table.

"Wow! This is lovely," I said.

Precise rose designs were stitched into the white cloth. An expert craftsman would be put to shame by his embroidery.

"You think so? I stayed up all night working on this little thing."

"I know exactly how you feel. It's hard to stop once you get focused on sewing something."

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"Totally!"
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As we spoke, I started to hear a scratching sound coming from behind a closed door. It could be none other than Blanche.

"Goodness gracious. She's never this excited with a normal visitor."

"She isn't?"

"I think she likes you, Melly," Zara said.

"It's an honor."

Zara opened the door with a reluctant look on his face. Blanche shot out and jumped up next to me on the sofa, causing it to creak loudly. She was staring at me with her big eyes. I decided to greet her with a nod.

"H-Hello."

"Meow!"

She leaned down and lowered her head, probably so that I could pet her. I gave her some good scratches so that she wouldn't be disappointed.

"You have such lovely fur, Blanche," I said.

"Doesn't she? I brush her every single day. I even have to bathe her once every three days."

"That sounds like a lot of work."

"It is! She takes up so much of my time." Zara explained how hard it was to bathe her, since he only had a small bathroom. "I wish I had a bigger house, but once you take the rent into consideration, I could never live anywhere nicer than this place."

At that moment, I was struck with an idea.

"Would you be interested in living with me?" I asked.

"What? Live with you, Melly?"

"Yes!"

Or, more accurately, he would live with Amelia, Blanche, and me.

"I-I can't!" he cried.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure the idea of sharing a home with me is unpleasant," I said, a little saddened.

"Ah, no, it's not that..."

"It's not?"

"People might spread weird rumors about us, as a young man and woman living under the same roof."

"But you asked me to live with you before, remember?" I reminded him.

"I-I was just saying it on a whim. I didn't really think you'd agree... I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking back then."

"Oh, I see."

I thought the idea of living with Zara sounded fun. But it turned out he didn't feel the same. I couldn't help but feel a little dejected.

"Ah, it's not like that, Melly. I do want to live with you. But men and women almost never live together, and I don't want people to say bad things about you."

*"…"* 

"Um, do Fore Elves ever live with the opposite sex before they're married?" he asked.

"No, they don't. Only after they're married... Ah!"

I finally realized what he was getting at. He was exactly right. Men and women would never live together before they're married.

Zara furrowed his neatly plucked eyebrows and sounded uncomfortable when he shared his next thoughts. "I'm still a man, you know."

*"*...!*"* 

The blood drained from my face. I hadn't even realized how rude my proposal was. Zara was once feminine-looking with his long hair, but now that it was short, he strictly looked like a man.

But it's not like I'd mistaken him for a woman when I asked him to live with me. Flustered, I tried to clear things up.

"I'm sorry, Zara. It's not that I don't see you as a man. I really just felt like it would be fun to live with you, and nothing more." I wouldn't just invite any friend to live with me. I invited him specifically because of who he was. "I don't really know how to put it... But you're a special person to me, in a way that surpasses gender. That much, I'm certain of."

I managed to put words to the feelings I'd always harbored for Zara. There was no better way to express it.

"I'm special to you, Melly? You don't feel the same way about anyone else?"

"Yes. You're irreplaceable."

"I see. I didn't know you felt that way." Zara's stiff expression began to untense. I was relieved to see the misunderstanding was cleared up. "If that's true, it makes me really happy."

Zara's sunny smile was beautiful and full of light.

I always heard that it was hard for men and women to get along, but I wanted to be sure I didn't upset such a kind person. It was why I decided to be completely direct about how I felt.

"I'm sorry. Back to the topic at hand. Weren't you talking about living with Lady Everhart?" he asked.

"Yes, about that..."

I was fortunate enough to receive an offer to live at the Everhart home—the family of Liselotte's mother, who appreciated mythical beasts. But I couldn't help but feel like, if I was going to move somewhere, I wanted a house to call my own.

"I don't think living in a noble's house would be a good fit for me," I said after explaining the situation.

"True, you might not be able to let loose there."

The Everharts owned a long-standing family home. It was filled with chandeliers, luxurious furniture, and marble floors. Everything I heard about it told me they spared no expense.

"I thought as much myself." I couldn't help but feel I would have to be on my

best behavior around Lady Everhart, the home's owner, as well. "That's why I decided to find a home I can call my own and be myself in. But with Amelia as a housemate, that home would have to be a lot larger. Amelia didn't fit through the doors of the cheaper apartments. My only option is to rent an entire house."

"I see. That's a tricky one."

"It really is. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau says they'll pay my rent, but I want to live within my means," I said.

I wanted to cover the majority of the rent myself and have them pay the rest. I would feel too guilty if the bureau paid for all of my housing.

"Sorry, but I'm poor," I confessed.

"You want to be able to always take care of yourself, don't you? You've got a solid foundation. I really like that about you, Melly."

"Thanks for saying that."

I was really glad that Zara and I shared similar values. I probably felt so at ease around him because we looked at things the same way.

"Then do you want to go check out houses now?" he asked.

"Ah, yes! I actually came to ask if you would come to the realtor's office with me."

"Is that right?"

"I should have at least brought you something to eat or drink as thanks first, sorry..." I realized.

"Don't worry about it. I'm really happy just to have you stop by. I only wish I knew you were coming. I would have baked cookies last night instead of working on my needlework."

"C-Cookies?!"

To be frank, Zara's cookies were something I would gladly pay for. I thought back to the nut cookies he once gave me. They were so delicious...

"Yep. Are you free after this? We could do some baking together," he invited.

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"Ah, I'd love to! But I have to go get my things from the dorm after this."

"What things?"
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"Oh, because I'm going to be staying at the Lichtenberger home for a while."

"Really?"

"Yes. I would have loved to have cookies..." I lamented.

"Why don't we buy some on the way back from the realtor?"

"No, I don't think so."

I was already craving Zara's cookies. The ones I made and store-bought cookies didn't compare at all to Zara's. Those cookies had cast a spell on me.

"If we live together, I can bake with you whenever we want," I said.

"That's true."

Living with Zara just sounded like so much fun. If only it was something the two of us could do.

"Why don't we invite someone else to live with us too, Melly?" he suggested.

"Ah!"

That was it. We wouldn't have to worry about how it looked if it wasn't just the two of us.

"But who do we ask?" I asked.

"That's the tricky part..."

"Garr already has a family."

"Right, that won't do."

I wanted to live with someone I was close to, if possible. But Zara and I didn't share many acquaintances.

"What about June, Melly?"

"Definitely not!" I shook my head as hard as I could.

"Really? You two always seem like brother and sister to me."

"I don't want people to misunderstand if they see Ulgus and me walking

home together," I said.

"Misunderstand? What do you mean?"

"L-Like that we're living together unmarried," I explained.

A female knight at the dorm once said something to me about it. She said that since Ulgus and I were similar ages, and we were always relaxed around each other, that we would make a good couple.

"Ulgus is my coworker. We're friends. I trust him and think of him as an adorable little brother," I said. "But I've never thought of being more than friends with him, and I don't want people to think we're together that way."

"But people might think that about the two of us..."

"I don't mind, as long as it's with you."

"What do you mean by that, Melly?"

"?<u>!</u>"

My face started to burn up. I felt like I'd said far more than I should have. My heart was racing and I couldn't look at Zara.



I sputtered out a response, still keeping my eyes away from him. "S-Sorry, please ignore what I just said!"

"That's probably for the best. I'll pretend I didn't hear anything."

Zara agreed to be mature about my strange remark, allowing us to avoid any dilemmas.



**WE** left for the realtor's office, putting the issue of who to live with aside for the time being.

"Oh, Zara, there was a realtor in the shopping district," I said.

"I don't hear very good things about that one."

"Th-That makes sense."

The shop was a suspicious-looking place that I couldn't even see inside of. It sounded like the service there wasn't any less questionable. Zara told me they would rent out broken-down homes without any explanation, show houses with leaky roofs to clients, and force people to move into rooms without any windows.

"That's terrible."

"Still, this sort of thing happens because so many people want to live in the royal capital."

"I see. That makes sense."

As we chatted, we eventually arrived at the Enoch Royal Knights' headquarters.

"Um, Zara?"

"The knights can refer you to houses too."

"They can?!"

This fact was news to me. Zara explained that they offered this service for the knights who wanted to live independently outside of the dorms.

"The knights are the ones who led me to my current house," he said. "It just

happened to allow mythical beasts too."

"Ah, that's right. We'll have to confirm that mythical beasts can live there."

"Definitely. They're friendly and eager to help out, so I'm sure we'll find a good place."

Zara and I decided to have the office refer us to a house. The two of us in our plain clothes really stood out in the barracks. Knights were glancing at us as we passed them in the hall. It was an awkward situation.

"Guess we should have worn our uniforms," Zara said.

"Yes, I didn't expect to draw so much attention."

We hurried to the administration office.

The person who agreed to work with us was the same old man who reunited Charlotte and me.

"Tell me, how is she doing?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Glad to hear it. I looked into it and learned that fox people live in packs, so they grow depressed when separated from their families."

Charlotte certainly was depressed when I first met her. But nowadays, she'd regained her energy and turned into a cheerful young girl. She seemed to be living a comfortable life. Maybe the hastily assigned family roles I gave everyone succeeded in their goal.

"However, I'm worried about what's soon to come," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"At this time of year, lots of noblewomen come to the royal capital to study domestic arts. The dorms are the place where they gather."

"So, there's going to be a big influx of people in the dorms?"

"Correct."

Charlotte was a sensitive girl. I could picture her becoming reclusive if she found herself in the midst of such crowds.

"Then why not ask Charlotte if she wants to live with us, Melly?" Zara suggested.

"That's a good idea!"

Amelia would probably love having Charlotte as a housemate too. Of course, this would all depend on what Charlotte wanted.

"That's right. You came here to see houses, didn't you?"

"Yes. I'm sorry that we got distracted," I said.

"Not at all. I've been worried about Charlotte, so I'm glad to see she has people she's close to."

We returned to the main topic.

"What are you looking for in a home?"

"I'd like a place where I can live with my griffin... She's a mythical beast who will be about the size of a horse." I wouldn't feel comfortable in the kinds of mansions nobles lived in, so I wanted a home that was the perfect size. "There's also a mountain cat in addition to the griffin."

"In that case, you might prefer a bungalow."

A bungalow was a single-story house.

"There are a few houses that would suit your needs." He retrieved some floorplans and unwrapped them for us. "These are double doors. The house itself has high ceilings, so your griffin should have no trouble getting inside."

"Wow...!"

There were three large rooms, a living room, kitchen, and washroom. The bathroom was separated, but it was pretty large—big enough for even Amelia to bathe comfortably.

"Risurisu, do you have any housing allowance from the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau?"

"I believe I'll receive some, yes."

"I don't get any for my mountain cat," Zara added.

"That's all right. You'll receive your marriage allowance, after all."

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"Marr—?!"
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I almost choked, despite not drinking anything. Zara was...oh no, his eyes were wide as saucers. I shook his shoulders, but he didn't react. It was like he'd totally blacked out.

I caught my breath and tried to clear things up. "Um, we're not getting married. We're just living together, and as we mentioned earlier, it won't just be the two of us either."

"I-Is that right? I'm sorry. I was mistaken..."

"It's all right."

As long as you understand! Zara seemed to have regained consciousness now that the misunderstanding was cleared up.

"So, how much is the rent for this house?"

"Actually, we're selling the home, not renting it."

That meant we would have to purchase the whole house to live there.

"It's also a bit out of the way..." He spread out a map of the capital city and its surroundings, pointing at a spot inside the forest. It turned out the house was outside the city itself. "I would say it takes about thirty minutes by horse to reach the barracks from here."

I'd been living in a dorm that was only a ten-minute walk away, so this was a big increase in commute time.

"Also..."

"There's more?"

"Yes. It was constructed one hundred years ago, and thus, the interior has deteriorated quite a bit since then..."

The man explained that, a hundred years ago, a certain nobleman built the bungalow to hide his mistress away. But, upon seeing this humble residence, the mistress was enraged that her lover wanted her to live in such a tiny place outside of the city. That was the end of their relationship, so it seemed.

"So, it remained sitting unused for the past hundred years." The man told us that this was the most problematic property in possession of the Royal Order. "I tell this story to everyone I show the house to, but they all say it must be bad luck to live there, so no one ever buys it."

"That sounds about right."

Not only would we have to pay for the house purchase, but the renovations required money too.

"I wasn't sure if I should show it to you, but it's the only property we own that could comfortably house a griffin."

"Um, may I ask the price?"

"Here you are."

The price written on the document, including the land itself, was about a year and a half of my salary. I didn't know much about market prices, but this felt like quite a steal. We could pay it off over time too, and if I was going to continue my life in the royal capital, I felt like this was the right home to own.

"What do you think, Zara?"

"It's pretty cheap. You don't usually see prices this low, even in rural areas."

"I agree."

However, we couldn't just jump at the chance to live in a house that met our requirements. Ignoring the house's past, the real problem was its state of deterioration.

"Want to go check it out, Melly?" Zara asked.

"Yes, that's a good idea."

It was always possible that it might be more livable than we expected. Zara, the man from administration, and I went to take a look at this problematic house.



WE took a carriage from the barracks and traveled for about thirty minutes before arriving. The house was located outside of the city, deep within the

forest.

"I'm sorry. It's quite the trip to get here."

"Well, you did mention that the guy built this place to hide his mistress away," Zara said.

"Right, he did. But this place sort of reminds me of the forest my family lives in," I commented.

Sunlight streamed through the gaps in the leaves, illuminating the forest brightly. We walked for a little while until the bungalow came into view. There was a wooden fence surrounding the house with some sort of inscription.

"Those would be charms to repel monsters," the man from administration explained. "Supposedly, the nobleman had a sorcerer make those for him."

Such repellent was probably why they could live in the forest. The man from the administration office explained that these charms were very rare, as no sorcerers who could create them remained. We'd also been told that the garden contained a pond and bridge, but the grass was too overgrown to see them.

The bungalow we were most interested in was now in sight—a house with yellow walls and a red roof, just like something a fairy would live in in a children's story.

"Wow, look at that, Zara! The house is so cute!"

"It really is!"

It was a lot bigger than I imagined, but it was what we'd need for Amelia to enter and exit comfortably.

"The house was built with honeystone, which was popular a hundred years ago."

"Oh, so they aren't bricks."

The honeystone had a luster to it. It looked sort of transparent when the sunlight hit it—almost as if they were actually made of honey.

"It doesn't look like a very old house," I remarked.

"It doesn't, does it? The real problem is what's inside." The older man retrieved his key and unlocked the wide double doors. They let out a hearty creak when he pulled on the doorknob. "My apologies for the terrible state inside. We don't have anyone who looks after the place."

We entered the house with lanterns for illumination.

"Melly, you should cover your mouth in here. It's full of dust."

"Th-Thanks."

Zara handed me a handkerchief. It did reek of dust inside the room, which was to be expected of a house built 100 years ago. There was a layer of it every which way I looked. The floor let out a terrible squeak as soon as I set foot on it. The wooden panels seemed to have really deteriorated.

"The whole floor's wrecked. We'd have to redo it all," Zara said.

"It feels like walking on wet leaves on a rainy day," I replied.

"Uh-huh. I think it's probably rotting."

"Oh no..."

I was scared I might fall straight through the floor. I grabbed Zara's shirt for safety, and he held my hand to lead me around.

Fortunately, only the living room had those wooden floors. The other rooms were made entirely of sandstone and limestone, including the walls, floors, and ceilings. They'd turned a little yellow with age, but didn't appear to be worn down at all.

"If we do something about the living room floor, I think we could live here," I said.

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"I agree."
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I was looking around the room when, suddenly, I heard a squeaking sound from somewhere.

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"Eek!"

"It's okay, Melly. It's just a mouse."

"R-Really?"
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The older man tried to open the curtains, only for them to rip in his hands like paper.

"Oh, my! This won't do."

"This is what happens when a house sits for a hundred years."

Now that light was pouring in, I could see how every corner of the room was run down and decrepit. It was like a haunted house from a picture book. The living room contained a large fireplace, shelves, and a marble table. All of them still looked usable. The shelves were filled with rows of porcelain cups.

"Heavens, take a look at these antique teacups!" Zara exclaimed.

The tableware, which had probably been purchased a hundred years ago, had likely increased in value with age. Zara's eyes were absolutely lit up as he stared at them.

"Do the furniture and tableware have to be returned to the owner?" I asked.

"No, I've been told the price covers everything inside and out."

The owner must have sold off the entire house at once.

The halls were wide enough for Amelia to traverse comfortably, even with her wings spread. The rooms were big too and probably had more than enough space for her to relax in.

We went to look at the rest of the rooms, including the separate bathroom.

"Um, how much do you think renovations on this house will cost?" I inquired.

"That's a good question..."

The man couldn't say for sure, since he wasn't a carpenter, but just replacing the wooden floors could be done for about three months' worth of my salary.

"What do you think, Zara?"

"I think we wouldn't have to worry about nosy neighbors out here."

"That's right! We can live here together without any troublesome rumors breaking out."

"It's also lovely how it reminds you of your family's home, Melly."

"Exactly!"

To be honest, I quite liked its outer appearance too. The honey-like stones used to build the house were just like a candy house in a fairy tale.

"Zara, I think we should take this one. What do you say?"

"Absolutely, if that's what you want."

Zara and I had decided on a place to live.

"I'm just a little worried about the renovation expenses," I said.

"Why, I can change out a few wooden floorboards. What do you say we buy the materials and do the rest ourselves?" he suggested.

"Huh?!"

"We made floors out of a wood called bilque in my hometown." Bilque contained lots of moisture and was quick to warp, ruining their floors. He told me that they had to change out their floors at least once a year. "So leave the floors to me."

"All right, then. Thank you so much."

I was relieved to hear that we would probably be able to remodel the home without much cost. We also needed to see if Charlotte would agree to live with us.

"Ah, Zara, I'd like to check with Amelia first too."

"Of course."

It would be her home too, so it was worth asking her opinion, even if I doubted she would reject the idea of living with Zara.

"Please discuss it with Blanche too."

"I think she'll be overjoyed."

"Well, I certainly hope so."

For now, we'd found a home. I was so relieved, I knew I'd sleep well that night.



**AMELIA** gave a simple response of "Sounds good!" Then she asked if it was really a good idea for me to be living with Zara. It sounded like she knew more about the issues of unmarried men and women living together than I did.

The next day, I asked Charlotte to join me during our break to discuss the idea of living with Zara and me. I wanted to finish the conversation before our tea got cold. I tried my best to present it to her simply so that she'd understand.

"Huh? You want me to live with you, Amelia, Mama Zara, and a big cat?"

"That's right. Of course, that's only if you really want to."

"I do want to! I want to live with everyone! But you are sure?" Charlotte looked at Zara with puppy dog eyes.

"What do you mean? I'd be happy to have you," Zara said.

"Really? Then I be sure to go to bed extra early!" she promised.

"Th-That's fine, Charlotte," Zara replied. "You don't need to concern yourself with that sort of thing."

Concern herself with what? I looked at Zara, but he immediately broke eye contact with me.

"Mell."

"Yes?"

Charlotte grabbed my sleeve, her cheeks tinted red.

"I very excited to live with you."

"I'm excited too."

Her cuteness was staggering. I squeezed her in my arms when I saw that big grin on her face.

"Your ears are so fluffy, Charlotte. You have lovely fur."

"You are so soft, Mell!"

"Soft?"

"Uh-huh. You have big chest."

Zara turned bright red as soon as Charlotte said that. Then he started to

choke on his tea. "Are you okay, Zara?" I asked. "I'm... Ngh! ...I'm fine..." He didn't look fine at all. "Mama Zara will feel better with hug too, Mell!" "Are you sure?" I asked her. "They always make me feel better! Hurry, Mell!" "R-Right! Then I should hug Zara, right?" I asked again. "Koff, koff... Huh?!" Zara asked between coughs. "I won't do it if you don't want me to..." I said. "I-It's not that..." "Okay. I'm going to hug you then." With that, I sat next to Zara and gave him a big hug. It seemed to work, since he stopped coughing after that. "Mama Zara, should I leave?" "Ah, wait, Charlotte! You can stay here!" Zara insisted. "Really?" "Really. Just have a seat right where you are," he said. "Okaaay!" I separated from Zara, since he seemed to have recovered. "Are you all right now?" "Yes, and I mean it this time," he said. So he was lying the first time. "Melly." Zara suddenly looked at me with a very serious expression. "Be sure not to do that to anyone other than Charlotte or Liselotte."

I was fully aware that it would give the wrong impression. I would never hug anyone else like that.

"Yes, I understand that."

"I sure hope so..."

Charlotte's ears twitched. She remarked that she was glad that everyone felt better now. I truly agreed with her about that.



**ZARA** completed all the paperwork required to purchase the house. He ordered the floorboards too, and he told me they had already been delivered to our front door. Tomorrow, we were all going to remove the current flooring together. I was talking to Liselotte about it.

"Sounds like it all was settled quickly," she said.

"It really was. I just loved the house as soon as I saw it. Come visit once the place looks nicer," I invited her.

"Really? I can come?"

"Of course. Zara, Charlotte, and I will be waiting for you with freshly baked cookies."

"You sound happy about it," she said.

"Yes, I'm really looking forward to it. However, there is one issue of concern the house is home to a bunch of mice."

"Why not have Album hunt them?" she suggested. "Ferrets are carnivores, I think."

"But Album is a fairy, not a ferret, right?" I asked. While I wasn't one to talk, he seemed too slow to do any real hunting.

"He might be of use. Why don't you take him with you?"

"I can try that."

I took her advice and went off to ask Album for his help. However, I couldn't find him anywhere.

"I wonder where he is?"

"He wanders around all day, so he's never in one specific place."

Liselotte told me they'd applied a barrier around the Lichtenberger home to

stop him from escaping, which meant he had to be inside somewhere.

"I heard my maids saying how they found him asleep in the sugar pot the other day," she said.

"In other words, he's hard to find," I concluded.

That meant there was no other choice but to lure him out. Coincidentally, there happened to be a stack of delicious-looking pancakes in front of me made by the Lichtenberger chef.

"Liselotte, let's use this as bait to trap him!"

"Will something so simple actually work?"

"I'm not sure, but it's worth trying."

We decided to try placing the trap in the hallway.

It was a very simple trap. We propped a large basket up with a pole and tied a string around it. Then we set a plate of pancakes underneath it. If Album came toward them, I would pull the string and trap him in the basket.

"Our plan is perfect," I said.

"But he's an intelligent fairy. I doubt he'll fall for it."

Liselotte and I hid around the corner and waited for Album to show up.

"Hey, Mell. Why don't we just have Father summon Album?" she asked.

"I don't want to bother His Lordship with this."

"But such a simple trap won't work on a fai—"

Suddenly a white shape appeared in the hallway.

"I smell something sweet! What could it be?"

Album had been lured in by the smell of pancakes. Liselotte's eyes went wide. She couldn't believe it.

"Wow, pancakes! Did Pancake Girl make these?"

Why didn't he find it strange that my pancakes were sitting out in the hallway? It was very confusing. But this meant Album was ours for the capturing. Once I was sure that he was inside the basket, I yanked the string.

"Go!"

Album was trapped inside the basket.

"Hey! What's going on?! Everything got all dark!"

I raced over and pinned the basket down firmly over the creature. But it looked like Album had decided to dig into the pancakes before even thinking of escaping.

"Yaaay... Hey, these pancakes are from this place's chef! I wanted the ones from Pancake Girl! Although, these are nice too!"

He knew they weren't mine before even tasting them? Not to mention, he was still eating the pancakes in his current situation. He was truly a gluttonous fairy.

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"Album, can I have a moment?" I asked.

"Hm? It's Pancake Girl. What is it? What do you want with me?"

"Yes, it's me. I have a favor to ask."

"What favor? What favor?"

"It turns out that my new house has mice in it..."
```

"Do you not like mice, Album?"

"They bite! Of course they scare me!"

*""* 

"Eek! Scary!"

He looked like a carnivorous animal, but was still a fairy on the inside. He probably wouldn't be any help when it came to mouse extermination. I was about to give up when Liselotte came up with an idea.

"Mell, what if you make him pancakes in exchange for help with the mice?"

"That's a good idea. I'll make you special pancakes if you catch my mice, Album."

"Wait, really? Then I'll get those mice for you!"

Ah, Album. You're such a simple fairy. But that's why I'm going to be able to

get rid of my mice.

"I probably won't be able to help you if I go there," Liselotte said.

"That's not true. I'd love to have your help, Liselotte."

"Then I'll just have to join you."

Tomorrow, I would be relying on Liselotte and Album to help remodel my new home.



**MY** worries about the cloudy sky proved needless when the next day came. The weather was sunny, with a blue, cloudless sky.

Album, Amelia, Liselotte, and I led Charlotte to our new house.

Charlotte's eyes lit up as soon as she saw the place.

"Wooow! Mell, the house is honey-colored! So pretty!"

"It really is a strange color," Liselotte commented.

The house was built entirely with honeystone, which was rarely mined these days. ...Of course, that was in part due to the house's interesting history.

Album approached the house and began to lick the honeystone.

"No flavor..." he pouted.

"Of course not. It's not actually honey," I said.

"Awww...."

Album was a glutton above all else. He had *just* eaten breakfast and everything.

"All right, Album. Please hunt those mice for me."

"R-Right..."

I handed him a leather bag, but he didn't seem very enthused.

"I'll make you pancakes for lunch," I promised.

"Really? You will?"

"Of course. So please give it your best shot."

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"Okaaay!"
```

Now with high spirits and determination, Album entered the house. But then...

"Gyaaaaah! There's a giant mouse! Even bigger than me!"

"Yikes..."

"Eww..."

It sounded like he was up against a massive foe. Album rushed up and clung to my foot, begging me with tears in his eyes.

"I'm scaaaared! I can't catch that thiiing!"

"B-But..."

I couldn't live here without getting rid of the mice. I wasn't sure what to do, but Liselotte had an eager suggestion of her own.

"Shall I burn them up, Mell?"

"No thank you, but I appreciate the offer."

That could result in the entire house going up in flames, so I politely declined the offer.

"We'll just have to lay another trap to—"

"Want me to catch mice, Mell?" Charlotte asked.

"Huh?"

"I very good at catching mice." Charlotte explained that mice used to get into the food stores of her fox person village and it was her job to get rid of them.

"But this mouse is bigger than Album," I said.

"That okay. Mice in my village were big too."

"R-Really? Then can I count on you?"

"Of course."

The leather bag Album took was too small, so I handed Charlotte a bigger one.

"May I have wood pole too?" she asked.

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"S-Sure."
```

She was apparently going to use Gula as a weapon.

"I'll be back!"

"Thanks, Charlotte."

I tore Album off my foot and ordered him to go with Charlotte.

"Aww! I don't wanna!"

"If that's the case, then I won't make any pancakes."

"I'll be back soon!"

Ah, Album. Such a simple fairy you are. That's my second time thinking that since yesterday.

I started to hear a commotion from inside the house, followed by Album's screams of "Eeeeek! A mouse!" and Charlotte's "There! Bite it, Album." Album was crying that he couldn't do such a thing.

I could probably leave Charlotte in charge of any mice.



"What do you want me to do, Mell?" Liselotte asked.

"Could you and Amelia make a simple stove for lunch, Liselotte? For now, I just need a place to cook and a place to burn waste."

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"All right."

"Please help her too, Amelia."

"Kreh!"
```

After they left to go gather stones, I suddenly realized something. The time that Zara was supposed to meet us there had long passed. It was unusual for him to show up late. But just then, I heard a horse's whinny.

I turned around to see Zara on a horse alongside Blanche.

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"Zara! And Blanche!"

"Sorry we're late."

"It's fine. What happened?"

"She just insisted on coming with me."

"Mraw!" Blanche raised one paw to greet me.

"She really wanted to come when I told her about the new house."

"I-I see..."
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Zara told me that his horse wouldn't run straight because it was scared of Blanche. I understood why having such a big cat alongside it was concerning. The horse had my sympathies.

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"Caught it! Album, grab its head!"
"Nooooooo!"
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It sounded like Charlotte had already caught the first mouse. She was a fast worker.

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"They're sure loud in there. What are they up to?" Zara asked.

"C-Catching mice."

"Hm, I see."
```

"Mraw!"

Blanche's eyes lit up when she heard about the mouse hunt. She stared up at Zara.

"Does she want to help catch the mice too?" I asked.

"I've never made her do anything like that before..."

"Those must be her mountain cat instincts."

"She's not even a carnivore. How strange." Zara told Blanche not to bite anything, then let her inside the house.

"Wow! A big kitty is here!"

"Wh-Why?!"

The inside only grew louder and louder. Charlotte had scampered all across the house and ended up collecting four large mice in the end. I tried my best not to look at the mice wriggling around inside the leather bag and praised Charlotte for her work.

"You're amazing, Charlotte!"

"The big kitty cat helped me. Album only helped a little."

"But I tried so hard!"

We released the captured mice into the forest. They were plump and meaty, but mice weren't edible.

"Please wash your hands, everyone. Mice are covered in germs," I said.

"Okaaay!"

Now we could finally get to work without mice around. The first step was to strip the floors. Zara used a tool with a curved end to take off panel after panel. Charlotte stripped them with her bare hands.

I carried the ruined floorboards to the garden, using them as fuel for the stove the others made. Amelia used her claws and beak to shred the panels to pieces, then Liselotte burned them with a fire spell.

"Liselotte, Amelia, try not to hurt yourselves, okay?" I stressed.

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"Yes, I know that."
```

"Kreh!"

Blanche helped haul the floorboards too, but gave up along the way and set them down in a random spot. Album had to sit on Blanche's head and guide her toward Liselotte.

It was time to get started on lunch. Today's lunch was going to be pancakes, just as I promised Album. It was easy to get tired of eating nothing but sweet pancakes. I decided to try making some salty ones too.

First, I whipped up the pancake batter.

I started by making a sweet sauce. The garden was covered in weeds, but it did have a single raspberry tree. I added lots of sugar to counteract the still-sour berries and squeezed some citrus juice in as a finishing touch. This would make it even more delicious.

Now that the sauce was complete, I started on the pancakes themselves.

I separated the egg whites and yolk, adding sugar to the egg whites to create a fluffy meringue. Then I added milk and flour to the yolks, mixed in baking powder, and stirred until the batter was white. Then I mixed both parts into a single bowl. The most important thing here was to preserve the texture of the meringue.

Once I stirred the batter up, I cooked it in a pan slathered with butter. I added some water along the way and covered it with a lid to steam. That way, they turned out nice and fluffy.

For the salty pancakes, I mixed cheese and forest walnuts into the batter and cooked them like that. The pancakes were still piping hot when I added fried eggs, salt, and pepper on top. With that, the salty pancakes were complete.

"Lunch is ready, everyone!"

Album showed up first after that call.

"Pancakes!"

"Yes, they're pancakes."

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"Can I eat them?!"
```

"You worked hard, so go ahead."

"Woo-hooooo!"

Blanche and Charlotte came next. Zara followed them.

"Whoa, Charlotte! Your face is all dirty."

"I found pretty rock under floor."

"Oh my gosh, Blanche! You're a mess too!"

Charlotte and Blanche had both been playing around under the floor, by the look of things. I washed the dirt off Charlotte's face with a damp towel.

"Hehe! That tickles!"

"Just a little bit more..."

The rock had been buried deep in the dirt, which Charlotte used her apron to wipe clean. I took a closer look and saw that her apron was covered in dirt.

Zara was trying his hardest to clean up Blanche's face and paws.

Once I cleaned her up, I asked Charlotte to show me the rock she found. It was about the size of the space that formed when I pressed my index finger and thumb together. Its surface was smooth, with a luster as if honey was trapped inside.

"Pretty, right, Mell?"

"Wh-What's this...?!" There was some sort of bug or something inside the rock. "Zara, isn't this amber?"

"It looks like it... But if anyone would know, it would be Liselotte."

"That's true." I asked her once she returned with Amelia. "Hey, Liselotte. This is amber, isn't it?"

"It is. I've never seen one so transparent, and there's something inside..."

"Is it a bug?" I asked.

"Well... It's too small to tell."

Amber was a form of tree sap that crystallized over long periods of time. Sometimes, they even crystallized with ancient creatures trapped inside.

"I hear you can sell these to collectors for a good price," Liselotte said.

"Really?"

It didn't likely belong to the house's owner, since it was buried in the dirt.

Zara patted Charlotte's head with a smile and told her how to use the amber. "Good for you, Charlotte. It might make a nice necklace or brooch."

"You can do that?" she asked.

"Of course. I'll show you sometime," Zara said.

"Yay!"

Album interrupted their pleasant conversation with a deeply voiced question.

"Um... Can we eat now?"

"Oh, that's right."

I thought they'd start without us, but everyone was waiting patiently. Album was surprisingly polite.

Everything was prepared once I served fruit for Amelia and Blanche.

"All right, let's eat."

First, I said my prayer, expressing gratitude for the food. Then I took a bite of the sweet pancakes.

"Mmm! So fluffy!"

The pancake batter had retained much airiness thanks to the meringue. Its sweetness paired perfectly with the sweet and sour raspberry sauce. I glanced at Album to see how he liked it. But he was frozen in place, still gripping his fork.

"What's the matter, Album?"

"These pancakes...came from Pancake Girl...?!"

"Um, did you not care for it?" I asked.

With eyes as wide as saucers, he squeezed his fork and shook his head. "This is the tastiest thing I've ever eaten."

"What? You're exaggerating, surely."

"I mean it!"

Maybe it tasted better after all his hard work that morning.

"Your pancakes really are delicious, Mell," Liselotte said.

"I-Is that right?"

"I love your pancakes too, Melly."

This came as high praise. Liselotte ate delicious food every day, while Zara was an excellent cook.

"Mell's pancakes are yummy! Eating them makes me smile!"

"Thanks, Charlotte."

My cooking made *everyone* smile. Just thinking about that filled my heart with joy.

Album approached me in my moment of happiness. He tugged on the bottom of my skirt and questioned me nervously.

"Pancake Girl. Will you make me pancakes again someday?"

"Sure. I'll make you pancakes on occasion, so long as you're not up to no good."

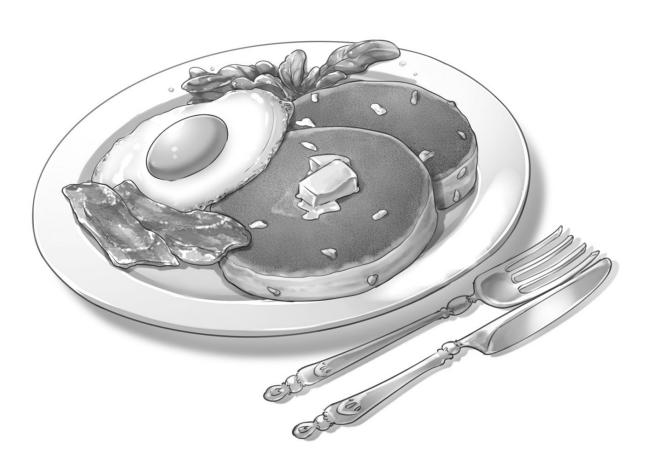
"Yaaay!"

That should succeed in making Album a bit more well-behaved. It had to... right? The power of pancakes was just that intense—at least, I certainly hoped.



**THE** work of stripping the floor ended after we burned the boards. We would place new ones down next time. There was still so much to do: clean the house, pull weeds in the garden, and all kinds of chores.

Progress on the house was going to be a slow, but steady job. I looked forward to the day that we could finally move in.



## Chapter 3: Downpour, Elves, and Mushroom Crab Noodles

I stared up at the bright blue sky above the royal capital. There wasn't a single cloud in sight, and I felt refreshed just looking at it. We could only feel the sun on our skin through gaps in the trees when I lived in the Fore Elf village. After all, we were creatures who lived deep in the woods.

Thanks to that upbringing, whenever I walked around town, children pointed at me and cried "Fairy!" At that point, a motherly woman always had to tell them, "No, that's an elf. Don't get too close!"

Elves were seen as weirdos in the capital. I'd also learned that people thought we were pranksters after I found a picture book about elves in a bookstore. Although, children seemed to love that story. But elves didn't actually care for mischief. They were probably confusing us with goblin folklore. It was very unfortunate and upsetting.

The townsfolk saw elves as creatures from stories. When encountered in real life, they were to be avoided. This wasn't just damage to our reputation done because of a picture book either—the elves who came to the capital themselves were *actual* weirdos.

Elves were a varied bunch. Some could live up to a thousand years, while others lived to be only one hundred. Fore Elves had life spans on the shorter side. But all races of elves shared something in common. We loved the lands we called home and lived quiet lives, following in the footsteps of our ancestors' traditions.

Any elf willing to stray from that norm and move to the city essentially *had* to be an oddball. That was why the townsfolk saw them as weirdos and even normal elves like me suffered from this poor reputation. But the knights of the Royal Order were quick to accept an elf like me. Though, maybe that shouldn't surprise me. It was simply who the Enoch Royal Knights were as people.

The knights were willing to accept whoever showed up, regardless of their race. There were beastfolk like Garr, centaurs, lizard-headed dragon people, cat-sith, and all sorts of races that seemed to come straight out of a picture book. But they put in plenty of hard work every single day. I'd never seen any of those myself—only heard talk of them.

I always appreciated how open-minded the knights were.

One day, we received a mission specifically for me, as an elf.

What job could possibly have an elf connection that I can help with...? I held my breath and waited for Captain Ludtink's information.

"You know the Dehde Grasslands, right?" Captain Ludtink asked. "It's a day and a half away from the city by carriage."

Vice Captain Velrey was the only one who nodded back to the captain. "The rookie knights train out there."

"Right."

He explained that the Dehde Grasslands were a big meadow to the west, located in Viscount Waston's territory. The viscount lent out his land for newly recruited knights to train on. Vice Captain Velrey told us she'd traveled there many times as an instructor. She spent a lot of time teaching the knights in both daytime and nighttime.

"I heard the Dehde Grasslands have started to become a popular sightseeing spot too," Vice Captain Velrey commented.

The meadow was full of natural food sources and was famous for being a treasure trove of mushrooms during autumn. Lord Waston kept the land open to the people for free, which only helped increase its popularity.

"Reports say that a heavy rain has been coming down on the Dehde Grasslands for about half a month now." Captain Ludtink told us that such an endless storm was unthinkable outside of the rainy season. "It's not just messing with the ecosystem there. The river next to it is flooding and turning the whole meadow into a swamp."

Vice Captain Velrey was shocked by his report. Emotion started to fill her

squinting eyes, but I couldn't tell if it was sadness or anger.

"I hear it was a beautiful meadow," Captain Ludtink said. "Isn't that right, Velrey?"

"Yes... There are fresh green sprouts budding in the spring and brightly colored grass at the start of summer. It starts to turn golden yellow in the fall. It's really beautiful..." she trailed off.

But all of those picturesque fields had been lost in the unnatural rainstorm.

"Now, back to the elf part..." Captain Ludtink told us that a member of the Magic Research Bureau had traveled to the Dehde Grasslands for a survey only to spot a single elf in the fields. "They said she was a beautiful elf with long white hair like cotton and porcelain skin."

To my surprise, it sounded like an elf right out of a fantasy story.

"I see. So, she's a fantasy elf," I remarked.

"Fantasy elf? What kind of elf are you, Risurisu?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"I... I'm not evil like a dark elf. I suppose I'm...unique...?"

Unique? What's so unique? I'm not one of those weirdo elves.

"Ah, that's it. I'm a normal elf," I declared.

"Does it matter? Can I keep talking?"

"I'm sorry. Please do."

The members of the Magic Research Bureau were speculating that this elf was causing the rain in the meadow. They suspected weather magic was the cause. Controlling the weather was no easy feat, but a High Elf would almost certainly be capable of such spells.

"The worker tried to get close and talk to the elf, but she scared 'em off with a lightning spell."

The beautiful elf had no intention of talking to anyone.

"That's why they want a fellow elf to try negotiating with—"

"N-No way!" I interrupted. She may have been an elf, but that didn't mean we

were both Fore Elves. "There weren't any beautiful, white-haired elves in my village, so there's no way we know each other whatsoever."

"I figured. I tried tellin' that to my bosses..."

"I-Is that right?"

I would expect nothing less of Captain Ludtink. He seemed to actually know a bit about elves.

"You both being elves means nothing. If people don't understand each other, it doesn't matter if they share a race or language. They're still not gonna get along."

"I couldn't agree more," I said.

"So I told them we should get a professional negotiator too, but the higher-ups wouldn't listen to me." Captain Ludtink told us that they ended up sending another member of the Magic Research Bureau instead. But it was no use. "That's why they want us to make another elf talk to her. Talk about a pain in the ass."

Captain Ludtink had no right of veto. We had no choice but to go on an expedition to the Dehde Grasslands.

"So, we're heading out," he sighed. The Dehde Grasslands was located next to a town ruled over by Lord Waston. "We'll be spending our nights in Lord Waston's territory."

I knew we wouldn't be able to camp outside in such a bad rainstorm, so that was very appreciated.

"But we don't know what'll be out there, so pack food to bring with us," the captain ordered.

"Understood," I said.

The Magic Research Bureau had also given us some supplies for our mission.

"They're boots and rain gear that deflect rain," the captain explained.

"W-Wow!"

"There's even a waterproofing cream you can apply to your boots and stuff!"

There appeared to be a spell engraved on the inside of the black jackets that deflected rain. Waterproofing the boots was a small change too, but I could tell it would make a big difference. I'd always thought the Magic Research Bureau only developed weird stuff. But now I knew they were coming up with real creations too.

"They said they wanted to know how it felt wearing the stuff when we're finished," Captain Ludtink said.

So they gave it to us for research purposes, not just to be nice. But I knew the gear would be helpful on a mission in a downpour anyway.

"That's all. Be ready to leave in an hour, sharp," the captain said.

We didn't need to hurry as much as usual this time since no one's life was in danger, nor was there a chance of any disaster breaking out. I went up to Captain Ludtink after everyone had dispersed.

"Um, Captain Ludtink..."

"What?"

"Should Amelia come with us?"

"Kreh, kreh kreh?!"

"I want to join too!" she was crying from behind me.

"You can't wear any rain gear, Amelia," I pointed out. "Do you want to walk around soaking wet?"

"K-Kreh." Amelia absolutely hated getting wet in the rain. It might have been instinct on her part, since she couldn't fly when her wings were soaked.

"Why don't we put this cream all over her body?" Captain Ludtink suggested.

"There's definitely not enough, though."

The can of waterproofing cream was bigger than Captain Ludtink's palm. But it was nowhere close to enough to cover Amelia's whole body.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh..."

Amelia still insisted that she wanted to go with me, even if it meant getting wet. Here I was thinking she'd learned to be independent, yet she still refused

to be apart from me, since I was like a mother to her.

"Then why don't we leave her in Lord Waston's town while the rest of us are in the Dehde Grasslands? We'll be traveling for three days total to get there and back, and since we don't know how many days the actual mission will take, I'll bet she doesn't wanna be alone all that time." Despite his frightening face, Captain Ludtink had a soft spot for Amelia.

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"That sounds good. What do you think, Amelia?"
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"Kreh..."

She seemed to accept the condition that she wouldn't join us in the Dehde Grasslands. Now I could prepare for the mission without any worries.

"All right, let's start packing," I said.

"Kreh!"

The sky was so bright and blue. It was hard to imagine any part of the world being flooded with rain. Just what was that elf's aim in bringing rain down on the meadow?

As I stared up at the sky in a daze, Charlotte came running toward me from the food storage.

"Mell, I made more canned food."

"Wow! Thank you so much."

Ulgus must have given Charlotte a waterproof bag. I looked inside and saw a healthy amount of food packed up neatly.

"You're so good at packing bags, Charlotte."

"Eh heh heh!"

I doubted I could put everything back in the same way if I took them out now. Charlotte's method was like a work of art.

"I learn how to pack from maid teacher."

"Really, is that right?"

Charlotte told me how packing bags was an essential skill for servants.

"Packing luggage for travel, for brides to take to new husband's house, and carrying grocery bags. Everything is packing, so we must learn."

"I see."

I wanted to learn that skill too and wondered if they would train a knight. I would have to ask Captain Ludtink about it later.

After that, I packed my bag with changes of clothes. I knew that it would probably be hard to avoid every single raindrop, even with waterproofing methods, so I made sure to include extra shirts and underwear.

With that, it was time for Charlotte to send me off like usual.

"I'm sad, but I wait for everyone to come home again."

"Charlotte...!"

"I will make lots of field rations while you go." She was squirming as she spoke. The girl was so cute, I couldn't help but pull her into a hug and squeeze her tight.

"We'll finish up our mission and be back soon," I promised.

"Good luck, Mell."

"Yes, thank you!"

I had to resist the urge to take her with us. Charlotte called out to Amelia next.

"Be safe, Amelia."

"Kreeeh!"

Amelia crouched down so Charlotte could gently stroke her beak. Then she hugged Zara and Garr before putting her finger up to Sly's jar. Sly returned the gesture from the inside of the glass. Charlotte next patted Liselotte's head and gave Ulgus some candy. She was treating them just like children.

"Big Sister Anna, Bandit, let's have tea party when you get back."

Vice Captain Velrey smiled and stroked Charlotte's hair. Captain Ludtink silently accepted the title of "Bandit." I always had to tense my muscles to stop myself from laughing at this part.

"All right, let's get goin'!"

"Have a good trip!"

Charlotte gave us a heartfelt goodbye as we set out on our expedition.



**THE** road to Lord Waston's territory was shockingly peaceful. We usually ran into monsters when we traveled somewhere in a carriage, but this trip came without a single incident. We ended up arriving in just one day, despite the estimate of a day and a half. Vice Captain Velrey explained it this way: "It takes longer to get here the more people you have."

"That makes sense."

She told me how hard it was to lead all those rookie knights during her time as an instructor. The two of us chatted about it, and before we knew it, the scene outside of our carriage windows had turned from the forest to the town.

Lord Waston's territory was lush and green, surrounded by wheat fields on all sides. Their sprouts shone underneath the sunny sky. However, one single spot was clouded over. That could be nowhere else but the Dehde Grasslands.

Before we headed there, we decided to visit Lord Waston and listen to what he had to say.

"Risurisu, put your hood up," Captain Ludtink ordered. "Don't take it off in town."

"R-Right..."

It was believed that the elf's weather magic was causing the rain in the Dehde Grasslands. If anyone saw that I was an elf, they might glare at me or even throw rocks my way.

"Well, they say she's a beautiful elf, so I don't think there will be any issue," I muttered.

"Huh? But I think you're beautiful, Medic Risurisu," Ulgus said.

Liselotte agreed with him. "He's right, Mell. You ought to be careful."

What? Really? Who knew? ... No, I'm an idiot for believing them.

"Ah, an elf!"

I flinched when a child pointed at me and shouted as soon as we entered Lord Waston's town. I thought I'd been instantly found out, but when I looked closer, the kid had his eyes on Zara.

A woman who looked to be the kid's mother covered the boy's mouth and explained, "His ears aren't pointy like an elf, see?" Then she apologized to Zara. "I'm so sorry. He's been reading all kinds of elf books lately..."

"No, that's quite all right."

But he wasn't wrong—Zara was as pretty as any elf beauty. I understood the confusion. In fact, I started to feel embarrassed that I ever believed what Ulgus and Liselotte said to me.

But that was all something for another time.

We arrived at Lord Waston's mansion and heard what he had to tell us about the grasslands.

"Goodness, me. I'm really in a bind." The viscount was a kind-looking man in his late thirties. "I lend the Dehde Grasslands out to the Enoch Royal Knights for their training, but I also organize mushroom harvesting tours..."

The training usually ended by autumn, at which point tourists began going to the Dehde Grasslands to collect mushrooms and sell them.

"They're called pine mushrooms. They're extremely fragrant and delicious."

We also learned that pine mushrooms had to be cooked the same day they were picked, or else the fragrance would be lost. That was how Lord Waston's territory became known as the one place in the world where you could enjoy this delectable cuisine.

"Each year draws more tourists and the land has been very active, but this rain means that the autumn harvest will be close to nonexistent... That's fine. I'll make the best of it. But the problem is that this rain just won't stop." Lord Waston clenched his fists on top of his knees and slumped his shoulders. I could tell he was disappointed. "The only place that's been affected so far is the meadow, which isn't so terrible, but if the town ends up damaged by the rain

too..."

Their crops would be wiped out, dealing a huge hit to the local economy. The tourism industry was already falling apart as it was. Losing the farms would escalate the situation dramatically.

"We had various authorities on magic come in to investigate, but all of them gave up in the end... Have you heard about the elf woman who was spotted in the Dehde Grasslands?" he asked.

"Yeah, we got that report already," Captain Ludtink responded.

"I even saw this elf once myself..." Lord Waston told us that he saw her before the rainstorm first broke out. "It was a very foggy day. I couldn't even figure out where I was. But then...the elf silently pointed in the distance, then turned around and left. I followed the direction she pointed me in and made it back to town."

The Magic Research Bureau had named the elf's weather magic as the source of the storm, but Lord Waston insisted that she didn't seem like a bad person.

"There has to be some other cause behind it," he said.

"That's what we came to look into," Captain Ludtink said. "I can't guarantee we'll solve the problem, if even experts are throwing in the towel, but we'll do everything in our power."

I wasn't used to hearing Captain Ludtink sound so serious, like a true knight. From his spot next to me, Ulgus whispered, "The captain sounded so cool just now..." Liselotte nodded in response.

Before we set out, Lord Waston handed us a leather pouch. "Have some if you'd like, everyone."

"What is it?"

"They're dried pine mushrooms. You can cook them in hot water to produce a rich flavor, almost like soup broth."

It was the area's local specialty, but they didn't have enough to sell at the market currently, so the viscount wanted to give his leftover supply to us.

"Drinking the water makes you feel strangely energetic. Please try it

whenever you can take a break." Lord Waston spoke to us as he handed Captain Ludtink a map of the Dehde Grasslands. "There are a few caves throughout the area. I recommend resting in them when you take your breaks."

It was unusual to see a map of a large meadow. It just proved how popular the area was as a tourist attraction.

"There's a great tree toward the back of the grasslands where lightning often strikes. I would stay away, if I were you," he cautioned.

"Understood."

Our plans were to arrive in the grasslands by evening and begin our mission tomorrow morning, but since it was still bright outside, we decided to head straight there. Amelia was going to stay at Lord Waston's home. The viscount had a son who looked to be about five years old. The boy's eyes lit up as he watched Amelia from afar, clutching a picture book to his chest.

I knew exactly what I was looking at—griffins were creatures straight out of fantasy stories, just like elves.

"I won't let him get too close to your griffin," Lord Waston said.

"Kreh, kreh kreh."

"I don't mind if he gets close," Amelia said. I translated her message and watched the boy rush up to her.

He opened up the picture book about griffins to show her. Amelia was nodding her head as she listened to him rattle on and on about the story. I couldn't believe that, on top of everything else, Amelia was a great listener too.

But this wasn't the time to play the doting parent.

"I'll be back soon, Amelia. Okay?" I said.

"Kreh!"

"Have a good mission!" she replied casually. I seemed to remember her refusing to ever be apart from me only recently. Amelia was growing up.

"Please be safe."

"Thank you, we appreciate that."

I bowed toward Lord Waston, since Captain Ludtink had already spun around and started to march away. I then followed him out of the house.



**WE** walked to the Dehde Grasslands on foot. It was scheduled to be a thirty-minute trip. We were lucky that it was so close, since we didn't want our horses exposed to the rain. Lord Waston's territory had been so sunny, yet the closer we got to the meadow, the hotter and more humid it started to grow.

I pulled my hood tightly over my head when it seemed like we were about to reach the rainy section. I clutched Gula, uncertain of what could be lying ahead. Gula still contained a few mysteries of its own. Its power activated when I was hungry, but I never reached the point of having a totally empty stomach in my normal life.

I once tried to go without eating to study Gula's powers. But it never activated. It probably didn't work when I was in a state of hunger I caused myself. The mystery only intensified. One thing I did know was that I could only select food items out of things I'd already used Gula to kill. It didn't work unless I was the one to kill it either.

Zara had touched the fish he caught with Gula, but they weren't added to the list of food I could choose from. In the end, it was still a weapon I knew very little about.

The once-bright sky became shrouded in clouds and began to drizzle with rain. Each step we took brought us into the intensifying storm.

The Dehde Grasslands were only grasslands in name—they'd been turned into a massive swamp in every direction. We could hardly walk through the muddy ground. Seeing frogs that weren't native to the meadow was proof that this place had been turned into something new. Just as the reports described, it was like a swampland.

It didn't take long before the rushing sound of rain turned to an absolute thunderous downpour.

"This is incredible!"

"Did you say something, Risurisu?"

"No, nothing!"

Calling that rain "crazy" would be an understatement. I could barely hear Ulgus even though he was right next to me. Captain Ludtink, of course, was still loud enough to hear.

I'd never seen such heavy rain. This was more than just a downpour—each drop of rain hit me with the force of a hammer. How could a tiny bit of water be so painful? Our rain gear sent water away from us, but it didn't stop the impact of the rain itself. My face was so soaking wet, it was hard to even blink.

The initial heat of the grasslands was no longer noticeable now that my body had been chilled by all the rain. I couldn't stop shivering almost as soon as we set foot into that storm.

Captain Ludtink spotted a cave and quickly ordered us to rest. We'd only been in the Dehde Grasslands for about thirty minutes, but we already needed our first break.

The cave was supposedly man-made—built for people like hunters to rest in.

Everyone removed their overcoats and sat down on the ground. Liselotte cast a magic ball of light for illumination and started a fire for us too.

"That was awful..." Ulgus was down on his hands and knees in total despair. I understood exactly how he felt.

"I've never seen such intense rain before," I said.

"It didn't rain like this in your forest, Medic Risurisu?"

"No, it didn't."

A change in the ecosystem was unavoidable in the unrelenting rain. Still, it was hard to even take a few steps without being totally wiped out.

"Ah, that's right. Let's try some of those pine mushrooms!"

I decided to cook them in water like Lord Waston suggested, not that it would take much effort. All I had to do was put the dried mushrooms in cups and fill them with boiling water. Unsure of what we should eat with mushroom water, I set out biscuits, cheese, and jerky to have as a snack.

"It's ready, everyone. Eat up."

Everyone picked up the cups of mushroom water, warming their fingers up.

"It's so nice to have something warm," Ulgus said. "Before you came here, we never even heated up water to drink anything."

"Really? Why not?"

"I guess you could say we just weren't focused on that stuff?" Ulgus said.

"Right. We were trying to be careful not to attract monsters, but..." Vice Captain Velrey spoke sadly. "Until now, we just never really had the energy. We were always vigilant from start to finish on expeditions. Of course, that's also what the job requires."

"It's exhausting to always be on edge all the time," Ulgus said. "We never even put the pieces together that it was hurting us."

"We're really grateful to have you, Medic Risurisu," Vice Captain Velrey said.

"But I really haven't done anything."

"It's thanks to you that we've learned how to relax," she explained.

"We never even thought of making field provisions," Ulgus added. "That soup you made us was so delicious."

Garr was nodding intensely too.

"I... I see."

I was learning for the first time just how much I influenced them. Hearing them thank me made me happy, but also a little embarrassed.

"On an expedition, you're on the clock all day, every day. You'll end up exhausted unless you get some time to relax," Vice Captain Velrey said.

"I know what you mean. Being on edge uses up your body's energy," I responded.

Ulgus remarked on how breaks were important as he sipped his pine mushroom water. "Whoa! This is really good!"

I took a sip too, curious about the flavor. "You're right! It tastes like a fancy

soup."

The flavor reminded me of the kind of soup that was stewed over multiple days. It was a deep, profound flavor. Pine mushrooms had to be the most delicious mushroom I'd ever tasted.

"He mentioned how fresh pine mushrooms taste the same, but they have a nice aroma too."

I could only imagine how they tasted when freshly harvested. Lord Waston had given us a passionate speech about how the best way to eat them was grilled with citrus juice—that we would faint if we ever tried it. Now I was dying to try some.

Ulgus's cheeks were turning pink. He looked full and satisfied. I was relieved to see his chilled body regaining warmth.

"Making soup with these must be heavenly," I mused.

"I like the sound of that."

"Let's have pine mushroom soup for lunch then."

If only we had some fresh ones. But the rain had surely ruined the pine mushrooms growing out there. I wondered if a new harvest could come in next year if the rain stopped. Although, I didn't know if the grasslands would ever return from their current state.

"Still, it's hard to imagine that this rain is being caused by a person." It was almost as if nature itself was going on a rampage. "Do you know anything about weather magic, Liselotte?" I asked.

"Just a bit." She explained that only a handful of sorcerers could use weather magic—a form of high magic that was banned in modern times. "The magic was said to first be created for farmlands experiencing a long drought."

It required a massive amount of magical energy, and in the first place, the sorcerer had to know how to cast it. It wasn't unusual for the sorcerer to mistakenly create a storm that ruined the sprouts of all the crops.

"It's really hard to make a rain that lasts even a few hours," she said. "Some people used up all the magical energy in their bodies and couldn't make it back

home."

"Oh no..."

"They used those spells in the sorcerer wars to stop enemy soldiers from advancing too."

"That makes sense. This rain makes it almost impossible to move."

Liselotte nodded when I asked if it was impossible to continue such a massive spell over multiple days. "Definitely impossible for a human. But an elf might be able to manage it."

That was true. We needed to find this elf and talk to her.

Looking outside at the rain, Captain Ludtink murmured to himself, "Looks like it isn't coming down as hard now."

"I agree."

Captain Ludtink took out the waterproofing cream and ordered us to coat our weapons and gloves.

"You'll probably drop stuff in this rain."

Everyone diligently waterproofed their gear. The nimble Garr quickly finished coating things with the cream and began to help Liselotte, who was struggling. Sly did her best to assist too.

"Um, Medic Risurisu, should we put this on our faces too?" Ulgus asked.

"Faces...?"

Indeed, it was an unpleasant feeling to have my face soaking wet while we came here. But I didn't like the sound of putting it directly on my skin.

"Ulgus is right. Get that stuff on your faces." Captain Ludtink, unbothered, began to slather the waterproofing cream on his face. Wouldn't that make him break out? I saw Zara's face twitching too. "You too, Zara."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Zara refused. "I only apply my homemade creams to my face."

"Quit complaining and just do it!"

"H-Hey! What are you doing?!"

Captain Ludtink grabbed him and spread the cream on Zara's face.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Ahto," Ulgus mumbled.

"It's fine. Crow shouldn't be coating anyone's face in the first place." Feeling sorry for Zara, Vice Captain Velrey began to apply the cream too.

"You shouldn't do that, Anna. Your skin might break out," Zara said.

"You can't exactly fight with a wet face. I don't see the harm in using the cream." It was such a brave answer. Vice Captain Velrey was right. I decided to use the cream too.

Sly was coating Garr's face for him. She'd created multiple hands to pat him down as much as she could. It was a special trick only Sly could do.

Liselotte seemed just as annoyed to be applying the cream to her face as Zara. "It's great that this stuff can repel water, but how do you wash it off?"

Everyone gasped when they heard Liselotte's question.

"Did it say anything about that in the instructions, Captain?"

It was a simple question, but Captain Ludtink looked away from her.

"Oh no! Seriously? You don't know?"

He didn't respond to Zara either.

"Don't tell me we can't wash our faces! Give me those instructions!"

*""* 

Zara was shaking Captain Ludtink by the shoulders as he stared off into the distance. I realized he must have left the instructions in the barracks.

"This is horrible!" Zara cried.

He was right. Every one of us was screaming it on the inside.



**NOW** that the rain had calmed, we went back out in search of the elf. The rain was still pouring down on us heavily, but it still wasn't as bad as before. I could see through the mist a little bit better now.

The waterproofing cream was doing an excellent job of protecting my face. Being able to keep my face dry made a huge difference in this whole experience. It was much easier to conduct a search in the rain now.

"Whoa, Medic Risurisu, look at the giant frog," Ulgus pointed out.

"That would be a river frog," I said.

"It's not like that big mountain frog we ate before, huh?"

"That's right."

Mountain frogs only lived in the forests and rivers on mountains, while river frogs only lived in the plains around rivers.

"They look similar, but river frogs are actually poisonous," I explained. "You have to be careful around them."

"P-Poisonous?"

"Yes. Your tongue will go numb as soon as you put them in your mouth."

"Yikes..."

The ecosystem these two similar frogs were part of changed based on where they lived. You couldn't simply eat them just because they looked the same.

"The same goes for mushroom picking," I said.

It was difficult for an amateur to distinguish mushrooms based on their appearance. Some of them would unknowingly consume poisonous mushrooms that made them sick for three days and three nights.

"That's really scary. Ever since you joined us, I've started looking around outside to see if I can find anything tasty."

"Ulgus, it's wisest not to touch anything in nature, even if it looks just like a food you're used to eating," I warned.

"Yeah, I get it. I don't want to be sick for three days and three nights... What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That."

"Oh..."

Something red was floating in a puddle. It didn't look like the kind of red you would see in nature. Ulgus, as an archer, had a sharp eye. His vision was the best out of any of the Second Expeditionary Squadron members. I quickly reported this finding.

"Captain, there's something red over there."

"Go check it out, Garr," the captain ordered.

The fast-footed Garr headed to the puddle, picked up the red thing, and brought it over.

"What is this thing?"

"Is it a candy wrapper?"

When he heard that question from Vice Captain Velrey, Ulgus lowered his head sadly.

"I'm sorry. It turned out to be useless."

"No, you did a good job spotting it."

"Huh?"

Captain Ludtink patted Ulgus on the shoulder. But he was too forceful and nearly knocked Ulgus off his feet. Garr supported him and stopped his fall.

"Thank you, Garr. Um... So what did you mean?"

"This candy is only sold at the knights' canteen. They ban rookies from bringing in any personal items when training here, right, Velrey?" Captain Ludtink checked with her.

"They're supposed to be banned, at least..." she replied.

"Then it's possible a rookie ignored the rule and brought it in without permission." Captain Ludtink put the candy wrapper in his leather pouch to submit alongside a report.

"How strict, banning candy during training exercises," I said. "Of course, I know it's not a field trip either."

Vice Captain Velrey responded to my remark. "Endurance, above all else, is a requirement for a knight's duties. Training exercises are meant for rookies to experience every possible extreme they'll encounter on a mission. That's why they're stripped of freedoms and can only eat the bare minimum of food."

"I-I see..."

But not only did someone break this rule, but they even discarded their trash in the grasslands.

"I don't know who the hell their instructor is right now, but I'm gonna be sure they hear about this." Captain Ludtink had the most bandit-like look on his face that I'd seen all day.

Sadly, we discovered a few more pieces of garbage after this. There was paper used to wrap up field rations, alcohol bottles, sketchy magazines—enough trash to make my head hurt.

Ulgus was the one to discover most of it. His eyes glinted like the tracking dogs of the Royal Order.

While Garr was away recovering some trash, I spotted something in a nearby puddle. "Th-That's...!" I rushed over and plunged Gula into the puddle. "Got it!"

I pulled it back out once I felt it hit. What emerged from the water with a splash was...a crab.

"What's that, Risurisu?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"A freshwater crab!"

The crab was grabbing Gula with its large pincers. It was bigger than my head and heavy too. These freshwater crabs had unique, giant claws. Their meat was delicious too.

Zara held a leather pouch open for me to stick the crab in. It was putting up a good fight, but I knew it would wear itself out soon enough. But it wasn't letting go of Gula either, so I had to carry both pole and bag over my shoulder. It was pretty heavy, but not enough to stop me from walking.

"Risurisu kinda looks like The Fool card," Captain Ludtink remarked to no one in particular.

I remembered The Fool from that set of fortune-telling cards and could admit I looked like the depiction. It was also definitely a foolish act to carry a crab around with me while on a mission. The comment really *did* suit me in this moment. But I couldn't let it get to me, so I pretended I never heard him.

"But this freshwater crab is a lot bigger than the ones I see at the market," I said.

"It probably doesn't have any natural predators out here."

"I suppose so."

We decided to stop for a lunch break when we found a second cave. I knew I could make something good with my freshwater crab and the pine mushrooms.

I asked Ulgus and Liselotte to make me a stove. While they were busy with that, I could get started on the cooking. I first needed to clean the crab of mud and dirt, but I didn't have a lot of water to work with.

"Hmmm..."

I could collect some rainwater, or maybe just add enough salt to the crab meat to make it taste better. As I was working on a solution, I heard a tapping sound coming from next to me.

"Sly?"

She was knocking on the lid of her bottle. I carried her to my cooking area with Garr's permission.

"What is it?"

Sly was trying to tell me something with her hand motions. She formed a shape that looked like a crab and then made a biting gesture toward it.

"Um, do you want to eat the crab too, Sly?"

She immediately made an "X" symbol above her head. That meant I was wrong, and she didn't want to eat the crab. Then she made a spitting gesture and removed the crab from her mouth.

"Swallow the crab, and spit something out...? Ah, I get it!" Sly must have been offering to clean the crab for me. When I asked her if this was correct, I received

a thumbs up. I had no idea she could clean food like that. Sly was a true prodigy. Garr gave me permission to borrow her for this task, so I asked her to lend me a hand.

Once she drank the water, Sly grew to be over twice her usual size. Then she swallowed up the freshwater crab. It squirmed around inside her mouth since it was still alive. The crab started to stretch out its giant pincers, turning Sly's cheeks claw-shaped.



"A-Are you all right?" I asked.

She hopped up and slammed herself back down on the ground to get the crab to stop moving. Then she wriggled her mouth around before spitting out a dark liquid.

"Ah, it's the mud!"

Sly spit out the crab after that. It looked like she'd squeezed it to death as she sucked out the mud, which was a big help.

"Wow, thank you so much, Sly!"

She stuck her hands on her "hips" and puffed her chest out proudly. She'd deflated back to her regular size too. This was a relief, since I was worried she would be stuck like that.

I could now go back to working on lunch.

I started by crushing the crab and boiling it in my pot, still in its shell. This would be a delicious meal on its own, but I added pine mushrooms to the pot to make it even tastier. I scooped out the foam that bubbled up to the top. Then I added a bit of salt and pepper for seasonings, completing my "freshwater crab and pine mushroom soup."

Big chunks of crab in the shell floated in the soup bowls. It didn't look pretty, but I had faith in how it would taste.

"Lunch is ready, everyone." I took some bread and cheese, and with that, it was time to dig in. "Please split the crab with a knife and scrape the meat out."

The crab wasn't just there to add to the broth. The meat was delicious too. I knew getting to said meat might be a bit of a chore, but I insisted they give it a try.

Ulgus was the first to eat. "Wow, you were right. This crab is amazing!" He seemed to like the freshwater crab. He stuck his knife under the shell and scraped out the meat.

I took a bite of meat and sipped the soup too.

"This crab meat... It's so tender and rich. This soup is also like, what would you

call it? I can't even put it into words," Ulgus said.

"I can hardly believe it," Liselotte chimed in. "This soup tastes so refined. It's rich, but simple enough so as not to be overwhelming. I don't know if even the high-class restaurants sell such a delicious soup."

I was pleased to hear Liselotte, with her noble upbringing, compliment my soup. Of course, it was all thanks to the flavors of the ingredients, in the end.

I was smirking to myself when Captain Ludtink butted in. "I've been thinkin', Risurisu. Shouldn't you open a restaurant instead of being a knight?"

"I only wish that people in the capital city would accept an elf-owned restaurant..." I said.

"Ah, that's true."

That brought me back to the present. We weren't here to pick up garbage or eat crab and pine mushroom soup—we were searching for the elf causing the rain in the Dehde Grasslands.

"I wonder if we'll find her," I muttered.

"Who knows?" Captain Ludtink replied.

I suddenly realized that Vice Captain Velrey's hands had fallen still. "Do you not like it, Vice Captain?" I asked.

"Oh, no... The soup is great. I was just thinking about something. Sorry, it's rude to eat your food with my head in the clouds."

"It's all right. Some days are just like that."

Maybe Vice Captain Velrey was holding on to some complicated feelings about this mission. Her usually gallant posture was just a bit more slouched today.

"You must be sad to see the place from your memories in such a state of ruin," I said.

"Yeah... That's right."

She'd also come to discover that the knights were being sloppy in their training exercises. It made everyone anxious about the future of the Enoch

Royal Knights.

"I really didn't want to come here when I was a prospective knight." Vice Captain Velrey described more ruthless training drills than I could have even imagined. "I thought it was wrong to have to spend every day doing such strict training. I thought of running away many times. Fortunately, everyone else was suffering just as much as me. We supported each other and managed to get through it together. Those exercises...back then, they felt like they were crueler than words could express."

All trainees, regardless of gender, performed the same exercises and ate the same unappetizing food. People began to drop out, one after another. But the knights didn't stop them—just allowed them to give up whenever they wanted.

"I didn't understand why they let them go," she said. "But it all made sense once I became an official knight and started going on missions."

Each mission saw her putting her life on the line to fight monsters, with not a single second being safe to let her guard down. She managed to make it through thanks to the lessons she learned in her training.

"The Dehde Grasslands training exercises are the first ones that strengthen both your body and mind," she said. "It's inexcusable for anyone not to take them seriously."

The training held here was so important because it taught knights how not to throw their lives away without a fight. I thought there might be other locations where they could perform such exercises, but Vice Captain Velrey said that wouldn't work.

"This place is far enough away and has enough space for us to move as a group," she explained. "The difference in temperature from winter to autumn is extreme, but not enough to kill anyone. It even has a town nearby. It's the perfect spot."

"I see." The Dehde Grasslands were optimal training grounds for teaching rookie knights. "I wonder why I wasn't sent to these training grounds."

"Most people who go through training are nobles or women. They want to screen out prospective knights who lived easy lives up to this point."

"What ...?"

"After all, you'll end up dead on a mission, unless you're fully committed."

"So, in other words, part of the goal is to make knights give up before they die."

"Right. People who make it through training also prove that they're already ready for battle."

It sounded like I was exempted from training because I was a Fore Elf who grew up in the woods.

"The interviewer can tell who's ready for missions right away," the vice captain said.

"Really? That's shocking..."

"You keep up with us on all the missions, Medic Risurisu. Your interviewer was right about you," she said.

Liselotte's first mission was an initiation in place of training. She was still with us today because she managed to make it through that first expedition.

"You're incredible, Liselotte!"

"Huh?! Mell, what are you ...?"

I was so charmed by the young noblewoman who worked hard every single day, determined to carry out a knight's duties. I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tight. But then she yelled at me when my pointy ear poked her in the cheek.

"What're you doin' back there? Let's head out!"

"Yes, Captain!"

I poured the leftover soup into my flask. I could add some dried noodles later for another meal. They were sure to be delicious with this soup stock.

"Stop draggin' your feet, Risurisu! Get a move on!"

"Understood!"

Our mission resumed in the pouring rain.



**THE** piercing rain accosted us as we struggled to keep standing on the muddy swamp beneath our feet. The mist was obstructing our vision too. The environment was as terrible as ever. Now we were even starting to hear the roar of thunder.

"Captain Ludtink, aren't we getting close to the big tree that puts us at risk of lightning strikes?" I asked.

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"Yep."

"Huh?"

"We're gettin' close."

"B-But why?"
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"This is the only place where an elf might be hiding out. But don't worry. Lichtenberger just made us a barrier to prevent lightning."

So they'd already prepared for this. But knowing we were safe didn't stop my hesitation to set foot into such dangerous territory.

With that fear in my mind, the sky suddenly lit up bright.

"Gyaaah!" I clung to the nearest person—Vice Captain Velrey. It wasn't long before we heard the deep crack of thunder. "Eeeek!"

"It's all right, Medic Risurisu," she said.

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"Urk... I'm sorry..."
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"Don't worry about it. I've heard how elves have sharper senses than us humans. Lights and noises are probably a lot more intense, aren't they?"

She was right. Garr was probably affected by that lightning strike too. Although, when I looked over at him, he seemed perfectly fine.

"Um, Garr, did you do something to prepare for the thunderstorm?" I asked.

He pointed at his ears and I realized Sly was sitting inside them.

"Wow, Sly can even do soundproofing!"

Sly could really do it all. She was amazing.

As kind as ever, Garr held up the part of Sly in his hand to me. My over-dramatic performance must have made him feel sorry for me. But it was the thought that counted, so I turned down his offer.

...Forgive me, Sly. Elf ears are just too sensitive.

The lightning increased in frequency the closer we got to the large tree. Liselotte's barrier prevented us from being hit directly, but I still feared that the roar of thunder was going to burst my eardrums.

Another bright flash came once the tree was more visible. But as soon as I tried to cover my ears, Captain Ludtink let out a yell.

"All units, prepare for battle!"

"What?!"

A monster must have used the dense fog to approach us.

"Wh-What is that thing...?"

"It's a water serpent."

Ulgus gave me the answer. He said that water serpents lived in rivers that ran through high elevations like mountains. So why would one of them be in the Dehde Grasslands?

But there was no time to think about that. Everyone had to focus on the battle.

The water serpent's scales were light blue and its body was about sixteen feet long. It hissed through its sharp fangs as it slithered toward us. However, the monster wasn't the only thing approaching us. Someone else was being chased.

The beautiful woman had white hair, long ears, and a sorcerer's cloak.

"Ulgus, it's the elf!" I exclaimed.

"It sure is!"

The elf beauty tripped and tumbled to the ground. The water serpent used this opportunity to open its giant mouth in an attempt to swallow her up.

But its meal was interrupted.

Vice Captain Velrey had already sliced into its neck with Avaricia, her twin blades.

A spurt of blue blood erupted from the serpent.

Captain Ludtink followed up with a blow to the head with his great sword.

"Die!!!"

His attack, bolstered by that shout of sheer bloodthirst, was incredibly effective. The water serpent wobbled like it had lost its sense of balance.

Ulgus shot the monster's eye with an arrow while Garr pierced its skull, impaling it down to the ground. The final blow was delivered by Zara, who severed its neck with his battle ax. The water serpent was dead within seconds.

It startled us to see the monster coming at us in the fog, but it appeared our unit wasn't its enemy.

"Are you all right?" Vice Captain Velrey outstretched a hand to the elf woman. My heart was racing, anticipating her response. This was an elf, after all. I worried she would brush the vice captain's hand aside, but instead, she took it and tried to stand up...only to stagger as if her ankle was twisted.

"Careful!" Vice Captain Velrey caught the elf and held her up.

"There's a cave over there. Let's go have a seat." Captain Ludtink reached out to support the elf from the other side.

"D-Do not touch me, you bandit!" she shouted.

*"…"* 

It turned out that she saw us as a clan of bandits.

Captain Ludtink scowled, only making him look like more of a bandit. What a terrible outcome for everyone.

Once we got inside the cave, Vice Captain Velrey gently set the elf down on the ground. Captain Ludtink, on the other hand, instantly stripped off his coat and showed her the bracelet that all knights wore.

"We're an expeditionary squadron with the Enoch Royal Knights. We're not bandits," he insisted.

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"Huh?"
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"We're not bandits." He said the important part twice for emphasis. "We're here to investigate this strange weather."

The elf's eyes went wide at that. Just then, her stomach let out a loud grumble.

The cave fell completely silent.

"Velrey, get her something to dry off with and something to eat. Lichtenberger, start a fire. Risurisu, treat her foot." Captain Ludtink wanted to improve conditions for the elf before he asked her anything about the situation. She wasn't likely to run away with that sprained ankle either.

The elf had seemed nervous around men, but she allowed women to touch her. She was letting Captain Velrey dry her off too.

I removed the hood of my overcoat and bowed. "H-Hello."

"So you are an elf?" she asked.

"That's right."

"...A Fore Elf?"

"Y-Yes, I am."

I was shocked that she could tell. I had no idea what kind of elf she was at all.

"Um, what kind are you, miss?" I asked.

"I am a High Elf."

"I see. My name is Mell Risurisu."

"I am Eliza Rune."

She reached her hand out, so I shook it. I was relieved—she seemed friendlier than I expected.

"I'd like to treat your foot...although, I can't use healing magic..."

"Very well. I allow it."

"Thank you."

I didn't waste a second and began to take a look at her foot. I unlaced her boots, removed them, and located the injured part. Her ankle was swollen, but I didn't see any signs of internal bleeding, so it couldn't be very severe.

"It looks like...it's just a simple sprain," I assessed.

The first thing I needed to do was cool her ankle down. I wet a handkerchief and applied it to the swollen area. She'd probably see some relief after a few repetitions of this.

While we waited, I decided to cook something for the hungry Eliza. Well, it was very simple cooking—all I did was add dried noodles to the leftover soup.

"Um, you can have some of this if you'd like." I asked if she was allowed to eat crab and mushrooms, to which Eliza nodded. I'd crushed up the noodles so that she could scoop them up with her spoon. It should be easier to eat that way.

Slowly and nervously, she brought the soup up to her lips.

"Oh, it is good." She only spoke loudly enough for me to hear her, but I was just glad she liked it. I watched with relief as she went back for bite after bite.

After her meal, I bandaged her cooled ankle so that it was nice and secure.

"How does it feel?"

"It does not hurt much now."

"Please be sure to rest up for a while."

"How can I rest, when things are like this?"

As soon as I heard that blunt reply, I was convinced. Eliza probably wasn't the one causing this rain. Somehow, I could just tell that she wasn't a bad person as soon as I laid eyes on her. The others probably felt the same. That was why we'd prioritized treating her injury and feeding her instead of questioning her about the situation.

"Eliza, do you know the cause of this rain?" I asked.

"The big tree, the great spirit of the grasslands, was angered." It sounded like a person had done something to upset the tree. "I tried to persuade him, but he wouldn't listen. He'd watched over this beautiful meadow for many years, yet

at some point, watching it became painful. What could have happened to earn such scorn...?"

What enraged the great spirit of the grasslands? Was it the increase in tourists? Or did the knights who came here to train do something wrong?

Something immediately came to mind for the latter option.

"Um, I think it's possible that the knights that were training here were throwing trash away in the meadow," I mentioned. "That must have been what angered the great spirit."

"Trash, you say?"

I showed Eliza the pieces of garbage we collected on the way there.

"Oh no! I did not know that..."

Eliza's base was located elsewhere, and since she couldn't come and go regularly, she never noticed the garbage.

"How foolish of them... That could certainly anger the great tree," she said.

"Would he be appeased if we cleaned up all the garbage?"

"I do not know about that."

I looked at Captain Ludtink. The decision had to come down to him.

The captain made his declaration without a moment's delay. "We're cleanin' up the Dehde Grasslands!"

With that, our mission was now to collect garbage in the midst of the downpour. We asked Eliza to wait for us in the cave, since her ankle was twisted.

We searched for pieces of garbage as a group. We couldn't split up, since with the environment and ecosystem being changed, we didn't know when a monster like a water serpent might appear.

"Be careful not to trip, Risurisu," Captain Ludtink said.

"I know— Ah!" I slipped on some rotting, soggy leaves as soon as the captain warned me.

"Watch out, Medic Risurisu!" Vice Captain Velrey caught me before I could fall. "You all right?"

"Y-Yes, I think so. Thank you." Nervously, I turned to look at Captain Ludtink. His face was scrunched up like a bandit who'd spotted its prey. I thought he was going to yell at me, but...

"Be careful from here on out, okay, Medic Risurisu?"

"R-Right. I'm sorry."

Vice Captain Velrey warned me gently, and Captain Ludtink seemed to have missed his chance to yell. That was a weight off my shoulders.

We continued to hunt for garbage—this time, with me paying more attention to where I was stepping. But the trash wasn't just on the ground either.

"L-Look, up there!" Ulgus was pointing at a paper bag stuck on a tree branch. I couldn't believe there was even garbage above our heads. His sharp eyes were playing an unexpectedly big role on this mission.

The more we cleaned, the more the grasslands started to change. The rain was slowly growing lighter.

"Hey, Mell. Look at the sky."

"Liselotte, what do you— Whoa!"

The sun was now peeking its face out from behind the clouds. The dark fog shrouding the Dehde Grasslands also seemed to be fading away entirely. I'd wanted to see this refreshing blue sky so badly. Everyone stopped to look up at the heavens.

The great tree's anger had been calmed. The puddles on the ground were starting to evaporate away too. It had to be part of the great tree's powers. A strong gust of wind blew past, causing flowers to bloom and a lush green color to return. The Dehde Grasslands had been returned to their rightful state in the blink of an eye.

"W-Wow...!"

"It looks like the spirit possessed incredible powers."

"I didn't even know this was possible."

No one who set foot on this land was likely to ever make the same mistake. If they did, then retaliation would come. Respect and gratitude were everything when coexisting with nature.

I thought our happy ending had come...but there was one last surprise in store for us. Garr's ears perked up. I could hear something too. Multiple creatures were slithering across the ground.

I recognized this noise. They were water serpents rushing toward us. The incredible Garr spotted them even before me. I instantly reported the sound to Captain Ludtink.

"Monsters! Multiple water serpents are approaching!"

It seemed that, having lost their waterside habitats, the water serpents all came to attack us at once.

"How many do you see, Ulgus?!" Captain Ludtink asked.

"Um, ten are ten feet long, three are sixteen feet long, one is thirty-three feet long."

I shuddered to think that so many of the serpents had been lurking around us this whole time. One of them was even thirty-three feet long? I'd never seen such a massive monster.

Liselotte squinted, forming a theory about their attack. "I think they believe we're the ones who got rid of their water."

So they'd been enraged by the sudden loss of their habitat and launched an attack.

"Fall back, Medic Risurisu."

"Vice Captain Velrey!"

"People were the ones who caused the water, and people took it away. Call it selfish of us, but it's impossible to coexist with monsters." Vice Captain Velrey, unsheathing Avaricia, murmured to herself in a deep voice. "I want to restore the Dehde Grasslands to its original state, without any water serpents. That's why I'm going to defeat every last one of you!"

She leapt forward with that shout.

As soon as she raised the beautiful, white twin blades—Avaricia—they erupted with light. Vice Captain Velrey must have activated it with her emotions.

The brilliant light of her swords blinded the water serpents. But that wasn't enough to slow them down. Snakes had a unique organ, sometimes referred to as the third eye, in between their eyes and nose. This allowed them to sense heat and perceive their surroundings. Therefore, they continued their attack without cowering.

But this time, without eyes, their movement was slowed.

Vice Captain Velrey sliced into them with her shimmering blades. That single hit was enough to penetrate their scales and sever the serpents in half.



Monsters were dark-type beings, so her light-type swords must have been super effective. It seemed that Avaricia possessed more than one power. The blades vibrated when they cut into something, allowing for a much deeper wound.

The twin swords were optimized for slicing.

Captain Ludtink and Zara had no opportunity to attack in this state. Ulgus prevented attacks with arrows, while Garr used his spear to sidestep them. All the while, Vice Captain Velrey continued to massacre the serpents.

She used one sword to behead a ten-foot-long water serpent, then sliced the head off one of the sixteen-foot-long serpents using both blades like a pair of scissors. Finally, she pierced the skull of the thirty-three-foot-long water serpent before cutting into its neck over and over again. With each thrust, Avaricia repelled the enemy's blood from its blades—maintaining a color of pure white.

The water serpents were wiped out in no time at all. Vice Captain Velrey walked back to us like normal, but as soon as she sheathed Avaricia, her knees buckled.

"Whoa, Vice Captain!"

"Anna!"

Zara and Garr grabbed the vice captain to steady her.

"That's a surprise. I didn't think I'd run out of energy so quickly," she said.

These mysterious weapons, titled "The Seven Deadly Sins," were a joint creation between the Magic Research Bureau and Monster Research Bureau. Avaricia, Vice Captain Velrey's twin blades, was the word for "greed."

"Maybe you activated the weapon's power when you said we couldn't coexist with water serpents, and that you wanted to restore the original Dehde Grasslands," Captain Ludtink theorized.

"...That's possible. It doesn't feel like greed to me, though," I said.

But from the perspective of the Monster Research Bureau, who loved monsters and wanted to coexist with them, the vice captain's statements would definitely count as greed. Thinking of it that way made a little more sense, even if it was still ridiculous.

But the vice captain was victorious thanks to the activation of Avaricia's special power. I was grateful to have it either way.

"Are you all right, Anna? Want me to carry you on my back?" the captain offered.

"No, I'm fine now. Sorry to scare you."

With that, Vice Captain Velrey stood up and began to walk like normal. It didn't seem like the swords used up her magical energy. Maybe it was the emotions themselves that powered the weapons and nothing more. Once again, I couldn't help but ponder the mysteries behind these strange weapons.



**WE'D** managed to fill two large leather bags by the time we finished collecting garbage. Then we headed straight back to Eliza, the beautiful elf, to report our findings.

"...and so, here we are."

"I cannot believe the great tree was really angered by the garbage the knights left behind."

"I'm very sorry."

"But it was not your doing, no?"

"Well, no..."

As fellow members of the Enoch Royal Knights, we needed to apologize to the great tree.

"The grasslands are back to normal now. I am sure that means the great tree forgave the others for their foolishness. You ought to leave the rest to me and return home."

"Eliza..."

I knew almost nothing about how to treat spirits with the proper respect. It was probably best for Eliza to deal with that part.

"But why did you come here, Eliza?" I asked.

"This used to be the homeland of High Elves before humans decided to develop it and move here. Why, it must have been five hundred years ago." She told me that the High Elves were chased out of the grasslands and had to take up residence deep in the woods. "But this place has a great tree spirit, which we used to come here to check on..."

That was why elves were occasionally spotted in the Dehde Grasslands.

"Call it good fortune that humans never approached the great tree. The grasslands' owners have all loved this place too. That is why us High Elves went without driving out the humans."

But then the previous generation's Lord Waston began to lend the area out to knights for their training exercises.

"I believe the great tree forgave the knights, as their crime wasn't one of evil."

Eliza explained that, as soon as people set foot on the land, it gained more power. The great tree had experienced rapid growth in recent years. He ignored any disturbances caused by tourists, as their visits were limited to the autumn, and they were never particularly disruptive.

"But then, six months ago, the knights started to display shameful behavior."

Searching for the origin revealed that a change in instructors had occurred.

"That must be why the great tree was angered."

Eliza told me she'd been coming to the Dehde Grasslands daily in the midst of the storm to try and quell the great tree's wrath.

"Perhaps the great tree accepted your gesture when you removed the source of his anger, caused by your fellow knights," she said.

We couldn't let something like this happen again. We needed to report this incident to the higher-ups, come up with a prevention plan, and implement it.

"There is one last thing I wish to ask you, Fore Elf."

"It is...your food. How do you make it?"

"You mean my soup with noodles?"

"Yes."

"I simply boiled freshwater crab with dried pine mushrooms, then added dehydrated noodles to the soup."

"What are dehydrated noodles?"

"They're just noodles that have been dried out."

"Our village has freshwater crab and pine mushrooms, but we do not sell dried noodles."

"Um, Lord Waston's town probably has some..."

"High Elves do not care to tread into human habitation."

"Yeah, I thought so."

I was a Fore Elf who chose to live with humans, of course, but I decided not to bring that up.

Vice Captain Velrey came up with a suggestion instead. "I'll tell Lord Waston about the noodles. He seemed to respect you as the guardian of the Dehde Grasslands, Miss Eliza, so I'm sure he'll agree to help."

"W-Well, if a human insists, then I suppose I will have no choice but to take him up on the offer."

I couldn't help but chuckle at Eliza's attempt to keep her emotions close to her chest.



**WE** returned to town after that, but it was already late evening. We decided to head straight to Lord Waston to deliver the report.

"The grasslands are completely restored! I feel like I'm dreaming!" Lord Waston wept with joy.

"The elf from the grasslands told us she would like some dried noodles. We hope you can provide those for her."

"Dried noodles? Really?"

"Yes. She says they don't have them in their elf village."

"Very well. I'll leave them by the great tree tomorrow."

The great tree was quietly watching over the Dehde Grasslands. We told Lord Waston to remember that fact.

Amelia, who'd been waiting for my return...was curled up in a ball, fast asleep. Lord Waston told me that she spent the day playing with his son and was recovering from the exhaustion of it now. I never knew Amelia was capable of looking after children. As soon as I got close to her, her eyes snapped open.

"I'm back, Amelia."

"Kreh, kreh!"

She praised me for my hard work. This mission was a particularly difficult one. I leaned into Amelia's soft, fluffy stomach and told her all about it.

"I got drenched by rain, frightened by thunder, and attacked by snake monsters. But we managed to make it out by working together as a team." As I recited this to Amelia, I began to grow sleepier and sleepier. "Amelia, it was another really hard mission today..."

"Kreh."

As I started to doze off, Amelia covered me with her wings like a warm blanket.

## Interlude: Charlotte's Stay at Home and Expedition Seafood

**MELL** went on another expedition today. I feel like she goes on lots these days. I'm really lonely without Mell and everyone around...

But I don't have time to get sad. I have lots and lots of work to do. First, I do the laundry and clean the barracks. The other units usually bring papers here about this time.

"Charlotte? Where aaaare you?"

The usual girl knight was here, smacking her lips a little. I was used to taking papers from her after doing it so many times now. I'd hidden behind a wall when I heard someone calling. Just like always, she was calling me out to see her.

Her name was Malu Tone and she was eighteen just like Mell. She told me she had seventeen freckles on her cheeks. I knew the visitor had to be her. But Bandit told me to always confirm I knew who it was when someone visited.

I jumped out when I saw it was definitely Malu.

"Here I am!"

"Oh, yay!"

Malu stroked my cheek and ruffled my hair. She was a little rough, but that was just how my dad did it before he died. My heart hurt when I thought about it.

"You have more papers for Bandit, Malu?"

"I sure do."

"Then I take care of them."

"Thanks, Charlotte. Looks like the second squadron is out on another expedition, huh?"

"Yes! They just come back, but they go out again."

Malu poked at my puffed-up cheeks. It tickled, so I burst out laughing. "Your work increases too, since your unit's been so busy lately."

"But I want to work with Mell..."

"They'll be back soon."

"Right..."

"See you next time, okay?"

Malu left after that.

Then I went to bring the papers to the office. Like usual, I stuck a big rock I found on top to hold the papers down.

"...Ah!"

There were baked goods on Bandit's desk. It was wrapped up, but I smelled something sweet. The bag had a card that said "For Charlotte" on it.

"Let's see... 'Eat this on your break - Zara.' Ah, it's from Mama Zara! Yaaay!"

There were cookies inside the bag. I was so happy, I twirled around in the office. I would eat them for my 3 o'clock snack, but until then, I had to work hard.

For lunch, I ate from the lunch box the ladies in the dorm made me. I liked the food in the dining hall, but there were lots of people and all the noise made me feel icky. That's why they made lunch boxes for me to take out.

Inside was a smoked meat and cheese sandwich and tender, simmered beans. There was also grilled fish on a skewer and some bright red raspberries. They were all my absolute favorites.

I was going to live with Mell and Mama Zara soon, and we'd promised to make lunch boxes together. I studied my daily lunches to decide what foods I wanted us to cook and pack together.



I had to go shopping in the afternoon. There weren't many people out at that time, so I was able to go on my own.

I wore a big coat to hide my ears and tail, since people stared at beastfolk. Mama Zara made the coat for me, so it had very cute lace sewn on the cuff and sleeves. I just loved it.

Fish was on sale today. I wanted to make expedition food with fish that Mell and the members could take on missions.

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"Hello, Fishmonger!"

"Oh, if it isn't Miss Charlotte?"

"Yes, it is!"
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The old man who sold fish had big, strong arms. He had a scary face just like Bandit, but he was very nice to me. I always bought my fish there. It was Mell's favorite shop.

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"What's cheap today, mister?"

"How about this?"
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He showed me a barrel full of tiny fish, the size of my palm. "Short mackerel's on a bargain sale, since I've got so much."

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"Then I will take short mackerel, please."
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"Comin' right up!"
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He dried off the mackerel, wrapped them in leaves, then wrapped the leaves with a newspaper. I always liked to watch him fold the paper so fast.

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"I gave ya a butterfly tuna fillet as a little extra."
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"Yay! I love tuna!"
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"Ya do? Well, that's good."

Butterfly tuna was a delicious red fish with lots of fat. But since he gave it to me for free while I shopped for the knights, I had to use it to cook something for their expeditions. I wanted to buy lots of butterfly tuna when I got my salary. To get that salary, I needed to work hard.

After that, I did more shopping and went back to the knights before the big evening sales.

"Phew!"

I put the things I bought inside the cooling box, which was a normal box with a magic ice stone inside. They said that putting food in it would make it not rot. It was a donation from the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and about six feet tall.

Most of the food inside was Amelia's fruits. The second squadron also used it for their food.

It was just about time for my snack anyway, so I decided to take a break. I made tea and put out Mama Zara's homemade cookies on a plate. Then I took them to the break room, but no one was there. Liselotte, Papa Garr, and the others would usually be with me.

Even now, my sense of loneliness persisted. But as I thought about the others, I bit into a cookie.

"Wow! So yummy!"

Mama Zara's cookies were tasty enough to make me forget my loneliness.

Thank goodness for these cookies. Now I can keep working hard.

"All right!"

With my spirits restored, it was time to make some expedition food.



I started by prepping the short mackerel. I counted them all up and saw there were more than twenty in total. Mell once taught me how to cook short mackerel. First, I took off the scales and removed the gills. Then I put a knife under the pectoral fins and scraped out the guts. Mell said she didn't like doing this, but I thought it was fun. I always felt like I did a good job when I was done.

Then I cut up the meat into three pieces. I put the bones aside because I could use them too.

Then it was finally time to start cooking.

The first thing I did was season the meat with salt. Then I poured enough olive oil into the pot to cover the short mackerel, added chili pepper, medicinal garlic,

rosemary, and bay leaves. Then I let it boil. Once the bubbles started to come up, I sprinkled in more salt. Then I took it off the fire and waited for it to cool.

Once the fish wasn't hot anymore, I poured it and the olive oil into a jar. My "short mackerel olive oil sauté" was all done.

For my second dish, I would let the short mackerel soak in the olive oil raw. It was really easy to make, but it just took a long time. I salted the fish and let it sit for a while. Then I just had to soak it in olive oil. These were really yummy too. You could eat it as a bread topping, or on steamed potatoes. That was what was so great about "olive oil-pickled short mackerel."

Finally, I sprinkled salt on the short mackerel bones and fried them in oil. That way, they got nice and crunchy like candy.

Next, I wanted to make rations out of the butterfly tuna fillet. I rubbed it with salt and let it sit. While I waited, I poured lots of olive oil into a pot, added medicinal garlic, rosemary, and thyme to diffuse a good aroma.

Then I added the butterfly tuna and let it simmer on low heat. Once the inside got cooked, I took it off the heat, set it in a bowl, and removed the bones.

I put the meat in a jar, poured in olive oil, and my "bottled tuna" was complete.

I cooked a whole lot today. I hoped Mell would be happy with what I made.



**EVERYONE** came back a few days later. I led Mell to the food storage right away.

"Wow, Charlotte! You made so much again!"

"Uh-huh. I worked hard!"

"Good girl, good girl." Mell gently patted my head. "I'll bet it was hard work, wasn't it? You cut up all those fish by yourself."

"It's okay. I'm good at cutting fish!"

"You're so talented, Charlotte."

"Heheh!" I was happy if Mell was happy. I was glad I made that food for her.

"Did you like the expedition food I made for you?"

"Yes, it was delicious! Your bread is so much fluffier than mine."

"Really? That's great!"

I had to work just as hard next time too. That was the determination I felt in my heart when I heard Mell's praise.

## Interlude: Ulgus's Squadron Observation Log

**CAPTAIN** Ludtink came to work with a red palm print on his cheek today. His fiancée must have slapped him.

"The hell are you starin' at, Ulgus?!"

"Eek! I'm sorry!"

His face was more terrifying than usual. He was definitely in a bad mood.

Vice Captain Velrey arrived next. It looked like she spotted the palm print too, but she quietly looked away, pretending she didn't see a thing. Garr and Sly showed up after that. They looked at the mark on his face sympathetically. Sly even covered her own face, like it hurt her just to lay eyes on.

So the captain gets mad at me for looking at him, but not Garr? Is this what you would call goodwill? I've gotta build up more goodwill with the captain.

Ahto came next. He jolted when he saw the palm print. "Hang on, Crow! What on earth happened to your cheek?" he asked. "Don't tell me you got in another spat with your fiancée!"

"Shut it. Don't even mention it."

So it was really just a matter of not talking about it.

"Fine, then don't come to me if it leaves a scar," Ahto huffed.

"I'm not as soft as you."

"Ugh!" Ahto let out a big sigh before plopping down on the sofa. They'd known each other for a long time, so he didn't feel the need to ask any more questions.

Sorcerer Lichtenberger didn't notice the palm print on the captain's cheek. That young lady didn't care about anything that wasn't mythical beasts. She was operating as usual today.

Finally, Medic Risurisu arrived with Charlotte.

"Oh, Bandit! Your cheek is all red," Charlotte said.

It sure is. The captain's cheek is red and swollen. But you shouldn't mention it, or else he'll make a scary face at you! I begged her in my mind, not that she had any chance of hearing it.

Captain Ludtink didn't glare at Charlotte, of course. He wasn't mean to her either.

"Let me cast a spell on you!" Charlotte went up to him, twirled her finger around, and chanted a spell. "Pain, pain, go away!"

He'll kill me if I laugh... He'll kill me if I laugh... I repeated it over and over in my head, gritting my teeth to keep the laughter inside.

"Did the pain go away?" she asked.

"...It's a lot better now."

I couldn't take it anymore. I burst out laughing when I saw Captain Ludtink being so nice to her.

"Hey, I hear that! What the hell're you laughin' about, Ulgus?!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

I could never tell the captain that I was laughing because of that sweet smile on his face. Still, I was amazed that Vice Captain Velrey, Garr, and Ahto could keep a straight face. That must just be what happens when you become an adult.

It was then that another assassin came in for a strike against Captain Ludtink.

"Captain, I wet a handkerchief for you to put on your cheek."

I'd been wondering where Medic Risuirisu went off to. It turned out she was preparing a handkerchief to cool the captain's swollen cheek. That was our combat medic, all right.

"It's fine. I don't need it," he grunted.

"Yes, you do." Medic Risurisu approached him and tried to apply the handkerchief. But the captain pulled back to dodge her. "Please hold still, Captain, or else I can't get the handkerchief on you!"

"I said I don't need it!"

"Sure you do. Don't you have a meeting today? I'm sure you know what the other captains will say if they see you like that!"

Medic Risurisu was right, unsurprisingly. The captain would obviously want to minimize material the others could use to tease him. He was the youngest captain of them all, which meant he had a target on his back.

Still, Captain Ludtink continued to resist.

"Charlotte, grab him from the other side!" Medic Risurisu ordered.

"Okaaay!"

Once Charlotte grabbed his arm, the captain had nowhere else to run. Medic Risurisu began her treatment. Captain Ludtink suddenly stopped struggling. I thought Charlotte was using all her strength to keep him pinned, but it didn't look like that to me. She was probably just squeezing his arm a little bit.

So why did he calm down? When I took a closer look...I spotted it. Shockingly, Medic Risurisu's chest was pressing against the captain's arm.

I'm so jealous!

But just then, I felt a chill run down my spine. This icy cold sensation turned out to be coming from Ahto. He had a terrifying expression when I looked at him.

Silently, he stood up and stomped over to Captain Ludtink.

"I'll take care of that for you, Crow. Charlotte and Melly, could you go bring us some ice and salt from the cafeteria?"

"Wait, salt too, Zara?" Medic Risurisu asked.

"Ah, my bad. Just ice is fine. I was wrong."

"R-Right, of course. Mixing salt and ice would get cold enough to give him frostbite."

With that frightening science lesson, Medic Risurisu and Charlotte both left the room. Ahto's grin instantly turned into the devilish face of the Ferocious Ax-Wielding Prince. Then he slapped Captain Ludtink's arm as hard as he could. "Ow! Shit, that hurts! What the hell are you thinking?!"

"I should be asking you that, Crow! You knew Melly's chest was touching your arm and you didn't say anything!"

"Well she's the one who put it there, didn't she?!"

"She didn't just put it there. She was trying to treat your swollen cheek because she cares about you!"

"It was only a second. What's the big deal? I went through hell yesterday!"

"What happened, exactly?"

"Marina was really dressed up, so I just asked her if she was tryin' to get other men to look at her, goin' all overboard like that. Then she hit me."

"That's horrible! That's no one's fault but yours!" Ahto let out his second deep sigh of the day, then launched into a lecture. "You need to act like more of an adult."

"The hell? I act like an adult."

"Well, you sure sound like a child."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"At this rate, I'm worried you two are going to split up."

"Huh? Why? Marriages between nobles don't have anything to do with how they get along."

"But if Marina gets too upset, her father will suggest the engagement be dissolved."

"...."

Even Captain Ludtink heard the truth in Ahto's words.

"Then what do I do?"

"First, grow up and start being honest. Then find things you love about Marina and compliment her on them."

The captain's face puckered. Everything on that list would be rough for him.

"If you don't know how to do that, then why not start with a more mature

appearance?"

"Mature appearance?"

"Mm-hm. For example, try growing out your beard."

"My beard..."

"Of course, you can't go with that bandit's beard like before."

"The hell's a bandit's beard?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like."

Ahto's advice seemed to leave a deep impression on Captain Ludtink.



A few days later, Captain Ludtink had started to grow out his large beard...but I could only see a bandit when I looked at him, thanks for asking. But he told us he made up with Marina. He was still growing his beard out just so he didn't jinx it.

"Um, Ahto, didn't he just turn back into a ban—"

"June, it sounds like things are going well with his fiancée, so let's not rock the boat."

That was how the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron came to watch over the rebirth of Captain Ludtink's beard.

# Chapter 4: The Popular Ulgus and Delicious Home Cooking

A bright blue sky, picturesque white clouds...and Ulgus, sailing through the air thanks to Captain Ludtink.

"Argh!"

Ulgus slammed into the ground with a loud thump. A cloud of dust kicked up, causing him to cough painfully.

Captain Ludtink was utterly merciless. He raised his foot to stomp on Ulgus and line up his next attack on his stomach.

"Look out!"

Still sprawled out on the ground, Ulgus managed to dodge the stomping right at the last minute. But Captain Ludtink's attack was unrelenting. Nimble despite his size, the captain was able to land a kick to Ulgus's rear end as he evaded the previous blow.

"Ack! That hurt!" Ulgus folded forward like a cooked shrimp.

Ever aggressive, Captain Ludtink raised his fist again, but then...

"Stop!"

Zara, the referee, cut them off there. Captain Ludtink clicked his tongue, his face scrunched up like a true bandit.

"Damn. The fun was just about to start," he cursed.

"The battle was already long over," Zara said.

"I know, I know."

"You always take it too far, Crow. I feel awful for June."

"He's the one with his head in the clouds during combat training. That's why I decided to give 'im a real show."

"Ugh! That's not the issue!"

Zara reached out and helped Ulgus stand. Garr patted him on the back gently to get the dirt off his shirt. Even Sly brushed his messy hair back into place. They were all so nice.

"Are you okay?" Zara asked.

"Ah, yes. Captain Ludtink was going easy on me."

Really? Are you sure?

From my point of view, it looked like a bandit hunting down an innocent villager, but Ulgus explained that the captain was actually only using half of his strength.

"Captain Ludtink could tell I wasn't in my usual state, so he didn't go all out today," Ulgus said.

"Crow... That's nicer of you than I expected," Zara commented.

"I wasn't bein' nice," Captain Ludtink grunted. "I could tell he was spacing out, and I thought I might break him if I used my full strength."

"Hehe! Don't worry, I understand."

"I really don't think you do, Zara."

Our morning training came to a close after that.

I found Ulgus in the break room, staring out the window. I looked at Zara, who was sitting in front of him. He shook his head upon seeing my questioning eyes, asking him if he knew what was going on. Ulgus had been spacing out during training too. I didn't think he was sick or anything, since his face was a healthy color.

I decided to ask him directly. I couldn't just leave things like this. "Hey, is something bothering you, Ulgus?"

"Huh?!"

"It just kind of seems like you've been in a daze all day."

"Ah, I...I'm sorry."

I wasn't used to seeing the always-cheerful Ulgus with his eyebrows knitted in a sad frown. He looked like a puppy abandoned on a rainy day.

"You must have something weighing on you, huh, June?" Zara questioned.

"Huh?! How'd you know?!" Ulgus asked.

"Because you seem so down."

"I'm sorry..."

"Why don't you talk to me about it, since you're having trouble, Ulgus?" I offered.

"Medic Risurisu...!"

"If you can't find the solution yourself, it might come to you by talking to someone else," Zara added.

"Ahto, even you...!" Ulgus balled up the fists resting on his knees, then made direct eye contact with Zara and me. "I-It might take a while to tell the whole story, but could I have some of your time this evening, Medic Risurisu, Ahto?"

Zara and I gave the exact same response. "Of course!"



**AFTER** work, we headed to the restaurant where Zara once worked—Avan Atulaford.

Amelia came too, with Ulgus's permission. She had experienced another growth spurt and was now about eight feet long. She really stood out once we were inside the restaurant. Liselotte told me that Amelia would now be considered an adult. Avan Atulaford was a big restaurant, fortunately, so Amelia didn't have trouble fitting inside.

As always, we were shown to a private room. They even laid out a rug for Amelia.

"It's my treat today, you three!" Zara declared. "Order whatever you want."

"But I'm the one who invited you guys here, Ahto..." Ulgus said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just in the mood today."

"R-Really? Then I'll gladly take you up on the offer..."

"Of course. You're young, so let me spoil you."

"Look, Ulgus! These look so good!" I showed Ulgus the menu with illustrations of the food. Lots of the dishes were seafood, since they were currently featuring white fish.

"Hmmm... It's so hard to choose."

"Let's order lots of dishes and share them."

We decided to order creamy fish and cheese pie, grilled fish, fish boiled in soy sauce, and fish skewers.

"Wow, I'm so excited!" I exclaimed.

"You sure love fish, don't you, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus said.

"Fore Elves don't fish, so we could only purchase seafood from traders," I explained. "Most fish brought to the depths of the forest were already dried. The occasional raw fish being sold was extremely expensive, since it came with transportation fees and cooling costs. That's why I was so startled when I first saw the market price of fish in the royal capital."

"I see. I didn't know about that."

My family was really excited when I sent them fish jarred in oil and packs of dried fish. I felt like my little sisters were more interested in the fish than any of the lace or ribbons I sent them. I guess food interested them more than romance...

Our seafood dishes were brought in during our conversation. The creamy fish and cheese pie was served on a large platter. Zara began to cut it into slices.

"Oh, it's light flounder. They're really good this time of year," he said.

How luxurious, getting to enjoy a seasonal fish.

Cutting into the pie with my knife produced a crunching sound, allowing the velvety cream and gooey cheese to seep out. But I couldn't just sit and watch all day. I divided up the other dishes too, putting the boiled fish on small plates.

Ulgus poured citrus juice into my cup.

"There we go. Let's eat up."

We raised our glasses in a toast to the white fish.

I started with a bite of creamy fish and cheese pie. The layer of crust on top was crisp and flaky. The fish inside was light in flavor, but filled my mouth with savory juices each time I chewed. It paired nicely with the rich cream sauce and salty cheese.

The boiled fish with soy sauce had been cooked until it was extra tender. It melted in my mouth, leaving a sweet and spicy flavor that I couldn't get enough of. The rest of the food was just as superb. We finished eating in what felt like no time at all. The waiter then brought us raspberry tarts as an after-dinner treat. They even brought us piping hot milk tea for free.

"Will you talk to us about your problem now, Ulgus?" I asked.

"Ah! That's right." He seemed to have forgotten his troubles from the afternoon as he consumed the delicious meal. "Uh, well, it's really not a big... No, it's a pretty big deal."

Ulgus took a deep breath before beginning.

"So, this all started about two weeks ago..."

He told us it happened on payday. Ulgus had plans to go out to eat with the knights who joined the order the same year as him. But then Captain Ludtink talked for a long time at the end-of-day meeting, making Ulgus fear he would be late for the group dinner.

"So I decided to take a shortcut that I don't usually use."

He went down an alley located in the center of town, followed a wall, and climbed over it to get to the other side. What he found on the opposite side of the wall was something entirely unexpected.

"A young noblewoman was surrounded by a bunch of scary-looking hoodlums... She had become separated from her servants and wandered into the thugs' territory. She had tears in her eyes and asked me to help her..."

It went without saying that Ulgus, having interrupted their encounter with the young lady, ended up on the receiving end of their anger.

"Three of them came and attacked me after that..."

The first thug was big and muscular, the second was tall, and the third was small but wielding a knife. The three of them rushed Ulgus all at once.

"I knew I could run away if I had to, but I'm not so good at close-range combat."

That was true. Captain Ludtink always managed to beat Ulgus up during their training. Ulgus told us how, because of that, his blood ran cold when he was attacked. But the young noblewoman was right there watching it all. Ulgus definitely couldn't just leave her there.

"So you fought them, June?" Zara asked.

"Yep. I was really startled when the muscley one threw a punch at me, but... He'd turned out to have much lighter punches than Captain Ludtink. He was slower too. The tall one tried to do a roundhouse kick, but...his movement had no real power behind it."

Then Ulgus grabbed the wrist of the small thug with the knife, twisting his arm and getting the man to drop his weapon.

"I was really happy that they were so weak," he said. "But then when I thought about it later, I realized Captain Ludtink is just that strong."

I'd always thought that their training was just an excuse for Captain Ludtink to beat up Ulgus. But it sounded like Ulgus actually *did* learn things from it.

"After I took out the last of the thugs, I was going to lead the young lady to the main road..."

But then she told him she was frozen with fright and couldn't move. So Ulgus lifted the woman up and cradled her in his arms out to the main street. Fortunately, he was able to reunite her with her servant, and then they parted ways.

"She asked me for my name, but I still felt like I was going to be late for dinner. I just said the first thing that came to mind, that I was no one important, and then I left."

"I feel like I'm starting to see where this is going," Zara said.

"My heart is fluttering!" I gushed.

I'd always thought these sorts of things only happened in stories. But this was very much real life. I urged Ulgus to continue.

"Three days ago, a letter arrived at the barracks." It was, of course, from the young noblewoman. "The sender's name was Cheryl Glenda Seton."

"Seton? As in Duke Seton?" Zara asked.

"Yes. Lord Seton's daughter sent the letter." Ulgus told us that the letter was an offer to join her for dinner as thanks for rescuing her the other day. "Before Sorcerer Lichtenberger joined the Royal Order, I probably would have gladly taken Her Ladyship up on the offer..."

"What changed?" I asked.

"Because of what I saw in the cafeteria when we were celebrating after a mission."

What did Liselotte do that had him so shaken up? I was incredibly curious.

"...It was how Sorcerer Lichtenberger...dined."

Liselotte's manner of eating, according to Ulgus, was both graceful and elegant.

"I know that kind of thing happens naturally when you're raised in a family of nobles. It's not that I'm ashamed of my upbringing. I just felt like the two of us came from totally different worlds."

Unable to bear the thought of a one-on-one situation, Ulgus wrote back declining, saying her gratitude was all that mattered to him.

"I thought that would be the end of it. But the day after I sent the letter, I received another response..."

This time, it was a love letter. She wrote how Ulgus was like a prince, carrying his princess to safety after vanquishing the villains. Lady Cheryl passionately requested to meet him one more time, now that she'd developed such feelings for him.

"It was totally outrageous. I'm nothing like a prince most of the time."

In his normal state, Ulgus was more like a puppy than a prince. I knew how pressured he must feel if this young lady expected him to act like a prince.

"So...I wrote a letter back in a desperate state."

He told her that he was just an average knight, who looked forward to eating his three meals and who was always defeated in his combat training.

"But she said I must be lying, and that I was a wonderful man..."

If nothing else, Ulgus was a good pen pal. He exchanged around ten letters in just two weeks.

"So I thought about it for a while, and finally, I told her that I liked women who were good at cooking."

Noblewomen definitely didn't cook. That was the job of servants. But it turned out that even this wasn't enough to make her give up on Ulgus.

"A few days later, a lunch box delivered from the duke's house showed up..."

Ulgus said it was delicious. He ate every last bite. Now he was covering his face with his hands, languishing over his own gluttony.

"It's like whatever I say ends up having the opposite reaction."

After struggling to come up with something, Ulgus wrote back and said that he was already engaged to a woman who was good at cooking.

"I really thought that would be the end of it. But then..."

"There was more?" Zara asked.

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"That she wanted to meet my fiancée."

"Oh no..."

"You really messed up, huh, June?" Zara chided.

That was why Ulgus was in such a daze all day.

"I just can't do it. Lady Cheryl is beautiful and seems earnest, and I do think she's charming and all, but I could never live in high society like that!"

"True. Placing a commoner in high society is like an ocean fish jumping into a lake," Zara said.

Zara, that would kill the fish...although it was a good example.

Ulgus instantly had tears in his eyes. "I don't know what to do anymore!"

"Poor June..." Zara pulled Ulgus into a hug. He was such a motherly, openminded person. It was hard to even put into words. "I wish I could have crossdressed and pretended to be your fiancée."

Ulgus pulled away from Zara to look up at his face. "Wait, Ahto, that might work!"

"Of course it won't," Zara tutted. "Have you ever laid eyes on such a boorish woman before?"

I thought Zara was a woman the first time I met him too, so I don't think it's such a bad idea...

"But even if you managed to pass me off as a woman, there's still a problem in our respective physiques."

He was right about that—Zara was taller than Ulgus and had broad shoulders too. Presenting Zara to the noblewoman as his fiancée might not be too convincing.

If only there was some other girl close to him in age that we knew...

"Ah! Ulgus, why don't I pretend to be your fiancée?" I suggested.

"What?! I-I couldn't ask that!" For some reason, he was looking at Zara.

"But there aren't any other women you can ask for help, are there?" I pressed.

"Not...really. No, not a single one. It would be disrespectful to ask Vice Captain Velrey, and Sorcerer Lichtenberger is a marquess's daughter, so I don't want rumors to spread about the two of us. Charlotte doesn't deserve to be put in the middle of a dispute either."

"I guess you'll just have to get Melly's help," Zara said.

"Are you sure, Ahto?"

"Why ask me? Melly's the one you should ask."

"Ah, th-that's right." Ulgus turned to look at me and bowed his head guiltily. "I'm very sorry, Medic Risurisu, but would you be so kind as to play the role of my fiancée?"

"I will, since there's no one else," I said.

"Urk! Thank you so much..." Then he turned to Zara to ask something else of him. "Would you accompany us too, Ahto?"

"Why me?"

"B-Because I'll feel less nervous."

"Very well... Oh, I've got it!" Zara clapped his hands. "If we're going to do this, let's come up with a backstory."

"A backstory?"

"Exactly! For example, we make Melly an elf princess and Amelia her companion!"

Amelia, thinking this entire conversation had nothing to do with her, raised her head, startled.

"And I can be the knight who guards Princess Melly!"

"That's a great idea, Zara," I said.

"Right? We could even make outfits too!"

"Absolutely! I don't know how to sew a dress, so I'll ask Liselotte if I can borrow one from her."

"I'm dying to see you in a dress, Melly!"

"Y-You two sure are having fun, aren't you?" Ulgus interrupted.

"Of course! We have to!"

"l...see..."

"This isn't the kind of opportunity that comes every day."

That was how I came to play the part of Ulgus's fiancée.



**THE** next day, I told Liselotte I needed a dress for reasons I didn't want to go into. She gladly lent me one of hers.

"I see you're meddling in some odd situation again," she said. "Well, I'm sure you'll make it out all right as long as Zara Ahto is with you."

Her trust in Zara meant that, thankfully, she didn't ask any questions. Ulgus had said he would explain once the situation was resolved, so Liselotte would just have to wait a little while.

I'd specifically asked for clothes that would make me look like an elf princess. My heart was racing just imagining what sort of dress she would come up with.

"Welcome home, Lady Liselotte, Miss Mell."

"Th-Thanks."

I never got used to having a row of servants greet me like that. I'd been living at the Lichtenberger house for a while now, but I didn't exactly feel any more comfortable there. I was now realizing just exactly how Ulgus felt when he said he was no match for a duke's daughter. In fact, maybe Ulgus was actually very clever to realize that before experiencing it for himself.

We went to Liselotte's bedroom to pick out a dress. The maids brought out an assortment of colorful dresses.

"How about this one, Mell? I just had it made last month," she said.

"Liselotte, have you worn this a single time?"

"I haven't."

"I'd feel guilty being the first one to wear it! Also, I've noticed something..."

"What is it?"

"I-I feel like the dresses are too long..."

"I suppose so, now that you mention it." Liselotte was taller than me, meaning none of her recently made dresses would fit me well. "Then why not use one I had made last year? It's not in fashion anymore, but it will still look nice if we change the accessories."

"Well..." I didn't feel like those would fit me either. "Um, who is your longestserving maid, Liselotte?"

"The one with brown hair."

"Thank you. Excuse me, but do you have any dresses from when Liselotte was the same height as me?" I asked.

"Yes, we do."

"Could I borrow one of those, Liselotte?"

"I don't mind."

We began to look through Liselotte's dresses from years past.

"Starting from the right, these dresses are from when Lady Liselotte was twelve years old, then thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen."

The maid had kindly brought a number of dresses for me to look through. I held the dress she wore when she was fifteen up to my body first. It was a wonderful piece, made of deep red velvet with layers of lace on the sleeves, but none of that mattered.

"It's too long..." I muttered.

I moved on to the dress from when she was fourteen. But this one didn't work either. The skirt would end up dragging on the ground.

"Let's try two years earlier, from when Lady Liselotte was twelve."

I thought it would be fastest to just take the smallest one and hold it up to me.

"Ah! ...This one's too short!"

To be honest, this came as a relief. It was a very eye-catching light pink dress that would have required courage on my part to wear. Silently, I let out the breath I was holding. Liselotte's dress from when she was twelve wasn't a perfect fit.

But it was Liselotte's dress from when she was thirteen that turned out to fit my body.

"Mell, I don't know what to say exactly, but I feel this dress suits you."

"R-Really...?"

"Yes. Isn't that the color of the Fore Elf woods?"

I took in the dress' shape and color for the first time.

"I guess so, now that you mention it," I replied. "I do feel like this deep green is the same color as the Fore Elf woods. The lace on the sleeves even looks like leaves."

"Right? The ribbons have gone limp, so you'll have to take them off and sew them back in again," she said.

I decided to try it on.

"Let's see... There we go." The skirt was long enough and it fit around my waist—the problem was the tightness in the chest. "You were thirteen when you wore this, Liselotte, so it makes sense it's a bit tight."

"I feel like the chest is tight in all my dresses, even the recent ones."

"Really? So it's the same for both of us?"

"It's possible."

Liselotte told me that she had her dresses altered by the Lichtenbergers' seamstress.

"I'm sorry to ask even more of you..."

"It's not an issue. You never dress up, Mell, so it's been fun."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that."

It seemed like the dress issue was solved. Now all that was left was to wait for the day of the meeting.



**WE** arranged to meet Lady Cheryl Glenda Seton at Avan Atulaford. When Ulgus suggested it, Lady Cheryl went and reserved the entire restaurant. Ulgus was clutching his stomach, questioning how it ever came to this.

The day of our meeting was here.

I spent the morning being whisked around to get dressed up. It was my first

time wearing a gown, my first time having my makeup done, and my first time wearing a necklace and earrings.

It was such a unique experience.

The maids even tied a big ribbon around Amelia's neck. She was very pleased by this—going back to the mirror over and over again to look at herself.

Liselotte came to see me once the maids were finished. She was holding something sparkly. "I'll let you borrow this, Mell." She set a dazzling tiara with a massive diamond inlaid on my head. I jumped when I saw it in the mirror.

"Whaaat?! Isn't this really, really expensive?"

"I don't know how much it costs," she shrugged. "Father gave me this on my thirteenth birthday, but I never wore it. I don't want it to just sit and collect dust."

Liselotte, please use your birthday presents, I'm begging you...!

The image of a depressed Lord Lichtenberger flashed in my mind.

"It suits you, Mell," she said. "You look just like a princess."

"Y-You think so?"

The tiara was heavy enough to nearly tip my head over. But after hearing Liselotte's praise, I felt like I just needed to deal with it.

"It must be hard to be a princess," I sighed.

My shapewear was tight and the dress was heavy. All my jewelry made me worry about attracting thieves, and walking in these high-heel shoes was next to impossible.

"I'm sure they get the hang of it after time," Liselotte said.

"I truly respect those princesses."

Zara came to get me once I was finished getting dressed. He'd said that he wanted us to dress up as an elf princess and her knight, so I was excited to see what outfit he'd made for himself.

"I've come to escort you, Your Highness," Zara spoke with a deeper tone of voice than usual.

### "Wow...!"

Zara was dressed in a jacket with a stand-up collar, black slacks and boots, and a cloak the same shade of green as my dress. He looked exactly like a handsome knight from a fairy tale.



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"How amazing, Zara! You look wonderful!"
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He told me that Liselotte informed him of my outfit and he was able to purchase fabric for his cloak that matched my dress.

"Your knight's uniform looks like the real thing," I said. "As always, you've done great work."

I knew he learned the basics of making clothes in his village, and I could only imagine how much work it took to reach this level of craftsmanship.

"There was a time that I wanted to make clothes for a living." But that was before he realized he liked making his own clothes more than anyone else's. "I can make dresses too, so I hope I can make a dress for you some other time, Melly."

"A dress made by Zara? I bet it'll be adorable. But I don't have anywhere to wear it," I pointed out.

"We could have a party, in that case."

"A party when we finish our house?" I suggested.

"I love that. I'll make a dress for Charlotte too."

Progress on our house was currently underway. Once we finished remodeling, there were curtains to make, dishes to buy, and a whole list of things for us to take care of. But every part of it was fun. I couldn't wait for a day off to get to work on it. Not that this was the time to chat about such things. We needed to meet up with Ulgus.

"June is waiting for us at the backdoor of Avan Atulaford," he said.

"Then we should hurry."

We got in the carriage and headed to the restaurant.

"Good to see you all again..." Ulgus greeted us with dark circles under his

<sup>&</sup>quot;You look beautiful too, Melly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Gosh, I'm embarrassed."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Me too."

eyes. He dressed in his personal clothes instead of his knight's uniform. He wore a black jacket, white shirt, and trousers—a true teenager's outfit. "I want her to see the real me so that she changes her mind."

"I'm not sure that will work..." I said.

Love was blind, after all. It had a way of sweeping someone's flaws under the rug.

Lady Cheryl appeared to have already arrived. Ulgus let out a deep sigh.

"Seriously, how did it end up like this...? I know I've always said I want to be popular with girls, but I never expected to get courted by a noblewoman..."

Zara slapped Ulgus on the back, causing him to stand up straight. "June, be a man and turn her down right."

"R-Right. I understand."

Zara's encouragement prompted Ulgus to face his destiny head-on, finally entering the restaurant. He took step after fumbling step forward.

"June, you're stepping with your right foot and swinging your right arm at the same time," Zara chided.

"Ah! I knew something was off!"

He was visibly nervous. But who could blame him, now that he had a noblewoman fawning all over him?

We arrived at the door, knocked, and watched it fly open with tremendous force.

"Mr. June! Thank you for meeting me!"

"Whoa!"

The beautiful girl had wavy, honey-colored hair and eyes as sweet as chocolate. She leapt out at Ulgus. This had to be Lady Cheryl, in all likelihood. Ulgus dodged her attempt at a hug, which meant she went flying right into my chest instead.

"Eek!" she cried.

"Lady Cheryl, are you all right?!"

"You can't just take off in a run like that!"

Her maids took turns scolding her.

"Don't worry. I landed perfectly on something soft," she said.

Is that supposed to be my chest? And stop patting it, please.

As I tried to figure out how to deal with the young lady, Zara helpfully pulled her off of me.

"Oh, and you are?" Lady Cheryl was just now realizing that Zara and I were there too.

"Ah, she's my fiancée," Ulgus chimed in. "She's from...the Fore kingdom, or something—"

"This is the third-born princess of the kingdom of Forestia, Princess Mellmell Reesrisu," Zara stuck his chest out and answered proudly.

The two of us came up with this backstory together. I was a princess of the small kingdom of Forestia, which existed deep in the woods.

"Good day," I said all princess-like.

"G-Good...day... I-I'm Cheryl Glenda Seton..."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Cheryl. I heard you wished to speak with me."

"Y-Yes..."

Lady Charlotte looked bewildered by the sudden arrival of an elf princess. She also seemed overwhelmed by the dazzling aura both Zara and I gave off. Although, Zara was doing about 80 percent of the dazzling. I handled the other 20 percent.

Amelia at our backs was also adding to our intensity, I was certain.

"I-I don't want to stand while we talk, Princess Mellmell, so shall we have a seat?" Ulgus suggested.

"Certainly, June."

Calling Ulgus "June" for the first time felt strange, but I just grit my teeth and

endured the awkwardness.

We sat down and had a waiter bring us black tea and sweets. Liselotte once taught me how to properly eat the cakes I spotted on the three-tiered tray, so I didn't have to worry about that part. However, this didn't feel like the right time to dish up. The mood in the room was very grim.

Lady Cheryl was hanging her head. Ulgus was staring off into space.

At this rate, I had to be the one to say something.

"So what would you care to discuss, Lady Cheryl?" I started.

"Oh, um, Mr. June told me that he had a lovely fiancée, so I became curious about—"

"Goodness! A 'lovely fiancée?'"

"Y-You're indeed lovely, which really surprised me."

"Thank you for saying so."

On the inside, I prayed for her to give up now. But Lady Cheryl turned her determined eyes toward me. "You see... I fell in love with Mr. June at first sight."

"Oh my heavens!"

"I care for him very deeply!" she confessed.

This was straight out of a romance novel. The young lady's maids were watching the encounter and holding their breath. I had to become the high-class villainess that was always the rival in these kinds of stories. I pressed Lady Cheryl for more information.

"Just what are your intentions?"

"I-I don't accept that Your Highness is the one marrying Mr. June."

"And what about it?"

"...rriage."

"Huh?" Not even my elf ears could pick up her tiny whisper. I asked her to repeat herself. "What was that? I can't hear you."

"I said, I want to compete for Mr. June's hand in marriage!"

"Whaaaaat?!"

Ulgus was the most shocked of any of us. Amelia, on the other hand, looked amused by this development.

"P-Please stop this. I'm not worth all this fuss!" Ulgus was starting to sound more like the heroine of this story. Zara shrugged his shoulders, amazed by the way this was playing out.

"Compete? Compete in what...?" I asked.

"In cooking. Mr. June told me that he likes women who are good at cooking. When I read that in his letter, I worked my fingers to the bone to learn culinary skills. Princess Mellmell, if you can cook something more delicious than I can, then I promise I'll step down!"

Step down from what, exactly? Ulgus and I are already engaged... But witty retorts probably weren't needed in a romantic tale such as this.

"We can use ingredients we buy in shops. I'll pay for everything myself," she insisted. This proposition was getting more and more outrageous. "Mr. June can decide the victor. But I'll be using a magic tool to be sure he's not lying about his choice."

Lady Cheryl's maid showed us a ring with a crystal on top.

"It turns red if you lie, and blue if you're telling the truth."

"Wh-Why are you walking around with something like that?" Ulgus asked.

Lady Cheryl showed Ulgus the ring as she continued, "I wanted to show you that my love for you was true. As you can see..." The transparent crystal began to turn into a faint but beautiful blue. It seemed she really *did* love Ulgus. It was just that her love was too overpowering. "You may decide the theme for our cooking, Mr. June."

She actually wanted to go for this. She kept outlining the competition, even though I hadn't even agreed to it yet. Ulgus looked at me nervously, and I knew he was asking me if I would agree to the competition.

I knew what foods Ulgus liked. That was more than enough to win with. I

looked him in the eyes and nodded firmly.

"...All right," he conceded. "I'll pick a theme."

Ulgus's theme was...home cooking.

Lady Cheryl's eyes went wide.

"Mr. June, what is 'home cooking?' What sort of things does that encompass?"

"Huh?"

The term didn't seem familiar to her. It highlighted the major difference in values between Lady Cheryl and Ulgus.

Since Ulgus was too shocked to respond, Zara offered an explanation instead. "Home cooking refers to those classic meals you eat as a family. You could call them the tastes of home."

His voice was deeper than normal. The maids and even Lady Cheryl couldn't look away. Today, Zara was both the ideal knight and gentleman...even if he was just playing the part.

"Did that explanation help you?" he asked.

"Y-Yes. I just need to make a familiar dish that I'm used to eating regularly."

"Exactly."

"Very well. Then let's have a 'home cooking' battle," she agreed.

We discussed the details and agreed to submit our food five hours later. Avan Atulaford had two kitchens we would split into and use to cook. The prize in this competition, Ulgus, was led to a separate room by Lady Cheryl's maids. He would stay there without any visitors until it was time to be our judge.

Our break area was a large room, bigger than the usual private rooms, for nobles to dine in. A crystal chandelier hung above the bright red carpeted floors, and the wooden table looked like it was made of better materials too.

"I'd heard Avan Atulaford was a cheap restaurant, so I didn't think they'd have a room like this," Lady Cheryl said.

"It may be cheap, but they have some high-class regular customers," I

explained.

"Ah, I see. Now I understand."

The regular high-class visitors had been coming here for over twenty years now. Their knights who joined them in Avan Atulaford became hooked on their delicious cooking, which was why the restaurant still catered to knights after all this time.

Amelia was sprawled out on the nice, fluffy carpet.

"Kreeeeh..."

She dozed off in pure bliss.

"But five hours of cooking time? I'll be waiting around for four of those hours," I said.

"True. You could easily whip up some home cooking in an hour," Zara replied.

For now, we'd decided on what to make. All that was left was to wait.

"Melly, I brought my embroidery set with me. Care to join me?"

"Sure!"

The two of us decided to kill time with a bit of needlework.



#### "KREEEEH!"

Amelia awoke to see a lovely scarf sitting right in front of her eyes. The special scarf just for Amelia, with a yellow floral pattern embroidered into the material, was a joint creation between Zara and me.

"Kreh! Kreeeeh!" She wagged her tail and spread her wings with joy.

"I love seeing her so happy," Zara said.

"I've been too busy with work and preparing for the house to make her anything these days," I admitted.

"It's important to set some time aside for Amelia now and then."

"That's true."

Amelia urged me to put the scarf on her right away. Since she already had the ribbon around her neck, I wrapped the scarf over her head and tied it beneath her chin.

"All right. It's time for me to start cooking."

"I'll help too, Melly."

"Thank you, Zara."

Today's main ingredient was potatoes.

"You're making potato dishes, huh?"

"I am. Ulgus once told us that he ate nothing but potatoes when he was little, remember?" I felt that potatoes probably embodied home cooking for Ulgus. "He said that he didn't really like them, since he ate them so often, but I want to make something with potatoes that even Ulgus will enjoy."

"I like the sound of that."

That was why I spent the next hour whipping up the best potato dishes I could come up with.

I started the first dish by mixing a white sauce I made with flour, milk, butter, salt, and pepper into a bacon and onion stir fry. Then I coated a bowl with butter, lined up some thinly sliced steamed potatoes, and poured the white sauce on top. I finished with a sprinkling of cheese before putting the dish on the stove to cook, and then my "potato gratin" was complete.

For the second dish, I wrapped thinly sliced meat around whole steamed potatoes and cooked them together. Then I poured sweet and spicy sauce over them to complete my "meat-wrapped potatoes."

Finally, for the third dish, I added eggs and flour to mashed potatoes, then seasoned them with salt and pepper. When this base was well-mixed, I added cheese and fried them up in hot oil. My "cheese and potato fried dumplings" were ready to eat.

Our hour came to a close at this point.

"I was able to make three whole dishes thanks to you, Zara," I said.

"It was nothing. I'm just glad I could help."

What made these three dishes so unique was that you couldn't tell they contained potatoes just by looking at them. I wanted Ulgus to eat them without any prejudice, that way.

Lady Cheryl and I sat on either side of Ulgus at the table. He looked pretty uncomfortable to be in the middle of us.

"Princess Mellmell, my maids told me you only spent the last hour cooking everything," Lady Cheryl commented.

"That's correct. Home cooking is best when it's freshly made."

Lady Cheryl's dishes were brought out first.

"This is three-horned cow beef cooked with red wine." The slowly simmered beef already looked tender, just sitting on the plate. "This here is my own home cooking. Please try it."

"Right. Thanks for the food." Ulgus held the meat down with his fork and sliced off a bite with his knife. "Whoa! So tender!" He'd barely needed to use the knife at all. Ulgus tried this first bite. "Th-The beef actually melted in my mouth!"

It must have been incredibly soft. Ulgus continued to eat without a word, and in no time at all, his plate was cleaned.

"That was really good."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Lady Cheryl said. "This is what home cooking is like in a duke's family. Once we're married, I'd be happy to cook it for you every month."

"Th-Thanks..."

I felt embarrassed to serve my food after Lady Cheryl's fine dining, but I grit my teeth and prepared for my turn.

Zara brought out the potato dishes next.

"Oh! ... I see you made three dishes in only an hour," Lady Cheryl said.

"That's right. I think the true charm of home cooking is that you can whip it up

very fast."

"That's true..."

Lady Cheryl didn't seem to have quite understood that part.

"Please eat up while it's still warm," I said.

"Right, thanks for the food." He started with the potato gratin. As soon as he bit through the strings of gooey cheese and tasted a bit, Ulgus perked up in realization. "This is...potato, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's made of potatoes. What do you think?" I asked.

"That really surprised me. It's great. I've only ever had boiled potatoes and potatoes in soup before, so it's nice to eat it as a gratin for the first time."

The cheese on the outside was crispy, hiding a delicious, rich white sauce underneath. Both were the perfect complements to the soft potatoes. The second dish was the meat-wrapped potatoes. Ulgus seemed to notice what was inside the meat when he cut into it.

"Yeah, that's a potato, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a potato. They're delicious when eaten whole," I urged.

"A-All right, then I'll try it." He stuck his fork into the meat-wrapped potato and took a big bite. "Mmm!"

Ulgus's eyes shot open wide.

"It's delicious! The meat is cooked until it's crispy, which goes perfectly with the soft potato. I love how the taste of the meat has seeped into the surface of the potato!"

I was glad he liked it. Ulgus gobbled down all three of his meat-wrapped potatoes.

Finally, it was time for the cheese and potato fried dumplings to make their appearance.

"This is made with potatoes too, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, it's all potatoes."

It seemed like he didn't even need to try it to see the pattern going on. He stuck a bite-size dumpling on his fork and brought it to his mouth.

"Mmmmm!" Ulgus's face lit up with surprise. This made sense, since this was the only dish where the potatoes were served mashed. "My mouth filled up with all the melted cheese...!"

He went back for another dumpling before he could express any more thoughts. "I-It's so good...!" I could tell those words were coming from his heart. Ulgus loved this dish too.

"Try dipping the dumpling in the meat-wrapped potato sauce from before," I suggested.

"Huh? Ah, okay, sure."

As instructed, Ulgus dipped a dumpling in the sweet and spicy sauce.

"O-Oh my gosh...!"

The sauce had probably absorbed the savory meat flavors, making it even more delicious. The dumplings, cooked until they were nice and crispy, would be the perfect match for the sweet and spicy sauce.

The eating part of the competition was over now. Ulgus had eaten every bite of my three dishes.

"Now let me ask you, Mr. June. Did you prefer my red wine-cooked three-horned cow beef, or Princess Mellmell Reesrisu's potato dishes?"

Ulgus was wearing the lie-detecting crystal. We would instantly know if he was telling the truth or not.

"The cooking I liked more..."

I folded my hands and prayed. Please, please let me win!

"...was Princess Mellmell's potato dishes."

The crystal lit up blue as soon as he finished his sentence.

"I-It can't be...!" Lady Cheryl's legs gave out, but her maids rushed to hold her steady. "H-How...? How could a dish that took five hours to make be defeated by something that only took an hour?"

"Perhaps you would have won if the competition's theme was a special delicacy, Lady Cheryl."

"Mr. June, did you think my food was a delicacy?"

"Yes. I only get to eat such delicious food once, maybe twice a year."

"But we eat it once or twice a month at my house..."

"I'm sure you do. That food may have been 'home cooking' to you, Lady Cheryl, but to me, it was a special meal I could only have at a restaurant." Ulgus stared off into the distance as he spoke. "I was born in the poor part of town and I had lots of siblings. We ate potatoes every single day, since it was the cheapest thing we could buy. I started to hate potatoes because of that...but Princess Mellmell made such delicious potato dishes out of the exact same ingredient I ate as a child. That's why, to me, this is the ultimate 'home cooking.'"

"...l...see..."

"Now do you understand that there's a big wall between the two of us?"

Lady Cheryl nodded. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have meddled in your life, when you already have a fiancée and everything..."

"It's all right. I wasn't upset that you liked me. Well, I guess it did cause me a lot of grief..."

"I know now that what I did was wrong."

"It's fine. How about we agree to this? Let's go back to being strangers."

Ulgus bid her "farewell" before turning and walking away. It was the coolest I'd ever seen Ulgus act before.



#### "Aaaaaahhh! I was so nervous!"

When we ran into him outside the back door of the restaurant, Ulgus was yelling his heart out with tears in his eyes. That calm and composed man who said "Let's go back to being strangers" was nowhere to be found.

"Let's go somewhere else, June," Zara said.

"Urk... I'm sorry. You're right."

Since our outfits were very conspicuous, we went straight back to the Lichtenberger home instead of stopping by a cafe or anything like that.

"...So that's what you three were up to?" Liselotte was almost lost for words. She told us she thought we were going to a costume party.

"But it was actually kind of fun," I admitted.

"Well, that's good, I suppose..."

Ulgus was still trembling even now. Only Zara and I had enjoyed our experience of playing dress-up.

"Are you all right, June?"

"You certainly look pale."

"Why don't you drink some water?" I suggested.

Ulgus gulped the water down as soon as I handed it to him. Then he drank another cup-full, and then another. Now that I thought of it, I didn't remember Ulgus drinking anything at all while he was eating. He had to be parched after consuming so much rich food.

"Do you want more?" I asked.

"N-No, I'm okay, thanks." Ulgus clutched his chest, took a deep breath, and began to speak. "Medic Risurisu, it's thanks to your clever recipes that I was finally able to turn Lady Cheryl down for good. Thank you so much."

"Don't mention it."

"I never imagined that you would get roped up in a cooking competition."

"It's all right."

I was just glad she gave up in the end. This should mean the end of Ulgus's worries.

"But you're always going on about how you wish girls liked you. A woman finally courts you and you get cold feet?"

Ulgus gulped at Liselotte's remark. Zara decided to step in with an

explanation.

"Would an energetic puppy enjoy being courted by a kitten who's lived a sheltered life?"

"I suppose. It must be hard, being opposites like that," she conceded.

"That's what it's like for nobles and commoners," Zara said.

"Then what about elves and humans?"

Liselotte's question caused Zara's face to start twitching. Just what had him so nervous? It was unusual to see Zara lost for words.

Perhaps I shouldn't be the one answering in his place, but I decided to respond to Liselotte's question instead. "Elves and humans are different races, but I don't think we're opposites at all. You and I are friends, right, Liselotte?"

"Yes, that's true."

"The only real differences between us are the shapes of our ears and our hearing abilities, which isn't very much. It's sort of like...dogs and wolves, maybe?"

I couldn't find the exact words, so I just hoped they understood the point I was trying to make.

"Besides, I've always heard plenty of love stories between elves and humans."

"Really?"

"Really."

It really all came down to the compatibility of the two people involved.

"I think sharing similar values is what matters, not being from different races," I concluded.

"It must be a miracle to meet someone like that."

"Yes, I agree."

My views of marriage were shaped by the Fore Elf standards. But lately, I started to feel like marriages where both parties were free to choose each other, like what went on in the royal capital, were more ideal.

"I want to be a candidate for your maid of honor when you get married, Mell," Liselotte said.

"Maid of honor? What's that?" I asked.

"It's someone who helps put on the wedding. They make invitations together and go out with you to buy gifts."

"That sounds like fun."

"It is."

My thoughts on marriage had changed dramatically since I started to work in the royal capital. The idea of being chosen to be someone's life partner not because of my magical energy, but because they liked me for who I was made me so happy just to imagine.

"Ulgus, you'll meet the right woman for you someday," I said. "There's no need to rush."

"I hope that's true."

"Shall I introduce you to one of my friends?" Liselotte asked.

"No thanks, Sorcerer Lichtenberger. I'm scared of what your friends might be like..."

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

Birds of a feather flock together.

Ulgus probably had his own vivid mental picture of Liselotte's friends. I felt bad, but couldn't help letting out a chuckle.

"Mell! How could you laugh at that?!" Liselotte cried.

Ulgus burst into laughter too. Zara was covering his mouth to hide his smirk.

My quiet snickering grew louder and louder.

After everything that happened, we managed to end the day with smiles on our faces.



A few months later, Ulgus called me over and showed me a card. It was from

Lady Cheryl. Inside was a portrait of a happy-looking couple and the caption "We're engaged!" It seemed that Lady Cheryl found her soulmate after being rejected by Ulgus.

The man she was marrying was another knight.

"Why do I feel kinda weird about this?" Ulgus asked.

"Your soulmate is out there somewhere, Ulgus."

I tried to assure him of that. This was the conclusion of Ulgus's strange, romantic turmoil. All I could do was sympathize with him.

I hoped that, someday, Ulgus would meet a woman who loved him from the bottom of her heart. Until then, I would be there to support him however I could.

## Chapter 5: The Princess and Honeycomb Toffee

"ANOTHER expedition mission just came in," Captain Ludtink announced. "They'll give us the details later, but for now, just prepare ten days' worth of clothes and some light rations."

Everyone's faces stiffened when they heard we had an expedition coming up. Charlotte was the only one of us who openly expressed her sadness. But then, a smile instantly came over her face. You see, Charlotte had learned to play a little game whenever we were going on expeditions. I suggested it to her, since she always seemed so sad to be left behind, and she really took to it right away.

The game involved playing the scorned wife who bickered with her husband about work. Today's participant was Ulgus.

As soon as Captain Ludtink dismissed us, Charlotte ran up to Ulgus. "Hey, June. You have to work again?"

"It's not up to me. The captain gives us those orders."

As they continued this back and forth, the two of them went to the armory together.

"You worked on our anniversary too!" Charlotte huffed.

"But I made up for it, right?" Ulgus never missed a beat.

They both worked diligently as they bickered. Ulgus restrung his bow while Charlotte filled his quiver with arrows.

"Enough! What's more important, your job, or me?!"

"Th-That's not— Aha!" Ulgus finally burst out laughing. He thought Charlotte's performance was hilarious.

"Juuune! You laughed at funnest part!"

"I'm sorry."

"But now I feel happy. Good luck on expedition!"

"Thank you, Charlotte."

The game was over. I couldn't help but eavesdrop every time she played it—both because my squadmates committed to the role, and also because I always ended up laughing. Another major advantage of the game was that Charlotte accompanied her target and helped them pack, which made things go much quicker. Even Captain Ludtink stayed silent and allowed it.

However, a ten-day-long expedition was the lengthiest one I'd ever been on. Even Captain Ludtink didn't know the specifics yet. It was possible we were being dispatched on an escort mission. Not that, from what I'd heard, an expeditionary squadron had ever been given such an assignment.

It might be my first mission eating three meals a day, staying in a lodge in a city, and not camping outside.

"I wonder what this mission's going to be like?" I mused.

"Kreeeh."

I stuffed my bag with provisions as we spoke. Packing ten days' worth of clothes meant carrying a lot of luggage. I figured a carriage wouldn't be able to fit all of our bags. Instead, it turned out we would be taking horses and traveling with a separate luggage carriage.

"I don't even know what to imagine," I said to Amelia.

"Kreeeeh."

I'd been nonchalantly busying myself packing, only to instantly grow nervous when the general commander of the expeditionary squadrons showed up out of nowhere.

"Sorry to drop in like this." He greeted us briefly before explaining today's mission. "I want your unit to escort the seventh-born princess, Princess Henrietta."

Wh-What?!

"Henrietta?! That's the princess who abandoned Amelia!"

Liselotte had just said something better left unsaid. Her love for mythical beasts probably made her unable to forgive Princess Henrietta for giving up on

a griffin like she did.

"...I'll pretend I didn't hear that." With a sour expression, the general commander ignored Liselotte's outburst.

But why were we, of all people, being given this escort mission?

The princess would have her own bodyguards. The Second Expeditionary Squadron weren't the people to ask for something like this. Besides...the seventh-born princess was the one who abandoned Amelia on a deserted island.

I glanced at Amelia. Her tail was stiffened straight and her feathers were puffed up. Amelia could very well be dead right now if Garr and I never found her on that island. But now we had to protect that same princess? It was too cruel.

"Can I ask something, General Commander?" Captain Ludtink raised his hand for permission to speak, even though the general commander wasn't finished yet. "Princess Henrietta is the one who abandoned Amelia, this griffin here. She's a mythical beast, one of only a few in the world, and she could've died out there. Did they know that when they assigned us to be her guards?"

Captain Ludtink perfectly conveyed our frustration to the general commander. His words and actions were usually purely those of a bandit, but right now, he was giving careful consideration to the emotions of his squadmates. It made me really happy. I felt my heart grow warm. Amelia gave Captain Ludtink a gaze of respect too.

But Captain Ludtink wasn't finished.

"Amelia is a special part of the Second Expeditionary Squadron too. We can't protect anyone who looks down on her." He made that declaration with firm resolve. Everyone in the room was shocked.

Orders from above were absolute. If the captain was defying them, it meant he was prepared to be punished. Even Amelia, who was at the center of this disagreement, seemed bewildered by the captain's honorable demands.

"I do understand how you all feel," the commander said.

"But you're giving us these orders anyway?" Captain Ludtink responded.

"That's right. This mission comes directly from His Majesty himself."

This came as a huge shock. I was speechless. The king never gave knights direct orders outside of wartime.

"His Majesty is greatly saddened by the situation that almost resulted in Amelia's death."

The general commander relayed what he knew. The king had supposedly purchased Amelia personally from an adventurer who found the baby griffin in the forest. He wanted to give her to Princess Henrietta as a gift. After consulting with the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, Lord Lichtenberger, he was told to hand Amelia over to them, as raising a baby griffin would be too difficult.

Lord Lichtenberger sure was tough to pick a fight with the king. Well, maybe "tough" wasn't the right word. But His Majesty didn't heed the bureau's warning. He handed Amelia over to his daughter instead.

After that, Princess Henrietta started to raise Amelia incorrectly and ended up leaving her there on the deserted island. It sounded like Lord Lichtenberger's assumptions had been correct. That was also why the bureau hadn't been assigned to Amelia's recovery. Instead, our unit was wrapped up in that outrageous case.

I would never forget the watery soup and bread as stiff as rocks I ate in that cell...

"His Majesty wants Princess Henrietta to gain more of an appreciation for mythical beasts," the general commander explained.

"So that's why we have to guard her?"

"I really am sorry about this. But we can't defy orders from above."

Captain Ludtink glared at the general commander, his bandit's face twisting into a wicked expression. The general commander broke out in a sweat.

There was no disobeying the king. It would never be allowed.

"We have our own feelings in our hearts too," Captain Ludtink said. "We put

our lives on the line in battle because we agree with the country and the king's direction. But we won't follow orders that betray who we are as people. That would just make us pawns on his chessboard, not knights."

I almost wanted to cry. Captain Ludtink was protecting us—he was protecting *Amelia*. But this was yet another sign of his youth.

Everyone in the Second Expeditionary Squadron was young. That was why we agreed with Captain Ludtink's thinking. He asked us if he was right, and every single one of us nodded.

I didn't want to protect the princess who abandoned Amelia either.

However, there was one objector among us.

The person who stepped in between Captain Ludtink and the general commander was...Amelia.

"Kreh, kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh." She made her plea from in between them. "Kreh kreh, kreh kreh, kreh kreh."

"Amelia..."

Then she spread her wings out. A single white feather drifted to the floor.

"Risurisu! Amelia's tweeting, but we don't know what the hell she's saying," Captain Ludtink shouted at me.

"Oh, th-that's right." I translated her words for them. "Amelia said she wants to accept this mission."

"She what?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"It sounds like Amelia has been thinking about Princess Henrietta. Her Highness also...called her a monster." Amelia wanted to meet the princess again and prove that she wasn't a monster. "She says Princess Henrietta probably thinks about her too, and if they reunite, they can come to a mutual understanding of each other."

"I see..."

"If that's what Amelia thinks, then I'd like to take the mission," I said.

But the final call came down to Captain Ludtink. The others seemed to feel

the same.

When the general commander asked what he would do, Captain Ludtink crossed his arm and furrowed his brow. After squeezing his eyes shut, he opened them again with force. I knew he'd made up his mind.

"I apologize for acting brash," he said. "We'll accept the mission."

"I see. I appreciate your decision."

The general commander bowed his head deeply. Then he ordered us to leave at once, since our horses and cargo carriage were already waiting outside.



**OUR** destination was the town of Makinoore in Noivanova, the next country over, where the queen was hosting a tea party.

Noivanova was the homeland of Princess Shoalia—the fiancée of our country's second-born prince, and the princess I once met in town. This tea party was said to be a way of improving relations between our two countries. It was a very important event for our side.

Princess Henrietta was invited as the representative of the royal family.

We would be traveling for three days, spending four days in Noivanova, then traveling home for another three days, coming out to a ten-day trip.

Once we arrived at the meeting place, we saw a massive line of over ten carriages waiting for us.

"What is this, a wedding procession...?" Liselotte muttered under her breath. She was incredibly grumpy to be assigned the mission of protecting the princess who abandoned Amelia.

"Kreh kreh, kreh!"

Amelia tried to gently reason with Liselotte. "You don't look pretty when you're angry."

"Th-That's true. I'll be more careful." Liselotte slapped her cheeks to help focus on the mission at hand.

It seemed that a parade in honor of Princess Henrietta was being carried out

before she set sail. About fifty knights were gathered in the town square. The majority were Princess Henrietta's bodyguards. They wore uniforms that were clearly made of higher quality material than ours and had velvet cloaks to cover their backs.

"Appearances really matter for Princess Henrietta's bodyguards, don't they?" Ulgus murmured to himself next to me.

Now that he mentioned it, the knights were all very handsome. Their captain, in particular, was a beautiful man with curly silver hair and long eyelashes. He seemed like he came straight out of a novel—handsome in a different kind of way than Zara.

"They're all noblemen, just like the king's imperial guards," Ulgus said. "I was born in a poor part of town, so just looking at them makes my inferiority complex worse."

"You beat them in cuteness, Ulgus," I said. "Don't let it get to you."

"What do you mean by *cuteness*...?" He looked at me with puppy dog eyes and sadly slumped eyebrows. I wanted to tell him that was exactly what I was talking about.

"Now that I think of it, Zara said he used to be a bodyguard for the first-born princess too," I said.

"So the conditions really must be beauty."

Ulgus and I glanced at Zara from the side. He had silky blond hair, almond-shaped eyes, a straight nose, long limbs...yes, he really seemed to sparkle. Looks were definitely a priority for castle positions.

"Ahto is a truly good-looking man," Ulgus sighed.

"I agree."

The sound of trumpets suddenly came as we were chatting. The bodyguards stood at attention.

"Looks like Her Highness is here." Captain Ludtink sounded like a bandit informing his men that it was time to initiate their kidnapping. Well, he sounded like that to me, at least.

Princess Henrietta had brown hair and blue eyes—she was an adorable little princess. She stood in front of the knights wearing a light pink dress.

She's only seven years old? I guess the royal family knows how to behave.

The captain of her bodyguards, the man with curly silver hair, took one knee in front of Princess Henrietta.

"Thank you for gathering here. May our journey be blessed." She touched his shoulders with the bronze sword that had been prepared for her. One of the aides next to Princess Henrietta whispered something in her ear. She then turned her gaze toward us. "Second Expeditionary Squadron of Enoch, come forward."

Orders from a princess were absolute. We made our way toward her.

"Wh-What's that...?" She started to tremble when she looked at Amelia. It seemed no one told her about this part. Her blue eyes were wide as saucers.

"Your Highness, this griffin was raised by Mell Risurisu after finding her on a deserted island," Captain Ludtink explained. "The two have formed a contract."

"Y-Yes, I see. You've done well."

Captain Ludtink raised an eyebrow at her response. The princess let out a little shriek as soon as she saw that look on his face.

"Is something wrong, Your Highness?" he asked.

"N-No! Nothing's wrong!" She regained her composure after the captain's challenge, looking pompous as she gave her orders. "Please look after me well."

"Of course."

It was finally time to depart. Our main objective was to protect Princess Henrietta's carriage. We needed to maintain our energy over the long journey on horseback too.

"Let's do our best, Amelia," I said.

"Kreh!"

Her response was cheerful, which came as a relief. Amelia didn't seem as bothered by her past with Princess Henrietta, at least compared to how

bothered by it the rest of us were.

"Kreh kreh kreh, kreh." Amelia was more worried about Liselotte instead—she was still visibly tense.

"I just hope nothing bad happens," I whispered.

"Kreeeh!"

But a problem soon broke out, only two hours after we departed.

The carriage pulled to a stop. I heard someone shouting inside.

"I can't take this! My bottom hurts!"

It was Princess Henrietta, who wasn't used to riding in carriages for long periods of time. We stopped to take an hour-long rest. She locked out her servants and guards to stay in the carriage alone.

"So this is why the carriage has been so damn slow? Damn it!" Captain Ludtink was muttering under his breath. I decided to pretend I never heard his swearing. We'd planned to be eating lunch in a town by now, and my stomach was growling. "Let's eat lunch. Make something, Risurisu," he ordered.

"Understood."

I'd prepared lots of provisions, knowing that I needed to have something ready.

Since the morning started out so upsetting for all of us, lunch, at least, should be a lavish one. I took the thick pieces of bacon Charlotte made for us and cut it into thin strips. I put some cheese in between pieces of bread and slathered them with lots of butter. Then I wrapped the bread in bacon to roast until it was nice and crispy.

"Whoa, Medic Risurisu, that looks really good. What's it called?"

"These are my 'special cheesy bread bacon wraps,' Ulgus."

These would be hard to eat with our bare hands, so I piled them onto plates to eat them with knives and forks. Captain Ludtink grumbled that he didn't want to use silverware—a statement that didn't suit his noble upbringing. I was forced to wrap the meal up with a big leaf that I found and hand it to him that

way.

"All right. Let's eat!"

I stabilized the wrap with my fork, cut into it with my knife, and watched the meat juices seep out. I'd bought a nicer piece of boar-pig meat than usual, since it was on a special sale. Charlotte turned it into a delicious cut of bacon for us.

I brought the bread up to my mouth with my fork, watching the gooey cheese stretch out in strings. I stuck it in my mouth before any of the juices could drip off.

"Mmmmm!"

It was so good, I wanted to stomp my feet on the ground. Captain Ludtink was going back for bite after bite too, so I could tell he liked it.

"...Something smells delicious." Princess Henrietta stuck her head out of the carriage. She was startled when she saw us eating lunch around a campfire on the side of the road. Curiously, she left her carriage and approached us slowly. "What are you doing over here?"

"We're having lunch."

Her eyes went wide at Ulgus's simple response.

"Eating a meal outside? But that's unthinkable," she said.

"But it feels nice."

Zara was right. The sky above us was crisp and blue, with a gentle breeze blowing past. It made our food taste even better in such refreshing conditions.

"Would you like to try one, Your Highness?" I asked.

"Huh?"

As soon as I held a plate out to her, I heard her stomach growl. The blushing princess accepted the plate from me.

"Where's your table? You don't have any chairs?" she asked.

"No. You can set it on your lap and eat it like that."

"…"

Princess Henrietta seemed resistant to this idea, but then her stomach let out another loud growl. Her cheeks turned red, so she sank down to the ground to keep us from noticing. Her Highness placed the plate on top of her lap.

There was no beating an empty stomach. That much was obvious.

She used her knife to cut off a bite of bread, bringing it up to her lips. "What?! Why is the cheese so stretchy?"

"You can use your knife to cut it."

She slowly cut through the cheese and took a bite of bread.

"I-It's delicious..."

She gobbled down bite after bite, her cheeks still bright pink. Seeing her in this state made her look like the seven-year-old girl she really was.

I was relieved to see her finish it all without any delay.

After her meal, Princess Henrietta drank some tea prepared by her maids. Her face looked much more relaxed now, and I wondered if she'd been nervous all this time.

I took a cushion out of my bag and handed it to the princess. "I always use this cushion when I ride in a carriage. I'll lend it to you, if you'd like."

"I tried a cushion, but it still hurt."

"My bottom hurts when we travel too. So I researched the best type of cushion one could make. It won't hurt to try this one, at least."

"If you insist..."

The cushion was made entirely with Amelia's feathers to soften the bumps in the road. Traveling was much easier that way.

Princess Henrietta went back inside the carriage, cradling my cushion in her arms. The carriage set into motion a few minutes later.



**AFTER** that, we made it to the break site without any other stops. The princess came flying out of the carriage as soon as it stopped moving.

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"Your Highness! Please wait!"
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"It's dangerous to go anywhere without your bodyguards!"

She was quite the independent princess, by the look of things. I wondered what had her so eager, but then I realized she was running right up to me.

"Your cushion was amazing! My bottom doesn't hurt at all anymore!"

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Where'd you buy it? I want one too."

"I made it myself, actually."

"What?!"

"It's an original piece, made with my griffin's feathers."

"Griffin feathers... I see." Princess Henrietta hung her head and squeezed her fists. I imagined that His Majesty must have scolded her over the incident with Amelia.

I crouched down to look at Her Highness's face and saw she had tears in her eyes. I looked at Amelia and nodded. Since Amelia didn't seem angry anymore, I decided to ask the princess about her.

"Princess Henrietta, are you still scared of griffins?"

"I...thought I was, but the griffin with you is so calm... She's not scary at all."

"Is that right? I'm glad to hear it." Then I followed up with another question. "Why did you give up on taking care of her, Your Highness?"

"Because she wouldn't listen to me and she tried to bite me. I heard mythical beasts were clever, so I thought she'd obey my orders. But she didn't. She wasn't anything like the griffins in my picture books. Why, I thought that thing was more like a monster..."

So she left Amelia behind on the island.

"Mythical beasts are clever, that's true," I said gently. "But that doesn't mean they'll listen to your orders."

"Why not?"

"You have to build a relationship of equals with mythical beasts, not as master and servant. When you trust your mythical beast, they'll trust you back. That's how you form a bond."

"N-No one ever taught me that... Maybe we could've been friends if I knew..."

It sounded like Princess Henrietta held mistaken notions about mythical beasts. That was why the work being done by the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau was so important. I hoped they would continue those duties, so long as they didn't make trouble for anyone.

Although, I felt like His Majesty's fight with Lord Lichtenberger was the cause of all of this. Well, there were always going to be personality clashes in life.

"C-Can I apologize to her? Will she forgive me if I say I'm sorry?" Her Highness asked.

I looked at Amelia, who lowered her head to me. It seemed like she wanted to hear Princess Henrietta's apology.

"Amelia says she'll listen to what you have to say, Your Highness."

"R-Right. Okay." She took step after timid step toward Amelia. Her stiff motions made her look like a wind-up doll whose gears needed some grease. "...U-Um, my name is Henrietta. Do you...remember when I introduced myself last time?"

"Kreh!"

"Th-That's right. You were saying 'kreh' back then too."

Princess Henrietta placed her hands on her chest and took a deep breath. I heard her whisper a quiet "I can do this." She was prepared to face Amelia.

"I-I think I need to apologize to you."

"Kreh."

"I-I'm sorry...for leaving you...on that island. Th-That was wrong..." Her words trailed off there, as she'd started to cry. Perhaps she'd been holding on to this guilt ever since her father scolded her.

I was wrong—she wasn't some wicked little child. She'd proven otherwise,

and I was truly glad to learn this.

Amelia spread her wings, used her beak to pluck one of her feathers, and held it out to the princess.

"...What?"

"Your Highness, that's a symbol of friendship. Please go ahead and accept the feather," I said.

Princess Henrietta reached out timidly and took it from Amelia's beak. "Thank you... I'll cherish this."



"Kreh!"

"I'll also study about mythical beasts. I'll never make the same mistake again." She clutched Amelia's feather to her chest and curtseyed like a proper princess. Then she went back to be with her maids.

This was probably the end of the discord between Amelia and Princess Henrietta. I hoped Lord Lichtenberger and His Majesty would be the next ones to make up. Maybe that would be more difficult, with both of them being adults. I wished they could forget their differences and learn from Amelia and the princess.

That was when I realized Liselotte was standing next to me.

"Liselotte?" She squeezed her fists, trembling with anger. She was clenching her jaw and I knew she must be holding back her true feelings. "Um, I understand how you feel, but..."

The princess was a seven-year-old girl. It wasn't fair to feel so much rage toward her.

"...I still haven't forgiven her... Amelia almost died because of that girl," she said darkly.

I was still upset too, deep in my heart. But Amelia was the one who decided to move past that incident. I had no choice but to follow her heart.

Negative emotions only produced more negative emotions.

That was why, if you were able to, it was best to let go of that anger and forget about it. But that wasn't possible for everyone. I decided not to say anything more about it to Liselotte.



**THE** carriage pressed forward after our rest. Everything was going smoothly, but then...

"Kreeeeh, kreh kreeeh!" Amelia reported down to us from the sky. Monsters were approaching.

"Captain Ludtink, a swarm of monsters are coming toward us from the front!"

I interpreted. "She says there's six giant rats with sharp tusks."

"Those would be tusk rats, most likely. Got it." Captain Ludtink shouted out orders, "All units, prepare for battle! Risurisu, report to the bodyguards too!"

"Roger!"

I informed the captain of the bodyguards with the curly silver hair. He seemed to know something was going on, since my squadmates were heading toward the front of the party.

"What is it?" he asked.

"There are monsters coming. Captain says they're probably tusk rats."

"Got it. Thank you for the report."

I never expected to be thanked for something so simple. I started to think about it and realized that Captain Ludtink had never once expressed appreciation for anything like that. How could the two captains be so different? It was like one was a nobleman captain while the other was a bandit captain.

"You can fall back," he said. "Our unit in the rear will protect you."

"O-Okay!"

Protect me?! Captain Ludtink never offered that either. I'd only ever been treated like an annoyance with things like, "Get outta the way, Risurisu!" or "Are ya just gonna sit there forever?!"

Again, it was the difference between a nobleman captain and a bandit captain.

A few of the bodyguards headed forward at their captain's orders. The handsome young men charged to the front lines on their horses.

"Kreh kreh!" Amelia told me that the battle had broken out. She began to narrate the fight. "Kreh, kreh kreh, kreh kreh!"

First, the tusk rats attacking were about three feet long. Captain Ludtink was the one to meet their attack. He unsheathed Superbia and cracked the skull of a tusk rat while still on his horse. He was using a sword as a blunt weapon... Of *course* he was.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh."

After that, a smaller but faster tusk rat leapt forward. Vice Captain Velrey and Garr were the ones to handle it. The vice captain cut into it with Avaricia, while Garr pierced its heart with Ira when it staggered. It was dead in an instant.

"Kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh."

Two tusk rats tried to attack at once, but Zara knocked them away with Luxuria. Ulgus finished them off with arrows once they were on the ground.

"Kreh kreh kreh, kreh."

The remaining two monsters tried to flee, but Captain Ludtink wasn't going to let them get away so easily. He screamed, in a not-so-knightly fashion, that he was going to "crush them to pieces." Then he chased after them.

Ulgus used his arrows to hinder their feet. Captain Ludtink delivered the final blows.

"Kreh kreh, kreh."

"I-I see."

Amelia told me that the elite bodyguards never got a chance to fight. The handsome men were staring at the blood-soaked Second Expeditionary Squadron with horror. It was a relief to know that everyone was safe. After that, the bodyguard captain went to deliver an update to Princess Henrietta.

She turned pale when she heard they'd been fighting monsters. But her tense face relaxed when she heard our squadron had wiped them out. However...

"EEEK!" Princess Henrietta shrieked. She was staring at a bandit, his face half-soaked in monster blood. "A bandit!"

The princess's scream caused her bodyguards to tense up at the sudden arrival of this bandit.

"Kreh, kreh kreh."

"Guys! There's no bandit! It's just Captain Ludtink!" Amelia's words snapped me out of it. There was no bandit around—just my captain.

"It's all right, Your Highness," I said. "That's not a bandit. It's Captain Ludtink."

"Huh?"

"He's not a bandit."

That part was important, so I said it twice.

"He's...not a bandit."

"Right, he's a harmless bandit. Ah, wait, I mean, he's not a bandit."

"I won't forget that, Risurisu!" Captain Ludtink shouted at me when he heard that.

Naturally, the princess was frightened again.

I'd just had her convinced that he wasn't a bandit, but my persuasive powers went out the window just like that.



**OUR** first day of travel came to an end when we arrived at the town we would stay in. I was pretty tired after all the events of the day. We were staying at a luxury inn for the royal family and their company. It was five stories tall, with a fluffy red rug and big crystal chandelier in the break room.

I learned that each member of the party was getting their own room and would have their luggage brought to them. We were really being treated to the works.

Our job was over for the day. The captain of the bodyguards dismissed us. Captain Ludtink instantly informed us of our next move.

"All right. We're headin' to the cafeteria."

Apparently, he preferred the cheap cafeteria in the center of town to the stuffy atmosphere of the inn's fancy restaurant.



**THE** sun had set and turned the world dark. The shops, however, were brightly lit and open, since this was a tourist town.

"Melly, they call this place a fairy tale town," Zara said.

"Wow, really?"

Now that he mentioned it, the adorable brick houses covered in ivy were very fairy tale chic. I felt like I could see the main character of a fantasy story around every corner. Garr and Sly blended into the townscape well. Of course, as an elf myself, I wasn't out of place either.

"I hear they chose this place because they thought Princess Henrietta would like it," he explained.

"I see."

Perhaps His Majesty wanted his daughter to go on adventures and learn about the world while she was still young—before she had more limitations placed on her.

As we chatted, we eventually arrived at the cafeteria built with white walls and a blue roof. I couldn't get a clear view of it, since it was dark out, but I knew it must be a beautiful building. A worker dressed in a wizard's outfit greeted us as soon as we stepped inside. I saw other staff dressed as knights and jesters too. This place appeared to be a costume restaurant.

"Welcome. Table for nine?"

I loved that he included Amelia and Sly in his count. Amelia always looked defeated when the restaurant staff didn't include her.

He led us to a table in the back. I took a seat next to Zara, while Amelia sat in an open spot at the table.

"We'll take eight glasses of wine, assorted fruit, and honey water." Captain Ludtink ordered us alcohol without even asking. I couldn't believe he ordered wine for Sly too. Amelia, of course, was still limited to fruit and honey water.

"Captain, you can't have more than one drink," I chided.

"I know that already."

We would refrain from drinking any alcohol during normal circumstances. But today was special—it was the day Captain Ludtink defended Amelia's heart. Well, it was also a day that we didn't have to camp outside.

Our drinks were brought out quickly. Captain Ludtink praised us for a job well done that day, then we all took a sip of our drink. It was a dry, bitter wine.

"Now that I'm thinking about it, you first said that we weren't going to take the mission, Captain Ludtink. Was that really safe to do?" I asked.

"No, not at all. I'd probably still get punished if the general commander reported what I said to the higher-ups."

"R-Right, I thought so."

Still, Captain Ludtink was willing to take on the risk of putting his foot down and saying no.

"You made me feel like I want you to be my captain forever," I said.

"Oh yeah?" Captain Ludtink then gulped down the rest of his drink in one go. Maybe my words embarrassed him. "Then can I have another drink, Risurisu?"

"That's a separate issue," I retorted. "Please have something other than alcohol to drink."

The food was the most important part of this, after all. I held out the menu for the captain to see.

"Wow! The menu is straight out of a fairy tale!" I exclaimed.

"Oh my gosh, you're right," Zara agreed. "It's so cute."

The menu items were all based on fairy tale themes:

- The Smiling Princess of the Flower Garden Kingdom meal
- The Volcano Festival of the Town Guarded by the Fire-Breathing Dragon meal
- Bounty of the Forest Fairy meal
- Celebration Dance of the Lake Spirit meal
- The Hero of Light and the Devil meal
- The Tale of the Beautiful Goddess and the Saint meal
- Fairy Tale of the Day meal

"But I can't tell what the hell they're supposed to be."

Sadly, a bandit who lived in reality wasn't able to appreciate this menu for

how lovely it was.

"But it's fun not knowing what you're going to get, no? Let's all order something different, and we can trade if we get something we don't like," Zara suggested.

"I like the sound of that," I agreed with Zara's proposal. Captain Ludtink reluctantly went along with it. We each took turns ordering one thing from the menu.

Thirty minutes later...

"Thanks for waiting. Here's your 'Bounty of the Forest Fairy meal."

"That must be for Melly."

I ordered it because the name suited me so well.

"Wow, this looks delicious."

The meal was a bowl of soup with big chunks of vegetables, mountain bird skewers, and a steamed salad.

The waiter brought us the next meal.

"Next up is the 'Volcano Festival of the Town Guarded by the Fire-Breathing Dragon meal.'"

I'd imagined this one would be spicy. Vice Captain Velrey, who apparently loved spicy foods, took it. As the name involving fire, dragons, and volcanoes implied, it consisted of spicy grilled chicken thighs, lava soup, and veggies with chili pepper dressing. Each of the three parts of the dish were bright red.

"This looks great."

Vice Captain Velrey's eyes gleamed. I didn't know she had such a love for spicy food. I would have to make some chili seasoning she could add to her own soup for future meals.

"Here's your 'Hero of Light and the Devil meal."

"Ah, that's for me." Ulgus had picked this meal since he was at the age of admiring heroes. His meal was a sauté of white squid and scallops, a jet-black squid ink soup, and blood sausages skewered with miniature swords. The black-

and-white contrasting dishes represented the battle between hero and devil. "Whoa! It's so cool!"

Ulgus definitely liked his meal. I was glad to see it.

"Here we have 'The Smiling Princess of the Flower Garden Kingdom meal."

"Over here."

Zara picked this meal for Liselotte. He said that, when she was talking about mythical beasts, she turned as sunny as a princess strolling through a field of flowers. The meal consisted of omelet rice in the shape of a flower, flower soup, and flower salad—the ultimate fairy tale food set.

"It's certainly pretty." Liselotte was pleased with her order too.

"Next up is 'The Tale of the Beautiful Goddess and the Saint meal.'"

"Oh, that's for me."

The Second Expeditionary Squadron's goddess was definitely Zara. Of course, he was still a man. He was as beautiful as any goddess and as kindly as any saint, so this menu item was perfect for him. The set consisted of sweet noodles with fruit and cream, a forest apple tart, and raspberry jelly.

It was one girly food after another.

"Here we have the 'Celebration Dance of the Lake Spirit meal."

This one was for Garr. We unanimously agreed that quiet and happy words like "lake" and "celebration" fit him perfectly. His meal came with bean potage, butter-cooked white fish, and potato pancakes.

The pancakes were topped with thin slices of dried bonito—so thin that they were swaying back and forth in the air. That probably represented the celebration dance. It was a fun dish to watch.

"Finally, we have the 'Fairy Tale of the Day meal."

This was for Captain Ludtink—a menu item that changed every day. We persuaded him to order it since it came recommended.

"Today's dish is the 'Great Bandit set' from 'Tale of the Great Bandit."

Tale of the Great Bandit... I was both surprised that such a book existed, and

also felt like bursting into laughter to see bandit food served to Captain Ludtink.

The meal consisted of soup with a big hunk of meat in it, still attached to the bone. There were also slices of fresh raw meat on the side. They were exquisite dishes that a bandit was sure to love.

As tasty as it looked, Captain Ludtink had a scowl on his face.

"Want to trade with me, Crow?" Zara asked.

"You know I hate sweet foods."

"Ah, that's right."

"Would you like my "Bounty of the Forest Fairy meal?"

"I'm not eatin' anything with 'fairy' in the name."

Now he was just being stubborn. Zara shook his head with resignation.

"Want to try my 'Hero of Light and the Devil meal,' Captain?" Ulgus asked.

"The hell? Heroes and devils? I'm not a little kid!"

"R-Right..."

Ulgus didn't seem to mind being called a little kid.

Garr offered his "Celebration Dance of the Lake Spirit meal" next.

"No, I ate a bunch of seafood yesterday when I visited my family."

It was one complaint after another.

"I don't want to trade mine." Liselotte went her own direction. She seemed to really like her "Smiling Princess of the Flower Garden Kingdom meal."

"Would you like my 'Volcano Festival of the Town Guarded by the Fire-Breathing Dragon meal,' Captain?"

The muscles in Captain Ludtink's face started to twitch at the vice captain's suggestion.

"A-All that red food will burn my tongue off."

It sounded like he couldn't handle spicy things. He was so delicate sometimes.

"Crow, you'll just have to give in and eat your bandit set," Zara said. "You may

not like the name, but you like the food itself, right?"

"I guess..."

"Then what's the big deal?"

I finally began to eat the meal I ordered.

In all honesty, I didn't expect it to taste that great. I thought this was the type of restaurant where the appearance of the food was the best part. But I was wrong—it was delicious.

Captain Ludtink grabbed the meat by the bone and chomped on it. I felt like I was watching a bandit's tale just by looking at him. Ulgus seemed to get the same impression. I could see his shoulders shaking slightly. He knew he'd get yelled at if he laughed out loud.

But the service was just as good as the food itself. We were allowed as much bread as we wanted and got free soup refills too. We all ate until our stomachs were nice and full.



**WE** left the restaurant after enjoying our meals. However, one person in particular seemed to have enjoyed his meal more than necessary.

"Urk! I ate too much!" Ulgus groaned.

"Hey, are you okay, June?" Zara asked.

"My stomach hurts..."

Ulgus had eaten twelve whole pieces of bread, unable to resist going back for another piece of such delicious bread. Garr crouched down to carry Ulgus on his back, but he refused to make him go that far.

"Ulgus, once you get back to the inn, drink this medicinal herb in some hot water." I handed him some dried apple grass. "Apple grass regulates digestion, so it should speed things up for you."

"Thank you, Medic Risurisu. This will be a big help."

"Please stay warm and rest well."

"Ngh... I will!"

The shops were still open. I saw that the general store was selling adorable little strings with squirrels attached to them, like something out of a fairy tale. I wanted to peer through every last window, but I was there on a mission, not for sightseeing.

I was overwhelmed with exhaustion as soon as I got back to my room. I wanted to go to bed, but I needed to take a bath. I rang the summoning bell and had the employees run the bath in the bathroom. Since they had no tub big enough for Amelia to use, I was forced to make do by rubbing her body down with a wet towel, then massaging essential oils into her feathers.

After I finished my bath and dried my hair, I slept like a baby through the night.



**THE** next day, we met up early in the morning, since Princess Henrietta's carriage was about to depart.

Her Highness stood in front of the knights to address them. Liselotte was glaring at the princess angrily. It seemed she still wasn't willing to forgive her.

Wondering what was going on with Liselotte, I suddenly heard Zara start talking to me.

"Oh, Melly, your bag."

"Huh?"

What's wrong with it? Zara crouched down to take a look.

"Sorry. It was nothing after all."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I was relieved that there was no problem with my bag, since we were traveling on horses. ...But then I noticed the small, white squirrel plushie swinging from a corner of my bag.

"Ah, this is ...!"

"You were looking at it yesterday, right, Melly? I thought you might want it."

"I-I really did!"

The adorable squirrel was holding a raspberry. I had no idea Zara had been watching me outside that shop. I was really happy, but also embarrassed.

"Th-Thank you so much. I'll cherish this," I promised.

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

Princess Henrietta's address ended while we were chatting. We were just about to depart.

"Let's go, Melly."

"Right."

Our second day of travel proceeded without any stops from the princess's carriage. The biggest change was that Princess Henrietta came to play with us during the short break periods.

As for Liselotte, well, I was too scared to look at her.

Princess Henrietta kept glancing at Amelia curiously. I knew she was probably hesitant to approach her due to their past. But she'd stuck Amelia's feather from yesterday in her hat and seemed nervous about showing it to her.

"That's a cute hat, Your Highness," I said.

"D-Don't you think? I had my maid stick Amelia's feather through the ribbon."

I practically wanted to brag about the power of Amelia's feather. The white feather suited her stylish white hat nicely.

"Um, could you tell her thanks for me?" she requested.

"Why don't you try doing it yourself?"

"What? But doesn't she hate me?"

"I don't think she'd be upset if you thanked her from a distance."

"Then...I'd like to do that..."

"Let's go together." I took Henrietta's hand. We were standing about five feet away from Amelia. The princess squeezed my hand, now that she was looking Amelia in the eyes.

Amelia seemed to sense what was going on. She lowered herself to the

ground.

"I-I can do it now, right?"

"Right."

Princess Henrietta took a deep breath before unleashing her feelings toward Amelia. "Thank you for the feather, Amelia. It made my hat look really, really lovely."

"Kreh kreh!" Amelia wagged her tail as she answered.

"Wh-What did she say?"

"She said, 'That's good. It looks nice on you."

"R-Really?"

Princess Henrietta twirled her hat in her hands, curtseyed, and left.

It was the first time I saw her resembling a proper young lady.



**IT** was the third day of our trip. We crossed the border and took another half day of travel until finally, we arrived in the second-largest city of Noivanova, Makinoore.

An incredibly large citadel concealed the town. It was built about three centuries ago and was an important part of the kingdom's culture. This city had a lot of history everywhere you looked.

Princess Henrietta's schedule consisted of a banquet attendance on day one, a visit to an orphanage on day two, the tea party on day three, and a memorial ceremony on day four. She was going to be incredibly busy. This was impressive for a seven-year-old girl, even if she *was* a princess. Every part of her schedule was royal family business.

"Captain Ludtink, do nobles have to work from such a young age too?" I asked.

"I was climbin' trees and gettin' yelled at by my wetnurse when I was seven."

"I'm surprised to hear you had a normal childhood."

"I did. The royal family's just different."

They seemed like they were born with everything they could ever want in life. But that wasn't quite true. They received a strict education from a young age, were trained in the duties of the aristocracy until they were second nature, and worked morning until night for the good of their citizens. That was what it meant to be royalty.

"That sounds so hard..." I said.

"I'm glad I wasn't born into the royal family," Captain Ludtink responded.

"Me too."

"Anyway, what're you gonna get up to now?" he asked.

"I'm going to have fun, of course."

The rest of us could spend these four days as we pleased. Princess Henrietta didn't need more than her bodyguards for protection.

Finally, we were free! I took Liselotte's arm—she was glaring in the direction of the castle.

"Liselotte! Let's go shopping!" I exclaimed.

"What? Shopping? I don't feel like it at all. Besides, what about Amelia? We can't take her with us in these crowds."

"She agreed to go with Garr."

*""* 

"Come on, let's go, okay?"

Liselotte really seemed to be concerned about all this, almost like she was irritated with herself for being unable to forgive Princess Henrietta. A change of mood was required in times like these. There was only one option—a bit of shopping to forget her worries.

"The bookstores might even have materials about mythical beasts," I suggested.

"Mythical beast materials...?!"

"The general stores could sell dragon plushies too."

"Dragon plushies...!"

The town of Makinoore still retained many legends about the strongest of all mythical beasts, dragons. The nearby ruins were a popular spot for sightseers.

The anger in Liselotte's eyes had been replaced by an eager sparkle. This was how I always wanted her to be.

"Let's go!"

"Wait, Mell! Hang on!"

I grabbed Liselotte's hand and took off running. Right now, our greatest priority was to have some fun.



**OUR** first stop was the bookstore. As a town full of dragon legends, this seemed to directly result in a number of bookstores selling materials about mythical beasts. This shop in particular had shelves absolutely packed with materials on mythical beasts.

Liselotte's mood was completely fixed as soon as she saw the mythical beast books. She grabbed each one she laid eyes on and purchased them all. An employee offered to help, but was instead handed more books than he could even properly see.

"M-Ma'am, allow me to put these books on hold for you."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Liselotte, as a marquess's daughter, was used to traveling with lots of servants. She'd handed the clerk that mountain of books without thinking. The total purchase came out to more than fifty books. Of course, she would have them sent to her house, since she couldn't take them back herself.

"Mell, I'll lend you any research about griffins I find," she said.

"Thank you."

We headed to the general store after that.

"Oh, that squirrel is so cute, Mell," she said, commenting on my bag

accessory.

"Zara gave it to me."

"That's a mythical beast. It's called a white squirrel. Don't you know the children's story about the white squirrel candymaker?"

"Ah, I feel like I've read that before."

"It's a very famous story."

I see. So it wasn't just a squirrel. Now I know.

"Ah, this is the place," I said.

The general store listed on the tourist map was a large, three-story building. The inside was filled with female customers who were enjoying their time picking out items.

"Perhaps I should buy a souvenir for Father too," Liselotte said.

"I'm sure that would make him happy."

Lord Lichtenberger, as the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, would surely love a mythical beast item just like his daughter. I decided to ask an employee for assistance.

"Excuse me. Do you have any products relating to mythical beasts?"

"The right side of the second story is entirely comprised of mythical beast items."

"I see. Thanks for your help."

We headed straight to the second floor.

"L-Look at this..."

The mythical beast in question turned out to be dragons. Dragon products were laid out as far as the eye could see.

"Th-There's a giant dragon plush!"

The stuffed animal stood about six feet tall. It was supposed to be one-tenth of the size of the real thing.

"I-Is that a dragon?"

Its dragon-like face was exactly like the kinds you heard about in children's stories, but this one had white fur around its neck and stomach. This came as a shock—I'd always thought dragons only had scales.

"Liselotte, do dragons have body hair?" I asked.

"Yes. It's said that they used it to warm frigid adventurers during snowstorms."

"Wow..."

"Its official name is 'Mortial Furiket,' but people in town refer to it as the Furry Dragon."

"F-Furry Dragon..."

Merchandise featuring this Furry Dragon were very popular in the town of Makinoore.

"One famous food is the Furry Dragon steamed bun," she said. "They're made in the shape of the dragon and filled with raspberry sauce. I hear they're delicious."

"So when you bite into it, bright red sauce goes spilling out? How frightening."

"There's a rumor that drinking dragon blood makes you healthier. That's what it's supposed to be based on."

"Is that right? So they don't just use raspberry sauce because it tastes good."

"Exactly. They say eating a Fluffy Dragon steamed bun will keep you healthy for a full year."

"I see!"

I was standing there listening to Liselotte's passionate speech, when I suddenly realized a crowd had formed around us. It seemed that they wanted to hear about the Fluffy Dragon.

"You sure know a lot, ma'am."

"I never knew the dragons in this town came from something like that."

"I'm gonna get a Fluffy Dragon steamed bun on the way home now."

Liselotte seemed pleased to receive so much praise. She'd become unintentionally successful at spreading the word of mythical beasts.

"So what souvenir are you getting for Lord Lichtenberger, Liselotte?" I asked.

"Oh, that's right!"

I made sure to remind her before she got too lost in her satisfaction.

"I think I'll go with this giant Fluffy Dragon plushie."

"Really? You're going to give that to your father?"

"Uh-huh. Father loves cute things."

I'd been starting to suspect that myself. I always wondered why he formed a contract with the adorable-looking Album, who wasn't even a mythical beast. Lord Lichtenberger had a very big house. Surely, he had room for the massive plushie.

I imagined burying myself in the white fur of its stomach. It would probably melt away the whole day's worth of fatigue. The busy Lord Lichtenberger might need something just like that.

"I think it's a good choice," I agreed.

"Right?"

Liselotte proceeded to purchase the giant Fluffy Dragon plushie. Then I purchased Fluffy Dragon handkerchiefs so that Amelia, Liselotte, and I could match.

On our way back to the inn, Liselotte said something unexpected to me.

"Thank you, Mell."

"For what?"

"You know what for. You took me out shopping because you knew I was upset, didn't you?"

"That's true... But I'm sorry. I forgot that objective along the way and just started enjoying our shopping."

"I know. But still, thank you. I was able to process my feelings a little better."

Liselotte told me that this entire matter helped her realize that she was now in the position that I once was. "My role in the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau once forced me to treat you horribly..."

"Yes, that did happen."

"I thought you would never forgive me, but then you did in the end. You even agreed to be my friend."

"That was because you and your father both showed remorse for your actions and proved your sincerity," I reminded her.

"I know. I truly never wanted to do anything like that ever again."

Liselotte had given it a lot of levelheaded thought. She realized that Princess Henrietta was currently doing those same things—showing remorse and proving her sincerity.

"I knew it was wrong to be mad at her all this time."

"That's right. I want to see you smiling whenever possible, Liselotte."

Instead, she looked like she was about to cry.

"Even now, the part of me that wants to forgive her and the part that doesn't are battling inside me. But I'll just carry this hatred in my heart forever if I don't let it go, and I don't want that." Liselotte faced forward, her eyes filled with determination. "I've decided to forgive Princess Henrietta."

"Is that right? Well, I think that's for the best."

It was a decision that definitely took courage. Liselotte had taken another step toward adulthood. Gently, I patted her on the back.



WHEN we returned to the inn, a carriage with a unicorn was parked out front.

"Wait, is this ...?"

"That's Princess Henrietta's carriage."

Maybe she'd come to see Captain Ludtink. We entered the inn and were quickly approached by the curly, silver-haired captain.

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"We've been waiting for you, Medic Risurisu."
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"Huh?!"

I was dragged away from Liselotte and into a small break room of the inn. Princess Henrietta was sitting inside.

"Mell! Thank goodness! I thought you were on a date and wouldn't be back until late."

"D-D-D-Date?!"

"Weren't you out with the boy with the blond hair?"

"N-No, I wasn't!"

I explained everything to her—that I was with Liselotte, and that we bought matching handkerchiefs together.

"Shopping with a friend? That sounds like such fun. My teacher said I can't do that."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right. I'm sorry too."

The silver-haired knight cleared his throat.

"Oh, um, there's something I wanted to ask you," Her Highness said.

"Ask me?"

"Yes. I came here without telling my teacher, so we have to be quick." She decided to begin in the break room, since we didn't have time to relocate.

"I hope it's something I can help with..." I said.

"I just know you can."

"What would that be?"

"Um, you see, I have to serve something to every guest at the queen's teaparty."

"Serve them...?"

"I thought I could bring sweets from our country and that would be fine..."

"But it didn't turn out that way?"

Her Highness nodded. She had tears in her eyes. "I didn't read the invitation properly... It said that we were supposed to serve things we made ourselves."

"In other words, you can't use the sweets you already brought," I concluded.

"Exactly." Princess Henrietta had witnessed me cooking, so she assumed I could bake too.

"But can't your maids make sweets?" I asked.

"I asked them, but they only knew the complicated kinds. You cooked a simple meal during a short break, didn't you? I thought you might know how to make simple sweets too..."

"I-I see..."

The seven-year-old princess was too young to make anything complicated. That was why she wanted to learn from me, who was able to cook simple food.

"I could bring the sweets my maids baked, but I'm a bad liar, so I think they'd figure it out right away. That's why I have to make it myself... Please, Mell! You're the only one I can ask..."

Her sudden request put me in a tough position. I didn't know how to make many simple desserts. I only made the delicious kinds that came from precise measurements and following the steps in order.

I couldn't think of any simple desserts on the spot like that.

"Well..."

That was when one of her personal knights brought over tea and snacks for us. The black tea had slices of citrus fruit floating in it and the snack was baked meringues. I started with the baked meringue. They were delicious—sweet, with an amusing, puffy texture. It was a delicate flavor. I took a sip of tea, and that was when it hit me.

"Ah, I've got it!"

"I can't do baked meringue," she interjected. "This is what I asked the maid for help with, and it was too hard."

"No, not baked meringue. There's something called 'honeycomb toffee' that's a lot like this."

"Honeycomb toffee?"

"That's right."

Our village healer taught me how to make it when I was complaining of an empty stomach. But I never actually made it at home, since it required a nicer sugar than the kind we had.

"It's crispy like a baked meringue and very delicious."

"R-Really? Then I'd like to learn."

It was a simple dish and delicious when freshly made.

"Oh, I have an idea! You should make it in front of the queen, since it's fun to watch the cooking process," I suggested.

"What? Making sweets in front of the queen? I could never!"

"Sure, you can. It's simple, once you know the trick."

"B-But..."

"Let's give it a try!"

Honeycomb toffee was the only simple dessert I could think of. Princess Henrietta would have to put in the work to learn it. Her Highness couldn't stay in the inn any longer, so I decided to join Princess Henrietta in the palace where she was staying.

I informed Captain Ludtink that I would be leaving the inn. He was drinking with Zara and Vice Captain Velrey in the cafeteria. With a bright red face, he told me, "Sure, go on ahead." Well, I knew he would be fine with Zara and the vice captain with him.

"Melly, the palace is a battleground for women, so be careful."

"O-Okay, understood."

I explained the situation to Amelia too, who was lounging around in Garr's room. She told me to have a good time.

Then I went to tell Liselotte too, who insisted on coming with me.

We gathered our things and left the inn.

Our destination was the palace, which according to Zara, was a battleground for women.



**THE** clocktower chimed seven times just as the carriage pulled up to the royal villa. It was dinnertime. The detached villa in a corner of the royal palace, "Lily Parei," was built for noble visitors to stay in. It was a beautiful building, not that I could see much of it, since it was dark outside.

"There's a rose garden too."

"Well, I can't see it..."

That was something to look forward to tomorrow.

As soon as we arrived at Lily Parei, a woman with sharp-cornered eyes ran toward us.

"Oh, that's my teacher, Mrs. Leontine. She's scary," Princess Henrietta whispered to me.

Mrs. Leontine looked to be in her fifties. She wore glasses with round lenses and her graying hair was tied up in a ponytail. The woman had squinted eyes, a hooked nose, and a general appearance like that of a witch from a storybook.

That teacher was dashing toward us now.

The bodyguards stood protectively in front of Princess Henrietta, but they were quickly pushed aside. It wasn't a very effective defense at all. As a general rule, knights were supposed to be allies of the weak. Raising a hand against women was especially forbidden. Perhaps there was nothing they could do in this situation.

Mrs. Leontine glared at the princess. It was an incredibly overpowering expression.

"Princess Henrietta! Where on earth were you?!"

"Not far. I had my guards with me."

"You're invited to this palace, yet you leave before so much as greeting Her Majesty?!"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it."

"I've had enough of your 'sorries'!"

"Then what should I say?"

"It isn't about your words. What I want is for you to correct your actions."

"Oh my, don't we have to begin preparing for the banquet soon?"

Mrs. Leontine's face was bright red as she shouted, "I'm well aware!"

Well, I was only there as Princess Henrietta's representative, so I understood why her teacher was so upset. Tutoring the free-spirited Princess Henrietta was no ordinary job. I couldn't help but cheer her on in my mind.

We couldn't wander the palace in our expeditionary squadron uniforms, so a maid agreed to lend us her personal dresses.

After our baths, Liselotte and I headed to change, still in high spirits, when...

"I-I'm sorry, Ms. Risurisu, but we don't have anything in your size..."

"…"

Not a single maid had a dress that would fit my body.

The skirt might be the right length, but it was tight in the chest.

The chest size would be right, but the skirt was too long.

All I could do was cradle my head and ask how it ever came to this.

I ended up being lent a maid's uniform instead. Perhaps it was the best outcome, since I was there to cook. That was how I decided to look at it.

We ate dinner with the maids. They were all daughters of nobles who were working at the palace to train in the domestic arts for marriage. When they found out Liselotte was working as a knight, they all cried out with amazement. Liselotte was definitely pleased to receive so much praise.

Princess Henrietta returned two and a half hours later, looking exhausted. She was half asleep, but she still wanted to cook tonight.

"Why don't we do it tomorrow instead?" I recommended.

"No, I want to do it tonight."

She probably wasn't going to listen and I wasn't sure why.

"Princess Henrietta, you should rest for today."

"Huh?"

Liselotte was the one to throw cold water on the princess's motivation.

"Why? I can keep working."

"That sounds like idealism to me, though."

"I-Idealism?"

"I believe you're tired and want to rest, but pretending that you're energetic enough to do things."

"Th-That's not true. I'm...fine..."

But that was when she failed to stifle a yawn. The princess quickly covered her mouth.

Just as Liselotte said, Princess Henrietta was still trying to keep going despite her exhaustion. I couldn't teach her to cook in this condition.

"Your Highness, cooking involves using fire, which is dangerous," I cautioned.

"That's fine."

"No, it's not. The food won't come out tasting good if you're not able to fully focus."

"R-Really? It won't?"

"No. So why don't you go to bed for the day, then get to work tomorrow? A good night's rest will make your cooking turn out tastier."

"If you really say so, then yes, I'll go to bed." Then the princess pointed at her bodyguards and maids, making a declaration. "All of you, rest up too. I'm going to bed."

Princess Henrietta curtsied and left the room. Liselotte and I both felt a weight off our shoulders. It was our turn to go to bed now—we were exhausted



**THE** next day, I accidentally let out a sigh at the grand breakfast table where Liselotte and I were sitting. There were boiled eggs sitting in egg cups, bread, bean potage, omelets, and bacon. Everything looked delicious.

A round loaf of bread had been baked until the crust was crispy and a cross-shaped cut formed in the surface. A generous helping of butter had been dropped on top, melting into a liquid that glistened golden in the sunlight. I tore off a piece and watched the butter dribble off, quickly sticking it in my mouth before more of it went to waste.

Butter filled my mouth when I bit into the bread. That deep sigh came out of me when I tasted how delicious it was.

The potage was well-strained to create a smooth texture—both rich and thick.

The omelet was light and fluffy. It melted as soon as each bite reached my tongue.

But that wasn't the only egg dish at the table—there were boiled eggs too. Most inns would only let you choose between boiled eggs or an omelet, but both were up for the taking today. How luxurious!

I was reaching for a boiled egg when I suddenly got the sense that there was a specific way to eat these. My natural instincts as a Fore Elf had activated.

I decided to observe Liselotte, since she was just about to eat one too.

Liselotte started by picking up a spoon. Then she tapped it against the eggshell to crack it. She tore off the top of the shell and salted the egg. Then she used another spoon to scoop it out. It was a very elegant series of steps. She didn't just peel the egg, but used a spoon to eat the inside. It was very informative.

I tried to copy her and crack the egg with my spoon, but it turned out to be much tougher than I expected. I struggled with my eggshell until a server approached me, using his knife to remove the top portion of the shell for me.

"Th-Thank you."

He smiled back at me.

I salted my egg and scooped it out with a spoon. The egg turned out to be soft-boiled like some sort of fine dining sauce. Liselotte was dunking pieces of bread in her egg, so I copied her method. The butter-soaked bread was a great accent to the egg yolk sauce. It was unbelievably delicious.

After a few slices of bacon, still dripping with juices, our after-breakfast sweet raspberry mousse was perfect.

I was soooo full!



"MELL! Will you teach me how to make honeycomb toffee?" Princess Henrietta, already fired up so early in the morning, marched up to me for her cooking lesson.

"Urk... Okay."

I was currently dealing with the effects of eating too much food at breakfast.

"I have a scheduled visit this afternoon, so let's hurry."

"Roger..."

Liselotte, the princess, and I headed to the kitchen.

"All right. I'm going to teach you how to make honeycomb toffee today," I said.

"Yes, Chef Mell! It's a pleasure to be working with you."

"Chef Mell?"

"You're a chef, right?"

It was a very simple dessert, so the title of "chef" felt a bit like overkill. But I would just have to ignore that.

"The ingredients are sugar, water, and baking powder."

"Huh? Just those?"

"That's right. You only need a spoon and a ladle to make it too."

"What?!"

I decided to show her how to make it before explaining the process, since it was just a few steps.

I needed one tablespoon of sugar, one tablespoon of water, and a pinch of baking powder. I started by adding the sugar and water to the ladle, mixed them up, then held the ladle over a flame. I took it away once it started to bubble up. Then I added the baking powder and stirred it about a hundred times. That was when it started to puff up and expand.

"Wow!"

Princess Henrietta leaned over the honeycomb toffee, her eyes sparkling. Liselotte had the exact same expression behind her. I resisted the urge to chuckle.

Once it was complete, the honeycomb toffee was easier to remove from the ladle by heating up the bottom. I split the toffee in half, giving the two pieces to Princess Henrietta and Liselotte.

"I wouldn't call it an unbelievably delicious food, since it's only made of sugar and water, after all." I made sure to lower their expectations. But as soon as Princess Henrietta tried a bite, a smile broke out on her face.

"It's crunchy, warm, and delicious."

"I'm glad you like it."

She seemed pleased with the toffee. Liselotte finished her whole portion too. I assumed she liked it, since she didn't have anything to say.

"I didn't know you could use magic, Mell!" Her Highness exclaimed.

"M-Magic?"

"How else could you make such a delicious treat with so little effort?!"

"Th-Thank you..." I started to feel a little embarrassed, though my heart warmed with happiness too. "Anyone can learn this spell, Princess Henrietta. This time, why don't you try making it while I explain the steps?"

"Yes, please."

Princess Henrietta and Liselotte watched my demonstration with intense concentration.



"...AND there you have it."

"C-Can I really do it?"

"It's time to give it a try."

Princess Henrietta stood in front of the kitchen counter surrounded by her maids. They surely wanted to watch the process to be sure it wasn't dangerous.

"Start by adding one spoonful of sugar to the ladle."

"Okay!"

Her hands trembled as she held the spoon. It looked like her maids were holding their breath.

As soon as the last bit of sugar made it safely into the ladle, the princess let out a big sigh of relief.

"Next is one spoonful of water..."

But then, once she released the water, the sugar already in the ladle ended up spilling.

"Aaaah!"

Her maids tried to step in, but Her Highness ordered them to stop.

"I'm doing this alone. You don't have to help me."

The maids seemed moved by her determination. While she worked, Liselotte was measuring sugar and water, waiting for her turn. But she wanted Princess Henrietta to have the first attempt.

On her second try, she got both the sugar and water in the ladle. Then she placed it over a flame.

"Huh?! Whoa! Eeek!" She moved the boiling ladle aside in a hurry, then added a spoonful of baking powder.

"Ah, Your Highness, you only need a pinch of baking powder."

"What? Oh no!"

Stirring the mixture like that caused it to bulge out of the ladle and make a real mess before collapsing into a withered lump.

"I-It might still taste good..."

"Ah!"

I tried to stop her, but it was too late. Princess Henrietta took a bite of her failed honeycomb toffee and spit it back out.



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"S-So bitter!"
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"Baking powder has a bitter taste. A whole spoonful won't taste good at all..."

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"Blegh!"
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Next up was Liselotte, who had already watched Princess Henrietta's missteps.

She removed the ladle from the flame before it was boiling, then added a pinch of baking powder. Sweat was breaking out on her brow as she stirred the contents of the ladle round and round. It started to expand...but then...

"Oh?"

Liselotte's honeycomb toffee collapsed.

"B-But why?"

"I think you might have used too much force when you were stirring it," I explained.

"I-It can't be!"

After that, the princess and Liselotte put all their effort into their next batches like it was a competition. They seemed to get the hang of it along the way, and their toffee began to turn out nicely.

They were both hooked. The pair ended up making a small mountain of honeycomb toffee. The bodyguards and maids couldn't eat another bite after being forced to sample so many batches.

"...I'm going to bring this to the orphanage."

"That's a good idea."

It seemed my job was done now that they'd memorized how to make it. But that was when I felt someone grab my arm and stop me from leaving.

"Mell, I'm scared. Come with me to the tea party!" Her Highness insisted.

"Huh?"

"You too, Liselotte!"

"M-Me too?"

"Please!"

The look of desperation on the princess's face was what roped me into another night's stay at the palace. I sent word to my squadmates that I would be returning tomorrow. That was how I ended up getting to spend even more time in the luxurious royal villa.



**IT** was the third day of our stay—the day of the tea party. The rebellious and energetic Princess Henrietta had been reduced to a trembling bundle of nerves.

"U-Um, are you doing all right?" I asked.

"Oh, ah, yes, I'm all right. I'll be fine."

Her voice was coming out shrill and her brow was starting to grow damp. To anyone else, she would look incredibly suspicious.

Mrs. Leontine ordered Her Highness to carry herself like a proper princess. But the girl was only seven years old. She was too young to bear the heavy burden of all this official business.

I didn't like how this was looking. Liselotte and I went to the kitchen so I could rummage through the tea shelf.

"Ah, here it is."

"What's that, Mell?"

"A tea blend of apple grass and lavender. They help relieve anxiety."

I brewed the tea, then mixed it with forest apple juice to make it easier for her to drink. I brought it to Princess Henrietta and saw that she was still just as nervous as before.

Right now, what she needed weren't words of encouragement—it was a way to draw from her own self-confidence.

"Your Highness, I brought you some magic juice," I said.

"What's magic juice?"

"Here. Drinking it will make you the ultimate princess."

"Ultimate...princess...?"

"You'll be able to be a beautiful, proud, and kind princess this way."

"In that case, I'd like to try it."

After she drank some, the look on her face was one of relief. She gulped the rest of the cup down too.

"Thanks, Mell. It was really good."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I feel like I became the ultimate princess too."

"Yes, you truly are."

Now that Princess Henrietta had regained her confidence, it was finally time for the queen's tea party.



**WE** took a carriage from the royal villa to the palace where Her Majesty resided. I started to get nervous along the way too.

Liselotte had a dignified air about her. She must have been used to this sort of thing. Princess Henrietta was murmuring the steps to make honeycomb toffee under her breath.

We arrived quickly and exited our carriage.

Liselotte and I followed behind the bodyguards. The great hall contained a long table that seated twenty guests, ranging from young girls to aging noblewomen. Princess Henrietta appeared to be the last to arrive.

"Good day."

Princess Henrietta greeted the queen with confidence. She was nothing like the trembling girl I'd seen only a short while ago. She stopped in front of a woman, clearly the queen based on her presence in the room, and curtsied.

"I'm truly grateful to be invited to today's tea party, Your Majesty. I've been eagerly awaiting this event."

The queen waved her folding fan without any apparent objections, welcoming

Her Highness to the party.

"I'm looking forward to your special treat."

Her Majesty applied the pressure without an ounce of mercy. Princess Henrietta, however, seemed unfazed. Maybe she was the type of person who didn't feel nervous once the event had already started.

The tea party guests presented their gifts of treats to the queen, one at a time. There were cookies, chocolate cakes, black tea scones, and cheese tarts. Every last one of them looked like it could have been made by a professional chef. I doubted that these women even cooked their own food at all.

Finally, it was Princess Henrietta's turn.

She took a step forward and bowed.

The queen cocked her head when she saw the princess wasn't holding anything.

"I would like to make something sweet before your very eyes, Your Majesty."

"Oh?" The queen had looked uninterested until this point. But her eyes lit up.

Princess Henrietta placed her hand on her chest and took a deep breath. Then she began to point at tools on the tea wagon I pushed her way, launching into her explanation.

"This is a magic dessert called honeycomb toffee."

"A magic dessert, you say?"

"That's right."

She actually said the "magic" part. But it's fine. We practiced so much, so I'm sure she'll pull it off.

Princess Henrietta had no trouble measuring the sugar and water, then holding the ladle above a small flame. She removed it before it could reach a boil, then added a small pinch of baking powder and mixed it together.

This was the moment of truth. After she finished mixing, I could swear I saw the princess praying to the ladle.

Then it happened. The contents of the ladle started to swell and grow. Finally,

she heated the bottom of the ladle again and presented the fresh toffee to Her Majesty.

"This is honeycomb toffee."

"What a surprise. It really is like magic."

The queen asked how to eat it, and Her Highness informed her that the toffee was best eaten plain, with her hands. I was certain that a queen would never consume anything like that, but then I watched her pick up the honeycomb toffee and bite into it.

"...Oh my. How nice and sweet."

Those words were enough to draw the attention of the other noblewomen.

"I can make some for everyone, if you're interested. It's really very simple."

That was how Princess Henrietta came to make honeycomb toffee for all of the guests too. Everyone loved having a treat made by the princess herself. The tea party grew into a lively affair.



"THANK you, Mell. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help."

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Thank you too, Liselotte."

We shook hands before going our separate ways.

On the final day of our stay, we attended the ceremony too. The unflinching Princess Henrietta looked like a full-fledged princess now.

I knew her heart must have experienced lots of growth over this trip.

But soon our stay was over and it was time to return home. Everything went so smoothly, and I couldn't help but wonder if the princess was still in good spirits.

Thus, our expedition came to an end without any major issues.



A few days later, we received a letter from the king himself.

The envelope was labeled with neat handwriting, addressing it to "all members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron."

(Omitted)

I wanted to write regarding your journey accompanying Henrietta, my daughter. I'm sure the sudden order was a lot to take in. I appreciate how quickly you accepted the job.

I must now be honest and tell you that there were two major objectives surrounding this trip.

The first was to remind my self-indulgent daughter that she was as much a member of the royal family as any of us.

The second objective was to make her reflect on her abandonment of the griffin.

I tried time and time again, but she was unable to understand, no matter what I said to her. I sincerely apologize for utilizing your squadron to such an end.

Henrietta made a grave error in her treatment of Amelia, the mythical beast. I'm sure this was the result of my spoiling her in life. I'm truly sorry. I still feel terrible about it all. But it's thanks to you that my daughter has taken huge steps in her growth, both as a person and as a member of the royal family.

May the efforts of the Second Expeditionary Squadron be blessed with good fortune.

The letter read more like the writings of a father than a king.

Every word was brimming with love for Princess Henrietta.

"I wasn't sure how things would turn out, but I'm glad everything worked out in the end," I said.

Liselotte nodded.

"Now it's His Majesty's turn to make up with Lord Lichtenberger," I added.

"Father is deathly stubborn. I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"It's the adults who act the most immature."

"That's so true."

I prayed that, someday, the king and the marquess could work through their differences.

## Chapter 6: The Magic Fair and Jiggly Pudding

I had asked the Fore Elf magic healer about my magical energy and received the answer that something was sealing my energy away, making me unable to use large amounts at once.

But that meant I should be able to cast smaller spells.

Thinking back, I did succeed in using my magical energy through Gula, the magic pole, to create food.

This also meant that I was unable to cast the healing spell I learned from Lord Lichtenberger not because my dormant powers were getting in the way, and not because I lacked the magical energy for it either... In other words, I just didn't have the natural ability for healing magic.

When I explained all this to His Lordship, he let out a deep, deep sigh.

"You have the aptitude, but no ability to cast healing magic? I've never heard of such a thing."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"I see! Pancake Girl has no talent for healing magic."

Album, the ferret fairy, was the one to give that irritating conclusion. He nibbled on a cookie on top of the table, lounging around comfortably as he spoke.

"I-If I work harder, I might be able to learn magic faster!"

This magic classroom was held once every two weeks. If I practiced once every three days... No, I could never take one of Lord Lichtenberger's dreadfully strict classes every three days!

I'd much rather go on an expedition.

The stern-looking Lord Lichtenberger was, indeed, a harsh teacher too. Whenever I answered a question wrong, he stared at me with an icy gaze as

frigid as snow. Then he would assign me a ton of homework without any further comment. That was why I had to stay up until dawn last night finishing up all my assignments.

People with scary faces often tended to be gentle on the inside in unexpected ways. Yet Lord Lichtenberger's personality didn't betray his looks at all.

"Um, will I be able to learn magic if I study on my own?"

"No, it's not a matter of wisdom. That won't help you handle magic at all."

"I-I see."

"Magic is all about using the magical energy inside you effectively. It's not something that books can teach you."

"O-Okay..."

I didn't really understand, but it sounded like my spells would turn out better if I learned more about the magical energy in my body.

"Lord Lichtenberger! What exactly is magical energy?!"

"It's the sole force that connects us to all things in nature."

"...What?"

I grabbed Album, still nibbling his cookie, and whispered quietly enough so His Lordship couldn't hear me. "Album, do you have any idea what he just said?"

"What he just said?"

"That magical energy is the sole force that connects us to all things in nature."

"Ummm... I dunno what that means!"

"Y-Yeah, I figured."

I was relieved to know that it didn't make sense to him either. Thank goodness I wasn't alone in that.

Lord Lichtenberger cleared his throat as Album and I whispered to each other. "If you want something easier to understand, then call it a way of interacting with the world."

I'm sorry, Lord Lichtenberger. Now I really don't understand!

Magic was such a difficult thing.

"Um, I just don't feel like I'll be able to use spells..."

I had the feeling that magic was mostly a combination of natural-born talent and some sort of acquired sense for how to use it. Sorcerers were like people from a fairy tale—not that I was one to talk.

"This is just my own interpretation, but I feel like magic isn't a world where hard work pays off," I said.

"Sure. Idealism doesn't apply to magic."

There it was again—idealism. I thought I remembered Liselotte saying the same thing recently. Father and daughter were so darn alike.

"So, is it hopeless?"

"No, you still have a chance."

"R-Really?!"

What on earth could he mean? I leaned forward to hear more.

"You could use a magic tool to help you cast spells."

"M-Magic tool...?!"

Magic tools were items containing magic stones or other things packed with magical energy. They required a skilled craftsman, of which there were few, so they were incredibly rare and valuable items. They were also far too expensive for a commoner to ever afford.

"Um, Your Lordship..."

"What is it?"

"As a commoner, I don't think I can obtain a magic tool..."

"Probably not, if it's the kind in the capital city."

"Does that mean there are specialty stores outside of the city?"

"They're more like hidden villages for sorcerers."

"I-I didn't know those existed."

Lord Lichtenberger explained that there were villages whose only inhabitants were sorcerers. Magic fairs were held in these villages once a month and were where one could obtain a magic tool for a much lower price.

"They sell for less than one-tenth of the market price."

"What a lovely event."

But it wasn't as if all sorcerers could enter these fairs either.

"They might let you in if I write you an invitation."

"Um, could I please ask you to do that?"

*""* 

I bowed my head deeply, then retrieved a single feather from my breast pocket and gently set it on the table.

"This feather fell from Amelia about six months ago. You could use it for something like a quill, if you like."

"Fine. I'll write you an invitation and take you to the hidden village too."

Thankfully, that didn't take much convincing.

"The next magic fair takes place in a week. It'll last for five days."

"May we go when I have a day off?"

"Yes, that works."

"How long does it take to get there?"

"Once you receive and open an invitation, a teleportation circle appears. So there's no travel time at all."

"Wow...!"

It sounded like the location itself hadn't been revealed yet. It really was a hidden village.

"But why do they live like that?"

"I'm sure you know that the number of sorcerers in the world fell during the Sorcery Wars."

"Yes, I've heard that the wars made use of gigantic spells that depleted the magical energy of many sorcerers. Some even died."

"That's right."

Magic was seen as being equal to natural disasters at the time. There were also sorcerers who were imprisoned and treated as slaves by the sorcerers with political power. It was a period of great tragedy.

"The sorcerers who started the war were executed and the world was at peace again, but discrimination toward magic didn't die with them."

Even the good-natured sorcerers were persecuted, and their bloodlines began to disappear. But now that hundreds of years had passed, discrimination against magic was a thing of the past. All that remained were some people who never forgot that history of oppression.

"It's the families of those sorcerers who live in the hidden villages I talked about."

"I see. Now I understand."

"They're very wary of outsiders. But they're more than passionate about the preservation of the magical arts, so they'll help any struggling sorcerer who comes to them. Risurisu, I'm sure they can lend a hand."

"Wonderful!"

With that, our class was over for the day.

"Thank you very much, Your Lordship."

Album had curled up comfortably on my lap somewhere along the way.

"Ah, Album! You got cookie crumbs on my clothes!"

"Hmm?"

"You even drooled on me too."

"Hmmmmmm...."

"There's cookie crumbs in your fur too, Album."

It would all fall on the carpet if I stood up now. I wiped the drool with my

handkerchief, then bundled Album in it and handed him to Lord Lichtenberger.

"Here, you can have Album back now."

"I don't want him."

"Awww, how mean!"

It's not mean at all.

I set the handkerchief-wrapped Album on Lord Lichtenberger's lap, bowed, and left the room.

"Eeeeek! Lord Lichtenberger is scary! He's scary and I can't move!"

Album was screaming something back there, but it was best for him to sit on His Lordship's lap and learn his lesson.



**ONE** week later, I was getting dressed up to attend the magic fair.

I retrieved the cloak I'd been working on for today. The hood was even pointed to look like a genuine sorcerer's robe. The cloak itself was something I once bought from a secondhand clothing store. All I did was embroider a healing magic spell in the sleeves. Then I picked up Gula, my magic pole, to look more like a sorcerer with a staff. My appearance had been transformed and I really looked the part now.

"What do you think, Amelia?"

"Kreeeh!"

Amelia told me it suited me well. I was glad to hear that.

She would be staying home today. I'd learned that magic fairs were incredibly crowded, and with all the recent expeditions, I wanted her to rest up.

I put my wallet and handkerchief in a bag, packed some cookies for emergency rations, medicinal herbs in case I needed them, and Album. Then I was ready to go... Wait, Album?

"Album? Why are you here?"

"I'm a member of the magic class too, so I wanted to go to the magic fair with

you. Can't I come?"

"Well, I suppose I'm glad to have you if it means I won't be alone with Lord Lichtenberger."

I did invite Liselotte, but she told me magic fairs bored her after going to so many as a child. She would rather stay home and relax with Amelia. I would never forget the disappointed look on Lord Lichtenberger's face when she rejected the offer.

...Liselotte, I wish you'd try to make your father happy from time to time.

Since it was a bit chilly out, I wrapped Album around my neck like a scarf. He was soft and warm.

"Shall we get going?"

"Okaaay!"

"Kreh kreh!"

Amelia bid us farewell and told us to be safe. We would be teleporting to the hidden village with the magic fair from Lord Lichtenberger's room.

"Risurisu, leave the pole here. It'll get in the way at the fair."

"All right then."

I was really excited to look like a sorcerer and everything. But then Gula was taken from me.

"Why did you wanna walk around with that thing?"

"N-No reason."

Lord Lichtenberger was too intimidating to reveal the truth to. He was dressed in a jet-black cloak today, and with his already stern face, he looked even more like an evil sorcerer than usual. It was quite frightening.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He stared at me like he knew I was thinking something impolite. I forced a pleasing smile to answer his questioning gaze.

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"Are you all set to go?"
"Of course."
"I'm ready too!"
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Lord Lichtenberger nodded and retrieved an invitation from his breast pocket. As soon as he ripped off the red wax seal, a large magic circle appeared on the floor.

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"Wow...!"
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"It's like magic!" I almost said that too, but this very much was magic. Just how did it work? It was all so mysterious to me.

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"Let's go."
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"Ah, right."

It was my first time experiencing teleportation magic. I was very nervous. As I stood there, hesitating to enter the circle, Lord Lichtenberger ended up pulling me in by the arm.

"Eek!"

"Quiet."

It was our last exchange of words at the Lichtenberger home. I felt my body hang in the air before the room around me seemed to tumble upside down.



## CHIRP, chirp, chirp.

The first thing I heard was the chirping of birds. A warm, gentle breeze caressed my cheek. The rich scent of greenery hit my nose.

I opened my eyes to find myself in a village surrounded by vegetation.

"Wow...!"

I looked at the rows of thatched houses with children running around in between them. I'd imagined a creepy, isolated society when I heard this place described as a hidden village for sorcerers, but in reality, it wasn't so different from any other village. It even reminded me of the Fore Elf village in how it was

surrounded by woods.

"...Pancake Girl."

"Yes?"

"How long are you going to stay in this position?"

Position? Isn't Album just resting on my shoulders? But that was when I noticed something strange. My body was still floating in the air.

No, I wasn't just floating—Lord Lichtenberger was carrying me in his arms.

"Ah! Oh no! I'm sorry!"

Looking annoyed, His Lordship asked if I was doing all right.

"Lots of people get magic-sick when they teleport. What about you?"

"No, I don't feel strange at all."

Teleportation magic was a form of high magic passed down to the present day. It was done by concentrating a high amount of magical energy, which caused fevers and even fainting spells in people who came in contact with it—even if they weren't magic users themselves.

"I'm completely fine, actually."

"I see. Most people get magic sick when they teleport, even if they have a resistance to magical energy. Maybe it doesn't bother you because you have all that magical energy, and you're an elf too." Lord Lichtenberger set me down on the ground gently. I felt steady on my feet and not sick at all. "Well, I'm jealous."

"Does that mean you feel a bit unwell, Your Lordship?"

"I'm kind of nauseous."

"I see. I don't know if this will help, but here." I took some dried mint leaves from my bag and handed them to the marquess. "Chewing on this can relieve your nausea. Although, that might not apply to magic sickness."

It should make him feel a bit refreshed, at least.

Lord Lichtenberger accepted the mint and ate it.

"...I do feel a little lighter now."

"That's good." I stroked his back for him, but he stopped me, saying he was fine.

"It's a lot better now."

"Then it all worked out."

We decided to head straight to the magic fair.

"They hold the magic fair in the town square."

"All right."

The shopping district appeared on the road right off the entrance. There were bookstores specializing in magic texts, antique magic tool shops, and stationery stores with items sorcerers might need.

Just peering through the windows was a lot of fun.

"Stop getting distracted, Risurisu. Keep walking."

"Okaaay..."

The next street we arrived on was full of shops that sold food.

"Would you like some magic treats? We have butterfly chocolates with flapping wings, ice cream that lights up, and dancing cookies."

What on earth are magic treats...? I was starting to head straight for that shopkeeper, but Lord Lichtenberger grabbed my arm, causing me to snap out of it.

"Are you three years old?!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

I nearly forgot our objective amongst all the unusual sights. We needed to head straight for the magic fairgrounds.

The number of people on the road started to increase. Among the visitors were beastfolk, elves, and even fishfolk. Some were wearing robes like real wizards, while others were dressed in afternoon formalwear like nobles. I didn't see anyone else resembling evil sorcerers like Lord Lichtenberger. Fairies also

seemed to be unusual visitors. People were casting glances at Album as they passed.

We kept walking until we spotted tents. That was probably the area of the fair. Album suddenly reacted.

"Ah, I smell something yummy!"

"Those are probably the food stalls here."

"Food stalls?!"

I was so curious about what kinds of food they would have. It was so fascinating how different stalls sold different things based on local regions.

"We're looking for magic tools first."

"R-Right."

I nearly lost sight of our goal again. I needed to focus on searching for magic tools.

The magic fairgrounds were incredibly crowded and bustling. It looked like it would be difficult to even walk through them.

The first street inside was full of shops selling medicinal herbs. Common plants that grew in the Fore Elf woods were being sold for high prices. I couldn't help but wonder if I could set up shop here too.

The next street specialized in medicine made with magic. They were even selling medicine to fake an illness, like potions that gave fevers, stomachaches, and headaches. I couldn't help but laugh when I saw them. If the symptom was observable, you probably didn't need to put in any acting to feign being sick.

The next thing I spotted was a shop selling medicine to heal the user from afflictions like fevers or poison. They would be convenient to have, but the price left me lost for words. One potion was the equivalent of a month of my salary. If they were this expensive, the Royal Order probably wouldn't pay to purchase them either.

One of the medicine shops on the corner had a crowd gathered outside.

"Oh, what's that?" I asked.

"There's an exhibition sale for spirit medicine and magic potions."

"Exhibition sale?"

He explained that they were selling medicine inside the glass cases. I stood up on my tiptoes, eager to see what kinds they had, but I couldn't see over the crowd at all.

"You want to get a look?"

"Yes, I do."

With that answer, Lord Lichtenberger lifted me up in the air. He was totally treating me like a little kid. But that wasn't important right now.

"Wow, how incredible..."

The inside was filled with rows of beautiful blue and red glass bottles. The sheer number of them delighted my feminine heart. The only thing that could drag me back to reality was the prices I saw.

"Fifty gold coins for spirit medicine...? Ten million gold coins for a single potion...?!"

My salary was two gold coins each month. That was enough to demonstrate just how ridiculously expensive the potions were.

Lord Lichtenberger set me down again.

"Your Lordship, wh-why are they so expensive?"

"The methods and materials for making potions and spirit medicine are mostly lost these days."

"Huh?"

These methods had never made much progress in the first place, even in the old days. Most sorcerers could use healing magic, so there was little need to spend so much time and effort developing medicine. However, one particular oddball sorcerer made progress in the art of using magic to make medicine. They even successfully mass-produced spirit medicine in the end.

"That sorcerer began to sell their medicine, and in their later years, was even able to create these potions."

There must have been a big difference between spirit medicine and magic potions.

"Spirit medicine is medicine made using magic, while the magic potions contain miraculous powers that human intelligence could never produce."

According to Lord Lichtenberger, the reigning king at that time was prepared to offer his own massive fortune in exchange for the use of those magic potions in a war. But once he proposed that, the enraged sorcerer who developed the method of making potions ended up destroying all of their work.

That was why there were so few magic potions remaining in the world these days.

"That sorcerer is incredible too. They could have earned an unbelievable fortune," I remarked.

"I'm sure they were disgusted by the idea of having their lifesaving potions used in war."

It was certainly honorable. I felt like I understood that sorcerer's thought process. I never knew that magic medicine had such an interesting history.

"That's all very informative."

"I'm no expert, so that's just the gist of it."

"No, it was great."

The atmosphere of the street changed as soon as we rounded a corner. It was a road for selling weapons.

"I see they sell swords and bows, not just staffs," I observed.

"All the weapons here are enchanted with spells."

"Enchanted?"

"Right. Take a look at that bow." The bow was made with a large bird's feathers, while the arrows and arrowheads were entirely white. "They're enchanted with wind magic. Firing an arrow produces a wind spell."

"Wow, that's amazing."

Ulgus would love those. Of course, they cost thirty gold coins, so it wasn't

something either of us could so easily acquire.

There were also poison swords, quake lances that rocked the earth, and all kinds of enchanted weapons. Every last one of them was expensive enough to make my jaw drop.

"Few sorcerers can use enchanting spells. That's why they're all so expensive."

"I see."

Next to the enchanted weaponry store was today's destination—the magic tool shop. Trotting out from the back of the store was a giant mouse, about the same size as me, walking on two legs. She was wearing an apron, so I knew she must be the shopkeeper.

"Oh, if it isn't Lord Lichtenberger? It's been quite some time."

"It sure has."

"We still don't have any items relating to mythical beasts."

"I see. But I'm here to look for something my apprentice can use today..."

"My, what a cute apprentice."

The mouse shopkeeper was much cuter than me, but it didn't seem like something I should say, so I simply smiled back at her.

"H-Hello. I'm Mell Risurisu."

"I'm the manager of this branch of Forest Seed Temple. My name is Sasami."

"Do you have any tools that supplement magical energy?"

"I certainly do!"

Energy supplementing rings were tools meant for people like me who struggled to use magical energy. Once you understood magic, they helped you use your magic effectively.

Sasami showed me a necklace made of a red stone tied to a leather cord. "This garnet has a spell engraved in it that will help you activate your magic."

"Oh, wow."

The cost was one and a half gold coins. I could afford it, but it was still a large expense. Still, it was probably best to have one. The same effects were available in a ring or bracelet version, but I already had to wear a bracelet as a knight, and a ring seemed like it would make the gloves I wore on missions too tight a fit. The necklace was surely the best option, and I liked the garnet too.

"Well? Do you like the garnet necklace?" Lord Lichtenberger asked.

"Oh, yes, I do."

I did happen to have two gold coins in my wallet, but I unconsciously stiffened, still clutching my wallet. It was just so expensive. I couldn't bring myself to purchase it.

That was when I realized Lord Lichtenberger had already finished paying for it while I was frozen.

"Ah, L-Lord Lichtenberger!" I held up my wallet, but he stuck his hand in front of me to stop me in my tracks.

"I know it's hard to pay the lump sum on a knight's salary. You can return it over time, just be sure to pay it all back."

"Your Lordship...!" I couldn't be more grateful for the suggestion. "I'll be sure to return it in full."

"No need to rush."

"Okay!"

After that, Sasami got up on a stool and placed the garnet necklace around my neck. "Oh my, it suits you well. It's lovely."

"Th-Thank you so much."

Suddenly, I felt sort of embarrassed.

"Well? Feel any changes?" Lord Lichtenberger asked.

"No, not particularly."

"Really? Oh well. Now let's go buy a staff."

"All right."

We left Sasami's store after that.

The store selling staffs was two doors down. There were long staffs with crystals on the ends, short staffs with spells engraved, ring versions, bracelet versions, and even more. The shop was packed with all varieties.

I looked at the price tags and saw most of them cost about a single gold coin. I thought a sorcerer's staff would be more expensive, but it must be a special price for the magic fair.

"Which one do you want, Risurisu?" Lord Lichtenberger asked.

"Ummm, let's see..."

"Would you care to try one out?" The shopkeeper who suggested this was a wolf beastfolk just like Garr. He appeared to be a sorcerer too, as he was drawing a magic circle on the floor. "This is a magic circle for beginners to try staffs. It prevents any spells cast in it from getting out of control."

A spell getting out of control—that was common for beginners. I'd heard the many horror stories of them starting fires, nearly destroying their homes in earthquakes, and all sorts of disasters. This circle prevented anything like that from happening.

"Um, all right. I'll try it then."

"Certainly."

I couldn't let myself be distracted, so I handed Album over to Lord Lichtenberger.

"I-I wanna be with Pancake Girl!"

"It'll only be a minute. Please just be patient."

Lord Lichtenberger is your master in the first place!

But that wasn't important right now. I picked up a short staff that looked like a tree branch. Then I concentrated and chanted a simple, beginner's spell that didn't contain any difficult words to pronounce. I took a deep breath and began to chant.

"Upon me, your blessings. Heal the causes of my ailments."

A magic circle should form if the spell was successful. But the spell never activated.

"Wh-What did I do wrong?"

"Not sure. I thought you'd be able to do it with the garnet necklace's help..." Lord Lichtenberger said.

I came all this way. I bought a garnet necklace. How was I still unable to use any magic? Not only was I really depressed, but I felt so bad for making Lord Lichtenberger waste his time.

"It's all right, miss. This happens to people sometimes."

"l...see..."

"Yes. I believe you probably just aren't suited for healing magic."

"Not suited? But the color of my magical energy was green. I have the right magical energy for healing magic."

"However, that doesn't always mean you're able to use it."

"Th-That can't be!"

This was shocking information. I wasn't able to use healing magic with my magical energy.

"Of course, it's extremely rare."

As we spoke, the shopkeeper was writing something up. He handed it to me when he finished. "This is the address of a sorcerer who can appraise your abilities. Please head over and see him. He'll be able to look into your aptitude."

"Th-Thank you very much."

Lord Lichtenberger patted me on the back, seeing my shoulders slump.

"Um, do you want one of my cookies, Pancake Girl?"

Even Album was trying to cheer me up. Actually, where did he even get those cookies? I decided to abstain, since now they seemed suspicious.

"For now, I'd like to go to the appraiser's house," I said.

"Good idea."

We walked through the magic fair, discussing the appraiser.

"Appraisers use spells that give them magic eyes. Those magic eyes can see into people and things." Lord Lichtenberger told me that they usually made their living by appraising tools and weapons excavated from ruins. Though they were very rare, some could even appraise the true natures of people too. "I've never met an appraiser either."

"It's pretty nerve-wracking, don't you think?"

We exited the magic fair and passed through the village's main road. The appraiser's house was located in the midst of the dense woods. The tiny thatched-roof house was only as tall as I was. The appraiser probably wasn't a human, judging by that.

"Hello..." I called out, but received no response. "Hello!" I yelled louder this time, but still, no response.

For my third attempt, I tried pounding on the door loudly.

"I hear you, damn it!"

An old dwarf poked his head out from the tiny house. He was only about as tall as Sasami, the shopkeeper at the magic tool store. He had bushy white eyebrows and a distinctive long beard too.

"I-I'm very sorry to disturb you," I said. "The shopkeeper at the staff shop referred me to you."

"The staff shop?"

"Yes, he said you were an appraiser and could look over my aptitude."

"So you couldn't use a staff, I take it."

"That's right."

"Then take a seat."

Since I couldn't go inside his house, he agreed to appraise me in the garden. It was a quick change, so I assumed this must happen often.

"Um, how much will this cost?"

"Just sit."

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"Okay."
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The old dwarf started to draw a magic circle around me.

"My name is Mell Risurisu."

"Didn't need to say it. I knew it as soon as I laid eyes on you."

"O-Oh, really?"

I didn't know if "Appraiser" was a good way to address him. In fact, I never asked his name.

"Um, what should I call you then?"

"Just call me whatever. 'Old Man' is fine."

"...Sure..."

I decided to do as he said, since he just finished yelling at me.

Once the old dwarf finished preparing the magic circle, he took a seat in front of me, looking over my face closely. "I see. A Fore Elf, huh? A combat medic for the Royal Order too. How unusual."

"That's right."

"You have all that magical energy in you, but something's restricting it so it can't be used."

"C-Correct."

"But there aren't any obstacles in using normal magic."

"So it seems."

"Hmm."

Appraisers were incredible. He saw through to my traits, one after the next.

"Your magical energy color was green, so you should have been able to use healing spells, but yours didn't activate."

"You can really see all that?"

"Of course. The information about your magical energy contains traces of how it was used."

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"I see."
Who knew that magical energy came with such a "function?"
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"So I'd like to know what my energy is suited for."

"I'm looking at it now."

"S-Sorry."

I decided to be quiet for a while.

The dwarf squeezed my hands and squinted at me even more intensely. The chill that ran down my spine was probably the work of his magic eyes.

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"...Hmm. I see. I've got it all figured out."
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"R-Really? You mean it?!"

"What good would lying do me?"

"R-Right. So, what is my magical energy suited for?"

The dwarf man stroked his beard as he explained it to me. "First of all, I can tell you have no natural talent for healing magic whatsoever. You'll never, ever, ever be able to do it, no matter how hard you try."

That was three "nevers." I could hardly believe my ears. I brought my head into my hands.

"But it's not like you can't do anything at all."

I leaned forward eagerly to listen.

"It looks like you have a talent for enchantment magic."

"Enchantment...magic?"

"Right, but not the normal kind."

Normal enchantment magic allowed sorcerers to apply their strongest elements to items, granting them magic powers. For example, a wind magic master would be able to enchant items with wind spells. But I, on the other hand, had no specialty magic.

"What can I enchant, then?"

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"Your cooking."
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"Huh?"

"It seems your cooking possesses strange powers. Eating it raises one's spirits."

"Th-The food raises spirits?"

"You've got it."

I had to ask more questions to figure out what he could possibly be talking about. "In other words, eating it helps them recover from fatigue and gain stamina? That sort of thing?"

"No, they just feel better. That's all."

"Um..."

So, they ate my cooking and felt better overall than before. Nothing more, nothing less.

"That's the gist of it."

"I can't tell if that's great, or if it's totally unimpressive."

"Huh? I think it's great." The person who said that was Album, who had been watching all this unfold. "When I eat your cooking, my whole body gets all happy, and I feel like I can keep up the hard work after that."

"I-I see..."

"Now that I think about it, maybe the mint leaves you gave me had extra powers in them too, since my nausea went away after I ate it," Lord Lichtenberger said.

I picked and dried those leaves myself. I could see how it was possible that this would give them their own enchanted powers.

"I think it's an amazing power," Lord Lichtenberger continued. "Healing spells can fix any wound on a person's body, but can't touch their heart. Feeling in better spirits is entirely a matter of emotions."

"That's right. It's a good thing, Pancake Girl. You found your talent."

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"I guess you're right."
```

Learning that I couldn't use healing magic was a big disappointment. But it turned out that I possessed a power entirely unique to me.

"That means I've been helping everyone all this time on expeditions."

Thinking about it that way made me feel encouraged. It also made me more motivated to keep cooking my best food.

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"Thank you, Mr. Dwarf."

"I'm just killin' time."

"How much do I owe you?"

"That'll be a hundred gold coins."

"Whaaaat?!"
```

I spun around to look at Lord Lichtenberger. The price of the session didn't even seem to faze him. Maybe it wasn't such a big amount to the marquess, but it was an absolute fortune to me.

I was cradling my head when the old man revealed that he was just teasing.

"I don't want your money. What I want to see is your enchantment magic. That'll be the fee for my appraisal."

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"So, you want me to cook?"
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"That's right."

But the dwarf's home was too small for me to enter. When I told him that, he brought me ingredients from inside. I gathered nearby stones to build a simple stove. Album collected branches for me, while Lord Lichtenberger used a fire spell to light the stove.

"Are these all the ingredients you need?" He'd set out eggs, milk, and sugar, telling me this was all he had in his house. The dwarf also brought me some pots and pans, but they were all dwarf-sized and tiny.

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"Um... Do you have any flour?"

"Nope."
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"R-Really? I could have made pancakes if you did."
```

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"Awww man!"
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I heard Album expressing shock back there. But this meal was supposed to be for the dwarf man.

"What can I make with eggs, milk, and sugar... Ah!" Something came to mind. I wasted no time rolling up my sleeves and getting to work. "Mr. Dwarf, do you have any porcelain cups?"

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"Sure do."
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"Then please bring me a few."

"Fine then."

I started by making a caramel sauce. I added sugar and water to a bowl and cooked them until just before they were burned. The amber caramel started to give off a sweet scent.

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"Ah, that smells great."
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"Album, please don't get too close to the pot."

"Okaaay!"

Then I poured the finished caramel into one of the dwarf's cups. Next, I mixed the eggs in the first bowl, and the milk with sugar in the second bowl. Then I combined the two and strained them a few times. Finally, I added the mixture to the cup of caramel.

"All right. Now I just have to steam it."

I added enough water to the pot to create a layer on the bottom, placed a plate on top, then another pot on top of that. What I'd made was a simple steamer. I set the cup in the second pot and covered it with a lid. After steaming for about twenty minutes, it was ready to eat.

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"My custard pudding is complete!"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Pudding, huh?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes!"

Album had agreed to help out after rejecting me once. Lord Lichtenberger helped out too. I asked them to have some pudding too.

"It's hot, so please be careful."

This seemed to be the dwarf's first time eating pudding. He stared into the cup curiously. But first, Album slipped his spoon in and tried a bite of his own.

"Wow, so thick and sweet! Deeeelicious!"

Once he heard such extreme praise, the dwarf began to eat too. Slowly and nervously, he scooped up some pudding and found the courage to try a bite.

Then his eyes shot open.

"I-It's so...!"

After that, he took bite after bite before speaking another word. He finished his first pudding instantly and went in for another cup. I could tell he was pleased with the dessert.

In fact, he was eating so intensely that even Lord Lichtenberger and Album stopped to watch the dwarf. The old man looked unsatisfied after a third cup. Surprisingly, Lord Lichtenberger was kind enough to share his portion.

"I appreciate it." Then he gobbled down the last bite. "Well, I'm satisfied. That was tasty. Your magic really does enchant your cooking to raise one's spirits. What excellent magic you have."

"Yes, I was a little surprised at first...but now I see how nice it is."

"You should be more confident."

"Right!"

No appraisal fee was required, since the pudding satisfied him. That much was a relief.

We said goodbye to the dwarf and returned to the fairgrounds.

"Shall we go home now, Lord Lichtenberger?"

"Sure. But why not eat something before that?"

"Yes! Let's eat!"

"I wasn't asking you. What do you say, Risurisu?"

"Let's eat!"

The magic fair stalls are selling mysterious foods! I've been thinking about them all this time.

We wandered to the street full of food shops, as if lured in by the delicious scent.

The first shop had rows of whole fruit sitting out with slender tubes sticking out of them. I didn't know what to make of them at all. I decided to purchase one of the forest apples. When I sucked through the tube, I realized the inside was full of juice.

"Wow! How amazing!"

It was sweet, sour, and delicious. I was told that the inside of the apple was crushed with a spell, turning it into juice. I never knew magic could be used for something like that.

The second food shop sold meat skewers. They looked normal to me, but were said to be made using magic too.

"The skewers we sell are made so the meat juices and sauce don't drip. That way, you can eat it more cleanly, without losing any flavor."

"Wooow!"

I didn't hesitate to try one. The meat itself was boar-pig and the sweet and spicy sauce was glistening.

I opened wide and bit into it.

As I chewed, the meat juices began to fill my mouth. So this was the power of magic, retaining so much flavor in the meat? The juices mixed with the sauce to form a rich combination of tastes. It was almost too good to bear.

Cooking meat always resulted in a loss of juices. This sort of magic was incredibly convenient.

Album scarfed down some meat too. Lord Lichtenberger, still carrying him, looked a bit pleased. I just *knew* he loved cute animals, as unexpected as it was.

The third food shop sold dragon eggs. Lord Lichtenberger demonstrated this strange way of eating them. Of course, these weren't real dragon eggs, naturally. They were ice cream encased in the thin skin of animal innards. You were supposed to cut a spout and suck the ice cream out.

How can something be so delicious?!

The ice cream, made with fresh milk, was shockingly rich and creamy. The refreshing sensation filled my entire mouth.

There were also candies that looked like real gems, jellies that looked like the night sky, and pots with chocolate fountains emerging from them. I sampled all of them, enjoying these different kinds of magical treats.

"Satisfied?" Lord Lichtenberger asked.

"Yes! Thank you very much."

"I'm so full now!"

"You ate too much."

"So are you done shopping?"

"Yes... Ah, just one more thing."

I had to buy some souvenirs while we were here. I decided to purchase "magic cookies" for my squadmates, which were the famous products sold at the magic fair. The cookies themselves were engraved with spells. They said things like "Honesty Cookie," "Laughing Cookie," and "Truth Revealing Cookie." Apparently, each one had different effects when consumed.

Lord Lichtenberger looked at me suspiciously as I clutched my magic cookies. "You like buying kids' stuff, don't you?"

"What's wrong with that?"

I was looking forward to seeing their reactions.

After that, we returned to the royal capital. This time, I finally knew how my magical energy could be used.



**THE** next day, I informed everyone about the news I received at the fair.

"...So, I found out that there's absolutely no chance of me ever using healing magic."

I thought they might be disappointed. But instead...

"But you're fine how you are, Medic Risurisu."

"Exactly. You're still a fabulous combat medic, even without healing magic, Melly."

"Vice Captain Velrey, Zara!"

Garr gently patted my shoulder too.

"You amazing, Mell! I can't use any magic, so I jealous!"

"Even you, Charlotte...? Thank you so much."

I could have cried. They were all so kind.

"Still, who knew you had such a mysterious power, Medic Risurisu?"

"But now that I think of it, I definitely feel energized after eating Mell's cooking."

Ulgus and Liselotte were right. I possessed such unthinkable enchantment magic. All it was capable of was "lifting spirits."

"Maybe that's what's best for us. You can sleep off as much exhaustion as you want, but it's never gonna lift your spirits." Captain Ludtink murmured how "spirit" was hard to define in the first place. "Maybe it's all about the mental state. Being able to bring that out in people has gotta be a really rare talent you have."

It was a rare instance of even Captain Ludtink saying nice things to me.

"Thank you, everyone." As an apology for bothering them with all the fuss about my magical energy, I presented the cookies I bought as a souvenir. "I bought these in the magic village. They're cookies that bring out certain emotions. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

I took them out of the bag to see the various spells written on them. Knowing little about magic, I had no idea what to expect.

"I know these. I bought these at the magic fair when I was little," Liselotte

said. "I fed them to Father without telling him first."

"You did?"

Now that I thought of it, I seemed to recall Lord Lichtenberger calling them silly children's pranks. Having experienced them before would explain his sour mood. Although, I couldn't believe he'd fallen for a child's prank like that.

"Father ate a cookie and started to roar with laughter."

I wondered what that would look like—probably very frightening. I kind of wanted to see it for myself. Liselotte said that Lord Lichtenberger had banned magic snacks ever since then.

"That's why I haven't had these cookies in a long time. Although, there's no point in me reading the spells before I eat them." With that, Liselotte grabbed a cookie and gobbled it down. That was when a magic circle appeared before her eyes, then burst into the air.

"From the bottom of my heart, I deeply respect you all." As soon as she said that, she clapped her hands over her mouth.

"D-Did you eat the 'Honesty Cookie?'" I asked.

"I-It was nothing! I'm always honest, so I thought it wouldn't work..." she mumbled.

Captain Ludtink and Ulgus started to smirk.

"Oh yeah? You act so cocky all the time. Who knew how much you actually respected us?"

"I'm so happy to hear how you feel."

"I-It's not true!"

Her cookie appeared to reveal one's inner thoughts.

"Can I have one too?"

"There's no need if you don't want one, Vice Captain Velrey."

"But you bought them just for us, didn't you? I'd like to try one." Vice Captain Velrey picked up a cookie and bit into it. Just like with Liselotte, a magic circle appeared and burst with a snapping sound.

I wondered what cookie it could be, but the effects arrived almost instantly.

"Heh... Heheh, ahaha, ahahahaha!"

It seemed that Vice Captain Velrey ate the "Laughter Cookie." It was a rare opportunity to witness the vice captain laughing so hard. It was even kind of cute to see how she howled.

Once she was finished, I decided to apologize.

"I'm sorry about that, Vice Captain."

"No, it's fine. All that laughing made me feel a little better, for some reason."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

Charlotte raised her hand next. "May I have one too?"

"Of course. Here you go."

"Yaaay!" Charlotte ate the whole thing in one bite. The magic circle appeared, then vanished. "Ummm... Hmm?"

It seemed like the shift was starting to occur. She suddenly rushed to the window and shouted outside. "WOO-HOOOOO!"

Charlotte had apparently eaten the "Scream Cookie."

"Wow, what a surprise! I wanted to say 'woo-hoo' all of a sudden!" She still seemed to have enjoyed the experience, though.

Garr was next to step up to the challenge. He ate his cookie in a manly way with big bites. Once again, the magic circle appeared in the air before disappearing.

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"...Woof."
"Hm?"
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"Woof!"

Garr...had turned into a dog. I never expected there to be a "Dog Performance Cookie" too. He wagged his tail and looked at me with puppy dog eyes. I knew he was silently begging for me to pet him. I wasn't sure what to do, but Zara stepped up instead.

"Good boy, Garr! Good boy!" Zara ruffled Garr's fur. That was when the cookie's effects wore off.

"I'm sorry too, Garr," I apologized.

But the softhearted Garr said that it was kind of fun.

"I wonder what I'll get? I'm scared, but kinda excited." Ulgus timidly nibbled on his cookie. The magic circle appeared, then snapped away. I couldn't wait to see which cookie Ulgus got. "Achoo! Achoo! Wh-What's happ— Achoo!"

I-Is this a "Sneeze Cookie?"

Ulgus sneezed over and over again until there were tears in his eyes.

"Th-This isn't fun for anyone... Achoo!"

"Well, there's all kinds of cookies here," I said.

Next up was Zara. He selected his cookie carefully. After biting into it, the magic circle appeared and disappeared.

"...Oh? I'm so warm."

He then began to undress. Watching him undo his buttons one by one was strangely sensual. He took off his jacket and tugged his tie off too. I was watching all this, my heart fluttering, when— "Hey! What the hell're you doing, idiot?!" Captain Ludtink grabbed hold of Zara to make him stop. That seemed to be the end of the cookie's effects.

"I feel like I pulled something much more extreme than the rest of you," Zara said.

With her brow furrowed, Liselotte muttered about how glad she was not to have chosen that cookie.

"Besides, he's a man, so why did that look so erotic?" Captain Ludtink asked.

Everyone in the room quietly agreed with that question. Finally, I held the cookies out to Captain Ludtink.

"Okay, Captain. Your turn."

"I don't want one."

"Don't say that."

"Do you people want to watch me act like a dog, burst out laughing, or take my clothes off?"

"I'm more interested in seeing something scary."

"You little..."

Since he was refusing to eat one, Zara grabbed a cookie and shoved it into Captain Ludtink's mouth. Then he sealed his lips with his hands.

"Mmmph! Mmm, ngh!"

Zara let go when he saw the captain swallow.

"Z-Zara! I'll remember this..."

The magic circle appeared right in front of the captain, then snapped out of existence. My heart was racing to see what was going to happen.

Suddenly, Captain Ludtink covered his face with his hands. I didn't know what was happening to him.

"I-I'm very sorry for always speaking roughly. From now on, I'll only use nice words in life."

Ulgus looked at the spellbound Captain Ludtink and said, "It's a gentle Captain Ludtink." I felt like laughing, but managed to hold it in.

"I want to live cleanly, righteously, purely..."

The spell seemed to wear off at that point. Captain Ludtink hung his head for a minute before bringing it back up. The gentle captain had transformed back into the bandit captain.

"Why the hell'd you make me say all thaaaat?!" he roared.

Captain Ludtink must have eaten a "Well-Mannered Cookie."

These cookies were frightening indeed. They brought out all sorts of surprising sides to my squadmates. I was about to seal them up again, but Captain Ludtink stopped me.

"You eat one too, Risurisu," he demanded.

"Huh? That's okay. I bought them for all of you to have."

"Just do it already."

I wondered where that mild-mannered Captain Ludtink from a minute ago had gone. But I agreed that I couldn't be the only person not to eat one, so I reluctantly opened the cookies back up again and stuck one in my mouth.

The butter in the cookies made them come out nice and crispy. They were delicious, even if I was scared of what effect I would get. But none of that mattered in the next instant. The magic circle appeared and then vanished. The cookie had activated.

"Meoooow!"

I'd turned into a cat. I clung to Vice Captain Velrey, who was standing next to me, and begged her to pet me.

"Hehe! You're so cute, Medic Risurisu." She stroked my head as she said that.

"Meow meow!"

"I want to pet Mell too!"

Being pet by Vice Captain Velrey and Charlotte made me happy, but was also pretty embarrassing.

This was probably a "Mountain Cat Cookie." Normal cats weren't nearly this friendly.

We all enjoyed our fun but terrifying magic cookies.

As soon as I covered the cookies back up, the bell signaling the start of work rang out.

"All right. Time for the morning meeting."

Another day of work was just getting started.

I was determined to make it a good one.



# Chapter 7: Remodeling the New Home and Cod and Egg Hangover Soup

**THE** remodeling of my new home was moving along steadily.

Garr and Sly were over to help me today. They both wore towels twisted up into headbands, making them look like expert craftsmen. As for why Garr and Sly were visiting—yesterday, during the drinking party, Zara was forced to drink by knights from another unit. It was more than enough for him to wake up with a hangover.

Zara was depressed, knowing that he needed to help remodel today, which was why Garr agreed to help out instead.

I had Vice Captain Velrey and Liselotte at my side, so I was never approached by any other knights. Zara, on the other hand, found himself in the middle of a real party, and was unfortunately wrapped into their bout of drinking. Adult socialization could be quite the challenge.

Thankfully, the kind Garr and Sly were here to help out.

Liselotte was busy at the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, so she couldn't join today. Blanche, the mountain cat, came with Zara. She wagged her tail, listening to Zara's order to behave herself. Zara himself looked like he was in good spirits. But his face was very pale. I knew he wasn't feeling well.

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"Um, are you really all right, Zara?" I asked.
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Unlike Zara, the other group was brimming with energy.

"All right! Another day of hard work!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm doing better than I thought I would."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Really? Please say the word if you start to feel unwell."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Thanks, Melly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Kreh kreh!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Let's do our best, Album, Amelia!"

Charlotte had her long hair tied up on her head and was dressed in a collared shirt and slacks—something easy to move in. She was fired up, as were Album and Amelia.

"Let's get started, shall we?"

It was time to work.

Zara hauled the floorboards into the house. Sly waved a homemade flag to guide him in the right direction.

"Isn't that too heavy, Zara?" I asked.

He was carrying five large floorboards at once.

"I do wish I had a certain kitty's help..." He glanced at Blanche. She let out a relaxed yawn. "I'll just have to do it myself. I can't count on her for something like this."

"Please don't work too hard."

Garr and Amelia went up to the roof to remove the damaged tiles and replace them. Charlotte and Album were tearing down the moss in the bathroom.

"Wow, Album. You're really good at moss removal," Charlotte said.

"I can tear it off even faster than this."

"Show me, show me! I want see Album be as fast as he can."

"Just a bit, okay?"

Eager for praise, Album began to rip the moss away.

"Wow! You are amazing, Album!"

"N-Nah, it's nothing."

Charlotte knew exactly how to get Album to work.

I worked on making a mixture of polish to paint on the new floors. Not only would this make the floors shiny, but cleaning and preserving them would be easier in the future.

There were only three ingredients. The first was seed oil, which made the floor shiny and killed germs. Then I added an antimicrobial essential oil of

healthy herbs, followed by beeswax.

It was a simple process. First, I put seed oil and beeswax in a pot and cooked them over a low flame so that they wouldn't boil. Then I let it sit and cool once the beeswax was melted. Finally, I added a few drops of essential oil to complete the polish.

"Did you make the polish, Melly?" Zara asked.

"It's ready to go!"

Zara had finished putting in the floorboards. He was a fast worker. Sly was sticking her chest out proudly on Zara's shoulder too. She must have been a big help.

"Great work, Zara and Sly."

"You too, Melly."

We thanked each other, then I handed Zara the finished polish.

"I didn't even know you could make this stuff yourself," he said.

"You definitely can. This polish recipe came from my grandmother. It makes floors really glossy and shiny."

You were supposed to apply it once every six months or so. My whole family would help out when it was that time, since we had to move all the furniture.

"That's perfect. The polish I use wears down after a month," he said.

"I'll have to teach you how to make it then."

"I would love that."

We stopped chatting so that I could begin polishing the floor.

"Whoa!"

Zara had perfectly arranged the floorboards so that there were no gaps in between. I loved the smell of fresh wood in the house.

"I'm going to go ahead and start."

"Sure thing."

I wiped the floor down with a dry cloth, then began to spread the polish

around. As soon as the liquid touched the floorboards, they instantly began to sparkle and were particularly beautiful when hit with sunbeams.

"This might need a second coat."

"Then let's let it dry for a while first."

Zara agreed to inspect the kitchen. The stone oven and counters were unused and didn't appear to have any defects. But Zara wanted to have a look to be safe. Sly said she wanted to join him too.

Sly saluted me. I saluted her right back.

I decided to start preparing lunch now that I had a break. Garr and Amelia, who'd finished repairing the roof, offered to help out.

"Could the two of you gather up sticks I can use as firewood?" I requested.

"Kreh!"

Then I noticed Amelia's beak had soot on it. I couldn't quite reach her to remove it, so Garr wiped the soot away for me.

"Thank you, Garr."

Garr was always so nice. Amelia thanked him too.

But I needed to focus on preparing lunch.

I started by plucking the medicinal garlic growing nearby. The bulbs were small, but I didn't need more. I would wash and crush these for lunch.

I decided to use the same simple stove I made before. The weeds I pulled had dried out, so I put them in the stove and lit them. Then I removed my flask from my bag. I'd soaked dried cod and dried mushrooms in water overnight and could now make a soup with them.

Cod was good for liver function, making it a great ingredient to cure a hangover.

First, I poured sesame oil into a pot and sautéed the mushrooms and cod. Using grass for the fire was making the flames unstable. But just as I was noticing this, Amelia and Garr returned from gathering sticks.

"Wow, thanks so much. It's a big help," I said.

They'd managed to find a bundle of sticks that were nice and dry. Once I put the sticks in the stove, the flames stabilized more. Then I added the broth the mushrooms and cod had created in my flask and allowed it to boil. With that, I added medicinal garlic, salt, and pepper, allowing the soup to simmer as I removed the foam that formed. Once the broth was nice and clear, I poured some scrambled eggs in. Then I took the pot off the stove and let the eggs cook from the residual heat.

Five minutes later, my "Cod and Egg Hangover Soup" was complete.

I was about to call for everyone, but Garr had already gathered them up.

"Wow! Mell, the fish smell delicious!" Charlotte did love fish, after all. She recognized the smell right away.

"I love me some fish too!"

I wondered if there was anything Album didn't love. It was a mystery.

"Zara, this soup is good for hangovers," I told him.

"Is that right?"

"Do you have an appetite at all?"

"Why, of course I do. I'm ready to dig in."

With that, I poured the soup into bowls. Amelia received a serving of forest apples. I prepared some honey water for Sly.

I said a prayer of gratitude, and then it was time to eat. I started with a taste of the soup. The broth was incredibly rich with concentrated cod and mushroom flavors.

"This is soooo delicious!" The fish-loving Charlotte seemed extremely pleased. "I really love fish from ocean!"

"Me too!"

Both Charlotte and Album were wagging their tails as they ate. But they weren't the only ones. Garr seemed to like the soup too, as his eyes sparkled with each bite.

"What do you think of it, Zara?" I asked.

"It's light and easy to eat. The broth is delicious too."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I'd dried the cod with salt, which I could taste each time I chewed. The dried mushrooms were nice and crunchy, while the scrambled egg was light and fluffy. I savored my soup underneath the light of the sun.



I was cleaning up after my second coat of polish on the floor. Since they were mostly unused, I only needed to dust the other rooms to make them look nice. They hadn't worn down over time at all.

By the time night came, our house was sparkling clean.

"Mell, we can almost live here now!" Charlotte cheered.

"I think you're right."

"Now all we need are carpets, furniture, and the little things we'll need day by day," Zara said.

What kinds of carpets should we get? What furniture should go where? Just thinking about it was exciting.

As we chattered about the house, Garr watched over us with warm, kind eyes.

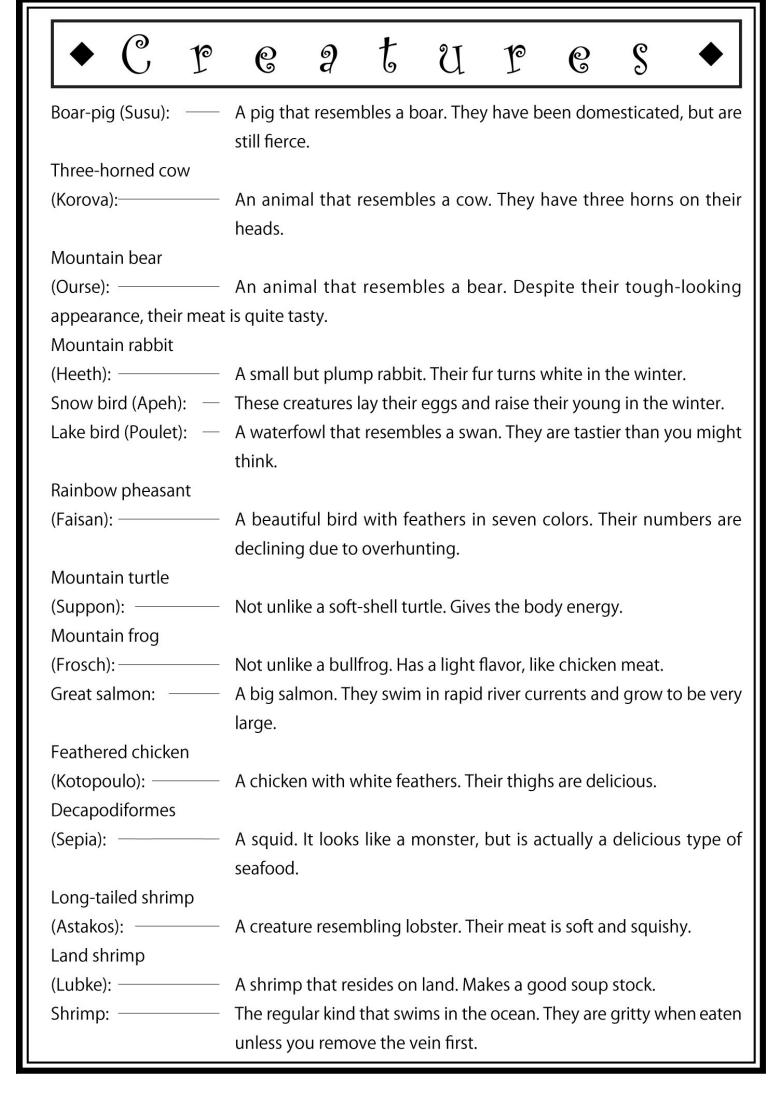
I only had to wait a little longer before we could move in.

I could hardly wait for the day that we all lived together.

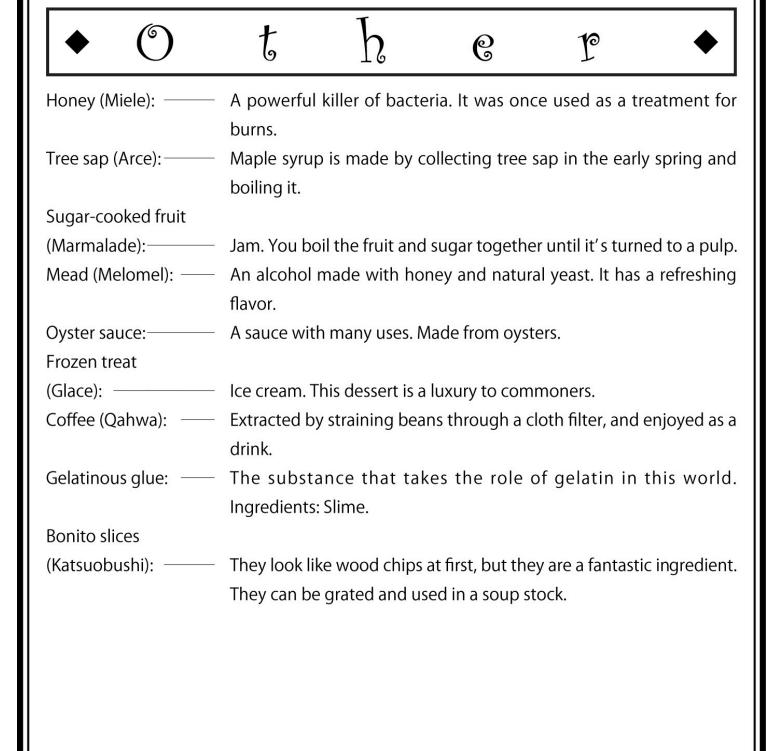


### Medicinal garlic: —— Relieves fatigue and exhaustion. Has a strong scent, even though it is irresistible when used in cooking Pepper mushroom (Peperi): These are much like chanterelle mushrooms. They are yellow in color and slightly poisonous, though you will be fine, so long as you do not eat many. Promotes digestion and has antibacterial uses. Rosemary: —— Mint leaves (Minze): Just mint. This induces an appetite and promotes digestion and absorption of food. This can be used to cover up odors in meat. It also helps treat things Oregano: like indigestion and bronchitis. Dill: -Promotes digestion and relieves stomach pain. It is a particularly good seasoning with seafood. Clary sage: — A great herb for inducing relaxation. It has a unique, sweet scent. Lemongrass (Limongrashi): — Can be used as an antibacterial or germicide. Sweet basil grass (Basirico): Basil. Helps relieve constipation. Apple grass (Camomail): — Chamomile. Helps settle the mind and body. Lavender (Labanda): Relieves headaches. Used to cover up odors in meat and fish. It has a unique, pungent Thyme: —— smell. Bay leaves (Laurier): Helps promote digestion. Health herb (Sage): — Also known as medicinal saffron. Best used in making preserved food, since it prevents decay. Chili pepper (Piman): — Induces sweating and courage. Mountain chestnut (Lemarron): — Chestnuts, the bigger kind. They turn soft when boiled.

Forest walnut ———— A walnut with a hard shell. Eating these can reduce blemishes. (Noyer): — Forest apple (Mela): — A fist-sized apple. They are common in the forest, but cultivated elsewhere too. The ones in the forest are particularly sour. Cereal crops (Grain): Used for cereal and very nutritious. Fuzzy fruit: — ———— Rambutan. A fruit like lychee. Dragon eye (Longan): — Tastes like melon. The name comes from the seeds inside, which make them look like a dragons eyes. Fiber fruit (Banane): — Banana. The fruit from the southern hemisphere that everyone loves. Mandarin (Kitrus):— A small orange. This is the fruit you most want to eat when you are sitting at a kotatsu. Winter strawberry (Fresa): A rare type of strawberry that grows in the winter. Raspberry (Rubus): — These are the normal raspberries that grow in the spring. Ginger (Zenzero): — Promotes vitality of the body. Forest pumpkin (Kurbis): Pumpkin. Possesses a subtle sweetness. Onion (Luk): — Makes you cry when chopped up. Radish (Ravanello): — Daikon radish. These have a bit of a spicy kick when eaten raw. Scarlet eggplant (Tomate): — Tomato. A vegetable that looks like the sun. Leafy potato (Taro): — The sticky texture of this food is irresistible. Snow mushroom (Champignon): — A mushroom that grows in the snow. Chewing on it produces an umami flavor. Soybean (Soya): — A dried bean that remains edible for a long time. Submerging the dried beans in water causes them to double in size.



Oyster:	— A shellfish. These creatures purify the ocean. Because of that, eating
	them raw often results in getting sick.
Forest crab	
(Fore gavuli): ——	— A creature resembling coconut crabs. They possess extremely hard
	shells.
Freshwater crab	
(Lecrabe): ———	<ul> <li>A crab that lives in rivers. Turns red when boiled.</li> </ul>
Butterfly tuna	
(Maguron):	— These fish are said to be swimming even when they sleep. All the fat
	attached to their red meat is delicious.
Light flounder	
(Kare):	<ul> <li>A white fish that's delicious when grilled, boiled, or fried.</li> </ul>
200501	<ul> <li>A light fish whose umami flavors come out when dried.</li> </ul>
Scallop: ———	— A bivalve. They' re a meaty, filling meal.



## Bonus Chapter: Mell and Ulgus's Expedition Cooking

"HELLO, I'm Mell Risurisu."

"Hello, I'm Ulgus, the assistant."

"This segment hasn't received much reception, but we're back with another episode."

"I sure love this segment though, Medic Risurisu."

"Thanks for saying that. Now I'm embarrassed."

"So am I."

"We're both embarrassed, and now it's time to introduce today's expedition cooking dish."

"Today we'll be making peanut butter."

"I love eating a big helping of peanut butter on a biscuit."

"Yes, that's delicious! Let's get started then. Ulgus, please show everyone what we're going to be working with."

"Sure thing. Let's see... The ingredients for peanut butter are peanuts, olive oil, honey, and salt."

"Correct. Let's begin. We'll start by cracking the peanuts and frying them."

"Can I leave the thin skin on, Medic Risurisu?"

"Yes, we'll remove it later."

"Roger!"

"We cook the peanuts for about fifteen minutes, let them cool, then peel off the thin skin."

"This is pretty repetitive..."

"We can do it, Ulgus!"

"What do I do with the peanuts I've peeled?"

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"Grind them up with a mortar and pestle."
  "Th-That's a lot of manual labor."
  "It sure is. I'll leave it to you, Ulgus."
  "I knew it..."
  "Thank you for your help."
  "Crunch, crunch, crunch... It's pretty hard to crush these."
  "Yes, it is. It's a big help to have a male assistant."
  "I'll do my best."
  "Once they get finely crushed enough, we can add three teaspoons of honey
and one teaspoon of salt. After that, please knead it until it reaches a paste
consistency."
 "...Okav."
  "With that, our peanut butter is complete."
  "Great!"
  "Let's try it the way you like it, Ulgus. We'll spread it on some biscuits."
  "Woo-hoo!"
  "What do you think?"
  "It's shockingly smooth, sticky, and with just a hint of sweetness. I can't get
enough!"
  "It turned out delicious thanks to your hard work, Ulgus."
  "Today's episode showed how to make peanut butter."
  "It's a simple nut butter, but it was really good!"
  "We'll be back next time with another episode showing off our expedition
cooking. This has been Mell Risurisu, the combat medic of the Enoch Second
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"I hope the next dish doesn't require so much strength. This has been June Ulgus, the man who doesn't care if you call him weak!"

Expeditionary Squadron."

#### **Afterword**

**HELLO,** this is Mashimesa Emoto. Thank you very much for picking up volume four of *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights*.

This was my first time writing a book of entirely new material. Many of these stories show glimpses of unexpected sides to the main characters.

Allow me to talk about this book's content, if only briefly.

Comment one: "The Mystery of the Valley and Cheesy Steamed Fish." The prologue. We see an unexpected pastime of Captain Ludtink's.

Comment two: "Pancakes and the Long-Awaited New Home." I wrote about Mell's feelings for Zara.

Comment three: "Downpour, Elves, and Mushroom Crab Noodles." This chapter focuses on Vice Captain Velrey, and we also meet a mysterious High Elf. Pine mushrooms are based on matsutake mushrooms.

Comment four: "Interlude—Charlotte's Stay at Home and Expedition Seafood." This chapter is about Charlotte's interpersonal relationships and her hard work.

Comment five: "Interlude—Ulgus's Squadron Observation Log." You can learn about Ulgus's true thoughts in this chapter.

Comment six: "The Popular Ulgus and Delicious Home Cooking." This chapter focuses on Ulgus. The highlight is this chapter's trope of a cooking competition.

Comment seven: "The Princess and Honeycomb Toffee." This chapter focuses on Amelia. I wrote this story about Amelia and the princess who abandoned her coming to understand each other's hearts.

Comment eight: "The Magic Fair and Jiggly Pudding." This story centers on Lord Lichtenberger and Album. The three "good friends" learn about magic together.

Comment nine: "Remodeling the New Home and Cod and Egg Hangover

Soup." This is the epilogue. The final chapter tells of all the effort put into renovating Mell's house.

Comment ten: "Mell and Ulgus's Expedition Cooking." As usual, this is a very laid-back chapter.

I certainly hope you enjoyed reading all of these.

Tera Akai-sensei provided another batch of lovely illustrations for this book. When my editor asked what artwork I wanted for this volume, I responded, "There's a bath scene in this one, so I'm sure the readers would love to see it illustrated!" Those pictures are the color images now in the front of the book.

I was so surprised to receive an illustration of the men's side, not just the women's side! I'm sure the readers are just as pleased about that.

Thank you for everything, Akai-sensei.

The manga edition of *Expedition Cooking* by Renji Fukuhara-sensei is also on sale now. A story about Amelia is currently being published on *ComicWalker*. She's so cute in the manga! I look forward to seeing her grow.

Each hair of Captain Ludtink's beard is drawn individually, so please take a good look whenever he appears in a scene. Zara's hairstyle even changes from scene to scene. Such incredible attention to detail!

Thank you for such wonderful chapters every month, Fukuhara-sensei. I look forward to working with you more in the future.

Volume two of the *Expedition Cooking* manga is now on sale, too! It contains a newly written short story titled "Ulgus and Captain Ludtink's Bandit Cooking."

Finally, I want to thank everyone who worked so hard to help me publish this work. I also want to thank all readers who made it this far. Thank you so much for following the story up to this point. I hope you enjoy the future adventures of *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights*.



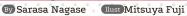
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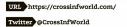
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