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EXPEDITION COOKING with the ENOCH ROYAL KNIGHTS
5

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 5

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 5

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ANNA VELREY
LISELOTTE LICHTENBERGER
AMELIA
JUNE ULGUS
...?
CHARLOTTE
MELL RISURISU
SECOND EXPEDITIONARY SQUADRON
MEET UP!

Chapter 1: Butterfly Tuna Open Sandwiches and a Counterfeiting Operation

NO magic, no assets, no fortune. That's how I, Mell Risurisu, have always lived my life. I was eighteen years old when my fiancé ended things with me on an early summer day. The memories of that moment still exist vividly in my mind.

I will never forget what my fiancé, Lance, said to me under that elderberry tree.

"*What did you want to talk about?*"

"*I'm rethinking whether or not I should marry you.*"

The crying summer bugs drowned his voice out the first time.

"*What was that? I couldn't hear you over all the bugs. Could you say that again?*"

"*I said I'm rethinking our marriage.*"

"*What? What does that mean?*"

"*It means I can't marry you, obviously!*"

I heard him the second time. By the third time, I finally understood what he was saying.

There was no point in marrying someone without magical energy. I wasn't beautiful enough to be worth marrying anyway, and I also came from a poor family with little to offer. In other words, there was nothing I could bring to the marriage that benefited him.

My fiancé was already decided when I was born. I never even played with him, since he was mean and liked mischief. I'd always thought that we'd get serious when we were older and start preparing for our marriage, but before I knew it, our relationship had quietly crumbled.

My parents were the ones troubled by the sudden end to my engagement.

There was little chance of me finding another fiancé now.

One prospect came to be: a widower elf in his forties whose wife had passed away. I'd never seen him as anything more than an old man from the neighborhood. I knew he was kind, but I couldn't look at him as a husband.

My parents dropped the subject when I made that clear to them.

But my relief didn't last very long. My parents started to look for another fiancé right after that. It really hurt to watch them going around to different people, bowing their heads while asking for help.

I didn't mind staying unmarried, but my parents strongly disagreed. They said they were failures as parents if they couldn't find a husband for every last one of their daughters. I still had little sisters who weren't engaged yet either. Thinking about how hard my parents were working brought tears to my eyes.

But it's not in my nature to sit around moping forever.

I made up my mind. I was going to leave the Fore Elf village and make a living away from home.

My little sisters had lots of magical energy, unlike me, and facial features that were sure to make them beauties when they grow up. All they needed was wealth. If I could do something about that, their fiancés probably wouldn't leave them all of a sudden like mine did.

That was why I set out for the royal capital.

Every Fore Elf who left for the city was said to be a strange sort of character. That was why the people of the royal capital treated me like I was out of the ordinary. I even went to interviews just to be told "Elves aren't suited for manual labor" and ended up being sent away.

Have I failed to make a living away from home?

It was the Royal Order of Enoch that saved me in my time of despair.

Those knights accepted anyone who came to their doorstep—even a Fore Elf like me. I was so grateful for their assistance. Since I used to help balance the books at home, I thought for sure I'd be given an office job at the Royal Order.

But I couldn't have been further off. I ended up assigned to the Enoch Second

Expeditionary Squadron as a combat medic.

Expeditionary squadrons exist to dispatch knights to places far from the royal capital. They carry out missions in distant locations.

I couldn't comprehend why I would be assigned to a squadron like that. Maybe it was because I told them I knew a lot about medicinal herbs. Such a simple detail ended up completely transforming my life.

If joining an expeditionary squadron wasn't enough of a shock, the knights who would become my squadmates were even more startling.

Captain Crow Ludtink looks nothing like a typical knight when he swings his great sword around. To be more specific, he's a gigantic man with a beard and scary facial features whose manner of speech is very harsh—exactly like a bandit. He's only twenty years old and, despite how he looks, is the son of a nobleman and has a beautiful fiancée. Captain Ludtink is a surprisingly good leader and a brilliant captain despite his age. Although, it sort of evens out when you take his faults into consideration.

Vice Captain Anna Velrey uses twin swords to fight. She's also the person I respect most of all my superiors. Not only is she beautiful, but she's kind and trustworthy too. I believe she's somewhere around twenty-five or twenty-six years old. I see her as the ideal woman, and it's probably thanks to the vice captain's support that I've been able to complete our extremely strenuous expedition missions during my time in the Royal Order.

Garr Garr is a beastfolk man and even larger in size than Captain Ludtink. He fights with a spear taller than himself to great effect. At twenty-eight years old, Garr is the oldest of all of us in the Second Expeditionary Squadron. People tend to be frightened of him, between his overwhelming stature and wolf's face, but I've never met a kinder person in all my life. He's always the one to suggest we take a break if I start to get exhausted during a mission.

June Ulgus is the youngest member of the Second Expeditionary Squadron at seventeen years old. When he wasn't around, the captain once told me that Ulgus is in the running for the best archer in all of the Royal Order. He both looks and acts like the youngest child of the group, so I treat him like a little brother as well.

Those were the first four squadmates I started out with, but another member joined our ranks within a few months.

The gorgeous poster girl for a local restaurant—no, the knight famed for his battle skills, referred to as the “Ferocious Ax-Wielding Prince,” was Zara. He quit the Royal Order after a series of events and went to work at a restaurant, only to be scouted again by Captain Ludtink. He’s twenty-one years old, making him one year older than the captain. It’s hard to imagine just how viciously he uses his battle ax during combat compared to his normal, gallant appearance.

Our fighting abilities were never a worry once Zara started coming along with us.

After some time, one more member joined us. Her name is Liselotte and she’s the daughter of Marquess Lichtenberger.

Liselotte is eighteen years old like me, and her father, Marius Lichtenberger, is the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. Liselotte is absolutely obsessed with mythical beasts. Her love for them almost blinds her to everything else in the world. She’s also one of the few practicing sorcerers and specializes in fire magic. Although her spells are so strong, they’re almost unhelpful during combat. I knew she’d be practicing better control over her magic in the future.

I’d even made other lovely friends outside of my squadmates.

First, I had Amelia—a mythical beast known as a griffin.

Our unit captured her, one of the only pure-white griffins in the world, on an island in the south. She started to see me as a mother ever since that incident. The two of us have since entered into a contract with each other. She loves to dress up and is at the age now where she can be sensitive at times. Now that Amelia is fully grown, she’s about eight feet long.

Next was Sly, an artificially made slime. During a bout of obsession with slimes, the Monster Research Bureau had poured their money into developing a man-made slime. After a series of events, Garr took Sly in and started looking after her. Sly has a transparent, orange body with an adorable little mouth and eyes. She usually sits in a glass jar, tapping on the lid or waving her hands to communicate. The charming, outgoing Sly always cheers me up.

And then there's Album, the gluttonous fairy who'd formed a contract with Lord Lichtenberger. He was a ferret fairy we captured in the forest after getting up to no good. Ever since then, he's decided to join us on certain missions and helps us out with our duties. His specialty is searching the forest and mountains for things we can eat, so he's surprisingly useful.

Finally, there's Charlotte, a maid who works solely for the Second Expeditionary Squadron. Charlotte is a beastfolk and has a fox's ears and tail. We took her under our care when she'd been captured by slave traders. She told us the village she used to live in had burned down, so now the Royal Order looks after her. Charlotte was incredibly shy at first, but she's grown into a more outgoing person lately.

These were the members I spent my lively, happy days with.

The expedition missions were hard, but I had my squadmates there to support me. It was how a Fore Elf like myself managed to make it as a knight.

IT had only been a year since I left the Fore Elf woods, but I'd now managed to purchase a house on the outskirts of the royal capital.

"This is our new home!"

"Kreeeh!"

It was an adorable little house built of honey-colored bricks. Zara, Amelia, Charlotte, and I were there to move in.

Zara and I purchased the house together. The interior was quite a mess after going unused for so many years, so we had to come together as a group to get it into usable shape. Thanks to everyone's help, both the interior and exterior of the house were now nice and pretty.

The realization that I owned my own home was very moving. As I stood outside, feeling like I could stare at that house forever, a sudden cat's cry from behind made me jump.

"Meooow!"

I turned around to see Zara's cat, Blanche. She was about five feet long—a

beautiful white cat with spots. This was no ordinary cat, of course. Blanche was a mythical beast found in snowy lands known as a Mountain Cat.

She pounced up to me to give me a nuzzle. For whatever reason, Blanche had taken a liking to me.

“Whoa!”

However, Blanche was extremely large. Her simple motion was enough to nearly knock me off my feet.

Amelia swiftly propped me up with her head. I knew I could always count on her.

“Oh my gosh, Blanche! What are you doing to Melly?!”

Zara arrived just a moment later on the horse he’d purchased to make the commute. It was a pretty dapple-gray creature. He explained to me that Blanche had eagerly been awaiting the day of their move. Her pounce was a full-body expression of her excitement.

Mountain Cats were a lot like dogs—friendly, but lonely when they went without seeing their humans for too long.

“Thank you for waiting, everyone!”

Charlotte was next to arrive. She appeared carrying a large bag.

“Whoa, Charlotte! Isn’t that heavy?” I asked.

“Not heavy. I am very strong.”

I’d planned to fly Amelia back to pick up Charlotte, but she rejected the offer. Now I learned she’d walked here all on her own.

“I ran around lots when I was in village, so I am a good walker!”

“I-I see…”

Charlotte turned around after this announcement as if she’d sensed a presence. We were still deep in the woods, even if the house was technically on the outskirts of town. There were plenty of wild animals living around us.

“Is something wrong, Charlotte?” I asked.

“Album is so slow.”

“Album?”

“Uh-huh. He came with me.”

“……”

Why would Album come here?

He’d formed a contract with Lord Lichtenberger and was living at his mansion. There should be no reason for him to come all the way to our house.

“Album? Where aaare you?”

A response came to Charlotte’s cry.

“*R-Right here…*”

Album staggered toward us—luggage tied to his neck with a bundled cloth.

“Whoa! Album, are you all right?”

“*I’m anything but all right…*”

His white fur was stained brown with dirt.

“What happened to you?”

“*A big…rat…chased me down…*”

“I did not know. Sorry I did not notice,” Charlotte said.

“*It’s fine…*”

He tried to stagger into the house. I promptly snatched him off the ground.

“*Wh-What gives?!*”

“You know what gives. I can’t let you in the house when you’re so filthy!”

I had to clean him if I wanted him in the house. I filled a tub with water from the well, placed Album inside, and rubbed him down with soap.

“*Ahaha! Ahahahaha! P-Pancake girl! Wash me gentler than that!*”

“I can’t be gentle if I want to remove the stubborn stains!”

I made sure to take my time and scrub his fur clean. Once his coat was nice

and shiny, I flipped the tub over and put him on top to dry.

“Phew!”

I wiped the sweat from my brow. It was a sunny day outside, so Album wouldn’t take long to dry.

“The tea is ready, Melly,” Zara called from inside.

“Thanks!”

“There’s sweets inside too.”

“*Yaaay!*”

Album quickly broke out of his slump and jumped to his feet. I wrapped the still-wet creature in a large cloth before bringing him into the house.

To my surprise, it turned out Zara had baked cookies for us. He also prepared an assortment of fruit for Amelia and Blanche. A plate of adorable cookies sat on the table, the center of each one filled with a circle of strawberry compote.

“I make the tea.”

“Thank you, Charlotte. Oh!”

Charlotte’s hair was in a braid. She told me Zara braided it for her.

“We match, Mell!”

“Charlotte, you’re so adorable, it just might be the death of me.”

“I am, right?”

Our conversation turned into a relaxing tea party to celebrate our move.

The tea was delicious and the cookies were divine. The house was adorable too. It was pure bliss!

However, there was a single thing that weighed on my mind—the teacups themselves.

“These cups look like artwork,” I observed.

The antique cups came with the house as a bonus selling point. Unlike my usual dishes, they were smooth, cream-colored, and had beautiful roses painted on the outside. I wondered if these were actually high-class luxury

goods.

“Now that you mention it, Liselotte said the series with the roses on them really took off half a century ago. They sold for ten gold coins back then,” Zara said.

“T-Ten gold coins?!”

I was only paid two gold coins per month for work. How could a cup be worth half a year’s salary?!

“But the company went bankrupt, so now they’re sold at antique shops for twenty gold coins,” Zara continued.

“Whaaat?!”

Supposedly, even Lord Lichtenberger had antique dealers come to his house to try to buy some of his possessions. They would try to buy these items for dirt cheap, thinking he didn’t know their value. That made Lord Lichtenberger chase them out after some stern words. Zara explained he had heard all this from Liselotte.

“I hear a lot of antique shops are up to no good these days,” he explained. “Even the knights have been consulted about the issue.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“They should know better than to lie about that stuff!”

“That’s very true.”

I glanced over as I responded to Zara and spotted Album eagerly stirring the liquid inside his cup. His spoon collided against the sides loudly enough for me to hear.

Those are worth twenty gold coins these days! You can’t stir them like that!

“That is not right, Album. Stir gently.”

“*Huh? How am I supposed to do it?*”

“Do it like this.” I stirred slowly, making sure not to touch the cup with my spoon. “Do you get it now?”

“*Uuuuuuh…*”

I couldn't let my guard down. A simple cup of black tea as a refreshment now tasted flavorless thanks to my nerves.

"Urk… How did it come to this?!" I lamented.

I wished I could go back in time to a month ago. I'd give myself a good lecture for thinking we wouldn't need to buy our own dishes. At this rate, I would never be able to have a meal in peace again.

"Zara, Charlotte, let's go shopping for dishes!"

"Oooh, that sounds like a good idea."

"Yay! Shopping!"

That decided it—we would be going out for an emergency trip into town. Blanche would stay at home, of course. Album had stuffed himself with cookies and was in no state to move for quite a while, either.

"Could you take me to the royal capital, Amelia?"

"Kreh!"

Charlotte would join Zara on his horse for the trip. She also donned the hooded cape Zara made for her, hoping it would prevent her from standing out in crowds. I went with a wide-brimmed hat to keep my elf ears hidden. With that, we were ready to go.

"All right! Let's head out!"

"Mraaaw!" Blanche gave us a relaxed goodbye before we set out for the capital.

Fortunately for us, this happened to be the week of the flea market that set up once a year in the royal capital. Traders from all around the kingdom gathered to sell their wares, both new and secondhand, at a cheaper price than usual.

"Remember how the patrol unit was running all over the place? They were busy getting ready for the flea market," Zara explained.

"Ah, that's right."

My heart was already racing. What wonders would we find for sale?

“I want matching cups with everyone!”

“That’s a good idea, Charlotte!”

We chatted amongst ourselves until we made it out of the forest.

It was clear that the flea market was a must-see for tourists. It was completely packed for the entire week of its duration.

We’d definitely underestimated the crowds it would draw. We were shocked as soon as we set foot in the city.

“Wow!”

It’s just one person after another! I had no idea it would be so crowded.

Zara paid to leave his horse at a stable while Amelia agreed to wait at a nearby safe spot.

“Now I see why the patrol unit was so busy,” I said.

I’d believed they were going to be examining the wares sold at the market for their legitimacy, but there turned out to be another job for the knights dispatched there. I watched a knight wake up a drunk tourist sleeping on the side of the road, proceeding to take him to a safe place.

“It must be so hard for knights, Mell,” Charlotte said.

“I can only imagine.” The flea market was a much more popular attraction than I expected. “I’m sorry, Charlotte. I didn’t think it would be so crowded.”

“It’s okay.”

“Are you doing okay?” I asked.

Charlotte had been brought to this country against her will as a slave. She now hated crowds because of the cramped conditions on the ship that brought her and the other slaves here.

“I am okay. I have you two!” She took Zara’s and my hand. I could tell she was trying her best to conquer her fear. “I know these people in town are very nice.”

“Yes, that’s certainly true.”

Charlotte must have gradually lost that fear when she went out to the

shopping district and the market to buy things on her own. I only wished I could thank all the people who'd treated her with kindness out there.

But Zara still had a warning for her.

"Just don't forget that there's still bad guys out there too, Charlotte."

That was true. There were bad people in the royal capital just as there were good people. You had to keep an eye out for everyone if you wanted to protect yourself.

"Be sure not to go off with any strangers, okay?"

"I know. I not go with strangers, even if they say they have butterfly tuna for me."

"Good girl."

Butterfly tuna was a favorite of hers. I hoped to buy some to take home if we had the time.

"All right. Enough chitchat. How about we head to that flea market?"

"Yay!"

"I'm really excited."

The flea market was being held in the town square. Rows of tents were set up to protect the shops from the sun.

"Wow! It is sooo amazing! Look at all the shops, Mell!" Charlotte enthused.

"There's so many!"

I spotted porcelain dolls, flower vases, wooden crates with beautiful paintings, chairs, and even musical instruments. I found myself unable to look away from one shop in particular selling gemstones.

My eyes were glued to a small diamond ring. I'd heard that people who lived in cities exchanged rings when they were married. This particular ring had a name engraved on the inside, so I knew it was probably a wedding or engagement ring. Perhaps it ended up at the flea market because the relationship died. Or maybe the owner's descendants decided to sell it.

The price was a single gold coin—shockingly cheap for a ring with a diamond.

“Mell, my grandma tell me not to buy things with someone else’s name,” Charlotte said.

“Is that right?”

“She say it means other people’s memories are inside. It will make you feel bad.”

“I see.”

Zara looked down at the ring too. “I wouldn’t be surprised if something’s wrong with it. Something this fancy should be going for five gold coins, even secondhand.”

“Oops!”

The shopkeeper glared at us while we discussed this. That prompted us to bow and exit the shop.

“I think brand-new dishes might be best, if possible.”

“Agreed. As much as I adore antiques, they’re better to look at than to eat off.”

I’d heard that potters had come to town to sell their handmade dishes, so we wandered through the labyrinth of the flea market, hoping to find one.

“Wow! So cheap!” I could hardly believe the prices of the freshly made pottery. One large white plate was only a single bronze coin!

“Look, Mell! So cute!” Charlotte was pointing at a set of cups. They came in sets of yellow, light pink, and blue—all painted with tiny little flowers on the exterior.

“I think they’re fabulous.”

“I agree.”

It was unanimous—we had our cups. The shopkeeper even included some small dishes with the same pattern for free. Then we purchased soup bowls, salad bowls, deep plates, dinner plates, and even more dishes for our home.

“Is that about it for today?” Zara asked.

“Yes, these will do.”

“I can’t wait to get home, wash them, and get our cupboards filled up.”

Appreciation for the flea market filled me. We’d spent less than a third of our budget. As we walked along, chatting about our purchases, we passed a shop selling silverware.

“Oh… So lovely.” My eyes swept across the silver cups, trays, sugar bowls, condiment holders, candelabras, and water pitchers. It was nothing but sparkling silverware everywhere I looked. “I didn’t know silver could be so beautiful.”

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

“I see myself in them. It is like a mirror!” Charlotte exclaimed.

I was completely taken by the silverware. But that ended as soon as I spotted the price tags. A silver dish alone cost thirty gold coins.

“Silverware certainly is expensive,” I said.

“I see what you mean. But I bet this still isn’t as pricey as other places in town,” Zara pointed out.

“You’ve got that right. The items you’ll find here are twenty to fifty percent cheaper than you’ll find anywhere else.” A large, middle-aged man rubbing his hands together approached us. “These are all first-rate goods imported from the famous silver-working country of Luimarr. They are *not* second-rate.”

When he asked us if we’d like to purchase anything, all we could do was smile sadly.

“Uh, I think these would be wasted on people like us.”

“I see, I see.” The shopkeeper backed down right away. He seemed to understand that we wouldn’t be purchasing anything. “Well, you see, I also have some second-rate items I keep in the back.”

“Second-rate?”

He went to the back of the shop and returned with a silver spoon. I was instantly captivated by the way it sparkled in the light.

“Why is this second-rate?” I inquired.

“It’s got a little scratch on the handle.”

“It does?”

I couldn’t see anything—even when the shopkeeper pointed it out. But Charlotte’s eyes were sharp enough to spot it.

“Mell, there is scratch here. Very small scratch.”

“I can’t even see that, Charlotte.”

“Me neither,” Zara agreed.

I didn’t know that something so trivial could make an item second-rate.

“We take pride in our craft, after all. A silver seller can only have his finest products in the front of the shop.”

“I see.”

Coincidentally, he had three second-rate spoons for sale today.

“I thought about just getting rid of them anyway, so how about the three of them for a single gold coin?” he offered.

“Whaaat?!”

“That’s so cheap!”

Well, no, a single gold coin *still* wasn’t cheap at all. It was only inexpensive in comparison to the other silver items.

“Thanks, we’ll take them,” Zara said.

“Zara?”

“It’ll be a nice little way to celebrate the move.”

I asked to split the cost, but Zara shook his head. He wouldn’t take my money.

“Thanks for waiting! I put a nice bow on ’em and everything,” the shopkeeper said.

“Thank you very much.”

After that, we headed to Avan Atulaford—Zara’s previous place of employment—where we rented a private room to have lunch.

“I am so hungry!” Charlotte said.

“I’m hungry too,” I agreed.

“Order whatever you’d like,” Zara offered.

Charlotte picked bone-in meat baked with herbs. I chose the white fish gratin while Zara ordered chicken stewed in butter.

We took our time and relaxed once a pot of black tea was brought to us.

“Y’know, that silver shop…” Zara began.

“It is suspicious. That place was strange,” Charlotte agreed.

“What?!” I couldn’t believe what the two of them were saying. “What was suspicious about it?”

“I can’t imagine any silver shop in the world would sell spoons for a single gold coin, even if they *are* second-rate,” Zara said.

“I-Is that so?”

“I know this stuff. I bought and took care of the silverware for important guests when I worked here,” he explained.

“Also, Mell, scratch on spoons looked like a knife. Why scratch product with knife?” Charlotte revealed that the scratches on the spoons were put there intentionally.

“Ah…I see.”

“I thought the same thing.” Zara explained that the spoons also felt lighter than real silver too. “That must be how he manages to sell counterfeits.”

“C-Counterfeits…?!”

The shopkeeper kept expensive silver products in the front to get customers’ guards down, then used that opportunity to sell them on cheaper silverware. It was a clever little scheme.

“Can I take these to a friend’s general store after lunch?” Zara asked. “I want to get them appraised.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I curious too.”

With that, we made the decision to get our silver spoons appraised.

Just as our discussion came to an end, the waiter arrived with our lunch.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“Yaaay! I am *starving*!”

The waiter served each of us our meals and placed a basket of all-you-can-eat bread in the center of the table. The soup of the day was mountain chestnut potage.

I said my prayer. Then it was time to dig in! I scooped a bite of fish gratin and brought it to my mouth. But the cheese wouldn’t separate from the plate, no matter how high I brought my spoon in the air.

“So much cheese, Mell.”

“It’s very stretchy, isn’t it?”

But suddenly, it snapped. I took my first bite, somewhat saddened by the loss of the gigantic cheese string.

“Mmmmm!”

The seared cheese on the top of the gratin was incredibly fragrant, which made it pair perfectly with the salted white fish. The rich cream sauce brought out the savory taste of the fish meat too.

“This is delicious. Would you like to try some, Charlotte?” I asked.

“Yes! Ah, Mell, I want stretchy cheese too.”

“Certainly. Go for it.”

With a grin on her face, Charlotte took the spoon and began to stretch it. “Wow! It so long!”

My heart suddenly felt lighter when I watched Charlotte enjoying herself. But when I glanced at that spoon, I couldn’t help but think about the fake silver spoons we just purchased. The dinner table was supposed to be a place for nothing but joy, yet that salesman lied and tried to corrupt our table with his fake silver spoons.

“Thank you, Mell. It was soooo good.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I knew we needed to finish our lunches and get those spoons appraised. With that urge in my head, I ended up eating three whole pieces of bread from the basket.

THE royal capital’s shopping district was much emptier in comparison. I knew everyone had to be visiting the flea market today. Zara led us to a store off the main road, past the winding alleyways and around a corner of the street.

“That’s my friend’s general store.”

“Wow…!”

The building was made of red bricks and had an aging tiled roof. I could make out antique lanterns hanging in the windows.

A bell rang when we opened the front door.

“Excuse us!”

“Come on in.” A slender middle-aged man with glasses emerged from the back. “Oh, howdy, mister. Long time no see.”

“It’s really been a while,” Zara replied. “I actually left the restaurant and went back to the Royal Order.”

“Did you, now? And who do you have there with you?”

“Let’s see…”

“I am Charlotte. I am maid at barracks.”

“Is that right?”

“The other woman is my colleague,” Zara said.

“I see.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Mell Risurisu.”

“Nice to meet you too. The name’s Gigi Rhode.”

We decided to get right to the appraisal. Zara gave him a brief explanation. “… and that brings us here.”

Gigi clicked his tongue. “The knights aren’t inspecting that flea market properly, are they?”

“It’s hard when there’s so many shops,” Zara said. “Knights aren’t professional appraisers either.”

“I guess so.” As soon as he laid eyes on the silver spoons wrapped in a cloth, Gigi clicked his tongue for the second time today. “They’re fakes. What a joke.”

Gigi took a so-called fake spoon and dropped it on a tile, producing a dull thud. Then he brought out his own silver spoon from the back, presumably something he knew was real, and dropped it on the tile next. It rang out with a high-pitched clang.

“This is what real silver sounds like.”

“It’s completely different!” I exclaimed.

Anything considered “pure silver” had to be at least 92.5 percent silver throughout the entire product. On top of that, proper silver manufacturers branded their wares with a special seal provided by the kingdom.

“These spoons are branded.”

“What? Where?”

“Here, Mell!”

“Huh…?”

There was a small dot on the spoon’s handle—proof that it was genuine

silver.

“Hard to spot with the bare eye, isn’t it? That’s because it’s a tiny little thing that looks like a mere scratch.” Gigi held a magnifying glass up to the real silver spoon to show us.

“Wow! It’s so elaborate, but I couldn’t even see it!”

“That’s amazing!”

He explained that the seals depicted different things in different eras. The one on this spoon was the profile of a woman’s face. “They usually change after half a century or so. Fifty years ago was the king’s profile, a hundred years ago they used a dragon, and one hundred fifty years ago it was a picture of a cat.”

“So you appraise the silver based on which seal you see?” I asked.

“Exactly. Any fine silver with a cat branded on it will fetch a pretty penny.”

“Wow!”

Of course, criminals tried to fake these seals on their counterfeits too. There were many ways of investigating an item’s legitimacy.

“They did a real bad job silver plating this thing,” he said. “This spoon just has a thin layer of silver painted on. It wouldn’t even be considered third-rate. Where’d you buy this thing?”

“It was a shop at the flea market. They said that these were imported directly from the famous silver-producing country of Luimarr,” Zara explained.

“Damn! They think they can just do whatever they want?” Gigi rolled up his sleeves and tried to march right out of the shop, only to be stopped by Zara.

“Now wait just a minute. We’ll report this to the Royal Order first. You don’t know what a criminal might do if you confront him!”

“I guess you’re right.”

Gigi agreed to write up an appraisal report instead.

There was a national exam prospective appraisers must take in order to become officially recognized. Of course, this title also meant that your appraisals were that much more reliable. This man named Gigi turned out to be

a top appraiser with connections to noble families as a result.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks. We can pay with—”

“Don’t bother. Just promise me you’ll catch the guy as soon as humanly possible.”

“Of course we will.” Zara would be taking the fake spoons and appraisal write-up to the knights. “You can go home without me, Melly and Charlotte.”

“All right. Ah, Zara, I’ll take the plates home too then,” I said.

“You’re sure they’re not too heavy?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m perfectly strong too. Besides, I’d like to get the dishes in the cupboards as soon as possible.”

“Okay then. Be sure to ask a deliveryman to take them if it’s too much to handle.”

“I will.” I waved goodbye to him and noticed Charlotte looked a little sad. “He’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.”

“Right.”

We went our separate ways after that. Since Charlotte was still feeling down, I stroked her back and made a suggestion.

“Why don’t we go to the market and buy ingredients for dinner? We can have a party to celebrate the new house tonight.”

“A party!” Her face lit up.

“Let’s finish up our shopping so we can get straight to cooking.”

“Okay!”

I would have to buy Charlotte’s favorite—butterfly tuna. Our first stop was the market’s fishmonger.

“Hello, mister. It is me, Charlotte.”

“Oh, if it isn’t little Charlotte. And you’ve got a friend with you too.”

“I do!”

I couldn’t believe the timid Charlotte was so friendly with this old man. It nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“Thank you for always including freebies when Charlotte shops here,” I said.

“Charlotte’s a popular customer around the market. I’ve gotta be sure she doesn’t shop somewhere else.”

The kindness of all the merchants at the marketplace filled me with gratitude.

“Mell, what fish do we choose?” Despite her question, Charlotte’s eyes were glued to the butterfly tuna.

“The butterfly tuna’s fresh today.”

“Mell, he says it is fresh!”

“Then let’s go with the butterfly tuna,” I said. “Could you please wrap some up for us?”

“Of course!”

After that, we purchased meat, vegetables, and anything else we needed for the party. Then we headed back to where Amelia was waiting for us.

“Kreeeeeh…” Amelia’s eyes went wide when she saw how much we bought.

“Ah, this is too much, isn’t it? I think I’ll ask a deliveryman to transport it for us.”

“Kreh kreh.”

“Really? You can handle it? Okay, then let’s go home.” I piled our luggage into the special griffin saddle the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau had given me. “Will it be all right for Charlotte and me to ride you too?”

“Kreh kreh, kreh?” She asked if it was okay to walk home instead of fly.

“Of course. Thank you, Amelia.”

With that, the two of us rode home on Amelia’s back.

The sun was setting. I could hardly believe it was already so late in the day.

“Could you prepare a bath, Charlotte? I’ll get started on cooking in the meantime.”

“Okay!”

“Please take care of the firewood, Amelia.”

“Kreh!”

We separated to take care of our respective jobs.

I wanted my first dish to be something Charlotte would love. I rolled up my sleeves and put an apron on. I added butter to a bowl of flour, stirred it slowly with a spatula, and added water once the dough was starting to get crumbly. Then I mixed it together some more. Once it was a good consistency, I rolled it into a ball and let it rest in the bowl for a while.

Next, I cut the butterfly tuna into fillets and seasoned them with salt and pepper.

I wanted a soup for the second dish and decided to go with Zara’s favorite—meatball stew. It took some time to prepare, but I would just have to bear it for the good of the move-in party.

“The bath is ready, Mell!”

“Then why don’t you hop in first.”

“Can Amelia come?”

“You don’t mind washing her?”

“Nuh-uh!”

“Then please do, thank you.”

The separate bathroom had a tub big enough for Amelia to soak in. I could just picture how happy she would be with her bath.

Once Charlotte had left, it was time to get back to cooking.

I fried the meatballs in oil then let them simmer in the soup. The second dish was essentially done at that point. Before making the third dish, I took the resting pie crust dough and shaped it with a rolling pin. After I bent and wrapped it a few times, I let the dough sit to rest again for a while.

“Okay, on to the third dish.”

Nothing said “party” like a whole roast chicken. I’d decided to splurge on a chicken while we were out.

I stuffed its bottom with veggies and tied it with a string. Then I kneaded salt and pepper into the meat and stuck some medicinal herbs all over the body. All that was left was to set it on an iron plate and roast it in the oven.

Then it was time to finish up the pie. I cut the dough into the shape of a fish, which ended up taking more time than I expected. That sort of work definitely wasn’t my specialty.

“All right! It’s done!”

Then I placed butterfly tuna into the fish-shaped pie crust. The final step was to bake it in the oven once the chicken was finished.

I decided to make raspberry mousse as an after-dinner dessert too. I wanted to serve it with the raspberry sauce I made at the start of the summer.

“I think that about does it!”

As I took a breather after all my work, Charlotte and Amelia returned from the bath.

“Mell, you can take bath next.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.”

Amelia’s coat was sparkling. Charlotte had done a great job with her.

“Was it hard to wash Amelia?”

“No, we had fun.”

Charlotte’s cheeks were still pink from the hot bath. Her hair was also dripping wet, so I decided to dry it for her in front of the fireplace.

“Mraaaw!”

Blanche grazed Charlotte’s hair with her claws like she wanted to help.

“Blanche! It tickles!”

“Meooow!”

Charlotte told me she got chilly after the bath and wanted Blanche to warm her up. I quickly wiped the moisture from her hair with a towel. I couldn’t let her catch a cold.

“Mell…”

“Yes?”

“When I was little, my mom dry my hair with towel in front of the fireplace.”

“…Is that right?”

Charlotte had Zara and me now. She wasn’t alone anymore.

When I finished drying her hair, I carefully combed the tangles out of it.

“Thank you, Mell. I so happy.”

I wrapped Charlotte’s tiny body in my arms and squeezed her tight.

ZARA returned just as the butterfly tuna pie was finished baking.

“Welcome home!”

“Th-Thanks, Charlotte.”

“Welcome back, Zara. Thanks for taking care of everything.”

“R-Right, of course.”

Zara sounded unusually stiff.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Ah, no, I’m just really not used to being greeted by anyone other than Blanche…”

“Oh, I see what you mean.”

Zara moved from far away to the royal capital, meaning he was separated from his family all this time. Our greetings had made him feel unexpectedly shy.

“I will say ‘welcome home’ every day now, okay?” Charlotte said.

“Got it. Sounds great.” Zara smiled.

“Goodie!”

Amelia and I moved to this house because we had to. But it looked like Zara and Charlotte’s decision to join us might have been good for them too. Now even Blanche didn’t have to wait at home all alone when Zara was on expeditions. She would have Charlotte there with her to look after the house. There was no downside to this arrangement in the slightest.

“Something smells tasty in here,” Zara noted.

“I cooked up a feast so that we could have a move-in party,” I said.

“Oh my! That sounds absolutely fabulous.”

When I set the dishes out on the table, Album finally woke up from his long nap.

“*Whoa, check out all the food! Am I dreaming?*”

“You’re definitely awake, Album.”

Surprisingly, Album had helped with the move and repairs around the house. I wanted him to enjoy all the food today too.

“*Oooh, it’s a whole roast chicken!*”

“I thought it would be a nice treat for our move-in party,” I said.

“*Woo-hoo!*”

I probably didn’t have to worry about the three of us finishing it all if Album was eating too.

“Zara, this is the meatball stew you love so much. It’s been a while, so I wanted to make it for you again.”

“Thank you, Melly! I’m really happy.”

“For the final touch…hang on just a minute.” I went to the kitchen and took the butterfly tuna pie out of the oven. “Ta-da! It’s butterfly tuna pie!”

“Wow!” Charlotte’s eyes completely lit up. Her ears perked up and her tail

started to wag.

I also made an assortment of pre-peeled fruits for Amelia and Blanche.

“Kreh!”

“Mrah!”

The two were pleased with their dinner too.

Now that everything was ready, it was time to finally dig in. I poured forest apple juice into the matching cups we bought today. Zara agreed to lead us in a toast.

“Cheers to our wonderful new castle!”

“Cheeeeers!”

“Cheers!”

It had been an exhausting day. The gentle sweetness of the juice seeped into my body.

I started by cutting into the pie.

“It is so cute, Mell. Cutting it makes me sad,” Charlotte said.

“Then do you want me to stop?”

“Um… No, I want to eat it!”

“Very well.”

I cut the pie into four pieces and garnished it with tartar sauce.

“You eat this pie with the white sauce?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes, exactly.”

Zara had taught me how to make an exquisite tartar sauce. It was a combination of egg yolks, vinegar, pepper, and oil to make the sauce portion. Then he added shredded vegetables and mixed them in.

Charlotte stuck her knife in the pie with a look of pure focus on her face. She made sure to dip her first bite in the tartar sauce, bringing it carefully to her lips so that it wouldn’t drip from the fork.

“Oh!”

Does she like it? I can’t wait to hear her thoughts.

“It is soooo good!” she enthused. “The crust is crispy, the butterfly tuna is so tasty, and the nice white sauce make it all taste even better!”

“She’s right. This is amazing, Melly.”

“Thank you both for the compliments.” I hadn’t actually expected so much praise—I even blushed a little. It was time for me to try a bite for myself. “Ah, this really did turn out delicious!”

The crunch of the vegetables complemented the flakey pie crust, bringing out the rich taste of the butterfly tuna.

“Butterfly tuna pie is both cute and yummy!”

“I’m glad to hear you like it.”

When I saw the smile on Charlotte’s face, I was truly glad I put in all the effort I did. Album had been quiet for a while. I looked over to find him licking his plate clean.

“There’s still more food, Album,” I said.

“*But the tartar sauce is so yummy!*”

I appreciated the compliment, but I didn’t particularly want to see him licking his plate… I ended up setting the extra tartar sauce next to him.

“Use it how you like. It goes well with lots of different foods.”

“*Woohoo! Thanks!*”

It was getting hard to ignore Album’s constant glances at the whole roast chicken. It was time to carve it up for him.

“I’ll take care of this one, Melly.”

“Oh, thank you.”

It was surprisingly exhausting to carve up a whole bird like that. Zara picked up a large knife and stuck it into the chicken. The crispy skin tore apart, and juices seeped from the part pierced by the knife. Album’s eyes were absolutely

glued to the chicken during this process.

Zara skillfully cut up the bird into pieces. “How’s this?” he asked.

“That’s perfect, thank you.”

“Wow! This look yummy too!” Charlotte’s eyes sparkled.

I was eager to try my first bite. I started with the meat. “Mmm!”

The skin was crisp and fragrant, but the meat itself was tender. I bit in and felt the juices seep out, leaving a faint sweetness in my mouth. Then I tried a piece of potato I’d cooked in the chicken’s stomach. It had absorbed the savory flavor of the chicken meat, making each bite exquisitely delicious.

“*Pancake girl!*”

“Y-Yes?”

His sudden call startled me. I looked over to see Album holding out the dish of tartar sauce.

“*The meat is really yummy with tartar sauce!*”

That was a most unusual combination. However, I decided to try it for myself. Something about it sounded nice. I tried pouring a tiny bit on the meat first and cut myself a bite.

“Wow, you’re right! That’s really good!”

The slightly acidic sauce actually brought out the flavor of the chicken. I would have never thought to try the two together. Charlotte and Zara enjoyed it too when they tried it for themselves.

“I wanna pour the stew!” Charlotte took the stew that had been simmering over the fire and poured it into bowls for us.

“Melly surprised me with this stew at my welcoming party,” Zara said. “It made me so happy.”

“I was just glad you liked it.”

It was so much fun eating and making merry with my squadmates. We always ate together on missions, but work meals and private life meals were completely different things. I always found it strange how the act of eating

could change so much in different scenarios.

“I hope we can all get together for a meal again sometime,” I said.

“That’d be a blast.”

With that fond memory in mind, we began to eat our meatball stew.

“How odd. I swear it tastes even better than it did a year ago,” I mused.

“Maybe you got even better at cooking, Melly.”

“That would certainly be nice.”

It was possible that I’d improved my skills after all the cooking I did on our expeditions.

“I loooove this stew!” Charlotte cried in delight.

“*Me too!*”

The four of us chatted as we ate our dinner. In what felt like the blink of an eye, our delightful feast was over.

ZARA made us warm milk after dinner. Charlotte blew on hers to cool it down before sipping it.

“You came home later than I expected, Zara,” I said.

“Right? The patrol unit got right to work as soon as I submitted the spoons and the write-up.” Zara had to join them on the job to lead them to the right shop.

“So that’s why it took so long.”

“Uh-huh. It was a whole big mess.” He told me the culprit was arrested, but there were more shops selling forgeries than they could keep up with. “The captain of the patrol unit said they’d have to arrest the manufacturers themselves.”

“I suppose that’s the only option,” I said.

They were going to up their degree of security starting the next day. National appraisers would also be attending the flea market to spot forgeries. I

wondered if that would include Gigi, Zara's appraiser friend.

"Well, we did what we could, you know?" Zara said.

"Yeah," I agreed.

The flea market would soon be free of counterfeits. It was all thanks to Charlotte and Zara noticing something was off with those silver spoons.

"Did I do good job, Mell?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes, you were great!"

"Yaaay!" She grinned when I patted her on the head. But then she suddenly jumped to her feet. What came out of her mouth next caught me completely off guard. "It is late. This is the special time for both of you, no? I go sleep now!"

"Huh?!"

Special time for us? What does that mean?

"I go brush my teeth now! Blanche, Amelia, you come too."

"Kreh!"

"Meow!"

Zara and I were left alone in the room—but only for a moment. Charlotte came right back.

"I forgot Album!"

Album was drinking his warm milk on one end of the table.

"Come too, Album!"

"*Aww, but I'm not done with my milk yet!*"

"You will get fat if you drink too much."

"*What's so bad about that?*"

"An evil witch will bake you into Album Pie."

"*What?! No way!*"

"Then come brush teeth and go to bed."

"*Urk… Fine…*"

It was kind of funny. Charlotte was really good at coaxing Album to do what she wanted.

Zara and I were left alone for good this time. I didn't understand why this hour was supposed to be special, but I decided to ask him the question that had been on my mind.

"How do you like life at the new house, Zara?"

"I'm having a blast."

"I'm glad we decided to be brave and buy this place."

"So am I."

Amelia could come in and out of the house without any trouble. Charlotte could have a peaceful life here too. It felt like things couldn't get any better for all of us.

"Let's make the most of this house together, Zara."

"Of course. I couldn't agree more."

Zara stuck his hand out, so I reached out and squeezed it.

Something about holding eye contact with him was making me feel embarrassed. When I was too shy to take it anymore, I scampered away to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

THE next morning marked our first day of commuting from the new house.

"Okay, let's get started on the lunch boxes."

"Right!"

We'd already discussed making lunches to take to work once the new house was ready.

First up: bread!

"Can you slice the bread, Charlotte?" I handed Charlotte the baguette and asked her to cut it. While she did that, I retrieved the leftover chicken thighs from yesterday's dinner. I'd set them aside to use for lunch.

“I cutted the bread, Mell.”

“Thank you!”

I placed layers of leafy vegetables on the bread slices and topped them with chicken meat. Then I drizzled tartar sauce over the top.

“I call it tartar sauce chicken bread,” I said.

“It looks yummy!”

“I think so too.”

Album, clever fairy that he was, had invented the delicious combination of chicken with tartar sauce. I made sure to set aside a portion for him too, of course. I wrapped the bread in a paisley cloth I used during the move.

The second dish was a soybean and scarlet eggplant stew. I cooked them together long enough to evaporate excess moisture, then filled jars with the finished stew.

“That should be good enough for lunch,” I said.

“I am excited to eat them!”

“So am I.”

Next, I made bacon omelets and reheated leftover meatball stew. It was about this time that Album awoke.

“*Any food for little ol’ Album, pancake girl?*”

“I made portions for you too.”

Zara finally emerged from his room. “Sorry about that. I was out like a light.”

“That’s all right. Breakfast is ready, so have a seat,” I invited.

I’d made the omelets in a rush, but the soft-boiled texture of the eggs was appetizing in its own way. But there was no time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast. We needed to head to work.

Zara traveled to the barracks on his horse while Charlotte and I rode Amelia. I kept Album tucked away in my bag. Amelia took off the ground, soaring over the tips of the trees until there was nothing but sky around us.

“The forest air feels so nice!” Charlotte cried.

“It really does,” I agreed.

Charlotte and I were both raised in forests. Filling our lungs with the forest air first thing in the morning brought us a sense of comfort. I was thoroughly satisfied by this new morning commute method.

I arrived at the barracks in the morning and spotted Garr, who was crouching and facing away from me.

“Good morning, Garr.”

He turned around and returned my greeting. Sly, who was perched on his shoulder, threw her hand up to say hello too.

I approached Garr and joined him on the ground.

“Ah, I see!”

Garr was making a small flowerbed in front of the barracks. Sly held up a small bottle of seeds for me to look at.

“You’re going to plant flowers here, aren’t you?”

Sly gave me a thumbs-up. They shared that Sly, Garr, and his fiancée Fredrica all went on a picnic together and returned with these flower seeds.

Fredrica was the noblewoman Garr was engaged to.

Garr once introduced me to her when we happened to cross paths. Fredrica was a strong-willed woman who pursued Garr, a beastfolk man, and even proposed to him. I’d learned that women could sometimes propose to men here in the capital city. That came as a shock to me, a native of the Fore Elf woods.

I’d been wondering what happened between them after that, but it sounded like their relationship was still going strong. I was happy to hear that they were taking good care of Sly too.

“It would be nice to have some pretty flowers bloom here,” I said.

We could ask Charlotte to take care of them while we were away on

expeditions. I had faith in her ability to grow them. I decided to help them plant seeds while we chatted.

“That should do it, don’t you think?”

The bell rang, signaling ten minutes before the start of work. I washed my hands at the well and headed to the captain’s office for our meeting.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron began its usual morning routine.

We were informed that the patrol unit working on the flea market incident was short on manpower. They were consulting expeditionary units about borrowing some of their members for the time being.

“They didn’t single our unit out or anything. Just do your normal routines for now.”

Our morning meeting ended there. But Captain Ludtink asked Zara and me to stay behind.

“What’s this about?” Zara asked.

“They tell me you’re the ones who spotted the fake silver yesterday,” Captain Ludtink said. “The general commander had nice things to say about you.”

“It was just a coincidence,” Zara said. “Charlotte’s good eyesight helped out too.”

Charlotte and Zara deserved the praise for their work. I was blind as a bat in the face of the counterfeit spoons.

“I couldn’t tell they were counterfeits at all,” I admitted.

“Well, it led to the culprits gettin’ caught in the end. There was talk of you guys bein’ paid a reward too.”

“Oh yeah? I won’t get my hopes up,” Zara replied.

That was all Captain Ludtink had to inform us of. I headed to the courtyard for today’s training with the female members.

“We’re going to work on defensive falling today.” Liselotte and I stood at attention and listened to Vice Captain Velrey’s instructions. “You’re much less likely to be injured if you learn how to fall the right way during combat. I know

you've learned this already, but I noticed how neither of you have had the chance to use it during an expedition."

She was right, now that I thought back on it. Neither of us had an opportunity to practice landing when we were sent flying.

Moments of battle were always total chaos to me.

"Protecting your head and your chest are the most important parts. Your limbs should be your second priority."

We would break our bones if we put our full body weight on our limbs. That would give the monsters the exact opportunity they needed.

I thought back to the time I broke a bone at twelve years old. I successfully climbed a tree and picked the giant mountain chestnut I saw from below, but just when my guard was down, I slipped and fell, breaking my leg when I landed on it. The village healer fixed me up with a restoration spell, but we didn't have a healer like that in the Second Expeditionary Squadron. We'd be in trouble if any of us got seriously hurt.

It was important to focus on sticking the landing.

"Now we're going to work on falling when struck from the front."

The danger here was being hit in the head too hard. We had to fall in a way that kept our heads safe.

"I'll demonstrate the correct method first. Medic Risurisu, push my shoulders as hard as you can."

"What?!"

"Hurry now."

"Ah, right."

It was an unthinkable role, but orders were orders, despite how scared I was to push her that hard.

"O-Okay, I'm going now."

"Sure."

I shoved Vice Captain Velrey's shoulders with all my strength. It looked like

she was about to fall backwards, but she hit the ground and bounced back up to her feet by using her hands.

“Wow! That was amazing!”

“Did that help you understand?”

“I’m sorry, but it didn’t help at all.”

“Me neither.”

“There’s an order to how you hit the ground. First your butt, then your back, then your shoulders, and finally, your hands. You’ll get hurt if you land hands first.”

The first step was to look down at your belt so that your head didn’t collide with the ground. Then, once your body was stabilized, you rolled over, put your hands on the ground, and pushed yourself back on your feet.

Her explanation made it sound simple, but I was scared to put it in practice. Vice Captain Velrey seemed to have predicted this—she laid out a training mat for us to fall on.

“Let’s have you both try it now.”

“O-Okay.”

“Certainly.”

Our responses came out quietly. We had no faith in our athletic abilities. But backing down wasn’t an option.

“Um…I guess I can go first,” I said.

Vice Captain Velrey would be the one to push my shoulders.

“Let’s go, Medic Risurisu!”

“Okay, go for it!”

I shouted back at her to get myself fired up. She wasted no time in shoving me by my shoulders, sending my body crumpling backwards.

“Bwah!”

Fwump! I hit the ground with a loud thud. I tried to use my hands to push

myself back up as quickly as I could, but I wasn't nearly as fast as Vice Captain Velrey. I had to get back up on my feet the normal way in the end.

"You made sure to look at your belt, Medic Risurisu."

"…Yes."

The vice captain was incredibly kind to praise me for the one thing I did right.

"It looked like you landed on your back. That can paralyze you if you hit it too hard, so be careful, okay?"

"I understand."

Next was Liselotte's turn to face the challenge.

"Let's move it, Sorcerer Lichtenberger."

"Y-Yes, Vice Captain!" She was just as merciless with Liselotte, giving her a firm shove. "Eeeek!"

Liselotte landed on her hands. The soft mat reduced the impact, but it probably would have hurt a lot to land straight on the ground.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine. I can get it right next time."

Liselotte hated to lose. This exercise had lit a fire in her.

Our proper training began.

"Oof!"

"Eek!"

Mine and Liselotte's shrieks echoed through the courtyard.

After many repetitions, we were finally able to fall properly before the morning was over.

"Well done. You should be fine as long as you can manage this."

Liselotte and I exchanged smiles. I'd managed to learn something I thought was impossible, filling me with a newfound sense of accomplishment.

"You both worked really hard." But what followed the vice captain's words of

praise came as a shock to me. “We’ll work on falling forward and to the side later this afternoon.”

“Huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“Hmm?”

A cold breeze blew between the three of us.

“What’s wrong, you two?”

“Um, Vice Captain Velrey, are you saying there are multiple ways to fall?” I asked.

“Right. You won’t fall on your back every time, will you?”

“N-No, that’s true.”

Liselotte and I collapsed to our knees. We really thought we’d mastered the art of falling. It never even occurred to me that there were multiple methods of breaking a fall.

Well, I owed the vice captain my gratitude for teaching us what to do.

AMELIA, Charlotte, Liselotte, and I decided to eat lunch together under a tree in the courtyard. We spread out a sheet for us to sit on. Zara had gone to the knights’ headquarters for training. He wouldn’t be back until later.

“I never even conceived of eating from a lunch box outside like this,” Liselotte said.

“The breeze feels nice this time of year,” I replied.

“I love to eat outside!” Charlotte chimed in. “But it start to be cold soon.”

Liselotte had been eating her meals in the cafeteria, but she said she had the chef at the Lichtenberger home make her a lunch to bring to work after we told her we would start doing the same. I was surprised to learn she’d asked a family servant to deliver her lunch from home when the time was right. Perhaps, this was also a “lunch box” in a different form.

“Thank you for waiting, Lady Liselotte.”

“Just leave it there, please.”

The box opened up to reveal it had three separate tiers. The maid even brewed tea for all of us. I couldn’t have asked for a better lunch break.

Curious, I peered into the lunch box that came from the Lichtenberger home.

“Whoa!”

“Wow! So pretty!”

There were ham and veggie sandwiches, small skewers with pickled vegetables, grilled meat, roasted fish cut into bite sizes, and all sorts of delicious-looking food. It was a beautiful, rainbow assortment of colors too. The yellow omelets practically radiated a golden light.

“How many people is this for?” Liselotte asked. “I can’t eat all this.”

“It looks like it’s three servings in all,” I pointed out.

“Yes, three servings.” Charlotte nodded.

“I told them I wanted to eat with the two of you, but they might have thought that meant I wanted enough food for all of us.”

“Ah, I see…”

“Oh, there is June. We should invite him too.”

June? Who’s June? I turned around and realized she was talking about Ulgus.

“Good idea. We can’t eat all of this on our own.”

Liselotte called Ulgus over to us.

“June Ulgus. Come over here.”

That was an order, all right. Liselotte was definitely a young lady who came from privilege.

“Wh-What is it?!”

The young man approached us, visibly nervous.

“You haven’t had lunch yet, have you?” Liselotte asked.

“No, I haven’t…”

“Then have some of this. We can’t finish it all ourselves.”

“Holy moly, this looks really good. You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“Go ahead.”

The maid prepared plates for us and divided up the contents of the lunch box. Though Ulgus’s plate had a small mountain of sandwiches on it, they were only bite-size, so I knew he’d be able to finish it all.

“Wow, it looks tasty!” Ulgus eagerly took a plate from the maid.

I unwrapped the cloth full of fruit for Amelia. She’d come to me with the very cute request of bringing her own fruit to work too when I was wrapping up our lunch boxes.

“Kreh!”

“Of course.”

Everything was ready now. All I had to do was pray before my meal.

“*Waaait!*” Album sprinted toward us with his lunch box on his back. “*I wanna eat with you too!*”

We’d gathered an unexpectedly large group for our picnic.

I wasted no time trying the tartar sauce chicken sandwich I made that morning. The slightly acidic tartar sauce paired nicely with the chicken meat and bread.

Charlotte had some tartar sauce on the corner of her mouth, which I wiped clean for her. Album’s tail was wagging as he ate.

Ulgus’s eyes lit up when he tasted the special sandwiches from the marquess’s home. I could tell he was in bliss to have discovered such delicious food.

Liselotte spoke fondly in between bites of pickled vegetables.

“This sort of thing isn’t so bad now and then.”

“I agree! It’s nice to spend time outside with friends.”

“It certainly is.”

We always ate outside on expeditions, but this was a different experience.

“It’s so strange. On expeditions, I feel relaxed whenever I taste your cooking, Mell. It’s as if I can finally let my guard down. But just feeling the breeze outside like this brings me a sense of relief too.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

The wind was blowing in from the east like a gentle caress against our skin. It was a little chilly, but I loved the autumn wind because it still contained some of that summer heat. I was really happy to know Liselotte felt the same way.

“*Aaaah, this is tasty!*”

Album seemed to be more focused on his gluttony, however. But that was just part of his personality.

“Have some beans, Ulgus.”

“Thank you!” He grinned at me before trying a bite. “You never cease to amaze with your cooking, Medic Risurisu. It’s like I’m back in my childhood home again.”

…Please don’t forget that I’m not your mother.

We spent our lunch break enjoying a peaceful meal and each other’s company

WE were called to the captain’s office after lunch—something that didn’t usually happen late in the day. Even Zara came back from his training for it. With a grim look on his face, Captain Ludtink read out the documents delivered from headquarters.

“We have a mission.”

Ulgus clapped his hand over his mouth as soon as he heard that, probably to prevent himself from whining. I knew how he felt. This was our first time getting orders during the afternoon and it was probably some sort of emergency. Just what could have happened? I listened to the continuation of Captain Ludtink’s summary.

“I know we just talked about the fake silver this morning, but they’ve traced the crime to its source where it’s being produced.” The knights had managed to track the confiscated counterfeits down to a distant factory. “We’ve been ordered to go there and turn that factory to dust.”

“Eeeeek!”

The forceful words of “turn it to dust” coming out of that bandit’s face made me let out a shriek.

“Pipe down and listen, Risurisu!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

I should have covered my mouth like Ulgus. I still had much to learn.

The patrol unit and national appraisers had investigated the flea market that morning, resulting in the arrest of multiple merchants selling counterfeit goods. These ranged from gem sellers to textile merchants to general stores—everywhere they looked, there seemed to be illegal items up for sale.

“What the hell’s going on at that market?” the captain grumbled. “Anyway, we’ve gotta head out to the silver factory now.”

The distant region where silver goods were produced was called Luimarr. We would have to get on a boat at a harbor town, sail for a day, take a carriage for another half a day, then spend the second half traversing a small, dangerous road.

“There’s a town at the foot of the mountain where they mine silver. It’s called Zilva and you can’t even get horses in, much less carriages. But a griffin could definitely fly in.”

When she heard that, Amelia stuck out her chest proudly.

“Kreh kreh kreh!”

“Really? You’re sure?”

Amelia had volunteered to carry the members on her back. She chirped that she would take good care of us.

“Start getting ready. Our orders are to head out immediately.”

I decided to prepare three days' worth of food and a little extra. I would just have to cook more food I found in the area on our way home—too much weight in my bags would only slow me down.

Charlotte's face was gloomy as she helped me pack. "Awww. I did not think everyone leave again so soon."

"I'm sorry, Charlotte."

"It is okay. This is work. I understand."

"I appreciate that. Would you be able to take care of Blanche while you're at home?"

"Oh, right! Blanche at home with me! I will not be alone!"

A smile instantly returned to her face. I was so glad she would have Blanche to keep her company this time.

We finished our preparations and it was time to set out. Album also stuffed food into his paisley handkerchief to take with us.

"Be safe, everyone!" Charlotte waved goodbye to us. Our mission was officially underway.

MY squadmates took turns driving the carriage as usual. Garr, Zara, and Vice Captain Velrey also took turns riding on Amelia's back to look out for approaching monsters. She currently soared through the air above us with Garr on her back. Captain Ludtink drove the carriage while I sat inside, swaying back and forth with each bump in the road. We quickly arrived at the harbor city.

Captain Ludtink stared up at the ship. He was visibly depressed. That was because he suffered from seasickness. I made sure to give the captain some medicine before we boarded today.

"You should drink this now, Captain Ludtink," I said.

"What's this?"

"A medicine to prevent motion sickness. It should help you feel less dizzy."

I'd prepared it after our previous sea voyages where Captain Ludtink

complained of terrible vertigo.

“I’ve heard it won’t make you sleepy either.”

“Yeah? Thanks.”

…Did I just hear that right? It felt like the first time Captain Ludtink ever thanked me. I had no idea he even understood the concept of expressing gratitude.

“Risurisu. You’re thinkin’ something stupid right now, aren’t you?”

“What?! Of course not! I was just taking a moment to pray that you don’t get seasick!”

“I don’t buy it. But whatever.”

Captain Ludtink boarded the ship after that conversation.

It was a giant passenger vessel over six hundred feet long, with private rooms ranging from first class to fourth class. The ship held a crew of fifty and nearly seven hundred passengers. Supposedly, they carried this many people every single day.

We would be traveling by sea for a day. Amelia was flying onto the ship from above after a crew member stopped her from boarding with the rest of us.

I was so excited—I’d heard this ship had shops, restaurants, and even a small theater. I’d come to the royal capital in the spare closet of a trading vessel. That trip cost me less than a third of what this passenger vessel did, but the voyage was a terrible experience of watching cats hunting rats around the decks.

We’d also ridden a ship belonging to the Royal Order when we went to search for Amelia, while other trips were done on high-speed boats to ensure fast travel. Today would be my very first time on a passenger vessel.

“Look, Ulgus,” I said. “It says they’re selling freshly roasted bread at that shop!”

“Freshly roasted? Sounds amazing!”

“Quit foolin’ around, Risurisu, Ulgus.”

“Yes, Captain!”

“We know!”

Captain Ludtink crossed his arms and glared at us, but turned pale the second the boat started to move. He drank the medicine I gave him in a hurry.

“I’m gonna wait in my room,” he said. “Come report to me if anything happens. And don’t forget this isn’t a vacation, so no playin’ around up here.”

“Roger that.”

“Please rest well.”

I decided to change out of my uniform since it would draw attention from the other passengers. Then Liselotte and I decided to go look at the shops while Amelia would wait for us in our room to avoid the crowds.

“Shall we get going, Liselotte?”

“Certainly.”

The second story was the main floor of the ship. It was a place that sold a little bit of everything, from light meals like bread, to drinks, pens and ink, towels, and soap.

“They have souvenirs from the royal capital and everything,” I noticed.

“Yes, I see that.”

“Ah, Liselotte, they’re selling mythical beast steamed buns.”

“Oh, my! They really are.”

Mythical beast steamed buns had grown popular in the harbor town, which was why they were selling them to take home here on the ship. The package had a regal white griffin drawn on it.

“I had them model it after Amelia,” Liselotte said. “Isn’t it cute?”

“Ah, you’re right. The eyes look exactly like hers.”

Liselotte told me that the souvenir steamed buns were in higher demand than they could keep up with. “They hired more people at the factory and went into intensive production, but they still couldn’t make them all in time.”

“I had no idea they were so popular.”

As we chatted, the old man who ran the store spoke to us.

“That’s the last box of mythical beast steamed buns, ladies. And to think I had fifty of them for the day’s trip. They just flew off the shelves when the passengers got here.”

“W-We’ll take it!”

They weren’t very expensive, so I didn’t give it much thought.

The shop also sold pennants that said “Welcome to the royal capital,” decorative clock towers, knight key chains, and various products.

“It’s hard not to want trivial little things like these when you’re on a trip.”

Liselotte adjusted her glasses, looking carefully at the items. I agreed with her—I sort of wanted one of the pennants too, but when I thought about it more, I realized I didn’t actually need one.

“If the mythical beast steamed buns are so popular, why not make other things too?” Liselotte said.

“I agree. Imagine if they made mountain cat stuffed animals.”

“That…sounds lovely.”

“They could even make wooden griffin carvings.”

“A brilliant idea.”

“Or—”

“Wait, Mell. Let’s discuss this in our room,” she said. “I’ll write it up into a business proposal!”

Liselotte ended up dragging me back to our room.

Our fun voyage came to an end in what felt like no time at all. Captain Ludtink said that he spent the trip sleeping, so it wasn’t that hard on him in the end. Zara, Ulgus, and Garr had passed the time by playing cards. Vice Captain Velrey went to the small theater to see a play called “The Great Hero’s Adventure.”

“Aww, I wanted to see the play too,” I said.

“I should have invited you. It was a good one.” The vice captain told me it was

an adaptation of the life story of a great hero from a distant land.

“What happened in the story?”

“He was a daring man who wore full-body armor, carried a crystal sword, and slaughtered vicious monsters like it was nothing.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“The most surprising part is that he’s still alive today.”

“What?! Is he really?”

She told me that, while the hero was a faraway figure from another country, he was the one who saved his homeland from the most vicious monster of all—a dark dragon.

“Liselotte, are dark dragons much different than the mythical beast dragons?” I asked.

“They’re completely different! Dark dragons are monsters that only look like dragons!”

“I-I see.”

Anyway, I’d learned that this so-called great hero was a very strong man who his homeland revered.

“Hey, it’s time to leave. No more jabberin’. Let’s get a move on.”

“Ah, right!”

I chased after Captain Ludtink before he had a chance to leave me behind.

After that, we had the ship remove the carriage we’d taken along with us, and then we headed out from the harbor city. Our horses’ coats were now sparkling—the crew must have groomed them for us.

Finally, we set out for the town of Zilva at the foot of the mountain. It loomed tall in the distance, and we would have to climb smaller mountains just to get to it. But this was where Amelia had agreed to fly the members to on her back.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh.”

Liselotte, Ulgus, Vice Captain Velrey, and I were the smaller people she told us

she could carry in pairs.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh.”

Vice Captain Velrey and I would get the first flight, followed by Ulgus and Liselotte, Garr, Zara, and finally, Captain Ludtink.

“Thank you for doing this, Amelia,” I said.

“Kreh!”

It was time to transport the Second Expeditionary Squadron. Amelia soared over the high peaks of the mountainous area.

“Eeeeeek!”

This was too high, even for someone like me who didn’t have a fear of heights. I ended up wrapping my arms around Vice Captain Velrey and squeezing her tight.

We finally arrived at the town of Zilva after three hours of flying my squadmates in. Amelia had given us an easy way of traversing the steep mountain roads.

“Thanks, Amelia. I bet that was difficult, wasn’t it?”

“Kreh kreh!”

She spread her wings and bragged that it was easy for her. What a reliable griffin she was.

Zilva was a bustling town full of workers who would mine, process, sell, or do any last job when it came to silver.

“Most of the people walking around are traders.”

“I-I see.”

We’d quickly purchased and changed into secondhand clothing at the previous harbor town. Our knight uniforms would stand out too much in a place like this.

Captain Ludtink wore a shirt with a round collar, a vest, trousers, and boots. It was…as if he’d tried his hardest to choose clothing that would make him look like a civilian. But I couldn’t see him as anything other than a hoodlum.

Vice Captain Velrey wore a top with a stand-up collar, black trousers, and a belt around her waist. It was a very simple look that I loved—like a pretty woman dressing as a boy.

Garr wore a cloak with a hood that fell all the way down to his feet. In one hand, he held an alcohol bottle for Sly to sit in. He kept the hood pulled around his head tight like a common traveler. It was the perfect disguise to blend in here.

Ulgus was wearing a hemp fiber shirt and a pair of loose slacks, with a backpack to hold his bow and arrows. He looked like any other young man you might see in these parts.

Zara had gone for a wide-brim straw hat, an overcoat with holes in it, and a large pack on his back. He even had a fake beard to complete his look as a traveling trader, leading his pet, Amelia, around by a rope. I rode on Amelia's back in an equally tattered overcoat, though I also wore a cap pulled down to hide my elf ears. I was playing the role of Zara's daughter.

The only person to dress a little more high-class was Liselotte. She wore one of her personal dresses and carried a folding fan to perfect her look as a rich young lady. But Captain Ludtink was not only our hoodlum—we'd come up with the story that he would be Liselotte's attendant.

Dressed in our disguises, we decided to split up to gather information.

Zara, Amelia, and I headed to a general store that also purchased items from customers. Amelia waited outside while we entered the store. The interior was a well-organized, tidy place. They didn't sell any strange drugs or products either, so I knew this store wasn't the shady kind. A middle-aged man with a mustache emerged from the back of the shop.

"Welcome. Oh dear! You two are in rough shape."

"We just traveled here from a distant land…"

"Did you, now?"

Zara told him the name of the snowy land he was born and raised in. This made the shopkeeper's eyes go wide.

“And what are you here for today?”

“I was hoping you’d purchase needlework from my hometown.”

When he gave the name “Fortunara” as the source of his embroidery, the shopkeeper leaned over the counter excitedly.

“Oh! I’ve heard that region produces beautiful embroidery!”

Zara reached into his backpack and retrieved a lap blanket he’d said he made for the female members of the squadron. It went without saying that it was entirely handmade by him.

“Wow! This is brilliant. I’ll take it for one gold coin!”

A-Amazing. The blanket Zara made in his spare time is worth a whole gold coin!

He murmured to me quietly while the shopkeeper went into the back to retrieve a coin. “Should I quit the Royal Order and become a needleworker?”

“It certainly pays well.”

I wasn’t sure about Zara’s salary, but I was only paid two gold coins a month. He’d made this blanket in five days. If he worked hard, this line of work could surpass his knight’s salary.

“I’m kidding, obviously. I like embroidery as a way to relax, but it would be really hard to turn that into a job.”

“I know what you mean.”

I absolutely loved to cook…but the idea of doing it for a living didn’t sit well with me.

“I think I enjoy cooking for people I like.”

“Me too. I embroider for anyone I like.”

That was why neither of us wanted to turn our hobbies into jobs.

“Thanks for waiting. Here’s your payment.”

“Thank you for your business.”

“Here, the girl can have this.”

He placed a bottle of candy in my hands.

“Wow! Thanks, mister!”

I tried to make my voice high-pitched like a child. Something about the sound made me shiver, but I just had to ignore that.

“Are you heading out to buy silver now?” he asked us.

“Yes.”

“Then you ought to be careful. There’s been some corrupt workers around here lately.”

“Corrupt workers? What do you mean?”

We pretended we had no idea about this situation.

“I’ve heard there’s a factory that’s silver-plating items around here.”

“A factory? Where is that?”

“I don’t know exactly. But there’s a rumor that one nobleman’s recently built vacation home is a hub of suspicious activity.” The shopkeeper laid out a map to show us its location. “This is the area.”

It would be about an hour’s walk from town. They’d cleared a space in the mountain to build a large mansion.

“These guys stole the rights to open shops at the royal capital’s flea market. Now some shops can’t set up there like they were supposed to. It’s a real pickle.”

We’d suddenly been granted helpful information. Zara and I thanked the shopkeeper and tried to leave—but then he stopped us.

“You’re no trader, are you? I can tell.”

When he heard that, Zara responded with extreme composure. “Why do you say that?”

“You’d make a lot more money selling this embroidery in the royal capital than a place like this. If you just came here to buy silver, you’re also too focused on the origins of those counterfeits, not the people selling them.”

“Oh no, Melly! We’ve been found out.”

“It seems so.”

Zara removed his hat and beard. I took off my cap.

“Look at that. You’re just a young man. And you’ve got an elf with you?”

The shopkeeper hadn’t even realized that Zara wasn’t that old. Well, he was definitely good at imitating a “grandpa” voice.

“So? Who are you?” he asked.

“We’re with the Royal Order of Enoch,” Zara said.

“Ah…I see. That’s good news…” He explained that a lot of evil-looking people had been passing through town lately. “See? There’s one of them now.”

The shopkeeper pointed out the window…straight at Captain Ludtink. Zara clasped his hand to his mouth but failed to stifle his laughter.

“S-Sorry, but he’s actually with us.”

“Ah, you don’t say? My apologies.”

“It’s all right. We know he looks evil.”

The shopkeeper knew suspicious people had been coming into town for half a year now, but no one could investigate them for information or bring their wrongdoings to light. They were scared of revenge.

“I hear they used to be mercenaries before this. The townsfolk are really spooked by them…”

“Is that right?”

“I thought about reporting this to the Royal Order, but I didn’t have any evidence, so I didn’t think you’d come…”

“Knights can still investigate without evidence,” Zara said. “If we don’t find any, well, then there’s no crime and we just get to go home.”

Expeditionary squadrons like us existed to handle problems in these distant regions.

“We appreciate any bits of information you can give us about these incidents.

It’d be a huge help,” Zara said.

“Yeah, that’s true. Thanks.”

“No, we should be thanking you for your information.”

We left the general store after that. It was time to reunite with the hoodlum standing outside. I couldn’t call him “Captain Ludtink” when we were in disguise, so I tried another approach to get his attention.

“Um, old man! We got some information.”

“Who’re you callin’ an old man?!”

“Uh, then…how about ‘mister’?”

“Why do you sound like you’re not sure? C’mon, follow me!”

“Whoa!”

The captain grabbed my arm and dragged us to a tavern. It was still early in the day, but the tavern was filled with a rowdy crowd. Liselotte’s face had gone totally stiff.

Zara and Amelia had left to gather the other members. While we waited, I told them about the information we had gained from the shopkeeper.

“He said a nobleman’s house was recently built nearby, and that it’s suspicious.”

“I see.”

As we spoke, a server approached us with beer.

“Thanks for waiting!”

Captain Ludtink picked up his mug with a smile. But I grabbed his arm before he could drink it.

“Wait, Cap— No, old man, you can’t drink when we still have things to do!”

“The hell do you mean? Am I supposed to *not* drink, and stick out like a sore thumb? And stop callin’ me old man!”

“Ol— Mister, no one is even paying attention to us.”

I managed to convince him to stick to the fried potatoes that had also been

dropped off at our table. The tavern was full of drunks focused on their beer, so no one was looking at us at all.

“Damn… Why’d it have to turn out like this…?” he lamented.

“Well, we’re on a mission.”

I’d started to get hungry too, so I decided to try a fried potato. They were cut into cylindrical shapes and gave off that appetizing deep-fried aroma. They were crispy on the outside but soft and fluffy on the inside. They’d also been given a light dusting of salt that made them truly irresistible.

Liselotte watched me closely as I chewed.

“Are you hungry, Mell?”

“Ah, yes, I am.”

She’d grown worried when she saw how eager I was to scarf down potatoes. I also ate some of the candy I got from the shopkeeper.

We left the tavern ten minutes later when the others arrived. Our next stop was a local restaurant. Amelia couldn’t enter, so I had her wait at an inconspicuous spot behind the building.

“Sorry, Amelia.”

“Kreh kreh!”

She told me not to worry about it.

The restaurant turned out to be a self-serve buffet. Looking at all the food, I could hardly decide what to eat and how to portion everything. I peeked into each of the three pots of soup, trying to choose which one I wanted.

“There’s bacon soup, mushroom soup, and vegetable soup.”

A woman working at the restaurant saw that I was hesitating and described the soups to me. I finally decided on mushroom soup and tender, simmered chicken for my main dish. I also piled boiled sausages, soft-boiled eggs, and bread rolls onto my tray before heading to the register.

“That’ll be three bronze coins.”

“Here you go.”

“Thanks a bunch!”

I’d expected a much higher price since this was a tourist area. I returned to my seat in a pleasant mood.

“Oh, is that all you’re having, Liselotte?” I asked. Liselotte’s tray held vegetable soup, breadsticks, and a mixed veggie salad. “Won’t you be hungry later?”

“I already had fried potatoes in the tavern. Remember?”

But I’d only seen her eat two or three of them. Well, everyone has different appetites. We also had field rations on hand if she got hungry, so there was no need to worry.

Captain Ludtink’s tray held a small mountain of food. He must have been starving. “I was pickin’ stuff out and the old lady started heapin’ it on my tray,” he explained.

“Oh, so that’s what happened?”

I wondered if the captain wasn’t used to this sort of buffet since he was raised as a nobleman. Garr arrived at the table with a similar mountain of food on his tray, courtesy of the same old lady.

Zara looked at Captain Ludtink’s tray and questioned him. “Can you even eat that much, Crow?”

“What choice do I have?”

“Good luck with all that. You better clean your plate.”

“I know that, damn it…”

Zara had chosen the same vegetable soup and mixed veggie salad as Liselotte, but he also had fried mountain fish as his main dish and a side of french bread. I wasn’t surprised to see he’d arranged them nicely on his tray, like it was something from a fancy restaurant.

Ulgus decided to pack his plate with bite-size helpings of everything. Meanwhile, Vice Captain Velrey had picked out bacon soup, a cheese omelet, spicy grilled meat, and the mixed veggie salad.

Everyone had ordered that same salad.

“Should I get some too?” I wondered.

“*…Where’s little ol’ Album’s lunch?*”

I jumped at the nearly inaudible mumble coming from somewhere nearby.

“Ah!”

It completely slipped my mind that Album was still stuffed in my bag. I pulled him out in a hurry.

“I’m so sorry, Album. I completely forgot you were here.”

“*That’s fine. I was out cold until now.*”

It was Garr who handed Album a plate. He’d shared some of his own helping with the fairy.

“*Wait, I can really eat all this?*”

Garr nodded.

“*Thanks a bunch!*”

Album eagerly jumped down to the table and began to gobble up the food.

“Thank you, Garr.”

He patted me on the back when I expressed my gratitude.

The restaurant was nearly full at this time of day. Customers rotated in and out quickly, filling the building with their chatter and packing their trays with food from the buffet.

“Bacon pie, fresh outta the oven!”

The staff kept setting out more and more delicious-looking dishes. It was a lively restaurant with a friendly old woman serving the customers. All the food I tried was perfectly delicious too.

Captain Ludtink wrote down the information Zara and I gathered while he ate. Then he passed the note around and told everyone to read it. The other members kept their expressions unchanged as they passed the note around and ate their lunches.

“When we’re done here, get suited up and ready to head out.” He gave us that order unbelievably nonchalantly, as if he was remarking on the weather.

We would change into our knight’s uniforms and equipment once we entered the mountain. Going outside of town increased our chances of running into monsters, so we needed to be careful.

Amelia’s white coat would make her too easy to spot in the mountains. I decided to have her wait for us at the lodge.

“Kreeeh!”

“We’ll be back soon.”

“Kreh kreh.”

Amelia warned me not to eat anything I found on the ground. *…What, am I three years old?*

“Kreh kreh!”

After saying goodbye to Amelia, it was time to depart.

The mountain was chilly, with dense fog that made it hard to see. I wrapped Album around my neck like a scarf to stay warm.

We were walking along a road that led to a mineshaft. Supposedly, the locals used to walk here themselves, but these days, they traveled in four-wheel carts powered by magic stones.

“Looks like the tunnel up ahead is closed,” the captain said.

“Does that mean they mined all the silver?” I asked.

“Probably. Some parts of the mountain will collapse if they dig into ’em any farther too. We’re probably safe here on the mountain path, but keep an eye out for danger.”

“Right.”

We continued to climb the mountain, looking for the nobleman’s vacation home we’d been told about. Along the way was a good spot for us to change into our uniforms and equipment.

“This’ll do.”

Us ladies hung up a cloth to create a makeshift changing room. The men simply changed outside.

“Hey, Crow! Your cape’s all wrinkled. How did you fold this thing?”

“Quit complainin’, Zara. You sound like my wet nurse.”

“Don’t talk back to me. It’s important for knights to keep up appearances, no?”

“We’re on a mission. Looks should be the least of our worries right now.”

“Ugh!”

I managed to pick up their whispered conversation with my sharp ears. I felt bad for poor Zara. His pleas to the captain were definitely going to go ignored.

It took us five minutes to finish changing, although Vice Captain Velrey finished in three. Liselotte helped me get my equipment on once she’d gotten dressed. All in all, it took less than ten minutes.

“All right. Let’s get movin’.” The captain had a map of the mountain with the house’s location circled. Getting to that spot meant hiking a treacherous path. “Damn it. Why’d they have to build their vacation home in a place like this?” He cursed under his breath as we climbed.

Nobles’ vacation homes were usually constructed in spacious areas that carriages could reach. Hiding the house away in the middle of a mountain was a clear sign that they were up to no good.

The wind whipped between the trees, scattering the red leaves and bringing them to the ground. But we couldn’t appreciate the beautiful scenery when we were struggling to climb the mountain.

I wondered if Liselotte was doing all right. I turned around and saw her face was red and sweaty. Captain Ludtink noticed too.

“All right. Let’s rest here for a bit,” he said.

It was getting colder and colder. Having sweat on her body would just chill her—she might even catch a cold. I sat right down next to Liselotte and wiped her sweat away.

“Thanks, Mell.”

“Of course. You’ve been working hard today.”

“And I’ll keep doing it. The house is still far away and I refuse to be a burden!”

There it was. Liselotte *hated* to lose. She was probably the only young noblewoman in history who was so determined to keep up with a knight’s mission.

“These people are tricking people into buying fake silver. It’s totally unforgivable.”

“I agree.”

Liselotte had joined us to be around mythical beasts, but the true heart of a knight was blooming inside her. Sometimes I wondered if that would be a problem for a marquess’s daughter, but at the end of the day, her experiences in the Royal Order were probably expanding her horizons.

I decided to make a special nutritional drink for the hardworking Liselotte. The main ingredients were thin slices of lemon I’d preserved in vinegar and sugar. Lemon and vinegar helped the body recover from fatigue. I diluted the drink with water so that it wouldn’t be too acidic.

“Here, Liselotte. It’s a nutritional drink.”

“Thanks.”

She gulped the whole thing down at once. I wondered if she’d been thirsty.

“How is it?”

“Sour, but refreshing. I enjoyed it.”

“That’s good.”

I made some for the rest of the members too, passing the drinks out along with some cookies with dried fruit.

“Medic Risurisu, these cookies are amazing!”

“Thank you for saying so.”

Dried fruit was called “nature’s supplement” because of how nutritious it was.

It contained lots of iron, making it a good treatment for symptoms of anemia.

Ulgus was munching on his cookies, blissfully unaware that they were healthy food. I gave Album a cookie too—a reward for being my scarf all this time.

"*Pancake girl! These are yummy!*" He held the cookie up with his paws, singing its praises.

"That's good. You can have another if you'd like."

"*Thanks!*"

I brushed away the crumbs on his fur and had him coil around my neck again.

When I went back to sit with Liselotte, I saw that Sly was on her shoulder.

"Oh, Liselotte, I didn't know you and Sly were friends."

"Yes, Garr Garr said I can have Sly help me if I need it."

"I see!"

I was surprised to learn Sly was going to help Liselotte get up the mountain. Captain Ludtink sounded impressed too.

"A slime rope for mountain climbin', huh? Wish we had one for Risurisu. Can you split into parts, Sly?"

It was an unreasonable demand. But Sly clenched her fists and started to breathe heavily. *Wait, can Sly actually split apart?*

The slime puffed up larger and larger, but then she shriveled down to a flat blob on Liselotte's shoulder. It turned out to be impossible after all.

"Guess not. Risurisu, have Ulgus tie you to his rope and pull you along."

"But that will be a burden on Ulgus."

"And you'll be more of a burden if you're slowin' us all down."

"Ah, yes, that's true."

I would have to rely on Ulgus's help from here out.

"Ulgus. Tie up with Risurisu and take her with you."

The way he said it made him sound like a slave trader ordering a henchman to

transport his captured elf. In reality, all we did was attach our belts with a single rope.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Curiously, I watched Liselotte and Sly to see how this was going to work. Sly wrapped around a tree trunk up ahead and pulled Liselotte toward her. It was a method of advancing that only Sly could help with.

“Do you think you can make it, Liselotte?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s far easier this way.”

“That’s great.”

I began to climb the mountain path with Ulgus pulling me as well.

“Is this too much for you, Ulgus?”

“Nope, I’m fine!”

“I see. Thank you for doing this. Please let me know if you start to get tired.”

“Sure thing.”

The path was only getting steeper. We climbed over the weathered rocks as the temperature on the mountain decreased more and more, making it feel like the middle of winter.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally saw a building come into view. It was a two-story wooden manor standing in an open area of the mountain, said to have been cleared out just for its construction.

“Velrey, Garr, go take a look inside,” Captain Ludtink ordered.

“Roger.”

Garr nodded and followed the vice captain.

I prepared a snack for everyone while we waited. We certainly couldn’t start a fire without alerting others to our presence, so I chose food that didn’t need to be cooked or warmed.

I first brought out the butterfly tuna Charlotte and I preserved in oil. I drained the oil and cut the tuna apart. Next, I sliced my salted mushrooms up and mixed

them with the tuna. I poured a sauce made of egg yolks, vinegar, salt, oil, and pepper over the tuna and mushrooms. All we would have to do is scoop this onto bread, and voila, we had “open-faced butterfly tuna sandwiches.”

“Please eat it quickly before we have to get moving.”

The bread was cut into small enough pieces for Captain Ludtink to eat one sandwich in a single bite. Zara used a knife to cut his sandwich up elegantly. He smiled at me when our eyes met. I felt like he was telling me he enjoyed it, and that made me happy. I tried a bite next—the butterfly tuna and sauce were a pleasing combination on their own, but they also brought out the flavors of the mushrooms. The bread really brought it all together. We were finished eating within ten minutes, so I then wrapped Vice Captain Velrey and Garr’s portions in a large leaf.

“Weird that there’s no sign of anyone.”

Captain Ludtink was murmuring to himself.

Indeed, the mansion seemed to be empty. Vice Captain Velrey and Garr returned with that report.

Our next step was to sneak into the house and obtain evidence. I would join Captain Ludtink and Liselotte, the two nobles, on this run.

“The rest of you can wait here. Alert us if anyone gets close to the house.”

“Roger that.”

I’d never snuck into a mansion before. It was a very knight-like mission.

“There might still be people inside, so keep your guard up.”

“Right.”

I clutched Gula, my magic pole, and followed the captain. Liselotte was using Invidia, her magic staff, instead of the one she always brought with her.

“Okay, let’s get a move on.”

We pushed the bushes aside and headed into the house.

I’d expected a nobleman’s vacation home to be full of fancy furnishings, but the floor panels we stepped onto were visibly shoddy. They creaked loudly with

each step, making my heart skip a beat.

“Do you hear anyone, Risurisu?” the captain asked.

“No, not at all.”

It was actually creepy how empty the house seemed. I could also tell that the curtains and rugs were made of hastily thrown-together items when I took a closer look. Each window had a curtain with a different pattern and the rugs had stains on them in some places. I didn’t get the sense that anyone lived here at all. Liselotte reached the same conclusion.

“They probably have it decorated randomly so that it’ll pass a snap inspection.”

“But it’s an obvious cover. It only makes the house look more suspicious.”

After inspecting the first floor, we failed to find the room where they were making fake silver products. We went upstairs next, but most of the rooms were bedrooms. There wasn’t any evidence in the storage room either.

Album found some half-eaten bread that had been left behind in one room. He picked it up and tapped it on the table.

“*This bread has been here for two days.*”

He was such a clever fairy. All it took was a simple tap and he could put a date to the bread.

“So that means someone was here up until two days ago.” Then I had to stop Album when he reached for more bread in the basket. “Don’t eat that, Album. I’ll make you food when we’re done investigating, so please be patient.”

“*Okaaay.*”

We managed to recover a few personal items with names on them.

It seemed that the fake silver wasn’t actually being produced here the whole time. They probably came and went through the mountain, making it in different places. Although, we didn’t have any proof of that yet.

Liselotte furrowed her brow. “I’d bet there’s a hidden room.”

“Yep. I’d take that bet.” Captain Ludtink agreed. The only problem was how to

go about finding a hidden room. “If you’re up to no good, you’re probably gonna do it in the basement.”

“I think so too.”

The basement…! If that was the case, we would need to search the first floor for a staircase. We headed downstairs to look for anything that stuck out. Captain Ludtink was tapping the handle of his sword on the walls.

“What does that tell you, Captain?”

“It makes a different sound if there’s nothin’ behind the wall.”

“I see.”

After an hour of walking around tapping on the walls, something finally sounded different at a particular part of the kitchen.

“Found it.”

It was a wall with a large, fancy wood stove fit into it. When he opened the giant stove door, we could see a staircase leading down to the basement.

“And there we go.” Captain Ludtink grinned. He looked like a bandit who’d just come up with a new scheme. “You’re thinkin’ something stupid again, aren’t ya, Risurisu?”

“N-No, of course not!”

I had to be careful. Bandits were sharp.

The captain had one last order before we went down.

“Hey, leave Album in the kitchen. He’s our lookout.”

“*Awww!*” Album teared up. He didn’t want to stay behind alone.

“Make him do it, Risurisu.”

“Okay…” I felt bad for him, but we didn’t know who we were up against yet. We needed to be careful. “Can’t you watch the kitchen for us, Album? I’ll give you more of the cookies from earlier.”

“*You got it!*”

It was so instantaneous. I nearly fell to the ground on the spot. Album was

truly a simple creature. But now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

"Let's go."

"Got it!"

Liselotte cast a magic ball of light to illuminate the dim staircase. The air grew more stagnant and it was a bit harder to breathe.

"Hear anyone, Risurisu?" the captain asked.

"No, not at all."

"Hmm."

No one was in the basement. Cautiously, we proceeded forward.

Suddenly, a rat darted past our feet with a squeak. Liselotte turned white as a ghost, but she gritted her teeth and stopped herself from screaming. As always, she refused to let anything get the best of her.

Liselotte! I'm so proud! I'll give you one of Amelia's feathers when we're done with this mission.

A room as large as a ballroom was waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. What we then came face-to-face with was a silver workshop.

Or more accurately, a counterfeiting operation.

"Jackpot."

"It sure is."

Captain Ludtink started to seize the fake silverware that was still in the process of being finished. My heart was racing—what if the boss of this place came back while we were there?

Liselotte was glaring angrily at the workbenches full of counterfeit goods.

"All right. That should do it."

With a bag full of evidence, we retraced our steps up the stairs. I waited behind Captain Ludtink as he poked his head into the kitchen.

"What's the matter, Captain?"

"Album's gone."

“What?!”

Maybe he got hungry and went upstairs for more bread.

“Um, should I look for him upstairs?”

“No. Somethin’s off.” He held his hand up, commanding me not to move. Once he said that, I realized he was right. Something about this felt strange.

“…Ah!”

“What?”

“Someone’s coming!”

A person was sprinting toward the kitchen. Captain Ludtink unsheathed Superbia, his magic sword, and stood at the ready.

“Captain Ludtink!”

The person who burst into the kitchen was Vice Captain Velrey.

“What is it?”

“Someone just came down from the mountain and made it into the house.”

“They what?!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize in time.”

A chill ran down my spine. I’d assumed any intruders would climb up the mountain like us. I never even entertained the idea of them hiking down from above.

“And this person kidnapped Album?”

“It’s possible.”

“Where did they—”

“Right here!”

Suddenly, the normal wall behind Liselotte opened up to reveal a hidden door. A tall, muscular, middle-aged man appeared.

“Liselotte!”

“Eeeek!”

To everyone’s shock, there was a second hidden room in the kitchen.

The man grabbed Liselotte by her arms and held a knife to her neck. The general store shopkeeper’s words replayed in my mind—these criminals were former mercenaries.

“If this girl’s life means anything to you, get out now and don’t come back!”

All of the blood had drained from Liselotte’s face. We had to rescue her as quickly as we could. But without any real plan, we couldn’t just spring to action when Liselotte had a knife to her throat.

Captain Ludtink glared at the man with a look that would put even the wickedest bandits to shame. I felt like it had some effect on the man. His ferocity seemed to weaken ever so slightly.

He has to have some sort of weakness.

That was when I glanced at the man’s belt and noticed a tied-up Album was dangling from it. He was limp, completely out cold. I sneakily took a piece of bread out of my bag, prompting Album to twitch and open his eyes.

He was startled when he realized he’d actually been captured. But when he saw me put my finger to my lips, he closed his mouth and stayed quiet.

Album was our only hope with Liselotte being held as a hostage. I mouthed instructions for him to bite the culprit. He seemed to understand, responding with a nod of his head. After that, I told Captain Ludtink that the man had Album with him.

“What’re you two whispering about?! Get outta here already!” As soon as he shouted, Album sank his teeth into the man’s arm. “Argh!”

Captain Ludtink sprang into action, but someone beat him to the punch. It was Liselotte.

She whirled around, raised Invidia, and brought it down hard against the man’s skull. “You fiend!” As soon as she screamed those words, Invidia suddenly lit up. A magic circle appeared and bound the man with flaming chains.

“Ah! That’s hot! It burns!”

So that’s the power of Invidia. The man was crying that it burned, but the fire chains weren’t actually affecting the parts of his body they touched. He wasn’t being physically hurt—the magic was making him experience the flames of hell.

“You wretched coward, doing these dastardly things for money!” Liselotte shouted. “All of these people here have put in so much hard work to obtain the statuses that they have! Do you have the slightest idea what *I’ve* been through just to become a knight?!”

“Invidia” was a word that meant “envy.”

Perhaps she was jealous of this man, finding a shortcut to earn money and obtain a place in society with it. But even if that was true, Liselotte’s sense of righteousness was probably what stopped her from taking shortcuts.

After some time, Invidia’s flaming chains faded away, revealing that the man was unharmed. The spell had been hot enough to make him faint, but he didn’t have any physical damage to his body.

“That was an illusion spell. How mysterious.”

“It really was…”

The Magic Research Bureau and Monster Research Bureau had developed this series of weapons, titled “The Seven Deadly Sins,” specially for the Second Expeditionary Squadron. When the owner of the weapon expressed the emotion the weapon was named after, it would activate their unique power.

Garr’s magic spear, Ira, sprouted vines from the ground that bound enemies.

Zara’s magic ax, Luxuria, could make the ground shake under the enemies’ feet.

Captain Ludtink’s magic sword, Superbia, conjured a black blade.

Vice Captain Velrey’s twin blades, Avaritia, gave off light bright enough to blind someone.

Liselotte’s magic staff, Invidia, produced flaming chains.

Then there was Gula, my magic pole. It had the very strange function of

creating food when I was hungry.

Finally, Ulgus had Acedia, his magic bow. I wondered what secret power it could possibly hold. Acedia translated to “sloth.”

As I pondered this mystery, a teary-eyed Album jumped into my arms.

“*Pancake giiirl! That was so scary!*”

“Album! You did such a good job!”

“*Uh-huh!*”

I gave the bread in my hand to Album, who wasted no time in chowing down. His tears were gone in no time.

Captain Ludtink personally tied up the culprit after that. When the rest of the workers arrived, we took them into our custody and led them back to town.

THESE criminals turned out to be in charge of all parts of the counterfeiting operation, from production to distribution to their sale. They’d mined silver from the closed-off tunnel and processed it with their own equipment.

They were feeling good after they raked in so much money in practically no time at all. We also managed to get information about their customers so that we could recover the counterfeit silver they’d sold.

I hoped the market would be free of those fakes as soon as possible.

With the wrongdoers in custody, we had them escorted away. Our mission was complete. I was so relieved that we’d solved the case without incident!

Just as we were about to leave the town, the old man from the general store ran up to us.

“You there! Knights!”

“What is it?”

“I-I just wanted to express my gratitude. Thank you for tracking down the counterfeit silverware.” He bowed his head deeply and presented me with a wooden box. “Take this.”

“U-Um, we…were only doing our job… Besides, we’re not allowed to accept gifts like these.”

“It’s not a gift. It’s a gesture from all of us.”

I looked at Captain Ludtink, unsure of what to do. To my surprise, he ordered me to accept the box.

“Are you certain?”

“It’s a gesture, not a gift. It’d be rude not to take it.”

Are you sure that logic checks out? I was hesitant, but I couldn’t say no to the captain’s orders.

“All right. Thank you very much for this kind gesture.”

The shopkeeper bowed again. The townsfolk waved goodbye to us as we departed for the royal capital.

With Garr driving our carriage, I opened the box back in the carriage.

“Whoa!” Inside was a set of dazzlingly shiny silver spoons. “I-I really don’t think we should have taken this!”

I looked to Captain Ludtink for a response.

“Well, no one’ll know if you don’t snitch. There’s one for each of us and everything. We can take ’em home as a memory of the mission.” Captain Ludtink handed out a silver spoon to each of us. Zara’s smile was faltering as he accepted his. “Here, this one’s yours, Risurisu.”

“……”

“Just take the damn thing!”

He shoved it into my hand. He even gave me an extra one to hand over to Charlotte.

The silver glittered even more when sunlight from the window struck it.

“So pretty…”

Despite everything that happened on the mission, I came out of it with a genuine silver spoon of my own. I decided to think that it all worked out for the

best in the end.

Chapter 2: The Strange Man in Armor and Sausage on a Stick

HAVING discovered the silver counterfeiting operation and captured the culprits, the Second Expeditionary Squadron was granted another monetary award for our service.

“All right! We’re goin’ out drinkin’ with this money!” The captain said we’d be having a drinking party since we didn’t have work the next day. “This coin is gonna let us drink ’til we drown!”

Captain Ludtink was celebrating our monetary award, though to my eyes, he looked like a bandit who’d just finished robbing someone.

“But I can’t drink, Captain Ludtink.”

“Then have some nice meat or somethin’, Ulgus.”

“Woo-hoo!”

I’d recently learned that taverns also served delicious food, so I was excited to see what they’d have on the menu.

Charlotte called out to us in the midst of our celebration. “Have fun, everyone!”

“What’re you talkin’ about, Charlotte?” Captain Ludtink said. “You’re part of the Second Expeditionary Squadron too.”

“I-I come too? Really?”

“I’m the captain, aren’t I? Of course you can come.”

“Thank you. I so happy!”

“Good. Now get ready, and make it quick.”

“Okay! I get ready!”

Just as the conversation was about to end, Album climbed up on Captain

Ludtink's desk and raised his hand.

"*H-Hey, guys… Can little ol' Album join this party too?*"

"Sure. You've been doin' some work for us too."

"*Thanks a million!*" Album jumped for joy as he thanked the captain.

I decided to change into my civilian clothes after work. Charlotte kept her clothes in the changing room, so she would meet us later at the designated spot.

Liselotte seemed impressed when she saw me in my civilian clothes. "You're well-prepared, aren't you, Mell?"

"I am. I wanted to have a change of clothes here since my house is so far away!"

Liselotte and Vice Captain Velrey were going to go home first to change.

Since I had some extra time, I decided to give Amelia a good brushing. Her white fur was sparkling in the light by the time I was done.

"Kreh kreh!"

"You're welcome."

I tied a velvet ribbon around her neck for the finishing touch. Her bonnet already had a fake rose sticking out of it.

"You look so cute, Amelia."

"Kreeeh!"

She hid her face with her wings as if my praise made her feel shy. I didn't imagine there was a cuter griffin in the entire world.

I was wearing one of the matching dresses I'd purchased with Charlotte recently on a shopping trip. Mine was navy blue with tiny flowers embroidered into it. I put a cape over it and headed for our meetup spot—a tall tree in front of the Royal Order's headquarters. Album was waiting for me in the hallway, so I scooped him up and placed him in my pocket.

I walked to our meetup spot at a leisurely pace. I still had plenty of time left.

When I arrived, I was greeted by a familiar face.

“Ah, you’re here early, Ulgus.”

“I actually just got here.”

Ulgus was wearing a black overcoat with a standing collar and dark green trousers. It was a warm-looking outfit. Although…suddenly it felt like the two of us were about to head out on a date. I swore the knights passing us were staring too. Things turned awkward as Ulgus seemed to notice the situation we’d found ourselves in.

“Medic Risurisu…sorry about all this.”

“No, I’m sorry too.”

The two of us stared off into the distance until Charlotte finally arrived.

She was wearing the same dress as me, but hers was a light pink color. She’d also chosen a cape with a hood to hide her large ears. Even though her tail was still perfectly visible, it sort of looked like a fancy decoration on her.

Her skirt fluttered like rose petals in the wind as she skipped up to us.

“Mell! June!”

I thought Charlotte’s arrival would take the eyes off of us, but in fact, it had the opposite effect.

“Urk!” Ulgus groaned. “This is bad. Everyone’s stares are only getting way worse.”

“What is wrong, June?” Charlotte asked.

“They think I’m taking two girls on a date. Everyone’s jealous, so they’re staring at me like they want me to burn in hell.”

“Ahaha!” Charlotte laughed. “That is not very fun, is it, June?”

“Not one bit!”

I backed away, thinking putting some distance between us would solve the problem, but that only made Ulgus look like some sort of loner. I felt bad for him and made sure to stay close.

The next person to arrive was Liselotte. She wore a wide-brimmed hat and a white fur coat, making her look incredibly rich.

“You all got here fast,” she said.

“Ah, Sorcerer Lichtenberger…” Ulgus sighed.

“And why do you look so disappointed?”

“It’s very hard to explain…”

The glares toward Ulgus got a lot worse once Liselotte showed up.

“Uuuurgh! I’m really happy to have all the girls around me, but everyone’s staring! It makes me want to die…!”

“Poor June!” Charlotte rubbed his head, getting a chuckle out of him. It sure didn’t *look* like he wanted to die.

“Sorry to make you guys wait.”

The gallant Vice Captain Velrey was next to appear. She wore a round hat and a shirt with a stand-up collar, just like usual, but had chosen an ankle-length skirt to go with them today.

“Wow! Vice Captain Velrey, you look lovely!” I exclaimed.

“I do? I thought it might be nice to wear a skirt once in a while.”

“It looks great on you.”

“Thanks, Medic Risurisu.”

Seeing someone in a skirt instead of their usual slacks had a certain destructive power to it. I could hardly stop staring at how nice it looked on her.

Meanwhile, the knights’ glares trained on Ulgus had now become relentless enough to practically spark a fire.

“Am I being tortured?” he groaned.

“It will be over soon enough.”

Ulgus’s brow broke out in a sweat and he started to tremble. I felt really bad for the poor boy…

Finally, a savior appeared in the form of a knight’s mortal foe: a bandit.

The other knights' eyes gathered on said bandit.

"What do you people want? Someone lookin' for a fight?"

Bandits were hard-headed. He clicked his tongue and glared back at the knights.

One of them was brave enough to approach the bandit.

"You there. Do I need to have you identify yourself?"

"The hell are you talkin' about?"

This was no real bandit who had arrived—it was Captain Ludtink. But the young knight didn't recognize him and was now instigating an interrogation.

"Give me your name."

"Why the hell should I?"

"If you're going to keep talking back, I'll have you investigated by the Royal Order."

"You're wastin' your time. They aren't gonna find any dirt on me."

"That just makes you all the more suspicious!"

The questions were really heating up now.

"Fine, then. I'll have the Royal Order dig into your entire history!"

"Seriously, what for?"

The knight grabbed Captain Ludtink's arm and tried to drag him away. But that was no easy feat when his captive was someone as muscular as the captain.

"Ngh… Grrrr… D-Do as…I say…"

"Stop yankin' so hard. You're gonna throw your back out."

"D-Damn you…"

"I'm sorry to interrupt all the fun, but this man isn't anyone suspicious." Unable to sit back and watch any longer, Vice Captain Velrey approached the knight and showed him her bracelet.

“If… If you’re not a bandit, who are you?” the knight asked.

I couldn’t hold my laughter in any longer and ended up snorting. Ulgus did the same. Naturally, Captain Ludtink made sure to shoot us a glare.

“I’m Crow Ludtink, captain of the Second Expeditionary Squadron.”

“Huh?”

“Here’s proof.”

That was when Captain Ludtink showed him his own bracelet. The other knight turned white as a sheet and backed away from him.

“I-I’m very sorry.”

I thought Captain Ludtink would yell at him, but his response was rather calm.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s your job to look out for suspicious people, so keep it up.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Now be on your way.”

“I-If you’ll excuse me, then!”

It was such a lenient reaction to a man who’d just called him a bandit. Captain Ludtink was truly a model ban— No, a model knight.

“Captain Ludtink, that was amazing! I really respect you!”

“What, you didn’t before or somethin’, Ulgus?”

“Oh… Ahaha. Of course I’ve always respected you.”

“Liar!”

“No, really!”

Regardless, the captain had shown up in a surprisingly casual outfit for a nobleman. He was wearing a light brown shirt made of hemp fiber with a belt around his waist, black trousers, and a pair of boots—like a worker from the lower side of town. He also explained that his muscles kept him warm in such a light outfit.

“The higher-ups at the Royal Order have asked any tough-looking knights to

dress in shady clothes and see if the others come up to question you," he explained.

"I-I see."

It took guts to approach a man with a scary face. But they couldn't use that as a reason to let them go unquestioned either. That's why scary-faced men were ordered to dress suspiciously so that the patrol unit could get practice stopping people for questioning.

"That was the fifth knight to stop me just on my way here."

Even Vice Captain Velrey laughed when she heard that.

Garr, Sly, and Zara eventually joined us. It was time to head to Captain Ludtink's choice of tavern.

"It's a place in the lowland, but they've got great food and booze," he said.

"Oh my, Crow," Zara chimed in. "How unlike you to spend your free time in the lowland."

"It's for work." Apparently, Captain Ludtink also had his own special assignments that he carried out. "I patrol the lowland once a month."

"Dressed like that?" Zara cocked an eyebrow.

"Yep. Sure do."

He used the name Crow Leeric and disguised himself as a merchant's bodyguard to patrol various shops and taverns.

"That…sounds tough," I said.

"Well, at least the order pays for the food and booze. The lowland's full of good guys too, so it's not the end of the world."

"That's good to hear."

We reached the royal capital's lowland by heading south on the main street and entering a tiny alleyway.

When I first left the Fore Elf woods on my trip to the royal capital, a nice old lady at a restaurant warned me to avoid the lowland because it wasn't safe. But supposedly, there'd been a drop in crime recently thanks to the work of the

knights.

Captain Ludtink led us to a tavern called Great Bear Pavilion. It was packed full of customers even though the sun was still out.

From behind the counter, a man who looked to be in his late thirties leaned forward and called out to the captain.

“Welcome, Mr. Leeric.”

“Howdy. Got any private rooms open?”

“Of course. Right this way!”

They seemed to have special rooms just for valued customers. Captain Ludtink moved through the tavern like it was his own house.

“Long time no see, Crow.”

“Yeah, I’ve been busy with work. How ’bout you?”

“Oh, you know how it goes.”

Wow… Captain Ludtink totally fits in at a tavern in the lowland. He doesn’t stick out even a little bit.

The private rooms in the back of Great Bear Pavilion weren’t too large. There was an old rug on the floor and a circular table sitting on top.

“Order whatever you like,” the captain said. “The award will cover it.”

The young employee from earlier brought us menus. “We’ve got some great liquor in today.”

“What kind?”

“Don’t be too shocked now. …It’s ‘Dark Dragon Slayer’.”

“What?!” Captain Ludtink’s eyes opened as wide as saucers. It seemed this was a very rare alcohol.

“Um, Cap— I mean, Mr. Leeric, what’s Dark Dragon Slayer?”

“You don’t know, Risurisu?”

“No…”

Everyone other than me appeared to know it already. He explained that it was an extremely rare, high-grade alcohol made in a foreign country called Seredintia.

“They only make a thousand bottles a year, and most of ’em stay in the country. There’s a history behind the name too.”

“A history?”

“Uh-huh. It comes from the tale of Ciel Aiskoletta, the great sorcerer knight and hero of Seredintia.”

Ciel Aiskoletta was the country’s great hero—a knight who’d mastered both magic and the art of the sword. Now that he told me that, I felt like I remembered hearing about the dark dragon slaying too. But I didn’t know any details at all, nor did Charlotte.

“I do not know it either,” Charlotte added.

“It’s real famous, but I guess the story never made it to the Fore Elf or beastfolk woods.”

“Yes, we never had traveling bards come to our village,” I said.

“They do not come to our forest either. Can you please tell story?” Charlotte requested.

“Fine. Not that I remember it well,” Captain Ludtink said.

“I wanna hear!”

“I’d also like to hear this legend.”

“Then I’ll give ya the rough outline…”

Captain Ludtink proceeded to tell us the tale of Ciel Aiskoletta.

Long ago, a dark dragon appeared in Seredintia. It scorched the country’s territory, taking many knights out at the same time. The entire world would be affected if it were allowed to continue. The kingdom conducted a summoning of brave warriors. But not even those with the divine protection of the spirits or the gods were a match for such a powerful dark dragon.

That was when one man rose to the occasion. His name was Ciel Aiskoletta

and he'd already retired from his country's royal order of knights. He was forty-four years old at the time and stopped working as a knight to inherit his family estate.

This hero attacked the dark dragon with his crystal sword, which also functioned like a magic staff. The battle lasted three days and three nights before he emerged victorious.

"This Dark Dragon Slayer is the booze they make to celebrate that victory," Captain Ludtink finished.

"Wow… There are such incredible figures throughout this world's history."

"This was only thirty years ago, Risurisu."

"What?! Really?"

"Yep. Ciel Aiskoletta is still alive to this day."

"So he's a living legend," I mused in awe.

"Uh-huh."

Miraculously, this lowland tavern just happened to have obtained a shipment of Dark Dragon Slayer.

"I was surprised by it too," the employee said. "We'd love you to drink it, Mr. Leeric."

"You really don't mind if I have some?"

"Of course not. We owe you for all your help, after all."

It sounded like Captain Ludtink had been of great help to these people behind the scenes. How normal could it be to receive the highest quality alcohol possible like this?

"Well, we're celebratin' today. May as well have some."

"Thank you so much!"

That was how my squadmates and I came to have a Dark Dragon Slayer drinking party.

"None for you, Zara," the captain said.

“Uh-huh. I’ll abstain today.”

Zara didn’t hold his liquor very well. I thought back to our welcome party for him and recalled how he hadn’t been drinking at all.

“You’re not gettin’ a drop after what you put me through a year ago.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

It sounded like Zara had caused some trouble for Captain Ludtink.

“This idiot kept asking Marina and me when we were gettin’ hitched.”

Marina was Captain Ludtink’s fiancée—a beautiful and strong-willed woman. She was currently staying at a distant noble family’s home and training in domestic arts.

“We were actually supposed to get married this summer,” he said.

“I…see…” I said. It was hard to imagine him as a married man. “Oh, so it didn’t actually happen…?”

“Last year, around the time of Zara’s welcome party, my older brother’s engagement fell through, so our wedding had to get postponed too.”

“Oh my gosh! I had no idea!” This definitely came as news to Zara.

“I never told Marina either. Don’t let that leave the room.”

“But you really ought to tell her,” I said. “She’s probably anxious about it.”

“But my brother’s failed engagement is a stain on the Ludtink family name.”

“At this rate, there might be two failed engagements if Marina thinks you’ve lost interest in her,” I insisted.

“I guess you’re right…”

The captain had sworn he wouldn’t tell anyone about his brother’s engagement falling through.

“Then why’d you go and tell us, Crow?” Zara asked.

“Because you guys… How do I put it? I trust ya.”

The room fell silent. No one could believe that, despite the scary things he said and the way he acted with us, he truly trusted us…

“Wh-What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I never thought you trusted me at all,” Ulgus replied.

“Why the hell not?!”

“Because you’re always shouting ‘Damn it, Ulgus!’ at me during expeditions.”

“That’s ’cuz you’re always lookin’ away and zoning out and stuff.”

Ulgus was indeed one of the best archers in the Royal Order, but Captain Ludtink was right—he had a tendency to get distracted.

“I zone out?”

Everyone nodded. I often had to pat Ulgus on the back and ask him if he was all right during missions.

“Whaaat? I had no idea. I’ll be more careful.”

But Ulgus’s concentration was always really impressive after he got that scolding from the captain. He never missed a single shot when it really mattered. Maybe Ulgus just needed someone to snap at him.

“Let’s pick our food and drinks already,” Captain Ludtink said.

I’d nearly forgotten. My stomach had been growling and everything before our talk. I opened the menu and was met with something very different from a normal restaurant.

“Fried edamame…honey chicken, steamed clams, fried potatoes… I see.” A lot of their food was typically paired with alcohol. But they still sounded delicious. “Ah, Zara, they have something called a ‘snow thaw hot pot.’ Is that from your homeland?”

“No, I’ve never heard of it before.”

“The name makes me so curious.”

“Me too. Let’s give it a try,” Zara said.

“This one is boiled chicken.”

“Boiled chicken? That is all it is?”

Liselotte was reading off the menu to Charlotte, who couldn’t read this

country's language. She looked like her doting older sister.

"Um…I don't exactly know."

Liselotte didn't know how to explain the things she was reading off. I decided to step in and clear up the confusion.

"Charlotte, boiled chicken is usually done in a big pot with other ingredients. You let it stew for a while, then eat it with a special sauce."

"Wow! I did not know!"

I'd eaten boiled chicken for the first time when I came to the royal capital too. Supposedly, it was a dish from a foreign land.

"Quit blabberin' and pick something out," the captain snapped at us.

"Okay!"

We called a waiter and ordered our food and drinks. There was also a menu for mythical beasts, so we picked out assorted fruit for Amelia and honey water for Sly.

Our drinks arrived first. Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, and Garr would be drinking the Dark Dragon Slayer. Zara and I stuck to grape juice. Liselotte had ordered black tea, while Charlotte and Album went with warm milk. After that, Sly's honey water and Amelia's fruit were brought out for them.

"All right. Everyone's got their drink?" Captain Ludtink asked to be sure. "Then let's toast. Take it away, Ulgus."

"What? You want me to do it?"

"Just say somethin'!"

"Um, to Bandit! …No, I mean, to Captain Ludtink's trust in us!"

Before we could raise our glasses, Captain Ludtink barked back at Ulgus.

"Why the hell'd you call me a bandit?!"

"S-Sorry, it was a mistake!"

We ended up toasting to the sound of Captain Ludtink shouting "Screw you, Ulgus!"

This fabled Dark Dragon Slayer booze looked as clear as water from the outside. I'd pictured it being black since it came in a black bottle, but that turned out to be a false impression.

But how did it taste? Captain Ludtink took one big swig right away.

"Damn! That's the stuff!"

Garr and Vice Captain Velrey nodded in agreement after they tried it too.

"It's got a big kick to it, but somehow it also tastes a little sweet. It's rich too. How the hell'd they make such an amazing drink?"

The ingredients and manufacturing process were kept secret, of course. Captain Ludtink ordered another glass and sipped slower this time to savor it.

Our food arrived at the table after that. The waiter placed the "snow thaw hot pot" on the table first.

"It's so pretty…! It really looks like a bunch of snow!" I exclaimed. The surface of the large pot was pure white. How did they even make snow like that? I wouldn't know until I tried a bite.

"Wooow! So white! I never see food like this before!" Charlotte's ears perked up and her eyes sparkled as she stared into the pot. Album looked just as eager.

"Don't get too close, Album, or you might fall in," I cautioned.

"*Nah, I'm fine.*"

I decided to move him behind the bread basket so that we didn't actually end up with Album hot pot for dinner.

"I cut up the snow!" Charlotte skillfully cut into the thawing snow.

"Okay, everyone. Eat up."

I said my prayer of gratitude to the ingredients that went into this meal. Then it was time to eat. I scooped up a spoonful and sniffed it, but couldn't detect anything other than the scent of the broth. I'd thought it was meringue at first, but I was wrong. It was something that had fibers. The answer would be revealed as soon as I stuck it in my mouth.

"Ah… It's grated radish," I noted.

“Yes, I think so.”

Zara agreed with my conclusion, so I was probably correct. The radishes had been softened by absorbing the stew’s broth and had a bit of a spicy kick. They were delicious. Underneath the snow was a bounty of leafy vegetables and thinly sliced meat. These were even more heavenly when eaten with the grated radishes.

“What a surprise. They used grated vegetables to look like snow in their hot pot.”

“So pretty and yummy! I love this food!”

Garr was just as pleased as Charlotte, judging by how he went back for seconds. It was also perfect for Vice Captain Velrey, a lover of spicy foods. Album probably went without saying, but he was eating his serving with a big smile on his face.

Only Ulgus was staring at the hot pot with a strange expression. “Um, I feel like this would taste better if the radishes were cooked first…”

“This is a grown-up food, Ulgus.”

“What did you think of it, Medic Risurisu?”

“It was delicious.”

“I like it lots too,” said Charlotte.

“What about you, Sorcerer Lichtenberger?” Ulgus asked.

“I quite like the taste as well.”

“So I’m the only kid here?” Ulgus’s shoulders slumped. Charlotte tried to cheer him up by telling him he could take his time and grow up slowly.

One by one, more dishes arrived at our table. There was thick-cut grilled meat, meatballs with raspberry sauce, spicy roast vegetables, chicken soup, and more.

Everyone was having a wonderful time with their food and drinks.

Captain Ludtink became drunk as the night went on, breaking out into strange songs and everything. Vice Captain Velrey listened to him with a smirk on her

face. Garr wagged his tail happily as he indulged in some after-dinner cake.

The three who had alcoholic drinks ended up getting very intoxicated. It was about time we wrapped up the party.

“June, I’ll take Crow home, so you take care of Garr and Anna,” Zara said.

“Got it.”

“Melly, you and Charlotte can ride Amelia home without me, okay?”

“All right.”

Charlotte seemed to have had too much fun, as she was now half-asleep. She rubbed her eyes to battle against the exhaustion.

“Just a little longer, Charlotte,” I said. “You’ll be able to go to bed soon.”

“Uh-huh.”

A servant from the Lichtenberger home arrived to pick up Liselotte.

“See you tomorrow, Liselotte!”

“Yes, have a good night.”

“You too.”

We said goodbye to Liselotte.

“Hey. Risurisu.” A drunken Captain Ludtink, slumped against Zara, called out to me.

“Yes?”

“If you’re ever thinkin’ of gettin’ married, come tell me first.”

“I haven’t even met anyone! How am I supposed to get married?” I asked.

“But you’ve got Z— Ow!”

“Oh my gosh, Crow! I’m so sorry. Did I step on your foot?” Zara asked with a wicked smile.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?! You’re still mad I sent ya flyin’ during training!”

“Don’t be silly. Come on, let’s go.”

“Don’t try to hide it!”

I was just surprised he could still speak, considering how he was stumbling all over the place. Zara kept him propped up as they walked toward the town.

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr emerged from the tavern next. They weren’t stumbling and didn’t appear drunk at a glance, but…

“Be safe on the way home, Medic Risurisu.”

“I will. You be safe too, Vice Captain.”

The vice captain had a big smile on her face. She would never smile like that in any normal situation.

“It’s dangerous at night.” Her eyes squinted as she gave me that warning. Vice Captain Velrey had a strange sex appeal when she was drunk. She was like a regular, pretty girl—nothing like her usual straight-and-narrow demeanor.

“Get her home safe, Ulgus,” I said.

“I will.”

Ulgus stood up straight and saluted me.

Garr’s tail was still wagging. I wondered if he was just in a good mood. Sly seemed happy too.

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr were such peaceful drunks.

“Zzzzz…”

“Whoa! Don’t fall asleep standing up, Charlotte! We better get going, Amelia,” I said.

“Kreh!”

We both got on Amelia’s back. Just before taking off, a shop employee rushed outside to us.

“Excuse me, miss! You left something!”

“Ah!”

The man was clutching an extra plump Album. He seemed to have fallen asleep after his satisfying dinner.

“I’m sorry. I completely forgot about him.”

“I’m just glad I caught you in time.”

“So am I.”

I stuffed Album in my bag, letting his head stick out just to be safe. He was blowing bubbles from his nose and everything, so I knew he was completely out cold. I poked his forehead and received no response.

“The food was delicious. I’ll come back sometime,” I said.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

The staff member saw us off as we set off on the road home.

WE had the next day off to rest and recover. The day after that, I headed to work in high spirits.

Unlike how he acted at the drinking party, Captain Ludtink had a very sour look on his face during our morning meeting. I’d come to recognize this look—we were probably being sent on an expedition.

“I don’t really wanna say this right after our break, but we have a mission.”

I knew it. Everyone probably shared that same sentiment.

“A suspicious house has been spotted on Mount Mirenen. The locals have reported some sort of bandit or the like lives there. It’s about half a day away by carriage.”

It sounded like this was no normal bandit either.

“He’s dressed in a full suit of armor and spends his nights wandering around the mountain.”

That was certainly creepy. Mount Mirenen was full of monsters, so people always required personal guards when passing through it. But this person had been seen drifting through the mountain without so much as a torch in his hand.

“No one’s reported him causing any harm yet, but for now, he’s just bein’ weird.”

The locals tried to force their way into the mountain to investigate him, but they never managed to find this suspect. They'd tried to locate the house too. But during their attempts, they were stopped for very strange reasons. Sometimes the fog mysteriously grew thicker. Sometimes a sudden rainstorm broke out.

What could that mean? Was this bandit protected by a mountain spirit? I'd never heard of anything like it.

"There's nothin' in here about the forest being harmed or any burglaries in the nearest town. But since so many people are worried, we've been asked to go take a look."

A strange bandit was even more frightening than a normal one. But these were our orders, and we had no choice but to carry out the mission.

"Hurry up and get ready. Prepare three days' worth of luggage."

With that, we scattered to work on our preparations.

"Kreh, kreh, kreeeh!"

Amelia picked items for the expedition out of her box of personal goods. She used to select things like fancy hats and ribbons, but these days, she picked out windbreaker capes, warm hats to wear in the cold, and other things that were vital for expeditions.

Charlotte was helping her prepare. "You take moisturizing cream too, Amelia. I make this myself!"

"Kreh!"

Despite the fact that we were about to leave on an expedition, Charlotte didn't seem as lonely as she used to. That was probably because she had Blanche waiting for her at home. She'd even told me the two of them shared a bed when the rest of us were gone.

But this was no time to stare at Amelia and Charlotte. I needed to pack food once I was done with my personal belongings.

I filled a large bag with everything I would need for the trip. That included changes of shirts and underwear, socks, five handkerchiefs, a set of toiletries,

soap, sewing tools, insecticide pills, shoelaces, a comb, a hand mirror, three leather pouches, a knife, and a whistle. That was probably all I needed this time around.

Album appeared after this. He hadn't been present for the morning meeting.

"I wanna go on the expedition too, pancake girl."

"All right."

I stuffed him in the bag I wore over my shoulder.

Next, I raced to the food shed to prepare three days' worth of rations. Charlotte and Amelia joined me later to help. Once my food bag was full, I also filled little leather pouches hanging from my belt with my own personal food.

This would be very valuable in case we ran into some sort of unexpected crisis. I made sure most of the food was lightweight—jerky, crackers, dried cheese, chocolate, dried fruit, and biscuits.

"All right. That should do it." Once I was all prepared, I put Amelia's saddle on and wrapped a cape around her neck. "Amelia, Zara and I made this."

"Kreh?!" It was a cloth brooch in the shape of a rose. We made it to fasten the cape together. "Kreeeeh!"

Amelia was extremely pleased when I put it on her. I held up a mirror to show her what she looked like, to which she spread her wings happily. Zara had been the one to suggest finding ways for her to dress up on expeditions, even if only slightly. We ended up making the brooch together.

"You look so cute, Amelia!"

"Kreh!"

"I have one for you too, Charlotte."

"What? For me?"

"That's right."

Charlotte's brooch was one she could attach a ribbon to and wear as a hair ornament. I wove it into her long braid. She grabbed her braid and gazed at the rose accessory.

“It is so cute! Thank you, Mell!”

“It was no trouble. It really suits you.”

“I am so happy!”

It was nearly time to meet with the others. We needed to say goodbye.

“Okay, Charlotte. Please look after the house for us.”

“I will! Me and Blanche will be good girls!”

Charlotte and I always came to work together on Amelia’s back. She told me that she borrowed Zara’s horse to get home when we left for expeditions, so there shouldn’t be any trouble.

When I arrived at the plaza in front of the barracks, everyone was already there waiting for me.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

“It’s still before the designated time, Medic Risurisu, so you’re fine.”

“Thanks, Ulgus.”

I joined them in line. Captain Ludtink began his lovely mission summary.

“Our mission is to verify the unidentified man and house. No spacin’ out. Let’s focus and get this done.”

After that, we went to the back of the barracks and boarded the carriage that had been prepared for us.

Vice Captain Velrey would be riding on Amelia today while Garr drove the carriage. The rest of us entered the passenger car. Captain Ludtink knocked on the ceiling with the handle of his great sword. This signaled Garr to set the carriage in motion.

“I wonder who this person lurking in the mountains could be…?”

“If it’s a bandit, we can just beat ’em up and be on our way.”

Could that thick fog and the rainstorms really be a coincidence?

“Absolutely not.”

“Y-Yes, I think so too.”

Liselotte had another possibility in mind.

“Maybe this is another elf like that mission from before.”

One needed to possess very high magic to control the weather. Only an expert elf when it came to magic could achieve such feats.

“I…really don’t want to run into another elf,” I said.

“That’s strange of you to say, considering you’re an elf yourself,” Liselotte remarked.

“That’s because the elves who live far away from their tribes are incredibly strange characters, don’t you think?”

“I suppose…that’s true.”

She’d looked directly at my face while saying “That’s true.” She was a very honest girl.

“Could it be anything else if this isn’t an elf, Lichtenberger?” Captain Ludtink asked.

“Let’s see. Perhaps someone who’s entered a contract with a spirit?”

Being in a contract with a spirit apparently allowed one to control the weather or climate.

“But there are more elves or dwarves in the world than people in contracts with spirits.”

“I see.”

“I tried to think of other explanations, but can only come up with the impossible,” I said.

“What do ya mean by impossible, Risurisu?”

“Like…a hero summoned from a parallel world?”

This was something that only happened in stories. Ulgus jumped into the conversation when he heard that theory.

“Maybe it’s a holy maiden who fled to the mountains when her country was cruel to her.”

“Or maybe he’s a demon king who prefers to be alone.”

Ulgus and I were getting carried away, but we kept going.

“Or an archangel who’s descended from heaven!”

“Why not just a god, Medic Risurisu?”

“No, that’s far too outlandish. Be realistic. Maybe it’s Ciel Aiskoletta, the great hero and living legend!”

The carriage fell silent after that.

“Idiot. Of course it’s not him.”

“R-Right, of course not…”

After a lot of time racking my brain, the most likely option still seemed to be that the culprit was some sort of oddball elf.

MOUNT Mirenen was known as an inselberg—a hill within a flat plain. Since it stretched so high into the sky, it was referred to as Mount Mirenen. It was covered in dense forests, and therefore, produced many reports of monsters. Crossing the mountain allowed you to take a shortcut to the royal capital at a slope that wasn’t too steep, so it was a common route for travelers.

“So this is Mount Mirenen…? I don’t see the house anywhere. Well, whatever. Let’s get goin’.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Mount Mirenen didn’t feel as difficult to climb as our previous mission. It was more like walking up a road on a hill.

We made our way up slowly. This was a search, after all.

“Speak up if anything seems off.”

“*Ah!*” Album jumped out of my bag suddenly.

“Did you spot something, Album?”

“*Yeah! A radish!*”

“A…radish?”

“*Uh-huh! Let’s make the snow thawing hot pot again!*”

I’d never heard of wild radishes growing on a mountain. Was that really what it was?

“What’s wrong, Risurisu?!” Captain Ludtink asked.

“Album said he spotted a radish!”

“He what?!” Captain Ludtink stomped over to me with a menacing look on his face. “Didn’t I tell you not to look for food during a mission?”

“N-No, I wasn’t!”

“Then what’re you doin’?”

“I’m looking for things that seem ‘off,’ like you said!”

“Off? What’s off?”

“Radishes never usually grow on mountains!”

“Ah… Yeah, that’s off.”

“Someone must have planted it here.”

Captain Ludtink was taken aback too. Thankfully, he’d realized how strange it was for radishes to be growing on the mountain.

We followed Album to get a better look. Indeed, there was a single radish buried in the mountain soil. I could see its healthy-looking leaves and a bit of the white part sticking out. It didn’t look like someone had planted it. It was as if it was a normal radish growing naturally here on the mountain.

“*Heave-ho…*” Album tugged on the leaves as hard as he could. He always loved to boast of his strength, but it seemed this was too much for him… Just how deep did it go?

“Can you pull it out, Captain?” I asked.

“What’s the point?”

“I’d like to see what kind it is.”

Normal radishes were either long and thin, or they were round. If this was a new variety, it was possible it was native to the mountain itself.

“I suppose it’s also possible a passing trader accidentally dropped a radish seed they were carrying…” The captain crouched in front of the radish, grabbed Album, and handed him to me. I used my hands to wipe the fairy’s fur clean of dirt. While I worked on that, Captain Ludtink gave the radish a tug. “Ngh… I can’t get it.”

“Whaaat?!”

Not even someone with superhuman strength like him could pull the radish out.

“This is no normal radish,” I said.

“So? What’s it matter?”

That was when Liselotte nudged Captain Ludtink aside to take a look for herself. “Perhaps this is an albino mandrake!” She explained that mandrakes were tiny mythical beasts that looked like root vegetables with arms and legs. She stared at the radish with a newfound light in her eyes.

“Nah, I think it’s just some sorta radish with roots really stuck in the ground.”

But Liselotte wasn’t listening. She crouched down and started to speak to the radish. “Hey, you’re a mandrake, aren’t you?”

A marquess’s daughter talking to a radish. It was most peculiar. Everyone watched her, unsure of how to react.

“My name is Liselotte Lichtenberger. What’s your name?”

“*…Komerv*.”

“Huh? Komerv?”

He responded! A muffled voice had come out of the ground.

Liselotte blushed. She continued the conversation. “Are you a mythical beast? Or a different sort of creature?”

“*No…I am different. I have a contract with Master…*”

So Komerv wasn’t a mythical beast. Then how did he enter a contract with someone? Was he a fairy, a spirit, or something else entirely? My heart was racing with anticipation for his response.

“*I am…leaves.*”

That wasn’t exactly an answer. Everyone other than Liselotte slumped their shoulders with disappointment.

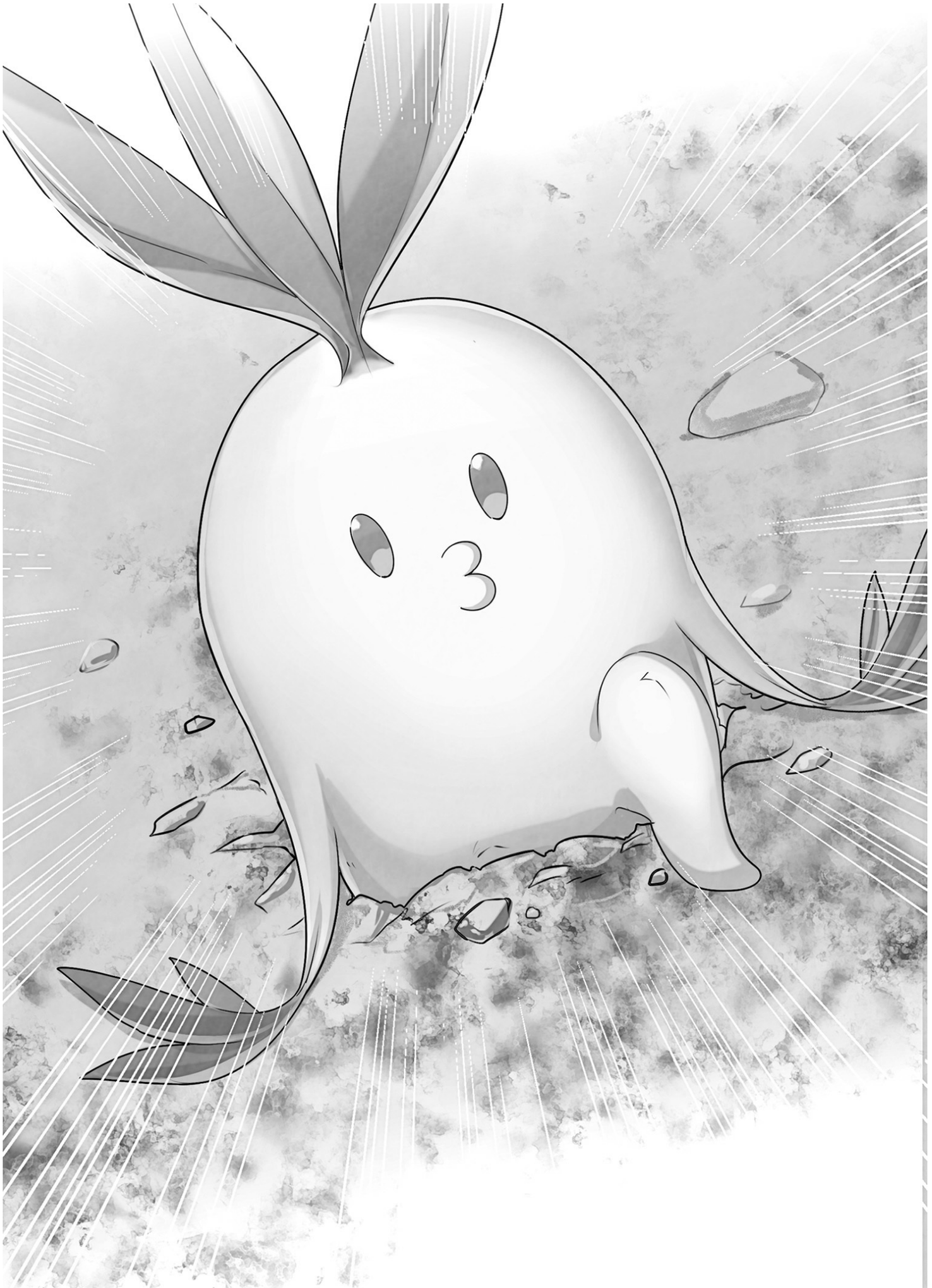
I crouched down and spoke to Komerv. “Excuse me, Komerv. Would you mind coming to the surface so we can talk?”

“*Um…fine.*” All of a sudden, two little arms emerged from the soil. “*Up…we go.*”

He pushed himself up and out of the ground.

“*…Phew.*”

Komerv turned out to be shorter than my own knees. He really just looked like a radish with eyes, a mouth, and four limbs.



Since he was all covered in dirt, I poured some water on him to clean him up.

"*Thank you. I feel better.*"

"Of course."

Liselotte stepped away. This wasn't a mythical beast, after all. Captain Ludtink took her place, crouching down and talking to the creature.

"Are you a fairy? Or a spirit?"

"*I…am a leaf spirit born from a world tree.*"

"A spirit!" I couldn't believe a spirit was buried in a mountain like this. "You said you had a contract with this 'Master,' right?"

"*Yes. I have a contract with Master.*"

"Where is this person right now?" I asked.

"*I…got lost. I was looking for him all over, but I couldn't find him… Then I got sleepy…and went to bed in the dirt.*"

"I see." So that master he was in a contract with lurked somewhere on the mountain. I wanted to get more details out of the spirit. "Komerv, does your master live in a hut here on the mountain, by any chance?"

"*A hut… Yes, he lives in a hut.*"

"Then will we find him if we go there?"

"*I don't know.*"

"You don't? Why not?"

"*I don't know…where the hut is.*"

In other words, Komerv was completely lost.

"Do you sense anything connecting you with your master, since you two have a contract?" I asked.

"*Master cast a spell. A very, very strong spell. It was a barrier. So I don't know anymore.*"

"A spell?!"

Now we knew his master was capable of using magic. I was starting to get a better picture of the situation.

“What did your master come here to do?”

“*…Something I don’t understand.*”

“Can you describe it at all?”

“*I don’t understand it.*”

Hmmm. So the spirit couldn’t comprehend what this person’s goal was and what they were doing.

“*Can we eat this Komerv?*”

“*I…don’t think so.*”

“*Your leaves look really yummy.*”

“*Hm?*”

I quickly covered Album’s mouth.

“What are you saying, Album?!”

“*I mean, he just looks so tasty.*”

Well, he was right that radish leaves were delicious. They make a great snack when preserved with salt. It was easy to get hooked on that crispy texture. But Komerv was no radish—he was a leaf spirit, in his own words. He probably had to be a high spirit too if he was born from a world tree.

“Let’s get back on topic. Komerv, your master isn’t doing bad things, is he?” I asked.

I highly doubted Komerv’s master came here to cause trouble on the mountain. After all, he’d entered into a contract with such a carefree leaf spirit. But I still thought I’d ask just to be safe.

“*Master doesn’t do bad things. Master is a good person.*”

“I thought so.”

At this point, there was nothing left to do but hear from the master himself.

“I’d like to ask something of you, Komerv.”

“*Hmm? What?*”

“Would you care to search for your master with us?”

“*I don’t mind.*”

“Thank you.”

We’d officially gained another member in our search party.

“Are you thirsty, Komerv?”

“*Mm…kind of.*”

“I’ll make you some honey water.”

Sly’s favorite honey water also contained powdered lemon peel.

“Here you go.”

“*Thanks.*” Komerv accepted the cup with leafy hands. He sipped the honey water with his tiny mouth.

“How do you like it?”

“*It’s sour and sweet. It’s good.”*

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I felt like his eyes looked a bit clearer than before. I knew he was probably uneasy about being separated from his master. Whoever this person was, we needed to reunite them.

“Let’s head out now.”

“*Okay. Thanks.*”

It turned out that Komerv merely teetered along slowly, so I decided to carry him in my arms.

Zara turned around and looked at me with concern. “Is he heavy, Melly?”

“No, it just feels like I’m carrying a radish.”

“Okay. That’s good. Just say the word if it gets to be too much.”

“I will, thanks.”

We proceeded forward with Komerv.

The forest trees were starting to turn red at this time of year. Along the way, I spotted bounties of things like mushrooms and tree nuts. I even spotted a tree absolutely full of forest apples, enough to make the branches sag, but I was banned from harvesting during our duties. Ulgus was looking at them too, so I pulled on his shirt and told him to keep his eyes on the trail. I started walking alongside him after that.

“I can’t believe it’s already fall, Medic Risurisu.”

“Neither can I.”

“I wanted to visit the summer festival, but we ended up going on an expedition that day.”

“Ah, that’s right! I’d been looking forward to seeing the fireworks show!”

“There’s always next year.”

“I guess so.”

“It’s already been a year since you came to the royal capital, huh?”

“Yes. I’ve also worked as a knight for a year too.”

My time outside of the Fore Elf woods passed in the blink of an eye.

At first, I was treated like a weirdo. No one would hire me and I was at a total loss. But that was when I came to find work at the Enoch Royal Order. I’d felt hopeless when my assignment turned out to be the Second Expeditionary Squadron, but the people I worked alongside were all incredibly kindhearted.

“I look forward to working with you even more, Ulgus.”

“Me too.”

Ulgus and I were chatting until suddenly, I sensed something strange. It was as if the ground was rumbling deep underneath my feet.

“What’s…going on?”

“Is something wrong, Medic Risurisu?”

“Something’s shaking… Is this an earthquake?”

“Earthquake?”

Ulgus didn’t seem to feel it yet. Garr didn’t either when I asked him.

“Do you feel anything, Amelia?”

“Kreh?”

Amelia didn’t understand either.

“I must be imagining things! I’m sorry. Let’s keep going.”

“*Something is coming from above,*” Komerv muttered quietly from within my arms.

“Huh?”

“*Something very, very big.*”

I listened closely and managed to make out a sound like that of hoarse breathing. There was no mistaking it—something was approaching us.

“Captain Ludtink! Something’s coming!” I shouted.

“What’s coming?!”

“I don’t know, but it’s big!”

“Something’s coming! Damn it! All units, ready your weapons!”

At the captain’s orders, everyone took out their weapons and got in position to fight. Garr and Amelia also reacted to the sound at this point. Garr relayed to us that it was the sound of a giant, four-legged animal charging down the mountain straight toward us.

“Risurisu, Lichtenberger, Ulgus, go climb a tree! Amelia, find somewhere to hide where your wings won’t get stuck!”

“Ah, um, got it!”

I grabbed Liselotte’s arm and led her to a tree that was thick enough to climb. Amelia crouched behind some bushes.

“Liselotte, can you climb trees?”

“Not at all.” Liselotte put her hands on her hips with a serious look on her face. Well, I’d predicted as much.

“Then use me as a stepladder to make it up there.”

“I can’t step on you, Mell.”

“It’s all right. Please just do it.”

“B-But…”

“We’re going to get in the way of the fight at this rate.”

“R-Right.”

I placed Komerv on the ground. Just as I was about to get on my hands and knees for Liselotte to step on my back, Komerv suddenly sprouted vines from the top of his head.

“Huh? Eeek!”

The vines coiled around Liselotte’s waist and dragged her up into the air. The tiny creature that didn’t even reach my knees was able to support her weight, raising her up and setting her down on a thick branch.

“*Next up.*”

“Huh? Aaaaaah!”

His vines wrapped around my waist and yanked me up to join Liselotte. Finally, he grabbed the branch with his own vines and pulled himself up to us.

“You’re really strong, Komerv,” I said.

“*I guess.*”

The reverberations had only grown more powerful. They were enough to shake the trees now. Once it was that close, we could finally get our first glimpse of it.

“Th-That’s…”

It must have been about sixteen feet long. The beast had black fur and sharp fangs. Its silhouette was round, but with stiff-looking bristles on its body.

“Is that…a great boar?” I asked.

“I believe it is,” Liselotte replied. “But boar-pigs are domesticated animals, so perhaps this is the older, native variety.”

“Ah, I see. That might be right.”

Great boars existed in the wild, but were domesticated to make them more docile. The result of this was the animal known as the boar-pig. I'd heard that great boars could range from three to ten feet long. They said their numbers had reduced as they became hunted more by monsters, but it seemed they still existed.

This one, in particular, was gigantic. It charged toward us, breathing raggedly.

Ulgus had climbed a tree across from us. He was seated on a thick branch with his arrow drawn, ready to engage in battle.

The great boar was truly in a blind rage, charging forward without any regard for its surroundings. It was even powerful enough to knock down trees.

Captain Ludtink—with Zara, Garr, and Vice Captain Velrey behind him—jumped out of its way at the very last second.

They were leaving the first strike to Ulgus.

It seemed that Ulgus was the main focus today. It would probably be next to impossible to land an arrow on the charging boar, considering it was shaking its head as it ran. But that's exactly what Ulgus did. It was as if his arrow was magnetized straight toward the boar's forehead.

"All right!" I couldn't help but pump my fist. I looked at Ulgus and saw the stern expression on his face. "Oh, he doesn't look very happy…"

I turned back to the great boar, but realized it was still on its rampage with the arrow sticking out of its head. I didn't even spot a single drop of blood. The beast had to have incredibly thick skin. Ulgus fired another arrow at its neck, but the arrow simply bounced off the skin and fell to the ground.

Captain Ludtink was up next. He swung his sword into the great boar from behind, but instead of the sound of tearing flesh, what reached my ears was more like the sound of sword against stone. The same could be said for Garr and Zara's attacks too.

"Oh no. They can't even make a dent in it…!"

At this point, Captain Ludtink barked orders at Ulgus. "Ulgus! Use poison arrows!"

“Yes, Captain!” Ulgus retrieved his special arrows laced with poison. Just as he was readying his second arrow, the great boar changed directions and charged straight toward Ulgus’s tree. “Whoa!”

Ulgus went flying when his tree was rammed.

I was about to scream Ulgus’s name, but I quickly covered my mouth to stop myself.

“This leaves me no choice.” Liselotte clutched Invidia, her magic staff, and glared at the great boar. But I grabbed her shoulder and shook my head. “But why…?”

“You need Captain Ludtink’s permission to cast spells.”

Her magic was simply too powerful. Casting a spell on a tiny mountain path like this could cause a disaster.

“But we must avenge Ulgus…”

“He’s not dead yet. At least, I don’t think so.”

Ulgus was really good at falling safely because of how Captain Ludtink always threw him during training. I imagined he’d hit the ground in a way that didn’t result in any injuries.

Captain Ludtink called out his next orders. “All of you, make a run for it while Garr and I distract him! Velrey, go get Ulgus!”

“Yes, Captain!”

It was the first time we were ever ordered to retreat.

We had to run away because we were at such a disadvantage. Zara came up to us in the tree.

“Melly, Liselotte, jump down!” Zara was going to catch us. I wrapped Komerv in my arms and jumped out of the branch.

“Eeeeeek!”

I landed in Zara’s arms.

“Gyah!”

“Are you all right, Melly?”

“Y-Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Zara.” He took me behind the bushes and set me on Amelia’s back. “What about Liselotte?!”

“Ah… Wait, I can’t jump from this height!” She was stuck in the tree, too frightened to jump.

“Hurry, Liselotte!” Zara urged.

“Komerv, I’m sorry to ask, but can you get Liselotte down with your vines?” I asked.

“*Hm? Sure.*”

The vines sprouted from his head and coiled around Liselotte’s waist, slowly lowering her down until she joined me on Amelia’s back.

“Hurry, Zara! Ngh!” I heard Captain Ludtink let out a pained grunt. When I looked in his direction, I saw something completely incomprehensible. The large-bodied Captain Ludtink and Garr were thrown into the air when the great boar mowed them down.

“What?!”

“Amelia, take Melly and Liselotte away from here!” Zara shouted.

“K-Kreh!”

Amelia couldn’t fly through the thick woods, so our only choice was to run. Amelia spun around and broke out into a dash.

“Zara!” I cried.

“I won’t be far behind!”

This can’t be happening…!

If Captain Ludtink and Garr couldn’t even deal a scratch to the great boar, there was no way Zara could take it out all on his own.

“Come with us, Zara!”

But as soon as I turned back to call out to him, I watched Zara’s body fly through the air. The beast had apparently slashed him with his teeth and

thrown Zara backwards.

I could just make out a streak of bright, crimson blood.

“Zara?!”

“Don’t turn around, Mell! It’s dangerous!” Liselotte warned.

“But Zara is…” I gulped again. This time, the great boar turned toward us and began its next charge. There were far too many trees for Amelia to take off into the air here. “A-Amelia, the great boar is…”

“Kreh!”

Amelia picked up speed, but at this rate, it was going to catch up to her and collide with us.

“Wh-What do we do…?” I turned around again. The great boar was just behind us. “Aaaah!”

It bared its fangs and crouched low to the ground, ready to pounce on Amelia. I closed my eyes, grit my teeth, and waited for the impact.

“Huh?”

The attack never came. What was going on? I didn’t sense it behind me anymore, so I opened my eyes and turned around.

“What?!” What I saw was the great boar’s head flying through the air. “Stop, Amelia!”

“Kreh!”

Amelia screeched to a halt. Just then, the head landed directly in front of us, producing a dull thud and splattering bright red blood on the ground.

“Eeek!”

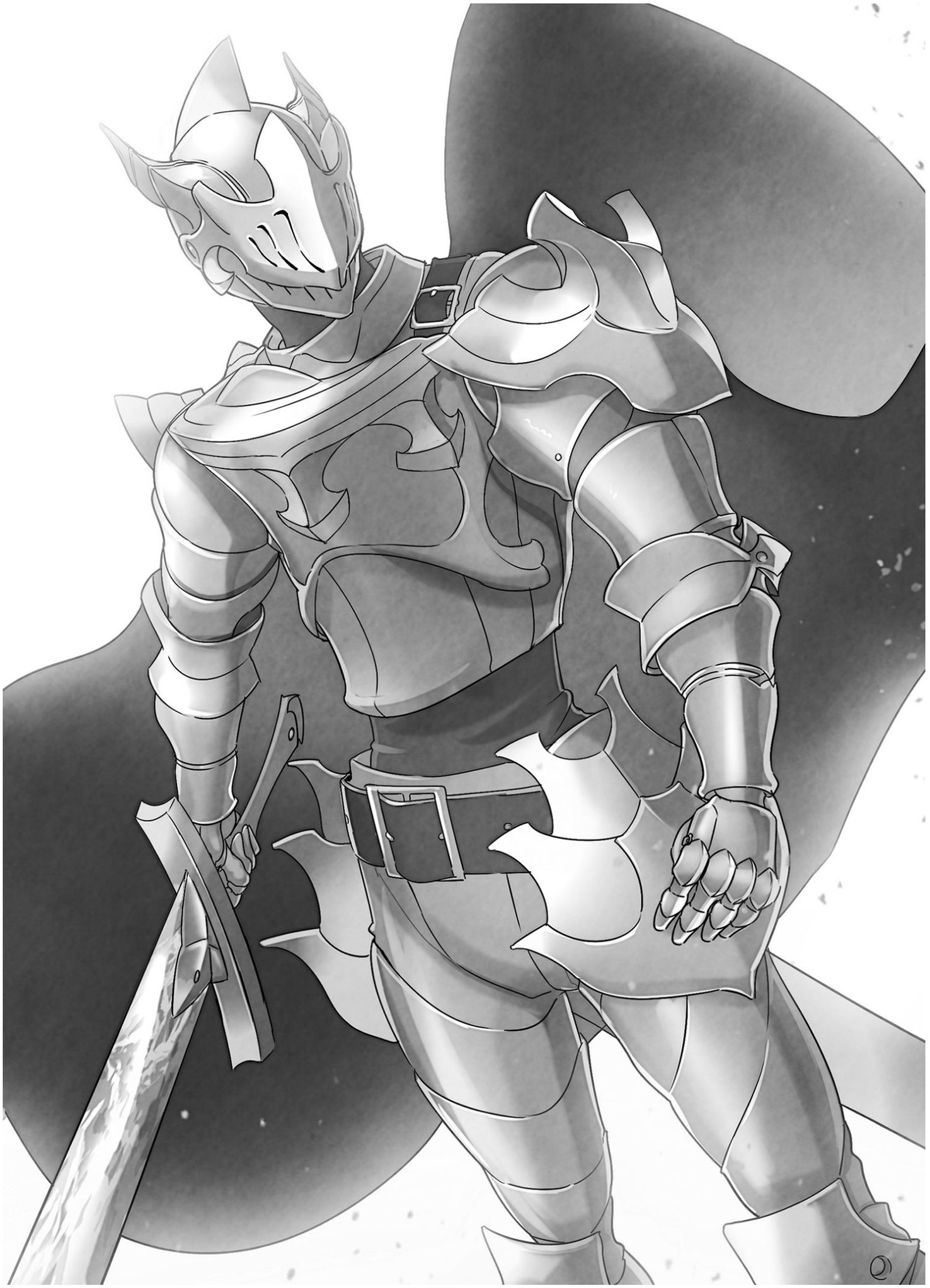
“Whoa!”

I shrieked. It felt like the great boar’s severed head was glaring at me.

“You there. Are you all right?”

A somber, husky voice came from behind me. I turned around to see…a knight in a full suit of armor and a red cape on his back. He held a transparent sword

that looked almost like it was made of crystal.



“*Ah, it’s Master.*”

“M-Master?!”

It was none other than the man contracted with Komerv who came to our rescue. But for some reason, he didn’t strike me as any ordinary person. Something about him was almost godlike.

The master flicked his sword to shake the blood off.

That was when I snapped out of my daze.

Captain Ludtink, Garr, and Zara were injured when the beast mowed them down. I jumped off Amelia, bowed quickly to the master, then handed Komerv off to him. I knew I needed to give him a proper thanks, but more importantly, Zara had been bleeding. It was probably a major wound. There was no time to waste.

“Are you there, Vice Captain?!” I called. “The great boar is dead!”

“I’m right here!”

I heard her response immediately.

“Is Ulgus all right?” I asked.

“He’s just a little scratched up, but he’s fine.”

“Good. Could you please check on Captain Ludtink and Garr for me?”

“Got it.”

I was finally able to get to Zara.

“…!”

Zara was face down on the ground and bleeding profusely. It was so much worse than I thought. My legs gave out from under me and I collapsed to the ground from shock.

“Mell, snap out of it!”

“Kreh kreh!”

Liselotte and Amelia’s voices brought me back to reality. This was no time to let shock get to me. I was a combat medic. I had to treat him however I could.

“What should we do, Mell?” Liselotte asked.

“L-Let’s stop the bleeding first.”

“Should we roll him over?”

“Y-Yes…”

Liselotte and Amelia helped me get Zara on his back.

“Urk!”

“He’s been…!”

“Kreeeeh!”

Zara had been slashed down from the chest to the stomach. The great boar’s fangs must have cut into him. I called his name, but he was completely unconscious from all the blood he’d lost.

If he’s lost this much blood, then it’s already…

Zara had acted recklessly so that the rest of us could escape. That single thought filled my chest with pain. He was breathing, but the expression on his face was one of anguish.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. This was no time for crying, but I couldn’t stop myself. I raised my voice and shouted to put myself back on track.

“Stop the bleeding!” I reached into my bag with trembling hands, searching for gauze and bandages.

“*P-Pancake girl…*” Album, who I’d been keeping in my bag, helped me search for the items with a look of anxiety on his face.

If only I could use healing magic. I could have healed Zara’s wound in the blink of an eye. How could I be so powerless? Why couldn’t I save someone I cared about so much?

“What do I do…?”

“*Hey. Do you want him to eat my leaves?*”

“Huh?”

I turned around to see the master carrying Komerv in his arms, who was

holding out a leaf for me to take. It must have been one of the ones growing from his head.

“That there is a world tree spirit’s leaf,” the master explained. “It will surely heal the young man’s wounds.”

“R-Really? Is that true?”

“He tells no lies. Feed them to him at once.”

“Th-Thank you…” I took the leaf from Komerv, ripped it into small pieces, and brought them to Zara’s mouth. “Zara, they say you’ll be healed if you eat this.”

“……”

“Please. Please eat it.”

Komerv approached us. He picked up the leaf scraps from my hand with his vines and placed them inside Zara’s mouth.

“Urgh…!” Zara let out a groan—but then he swallowed.

“Yes! You did it!” Just as I cried out with joy, Zara’s wound started to glow. I watched it close up right before my eyes. “I-It’s working!”

“It’s a miracle!”

“Kreeeeh!”

It seemed that Komerv was, in fact, a great spirit born from a world tree. It wasn’t long at all before Zara’s wound had fully closed and turned to normal skin, almost like he was never injured at all.

Thank god. I can hardly believe it. I started to cry again with relief.

Zara’s eyelashes fluttered. A moment later, he opened his eyes.

“Zara?!”

“…Ah. Melly…?”

“Th-Thank god!” I wrapped my arms around Zara when he sat up. “Thank you…for saving us. But please…don’t ever do anything so reckless again.”

“R-Right… I understand. I won’t do it again.”

Our joyful reunion was interrupted by someone clearing their throat behind

me. I turned around and laid eyes on a blood-soaked bandit.

“Gyaaaah! A bandit!”

“Who the hell’re you callin’ a bandit?!” I took a closer look. It turned out to be Captain Ludtink. “Ah, Captain Ludtink, are you injured?”

“Not too bad compared to Zara. But Komerv’s leaf patched me up.”

“Th-That’s good.”

He told me that Garr and Ulgus were also healed thanks to Komerv’s leaves.

“The master saved us.”

All of us turned to look at the master, who’d been watching over us from a short distance.

Despite being covered in blood, Captain Ludtink went over to thank him. “It’s nice to meet you. We’re the Second Expeditionary Squadron of the Enoch Royal Order. My name is Crow Ludtink and I’m the captain of this unit. I’m extremely grateful to you for rescuing us from such a terrible situation.”

Without being able to see his face, Captain Ludtink really sounded like a proper nobleman. Of course, his face was what turned him into a bloodstained bandit.

“The pleasure is all mine. I am Ciel Aiskoletta, Komerv’s owner.”

“Huh?”

“I hail from the Aiskoletta-Begiristain family of Seredintia. Does that clear things up?”

The master wasn’t just a master after all. As I stood there dumbfounded, Liselotte murmured next to me under her breath.

“I…I never imagined that was who he was talking about all this time…”

“S-So your true name is Ciel Aiskoletta…?”

“Correct.”

This person was none other than the great hero of Seredintia who held the nickname “Dark Dragon Slayer.”

Captain Ludtink was shocked too. I could see how stiff he was, even from behind.

“You have my thanks for looking after Komerv.”

“But…you’re the one who saved us…”

“No, I was merely chasing that great boar.”

The master, Sir Aiskoletta, walked toward the great boar’s corpse, plunged his sword deep into the body, and cut open a slit. Once he’d torn the flesh apart, he reached in and pulled a reddish-black stone from the area near the animal’s heart.

“Th-That’s…”

It was magic ore—something that should never exist inside of a wild animal.

Magic ore was a crystallized form of magical energy that existed inside the hearts of monsters. Having the magic ore inside of them was what caused monsters to go on rampages. It also made them targets for anyone looking to obtain magical energy.

These ores infused the monster’s flesh with magical energy and would make the average person sick to eat—essentially overdosing them with magical energy. Some unlucky souls even died from this.

That was why the act of eating monster flesh was taboo.

Wild and domesticated animals, however, had no magic ore inside them. How could a normal animal like a great boar have come to possess this ore?

“We’ll need to submit this to the Monster Research Bureau and have them look into it,” Captain Ludtink said.

A wild animal turning into a monster. The idea was enough to make anyone shudder. If Sir Aiskoletta hadn’t taken notice, the wild animal may have only grown larger and more violent.

I thought back to the giant three-horned cow we were once tasked with taking out. I’d heard a rumor that there was a ban on transporting its meat. Perhaps that was because it contained magic ore too.

“Sir Aiskoletta, did you come here because you were chasing wild animals with magic ore?”

“Not at all. I’m here in search of my very own ‘slow life’…”

“Huh?”

“Hmm. Perhaps you didn’t hear me. I said I’m here to live a ‘slow life.’”

Everyone had a question mark floating over their head. *What does he mean by that…?*

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, um, I’ve just never heard of a ‘slow life’ before.”

Sir Aiskoletta took a moment to explain this term to us. “A slow life is the act of living self-sufficiently in a remote, yet peaceful place. It’s a bit of culture that comes from a warrior summoned to this world from a parallel universe. It was he who first told me that all heroes who save their worlds eventually turn to a ‘slow life’ when their work is done.”

I didn’t really understand, but it seemed like this great hero had sought to leave his old life behind because he was constantly surrounded by people. That led him to desire a quieter slow life of his own.

“The warrior summoned here said that he simply could not go without living a slow life once peace returned to the world, so he went and moved to the countryside. I wanted to experience a taste of this life for myself, but I had my own family to worry about.”

That made sense. The Aiskolettas couldn’t just lose their family head like that.

“Why, it’s already been thirty years since then. I’ve given my son my fortune and my title, and now that I’m free, I came to this place to begin my newfound slow life.”

It turned out that Sir Aiskoletta also had the proper permission to use the land he was living on.

“Feast your eyes.”

He showed us the residency card he’d received from the king thirty years

prior. This allowed him to live wherever he pleased. The king must have issued it as a way to lure Sir Aiskoletta, the great hero and nobleman, into our country.

“Were you questioned by immigration authorities at the border?” I asked.

“I was not. The king declared that I may come and go as I pleased, so I warped here in a flash.”

It felt impolite to ask what “warped here” meant. It seemed the local residents had been frightened by Sir Aiskoletta because they didn’t understand his motives.

But that all led to a new discovery.

A wild animal containing magic ore—this issue needed to be resolved as quickly as possible.

“Sir Aiskoletta, may we take that magic ore into our possession?”

“Very well. I suppose I have no use for it. But do not touch it with bare skin, as it’s a concentrated form of magical energy.” The knight placed the magic ore in a leather pouch and wrapped it up in his own cloak. “My cape has the power to negate magical energy. You’ll fare well so long as you keep the ore inside.”

“Thank you so much,” I said. “I’ll return it to you soon. Although…”

Would he really continue to live all the way out here? I felt it would be a better idea to contact the king and have him provide whatever arrangements he needed. Of course, maybe he didn’t *need* any arrangements in order to live his desired slow life.

“You must be famished. We shall dine at my house,” he offered.

“Ah…right.”

“But before that…”

Sir Aiskoletta placed Komerv on the ground and unsheathed his crystalline sword. It was a truly beautiful weapon. As I gazed at it, the knight trailed his fingers along the blade, causing some sort of spell text to appear in the air. The next instant, the sword erupted with flames.

“It’s a blade of fire!”

“That’s an enchantment spell that magic swordsmen use,” Liselotte explained to me.

He raised the sword high and brought it down into the great boar. The beast’s head and body both caught fire and burned to ashes in no time at all.

“Now let us be off.”

Captain Ludtink seemed to be looking for a reason to refuse, but we ended up going with Sir Aiskoletta to his house.

“Gather here, if you’d be so kind.”

All of us approached the spot he had designated. I wondered what this was about, when suddenly, a magic circle appeared below our feet. Its light intensified and I felt my body lift into the air. Somewhere in between the blinks of my eyes, the sights before me had completely changed.

“Whoa!”

I stumbled when my feet connected with the ground again. Amelia used her beak to grab the hood of my overcoat and pull me back, stopping me from hitting the floor.

“Th-That was…a teleportation spell.”

We’d instantly teleported straight to Sir Aiskoletta’s hut.

This appeared to be a plot of land cleared out of the mountain, as there were freshly cut tree stumps all around. The entrance to the hut was lined with skinned animal pelts. There was even a small cookhouse. It was all very cramped since he was living there alone.

It really didn’t look like a place where a famous hero would live out his remaining years.

“The dwarves who live on the mountain constructed this hut for me,” he explained. “Most impressive, don’t you think?”

“Y-Yes…”

The great hero had also made friends with dwarves. I was learning so much so quickly, it was almost hard to keep up with it all.

“Hm? Wait, those are…” He was drying mushrooms outside in the garden. But they were of the poisonous variety. “Sir Aiskoletta, these are poisonous mushrooms. These ones here are also poisonous plants that will numb your tongue.”

“Is that so? Now I see why they tasted so foul!”

“……”

So he’d been living a self-sufficient life on medicinal herbs and mushrooms that he didn’t even understand.

“I’ve been told that food from the wild is particularly strong-tasting. I thought I merely didn’t care for these flavors…” He told us that he ate Komerv’s leaves when he wasn’t feeling well. “Wild animal meat is tough and foul-smelling. The mushrooms are acidic and tart, and medicinal herbs numb the tongue… And all this time, I thought this was merely the ultimate challenge I must grow accustomed to in my newfound slow life.”

I couldn’t tell how old he looked because he was dressed in full armor that kept him covered from head to toe. However, if the legend of the Dark Dragon Slayer was accurate, he had to be in his seventies by now.

What could have driven him to take up a life like this? Nervously, I decided to ask him.

“I find no greater thrill than the challenges posed by the unknown. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I couldn’t help but be moved by his words, even though he was being so reckless out here. But I couldn’t help but feel that his health wouldn’t hold out if he didn’t make a change of some sort.

“I shall treat you to the mountain rabbit I hunted yesterday.” After saying that, he brought out the rabbit he’d kept frozen with an ice spell. It was a plump rabbit that had clearly gotten its fill of autumn foods.

“Um, may I ask how you’ll cook it?” I inquired.

“I’ll skin the rabbit and roast it whole.”

“But the meat will have a bad smell if you do that.”

“And how shall I be rid of the smell?”

“You start by removing the blood and organs.”

“The blood and organs…?”

“Yes. The meat smells bad when you don’t dispose of them.”

“I see. Would you be so kind as to teach me this process?”

I turned to look at Captain Ludtink, thinking I should get his permission. But he merely mouthed the words “Hurry up and tell him you’ll do it,” so I turned back to Sir Aiskoletta and responded enthusiastically.

“Certainly!” This was my exact area of expertise. Before anything else, I introduced myself. “Um, my name is Mell Risurisu. It’s an honor to work with you.”

“I see. Please commence with the instructions, Miss Mell.”

“Of course!” I started by having him thaw the mountain rabbit. “The meat turns stiff due to rigor mortis once it’s been killed, but if you let it sit for a while, it ages and gets more tender.”

“Is that so? I never knew such a thing.”

I carefully skinned the rabbit before removing the blood and organs. All I had to do was cut it into parts after that.

“What method of cooking do you recommend?”

“Let me think…”

The rabbit would have a lot of fat at this time of year, so it was probably delicious when roasted without any other additions to it. But it also felt like a good idea to give Sir Aiskoletta a lesson in different medicinal herbs.

“Let’s make mountain rabbit sausages with lots of medicinal herbs.”

The knight nodded, pleased by my suggestion to use herbs native to the mountain. Well, I didn’t really know if he was pleased, since I couldn’t see his expression under the helmet. I just got the sense that he was happy.

“Then let’s go pick some herbs. There should be all sorts around the hut.”

“Understood.”

He eagerly prepared us some baskets and followed behind me. Along the way, I realized he had Komerv in his basket.

“For sausages, you can use medicinal garlic, oregano, health grass, thyme, and sweet basil,” I explained. Mountains held no shortage of medicinal herbs. “This is a medicinal garlic leaf. Some poisonous plants look a lot like this, so you have to be very careful in identifying them.”

“I see.” Sir Aiskoletta was passionately scribbling down notes about the herbs.

“*Master, this is health grass.*”

“Oh, outstanding, Komerv!”

“*I know. I’m outstanding.*”

Komerv and Sir Aiskoletta’s exchanges were rather cute. It felt like watching an old man with his grandson.

“Is this mushroom edible, Miss Mell?”

“Ah, yes! You can eat this one.”

“Then I’ll take it with us.”

Sir Aiskoletta was a fast learner and had already started picking herbs and mushrooms with impressive speed. After an hour or so, we had baskets full of many different herbs.

“All right! I believe we have what we need.”

We returned to the hut with a teleportation spell.

Komerv went and buried himself in the dirt again. I wondered if he was tired, since he’d mentioned that digging himself underground helped relieve fatigue. We first found him in the dirt because he was recovering from his search for Sir Aiskoletta all over the mountain. But that wasn’t important to dwell on now. We needed to start cooking sooner rather than later.

“Do you have salt and pepper, Sir Aiskoletta?”

“Alas, I do not.”

It seemed he'd been relying on the raw flavor of the ingredients themselves all this time.

"If it's absolutely necessary, I shall go and buy some from the nearest town," he offered.

"No, that's okay! I have some of my own that we can use."

"I thank you for your foresight."

I could never send a great hero from a foreign land out on my errands. The idea made me shudder.

"Whatever is the matter, Miss Mell?"

"No, nothing at all. Let's start cooking now."

We would use the cookhouse outside for our meal, with Sir Aiskoletta providing a fire by casting a spell for me. Flames appeared in the stove when he chanted the words.

"Wow…!"

That was one less thing to worry about. The first step in making sausages was to mince the meat.

"Can you do that for me, Sir Aiskoletta?"

"Certainly."

I rolled up my sleeves to get started on mincing the herbs…only to flinch when I heard a thunderous commotion from next to me. Sir Aiskoletta was mincing the rabbit meat faster than my eyes could even perceive. The meat was nice and ground up before I even realized what was happening.

"How does this look, Miss Mell?"

"I-It's good like that."

"What next?"

"How about you mince up these herbs?"

"Whatever you say."

That task ended in about five seconds as well.

“Now we add the herbs to the ground rabbit meat and thicken it with bread crumbs.”

“I see.”

“The only seasonings we need are salt and pepper. Please stir it together well once everything is in the bowl.” I asked the knight to handle this part too. He was very strong, so the mixing portion was done almost instantly.

“How’s it look?”

“I think that’s perfect!”

Sausages were usually stuffed inside animal intestines, but we didn’t have the proper kind for that today, so we’d have to take a different approach.

“We’ll wrap the sausage meat around these tree sticks and grill them that way.”

“Is that right?”

I stripped the branches of their outer bark. “Please cover the branches in sausage meat like how I’ve done here.”

“At once.”

The two of us worked on coating sticks with the minced meat and herb mixture. Once the shapes looked right, we were ready to cook them.

“The meat burns easily, so try not to make direct contact with the flames. Let it cook from the heat at a bit of a distance.”

I had him reduce the strength of the flames so that we could leave the sausage sticks on the stove. Juices started to seep out of the sausages as they cooked.

“What a marvelous smell!”

“Why don’t we make something else while we’re waiting?”

I decided on a soup made from the rabbit’s bones and mushrooms.

First, I boiled the rabbit bones and removed the foam that formed on the surface. Once the water was cloudy, it was time to discard the bones. Next, I added mushrooms and leftover herbs to remove any bad odor leftover from the

bones. It only had to simmer for a while before my “Mountain Rabbit-Flavored Mushroom Soup” was complete.

The sausages had finished cooking while I worked on the soup.

“I’ll serve these with some bread, and they’ll be ready to eat!”

The sun had set during our busy time in the kitchen.

“It sure is dark. Allow me to make a light.” Sir Aiskoletta retrieved his crystalline sword and stroked the blade. Just like before, a magic spell appeared over the sword before it erupted with light.

“What exactly is that sword, Sir Aiskoletta?” I asked.

“It’s a crystal sword. Both a magic staff and a sword all at once.”

“I-I see.”

He could enchant the sword with spells to produce many different attacks. It was a truly one-of-a-kind weapon.

Meanwhile, the others had been waiting for Sir Aiskoletta and me to finish cooking. We couldn’t all fit inside the hut, so we decided to eat our dinner outside.

“I’m sorry for the long wait.” I spread out a blanket and placed the pot of soup in the center. Then I set out the sausages next to it. “Please dig in, everyone.”

Ulgus was quiet today. He would usually cheer whenever I served him a meal, but he was probably behaving himself around Sir Aiskoletta. Even Captain Ludtink looked nervous. Album was openly drooling, but he still knew how to read the room.

“What’s the matter? Won’t you eat?” Sir Aiskoletta asked.

“Please try them yourself first, Sir Aiskoletta.”

“I see. Very well.”

He started with a mountain rabbit sausage. I was sure he’d finally remove his helmet to eat a meal…but he merely stuck the sausage through the mouth hole.

You’re actually keeping the helmet on?! It took all of my effort not to shout

that at him.

I caught a glimpse of a curled mustache through the hole in the helmet. He was probably an old man with a refined look to him.

“Here I go.”

Everyone was focused on his reaction to the sausage. He’d probably lived a life full of gourmet dining, so I doubted this would impress him at all. However…

“Brilliant! Just brilliant!”

“Y-You like it?”

“The savory juices pour out at first bite, but after a moment, the refreshing taste of herbs come out to tickle the nose and bring out the meat’s true flavor! I can hardly believe this is the same animal meat I’ve been eating on my own all this time. Who knew how critical it was to prepare it the correct way?”

I didn’t expect him to have so much praise for the dish. It must have tasted great in comparison to his slow-life meals of meat that weren’t cleaned properly.

“Now eat up, all of you!”

Once he encouraged them, the others finally reached out and took mountain rabbit sausages for themselves.

“Ah, this is delicious.”

“It’s so good!”

“Yep, pretty tasty.”

I wasn’t sure if they were just saying that because they didn’t want Sir Aiskoletta to feel left out. But my opinion changed when I tried a sausage for myself. It really was delicious. It probably tasted even better than usual because this mountain rabbit had so much fat. The soup was just as delicious, if I did say so myself.

“Miss Mell. Your knowledge of slow-life subjects is most remarkable,” Sir Aiskoletta said.

“Oh, um, is it?”

“Absolutely! Tell me the name of the teacher who trained you.”

“I’m a Fore Elf, so our tribe lives off the blessings of the forest. Picking medicinal herbs and mushrooms used to be part of my daily life.”

“I see. It all makes sense!” That was when Sir Aiskoletta sat up straight and surprised me with an unthinkable question. “Miss Mell. What say you teach me the art of the slow life?”

“Huh?!”

I was, in fact, worried about Sir Aiskoletta’s prospects if he continued living here alone. But I wasn’t someone knowledgeable enough to be a proper teacher.

How on earth was I supposed to answer that? I glanced over at Captain Ludtink, who, once again, mouthed the words “Hurry up and tell him you’ll do it.”

“Ah, um, s-sure, if that’s what you want.”

“Many thanks!”

“R-Right…”

That was how I ended up as the person in charge of teaching Sir Ciel Aiskoletta, the great hero of legends, the art of living a slow life.

But…how did I manage to end up in this situation?!

“Now, where shall I move to?” Sir Aiskoletta wondered aloud.

I figured he’d be welcome anywhere, from the palace to any nobleman’s mansion, but Sir Aiskoletta took it in a completely different direction.

“I wish to live in a quiet place surrounded by nature, if possible.”

A strange character living a life surrounded by nature…that sounded like Zara, Charlotte, and me. Of course, we had Amelia and Blanche with us too.

I instantly looked at Zara and Amelia. Amelia replied, “It’s not a bad idea, is it?”

“Um, what do you think, Zara?” I asked.

“Why not? We have an empty room already,” he said. “Plus, it feels a lot safer having a great hero around.”

“That’s true…”

“But we better check with Charlotte first.”

“Yes, I agree.” I looked at Sir Aiskoletta and made a proposal. “Um, we live with a friend in a house outside of the royal capital, but it’s surrounded by nature. Would you like to live with us if that friend agrees?”

“Oho! So you too have been enjoying a slow life!”

No, I don’t think that’s the word for it, but our life certainly is “quiet.”

“I’d be honored to live with you, should your friend allow it,” Sir Aiskoletta said.

“Wonderful!”

The matter was settled. It was time to return to the royal capital.

“This calls for a teleportation spell.”

“Ah, we already have a carriage. …Um, should we meet you somewhere? I’m sure you have luggage of your own.”

“Then I shall teleport the entire carriage.”

That was a great hero, all right. It seemed he could teleport us and something as big as a carriage all at once.

I glanced at Captain Ludtink.

“I don’t care. Just tell him it’s fine.”

“Ah, okay. We’d be glad to use your magic, Sir Aiskoletta.”

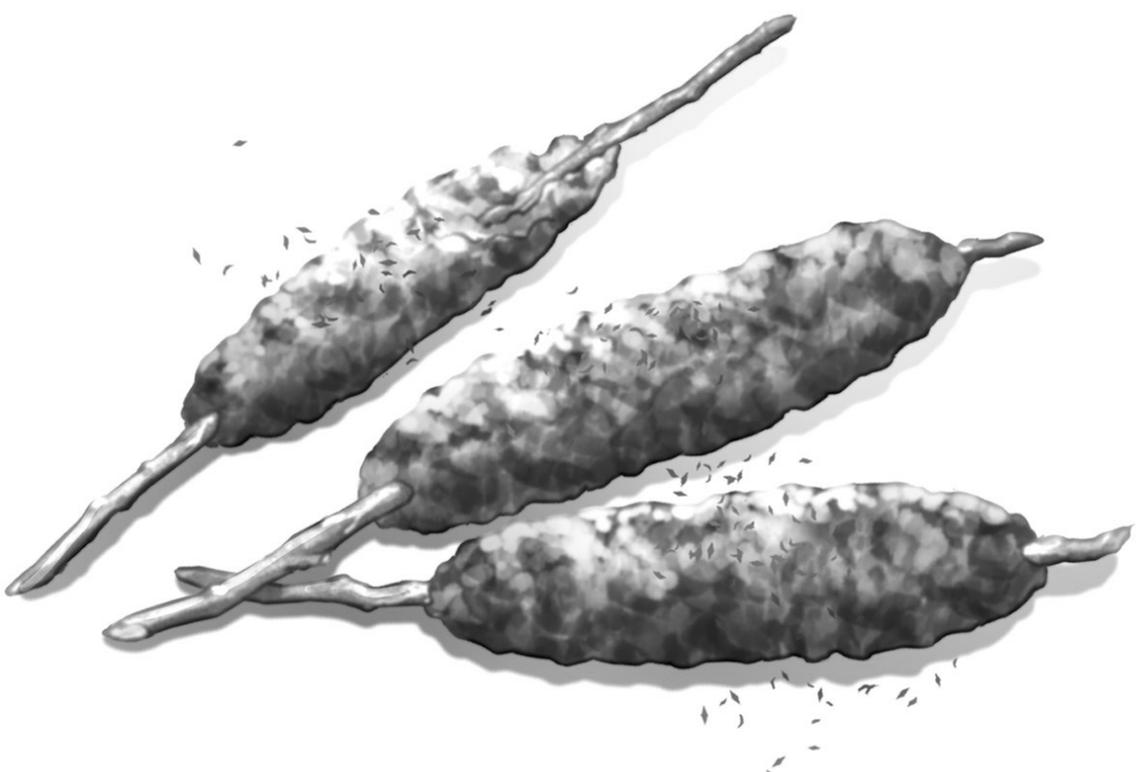
“We shall teleport to the foot of the mountain first.”

Teleportation spells were incredibly useful. I’d probably never be more grateful to have them than today.

Upon returning home, I asked Charlotte if Sir Aiskoletta could come live with us. She was tickled by the sight of his full-body suit of armor and gave her permission before even having a real conversation with him. Blanche shared her

sentiment.

That was how we came to welcome a new guest to our home.



Chapter 3: A Forest Apple Birthday Cake Full of Love

BLUE sky. White clouds. A house in the lush woods. Sir Ciel Aiskoletta, standing outside in a full suit of armor.

How did it come to this?!

I happened to run into Sir Aiskoletta on my morning off when I stepped into the garden to pick herbs. Frankly, I deserved praise for holding in my scream.

“Good morning, Miss Mell.”

Komerv, seated on Sir Aiskoletta’s shoulder, greeted me with a wave and a *“Good morning”* as well.

“Good morning, Sir Aiskoletta, Komerv.” I didn’t need to ask what he was up to. He clutched a basket of medicinal herbs like a housewife who’d just returned from the shopping district.

“I ventured into the woods and picked some medicinal herbs,” he said.

“Goodness. You’ve been busy this morning.”

It appeared he’d been hard at work since dawn.

“I ran into a few monsters, but I took care of them for you. I also cast a barrier to keep them away from your territory. Now there’s nothing to fear.”

“Uh, right… Thank you for doing so.” I looked into his basket after he asked me to check over his haul. After careful examination, I determined none of the plants he picked were poisonous. “Yes, these have all been harvested properly. You pass.”

“Hurrah!” Sir Aiskoletta puffed out his chest proudly. Komerv followed suit. “How do you preserve this particular herb?”

“We usually let them air dry. First, you wash away any dirt stuck to the leaves. Then you carefully wipe away the excess water, bundle them, and tie them with a cord. Then you should dry them in a place with good circulation and keep

them out of direct sunlight.”

“I see! So it’s best to keep them out of the sun,” he surmised.

“Exactly. The herb’s medicinal effects are weakened when they take in too much sun.”

“That’s news to me.”

“The herbs will be ready for use after a week or two of drying. Then you only have to preserve them by finely chopping them and placing the pieces in a jar. You can also roast them in a pot or bake them in an oven. There are many different ways of drying them,” I explained.

“Different strokes for different folks, as they say.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Sir Aiskoletta, Komerv, and I washed and bundled the herbs together. I hoped this meant he memorized the process for next time.

“I use the space under the roof for drying my herbs,” I said. “It’s out of the sun and gets good air circulation.”

“Understood.”

I could hang the bundles by their cords to let them dry up there.

“The ones here have been drying for about two weeks now.”

“Whoa! I didn’t know they’d turn out like this!”

“*So wrinkly.*”

“That’s right. They’ve dried nicely.”

I decided to make breakfast with my dried herbs and the ones Sir Aiskoletta picked.

“Allow me to help too.”

“Thank you. Please do.”

I felt bad about having a legendary hero help me in the kitchen, but as he put it, cooking with herbs you harvested was all part of the “slow life.” I didn’t really understand what he was getting at, but I couldn’t refuse him when he was so

eager to cook. We moved to the kitchen to get started.

There, in my kitchen, stood a legendary hero in full body armor. He was also wearing a frilly apron he borrowed from Zara. It was a bizarre sight, but I decided it was best not to let it get to me. Feeling my smile faltering, I spoke up to the knight.

“I’ll be getting started now.”

“And I’ll be learning from you.”

I started with a soup—something simple and appropriate for breakfast.

First, I got a pot and added boiled soybeans and scarlet eggplant paste I’d been preserving in jars. Then I threw in some mushrooms and bacon too.

“Sir Aiskoletta, could you tear up the herbs you picked and put them in the pot for me?”

“But of course.”

All that was left was to boil it and adjust the flavor with salt and pepper.

For my second dish, I decided to make butter with freshly harvested herbs.

“All you need to do is mince the herbs and mix them into the butter. Could you mince these for me?” I requested.

“You’ve got it.”

Sir Aiskoletta handled the knife work with total ease. I took the minced herbs and mixed them into butter.

“Now the herb butter is finished.”

“That smells brilliant.”

“Yes, it’s delicious. The aroma is even stronger when you actually eat it.”

“Then I look forward to it.”

I also made a cheese omelet with herbs and a salad with herb dressing. It turned into a more lavish breakfast than I’d been planning, but it was nice to indulge every once in a while. I put the bread I bought the day before in the oven to warm it up, brewed some herbal tea, and with that, breakfast was

ready.

I was in charge of breakfast on our days off. Charlotte handled lunch, and Zara cooked dinner for us.

Amelia was lounging around in the living room during this. In all honesty, she was the earliest riser of anyone in the house. She was sprawled out elegantly in front of the fireplace, but not to sleep—she was keeping watch on the fire for us. Amelia helpfully put more logs into the fireplace whenever the flames were dying down.

“Breakfast will be ready soon, Amelia,” I called out.

“Kreh!”

I spread my new tablecloth on the dining table, then placed some fresh flowers from the garden in the vase. Sir Aiskoletta helped me set the table too. Then he spread a cloth out in front of Amelia and served her assorted fruit and water. She nodded contently when he was finished.

“Wow! It is armor man. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Miss Charlotte.”

Charlotte had probably been awoken by the smell of breakfast. Album was wrapped around her neck—I wondered if he was cold. I’d been wondering where Album always went off to at night, but it turned out he was sleeping in Charlotte’s bed, since she had a higher body temperature as beastfolk.

Zara emerged in the kitchen next.

“…Morning, everyone.”

Zara had a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. He told me he woke up earlier than everyone else on expeditions just so he could have time to shake off his grogginess. Blanche resembled her owner in that regard, only waking up when she felt Zara’s bed grow cold.

“Breakfast is ready.”

Zara’s eyes went wide as saucers when Sir Aiskoletta, still dressed in the frilly apron, called out to him. If he wasn’t awake before, he certainly was now.

“I am hungry! Let us hurry and eat,” Charlotte said.

“*I’m starving too!”*

“Right. Let’s eat up while it’s still warm.”

I sat down and pressed my hands together, expressing gratitude for the food. When my prayer was done, I picked up my cup of herbal tea.

“Wow… Delicious.”

Today’s brew was apple grass tea. I’d cut thin slices of fresh forest apples, stewed them until they were mushy, then added dried apple grass and strained them together. The forest apples had a sourness that brought out the sweet aroma of the apple grass.

“This tea so sweet. I love it!”

“*Me too! Me too!*”

Charlotte and Album were gulping down the apple grass tea. It wasn’t long before I was refilling their empty cups.

“Thank you, Mell.”

“Of course.”

Sir Aiskoletta first reached for a slice of bread with herb butter. I could tell how eager he was to try it while I was making them. The butter had melted from the heat of the warm bread, filling the room with the strong scent of herbs.

As always, Sir Aiskoletta kept his helmet on while using the hole for his mouth to eat.

“Time to give this a try.” He took one giant bite of bread. “Mm! This is brilliant!”

The only ways to enjoy the taste and scent of medicinal herbs was to simply strain them and make tea, or to mix them into butter. I knew Sir Aiskoletta was enjoying the flavor of the herbs to the fullest. I took a piece of bread and spread a helping of herb butter over it to try for myself.

“These medicinal herbs are a bit bitter, but that tastes nice with the

smoothness of the butter. The strong wheat flavor really ties it all together!”

Some medicinal herbs tasted strange when made into a tea, but were made much more palatable when mixed in butter. It was hard not to go back for more helpings.

“Melly, this herb butter is amazing.”

“Thank you, Zara.”

This herb butter had something of a strange beginning. Dairy products were once completely foreign to the Fore Elf village. We lived on nothing but the blessings of the forest, and those blessings didn’t contain anything like cheese or butter. Dairy products finally started to be brought into the village once traders were given permission to visit us. Naturally, the Fore Elves became obsessed with this new form of food.

Some of them got absolutely hooked on eating bread with butter.

“But they couldn’t stop eating it,” I explained, recounting the story for the others. “Eventually, they got fat and their skin broke out.”

The Fore Elf village healer banned newly obese elves from eating butter, but it was no use. They suffered from butter withdrawals and still ate it anyway.

“Finally, the healer gave them permission to eat butter as long as they mixed in medicinal herbs. It was more delicious than expected. Herb butter exploded in popularity within the Fore Elf village. And so that recipe has been handed down to the current generation.”

“Who would have thought it had such an interesting history?”

Album was stuffing his cheeks with bread slathered with herb butter. I would have to keep a close eye on him to make sure he didn’t fatten up like a Fore Elf.

The other herb dishes were equally delicious. A delighted Sir Aiskoletta called this “the ultimate slow life.”

It was a fun start to our new life with Sir Aiskoletta.

VERY few people were informed of Sir Aiskoletta’s visit to the royal capital. He

probably didn't want a welcoming party from the entire kingdom, considering he was seeking a quieter life now. He even rejected the knights' request to dispatch guards to him. This was the man who took down a great boar in a single strike. I doubted he needed any guards to get by.

I could always count on Sir Aiskoletta to enjoy some form of "slow life" at our home in the woods while we were gone.

Lunchtime came at the barracks. Charlotte and I were eating Zara's specially-made lunches in the plaza where the knights trained. Zara had packed our lunch boxes with the very best of the best. He prepared hamburger steak sandwiches, fried potatoes, miniature omelets, and sausages. I could taste the care he put into them with every bite.

We were relaxing after our meal when Sly approached us with a small booklet in hand.

"What's the matter, Sly?" I asked.

She'd come here alone. Garr wasn't anywhere to be seen. Sly did her best to convey the situation using hand and body gestures. She transformed into the shape of Garr, and then again into a cake with candles sticking out of it.

"Um… Are you saying that Garr's birthday is coming up?" I guessed.

Sly smiled and gave me a thumbs-up. Then she opened up what appeared to be the calendar booklet distributed to all members of the Royal Order, tapping on the date that was ten days from now.

"This is Garr's birthday, isn't it?"

She gave me another thumbs-up. Then she transformed into the shapes of various foods and drinks, dancing and spinning around on the ground.

"I get it, I get it! Sly want to hold a birthday party!" Charlotte interpreted.

"Ah, so that's what you wanted to say! Did you come here to ask for our help?" I asked.

Still dancing, she gave me the third thumbs-up of the day.

"That sounds lovely." I smiled. "Let's get everyone together and have a big birthday party for Garr!"

“Yay! So fun! I want to help too!”

As excited as we were, I remembered that Garr was engaged to a woman named Fredrica. I would probably need to ask her if we could have Garr on the day of his birthday. If he already had plans, then we’d move the party to a different day.

“Let’s have the party at our house,” I suggested. “That way, there won’t be any neighbors to complain about us getting too loud.”

We even had a spare bed for guests if they wanted to sleep over. Of course, one guest was already staying with us, but the great hero shouldn’t cause our party any trouble.

I was already eager to lure Garr to the house under the pretense of a housewarming party, only to surprise him with a birthday party instead. I was certain that would make him happy.

“What should I do for Garr’s party?” Charlotte asked.

“It’s exciting to think about these things, isn’t it?”

“Yes! So fun!”

We would need the others to help us too. I started by asking Zara.

“What? A birthday party for Garr? Why, that sounds fabulous. Let’s do it.” Zara agreed to bake small, bite-size sweets for the party. This was music to my ears—I loved all of Zara’s desserts.

Next up was Ulgus. He didn’t hesitate for a second.

“Garr always looks after me. Let’s make it the best party ever!” Ulgus volunteered to hunt waterfowl in the forest for us to eat. That wouldn’t be an issue since it was currently hunting season.

I invited Liselotte next.

“A birthday party for Garr Garr? Of course I’ll attend.” She told me she had some special wine she could bring.

“It doesn’t have to be anything expensive,” I said.

“Father has more than enough in his collection. It won’t be an issue.”

I asked Lord Lichtenberger for permission just to be safe. He allowed us to take the wine.

Vice Captain Velrey and Captain Ludtink agreed to attend the party too. With that, all of our squadmates were on board.

Now I just had to ask Fredrica if she had plans with Garr so that I could finalize a date.

I'd first met her a year ago but had been too busy to see her again since. Fortunately, I knew her address and could send her a letter right away. Her response arrived the next evening.

Fredrica wrote that she'd wanted to spend Garr's birthday with him, but he turned her down, saying he might have to work that day. Now she hoped to join our party instead. We agreed to meet in two days, since I had the day off.

Our meeting place was the beautiful cafe with white walls we visited together a year ago. It was famous for its delicious waffles.

The two of us met up in front of the cafe.

"It's nice to see you again, Fredrica!"

"Yes, it's been so long." Fredrica was even more beautiful than when I last saw her. "What a surprise to hear you've entered into a contract with a mythical beast."

"Well, it's sort of a long story."

"Garr has told me about Amelia. I've always wanted to meet her."

Amelia let out a pleased cry when she heard Garr had spoken of her.

"She's so large, but so adorable."

"Thank you for saying so."

We decided to continue our conversation inside. The waitress greeted us with a smile—this cafe allowed mythical beasts inside just as it did any other customer.

"Welcome. Please have a seat at the back table."

I didn't sense many eyes on us as we walked to our table. I wondered if

customers at this cafe were used to seeing mythical beasts come in.

The last time I came to this cafe, I'd had to put a lot of thought into what kind of waffle I wanted. But today was easier. I chose a waffle with candied forest apple topping—a fruit at peak ripeness in the autumn. Amelia wanted forest apples too, while Fredrica ordered nothing more than a cup of black tea.

"I'd been hoping the two of us could talk again sometime," she said.

"I'm honored to hear that."

"But I know you have a busy job. I just couldn't work up the nerve to write to you."

Fredrica was a beautiful woman with catlike eyes, lips that were always curled upwards, and a determined spirit. But I also saw her as a thoughtful person who would step back from someone if she thought it was for their own good.

"We still haven't decided on a date for the wedding yet," she said. "My father says there are issues that need to be resolved."

"Is that so?"

She was worried that the wedding might not happen at all after a year of their engagement. But she was too scared to tell Garr that.

"I haven't been in the best place lately with everything on my mind, so your letter really cheered me up."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"But wouldn't I be in the way if it's only going to be people from work?" she worried.

"Of course not. The more the merrier."

"Well, that's a relief then."

We began to discuss our plans for the party.

"How would you feel about baking a cake with me, Fredrica?"

"A cake?"

"Yes!"

“How lovely! But I’ve never cooked anything before.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll be there to teach you.”

“In that case, I’d love to bake a cake together.”

“Then it’s decided!”

That was when the waitress arrived with my forest apple waffles and Fredrica’s black tea. I wasted no time in taking my first bite. I cut off a small piece of the waffle and topped it with the candied forest apples.

“Mmmmm!”

The crisp candied apples paired so well with the fluffy waffle. A gentle sweetness tickled my taste buds.

“Ah, you don’t want to order a waffle, Fredrica?” I asked.

“I’m all right. I don’t have much of an appetite with everything on my mind.”

“I see.”

“But you know what? I feel a bit better now that I’ve gotten to talk to you, Mell.”

“Does that mean you’re hungry again?”

“It seems so.”

“Then let’s get you a waffle.”

“That sounds lovely.”

The waitress brought her a menu when we called her over. Fredrica ended up ordering a raspberry waffle.

“My forest apple waffle is really good too. Here, try a bite!” I offered.

“Th-Thank you.”

I doubted Fredrica ever shared bites like this in her normal life. She hesitated, but agreed to try the bite I held out for her.

“Oh my. It really is delicious!”

“Right? Forest apples are in season this time of year.”

“Is that so? I didn’t know that. I wish Garr was here to try some too.”

“We can always bake him a forest apple cake!” I suggested.

“A forest apple cake? That sounds delightful. Garr will just love that.”

That was how Fredrica and I decided to bake a forest apple cake together.

When I got home, I informed Sir Aiskoletta about our party for Garr.

“Just forget that I’m here. Enjoy your party.”

“Would you care to join us, Sir Aiskoletta?”

“Oh? You don’t mind?”

“Not at all! Although, I’d appreciate it if you could help me prepare for this slow-life-style party too.”

Sir Aiskoletta leaned forward like he couldn’t wait to hear more. I couldn’t see his face underneath his helmet, but I got the sense that he was grinning for some reason.

“So? What’s the plan?” he asked.

“I’d like to make a medicinal herb candle. It should be extra fragrant.”

“Hmm. Most fascinating!”

An herb candle would definitely be a nice decoration to add as a centerpiece to the table. We wasted no time in getting started.

“All we need are dried herbs, essential oil, beeswax, wicks, and a glass jar.”

I started by melting the wax. Instead of putting it directly over a flame, I put it in a double boiler over hot water.

“Please stir slowly and carefully. Don’t go too fast.”

“Got it.”

I prepared the herbs while Sir Aiskoletta melted the wax. I decided to use lavender—a scent that would surely make for a relaxing party—and combined it with the very fragrant essential oil I made out of rose petals.

“How’s this look?” he asked.

“Yes, it looks like it’s nicely melted.”

Next, I poured the melted beeswax into the bottle and added the dried lavender. Then I stirred it together before pouring in the essential oil. Finally, I just had to add the wick and the candle was complete.

“Now we just need to keep it in a cool, dark place.”

“I never knew they made candles like this.”

“Interesting, isn’t it?”

I’d heard of different varieties that used berries, soybeans, or even rice bran.

“I’ve used candles all my life and never given them a second thought. I learned a lot today. You’ve given me an excellent bit of slow-life knowledge.”

“Stop, or I’ll blush.”

After that, Sir Aiskoletta practiced making even more medicinal herb candles.

FIVE days before Garr’s birthday party, I invited Fredrica to our house to practice baking a forest apple cake.

“You really live here, Mell?!”

“I do. It’s very fun getting to live with my friends, even if it *is* in the middle of a forest.”

“That’s lovely. It’s like something out of a fairy tale.”

“Thank you!”

The house only felt more like something out of a fairy tale when Charlotte, a girl with fox ears and a fluffy tail, came running outside to greet Fredrica.

“Welcome!”

“Good day.”

“I am Charlotte! And you?”

“My name is Fredrica.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

After their introduction, Charlotte picked up a net on a stick that was sitting in the garden.

“We go pick apples in the forest now!”

“What?!” Fredrica’s eyes went wide as saucers. She must not have expected the forest apples to be locally sourced.

“A fairy that lives with us happened to find a forest apple tree. That’s where we’ll be getting the apples,” I said.

“Y-You have a fairy here?”

“I do. His name is Album.” I retrieved Album from my bag to show her.

“*Hi there. Nice to meet ya.*”

“He talks!”

“He certainly does. Album is a white ferret and a fairy who can talk.”

Album’s arrival only made it look even more like we were living in a fairy tale world.

“All set for your cake?”

The next person to emerge was Sir Aiskoletta, dressed in a full suit of armor and bright red cloak.

“Wh-Who’s that?!” Fredrica asked.

“Um…he’s just an old man I know,” I said awkwardly.

Sir Aiskoletta wanted to keep his identity as a hero hidden and had asked me to introduce him as an old man who happened to be an acquaintance of mine. That was why I made sure not to share his real name, allowing him to keep up his act.

“Wh-Why…is he…wearing armor?” she asked.

“H-He just really looks up to knights.”

That was part of the backstory Sir Aiskoletta came up with too. It wasn’t very believable, but what else could we do but lie?

“Oh. Very well. I won’t mind him, then.”

That was the Fredrica I knew. She was very mature. Sir Aiskoletta’s presence was really best left ignored.

“All right. Let’s go hunt for forest apples!”

“Woo-hoo!”

“Prepare to meet your maker, forest apples!”

“*I’m starving!*”

“Please agree on one cheer to use, or it’s just a lot of noise…”

With that, it was time to depart.

“*There were soooo many forest apples on that tree.*” Album had stopped himself from eating the apples he came across. He wanted to save them for a time when we were all together. “*It always tastes better when you’re eating with your friends.*”

“That’s very true.” I scratched Album’s head and called him a good boy. He squinted his eyes like he was enjoying it.

“*You go straight down this path. Then it’s on the right!*”

We followed our guide down the path, weaving between trees—their leaves turning red with the changing season. Eventually, we stumbled upon a tree that was packed with ripe forest apples.

“Ah! There it is!”

“Found it!”

“And what a marvelous forest apple tree it is.”

We’d been walking for about thirty minutes at this point. I turned around to look at Fredrica.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Y-Yes. I’m just surprised. I’ve never been to a place like this before.”

“Look at all the forest apples!”

“I see. They look delicious.”

“I’m sure they are!”

Album and Charlotte wasted no time climbing the tree and plucking the apples.

“Please be careful up there, you two!” I told them.

“I am okay! I am good tree climber!”

“*I’m a forest fairy, so this is nothing for me!*”

I decided to take an apple so we could see how they tasted. Charlotte and Album skillfully climbed down from the tree.

I split the apple into two pieces, only to find the inside was filled with nectar.

“Wow! These forest apples have nectar!”

Nectar forest apples were produced by selective breeding. I wondered if this tree had been grown from specially cultivated forest apple seeds.

“I heard that it was a poor harvest for nectar forest apples this year.”

“That must mean we’re really lucky!”

I skinned the apple with my knife and cut it into pieces for us to try.

“Mmm! It’s delicious!”

They were nice and crisp, with a robust sweetness that came through once the sour taste died down. I should have expected the nectar variety to be even more delicious than the forest apples I’d eaten throughout my life.

“Well done, Album!” I praised him.

“*Eheheh!*”

There was no question about it—a cake made from these apples would be an absolute treat. The others helped me pick more apples until we had enough to head back.

ONCE we returned home, Charlotte started to teach Sir Aiskoletta how to make candied forest apples in the backyard. I could hear them laughing and shouting all the way from the opposite side of the house.

Blanche, Zara's mythical beast, gave us the warmest of welcomes when we came inside. She was probably lonely, what with Zara in town to run errands. But this came as yet another strange surprise to Fredrica.

"I'm sorry about her, Fredrica."

"N-No, that's quite all right. She's a very big cat, isn't she?"

"That's right."

The friendly Blanche nuzzled up against Fredrica and didn't hold back any of her strength. Amelia noticed Fredrica was flustered, so she nudged Blanche into another room.

"Let's see… This is the kitchen over here."

"R-Right." Fredrica suddenly had a look of anxiety on her face when we stepped into the kitchen.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I'm merely nervous. I've never cooked anything in all my life."

"There's no need to overcomplicate things. You cook with your heart, not your head. But you do need to use your head to follow the recipe."

"You cook with your heart…but use your head to follow the recipe…"

"Let's give it our best shot, okay?"

"Right."

We wasted no time in getting started. We were going to bake a trial forest apple cake.

"This cake is a simple variety from the Fore Elf village, not anything too fancy," I said.

"It's an honor to learn a traditional Fore Elf recipe."

"Well, I do hope you like it…"

"I'm sure I will. Garr always says the meals you make on expeditions are delicious."

"I…didn't know he told you about that."

“Yes, and that’s why I’ve wanted to learn how you cook.”

“Then please allow me to instruct you.”

Although, there wasn’t much to instruct. This was a simple cake for the busy elves to whip up in a short period of time. However, it was also the most delicious recipe I knew.

“First, add the sugar to the butter and mix them together until it’s all white.”

I let Fredrica stir while I measured the flour.

“This…is somewhat…difficult…isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes, it takes some muscle.”

She wiped the sweat from her brow as she mixed up the butter.

“Then you whip the eggs and add them to the butter, followed by grated lemon peel. You should stir them together again after that.”

I put Fredrica in charge of those steps.

“Allow me to do the rest of the stirring.”

“Good. I know I can count on you.”

She next stirred in flour and poured in milk in small increments. I took on the job of peeling and thinly slicing the forest apples. I laid them out in a greased cake pan to form the shape of a circle.

“Now pour the batter into the cake pan.”

“O-Okay.” Fredrica poured the batter very carefully so as not to dislodge the ring of forest apples.

“Now we just have to bake it.”

Fredrica looked like a weight had finally been lifted from her shoulders. She let out a sigh of relief before grinning at me.

“Let’s take a little break, what do you say?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

I brewed some tea and served it with leftover forest apple slices.

“These nectar forest apples are so delicious.”

“I’m excited to see how the cake turns out.”

As we were chatting in the living room, Charlotte and Album entered the house with cheers of “We’re back!” I turned to look at them and saw the pair’s faces were completely black with soot.

“Charlotte! Album! What happened to you two?!” I asked.

“Armor man blew on fire to make it bigger and a huuuge cloud of smoke came out.”

“*I’m all black now!*”

“There’s hot water in the kitchen, Charlotte. Go wash whatever you can off your face.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Fredrica was blinking rapidly at this sudden development.

“I’m sorry about that. It’s very lively around here,” I said.

“That’s all right. I was surprised at first, but now I’m sort of having fun too. This place is like something out of a picture book.”

We had mythical beasts, fairies, beastfolk, and old men in full suits of armor. Any ordinary person would definitely see this house as something strange and special.

“You’re an elf too after all, Mell.”

“Oh, right. I completely forgot.”

Elves like me were also usually found in picture books. Then there was Zara, who was like a beautiful goddess, and an assortment of mysterious creatures throughout the house.

“I haven’t been so excited about something since I was a little girl. It brings me back to the day I first met Garr,” Fredrica said.

“I bet Garr was adorable as a child.”

“Absolutely! His ears were droopy when he was little!”

“I really…wish I could have seen that…”

Garr with droopy ears was probably adorable enough to make even the strongest of men tremble.

“But he’s grown big and strong, of course.”

“I hope you’re able to have your wedding soon.”

Fredrica blushed and nodded. That was when I realized something. Garr’s love for her must have been what made her turn so beautiful.

I started to feel a bit jealous of Fredrica—someone with marriage in her near future.

A sweet aroma filled the kitchen, alerting me that the cake was ready. I removed it from the stove and saw it had turned a nice brown color.

“It turned out perfectly, Fredrica.”

“It looks so nice!”

I spread some liqueur over it to finish it up. The forest apple cake was now complete. All we had to do was see how it tasted.

“Mell, candied apples ready too! Let us eat together,” Charlotte said.

“Oh, great idea!”

I cut up the cake and served the slices on plates, making sure to include a side serving of Sir Aiskoletta and Charlotte’s candied apples.

“The candied apples are like a sauce for the cake.”

We decided to eat outside as the weather was perfect. Sir Aiskoletta prepared us log chairs and table stumps to eat off, while Charlotte brewed us black tea.

“Oh my! It’s like a tea party with the forest fairies. How charming!” Fredrica was moved by our outdoor tea party. Sir Aiskoletta complimented us on our forest apple cake.

“Tasty-looking cake you’ve made there.”

“Fredrica and I baked it to see if it would be a good option for Garr’s birthday

party. Your candied apples look good too!" I said.

"Indeed. Miss Charlotte told me it was her secret recipe. We must all try it at once."

"*Yay!*"

We wasted no time in digging in. The cake was thick and had considerable weight to it. I cut off a bite and brought it to my mouth.

"Yes, this tastes great!"

The outside of the cake had a crunch to it while the inside was moist, still carrying the distinct sourness of the forest apples. I tried a bite of candied apples with it next.

"This goes really well with the cake too!"

Most of the sweetness was baked out of the raw forest apples in the cake, while the candied apples were cooked with sugar. There was even an aroma to them that reminded me of caramel.

"I see. The cake and candied apples take two different recipes and combine them into a single sweet."

"Why, you're right. Both of them are delicious on their own, but they're only more scrumptious when eaten together."

"Then you should serve them together at the birthday party!"

"I agree!"

"That's a smart idea!"

Our forest apple cake had powered up into "forest apple cake with candied-apple sauce."

When the sun started to set that evening, a carriage from Fredrica's home arrived to pick her up.

The young woman took my hand and said goodbye to me.

"Thank you for everything, Mell. I had a delightful day."

"So did I."

We would meet again at Fredrica's house to bake the real cake the day before the party.

"I look forward to working with you again."

"As do I."

I was already eager to see if Garr would be pleased with our work.

Sly had told me she would be embroidering a handkerchief for Garr with a detailed depiction of his face. As always, Sly's nimble handiwork was most impressive.

Charlotte and I went out to buy our own presents for Garr. I chose a lightweight wooden cup and had the shop engrave his name on it. Charlotte picked out a brush made with boar-pig hair bristles.

"I love this brush too!" she said.

I tried brushing my own hair with it, but it was a bit stiff. Beastfolk probably needed sturdier brushes like these.

Preparations for the birthday party were coming along well.

The day before the surprise finally came, so I headed to Fredrica's house to bake our forest apple cake. I left Charlotte, Sir Aiskoletta, and Album to work on the candied apples at home. Zara was hard at work making sweets too. Even Liselotte was using her night to negotiate with her father about which wines to bring.

No one was sparing the slightest effort.

Meanwhile, Vice Captain Velrey was ordering catering from a restaurant and Captain Ludtink was going to bring his fiancée Marina—a woman who excelled in domestic arts.

It was shaping up to be a really lively party. I could barely wait for tomorrow.

Fredrica's forest apple cake eventually came out of the oven looking beautiful.

"This looks even better than our last one."

"It really does."

“I’m sure Garr will love it.”

Garr would be coming to our house tomorrow for what he thought was a housewarming party. What face would he make when we surprised him?

“I’m so excited, Fredrica!”

“As am I!”

All that was left now was to wait.

IT’S *finally the day of the surprise party!*

Ulgus and Sly were hard at work decorating the house.

The living room had turned into an adorable party venue covered in artificial roses and ribbons. Zara and Sly were the ones to come up with the designs, and they went out and purchased all the decorations while I was at Fredrica’s house.

Ulgus also hunted a water bird that Charlotte spent the morning preparing and roasting whole. She was dressed up with ribbons around her legs too. Having a cake and a whole roast bird only made it feel more like a party at the house.

The next addition was Zara and his homemade baked goods. He filled a three-tiered tray with a beautiful arrangement of bite-size cookies, scones, sandwiches, and fruit, making our table look even fancier.

“Sorry I’m late.” Vice Captain Velrey arrived with a five-tiered box of food filled with catering from a restaurant.

“Wow! It looks delicious!”

She’d secured a bounty of fried potatoes, grilled meat, meatballs, sausage, fish skewers, and mushroom gratin.

Album jumped for joy when he saw the food. I also prepared some intricately cut fruit Lord Lichtenberger had sent me for Amelia and Blanche.

Liselotte arrived with a hundred-year-old bottle of wine.

“Are you sure we can have this, Liselotte?” I asked.

“Certainly. Father told me I could take whichever I pleased.”

“I guess I’m not surprised anymore.”

I just hoped that Lord Lichtenberger wasn’t crying back at home, having lost one of his precious wines…

“Good day, everyone!”

Marina, Captain Ludtink’s fiancée, arrived in high spirits. We hadn’t seen each other in some time, and I was glad to see she was doing well. She told me that they discussed the true reason for the delay in their marriage the other day. It turned into a long fight, but they were able to reconcile in the end.

The next person to arrive with refreshments was Sir Aiskoletta. To my shock, he was carrying a bucket full of ice cream, which he explained was staying frozen with a spell.

“I went home with a teleportation spell last night and had my chef come up with this.”

“Wow, that’s wonderful! Thank you so much!”

The unexpected dessert from the hero only heightened my anticipation.

Sly, who’d come to the house before Garr, was visibly fidgeting. I knew she must be nervous about the party’s outcome as the person who planned it.

“Don’t worry, Sly. He’s going to love it.”

Sly responded with a thumbs-up.

One hour later, the guest of honor arrived with Fredrica. Garr was holding a bouquet of red roses—a housewarming present for us.

The moment he set foot in the living room, we all cried out in unison.

“Happy birthday, Garr!”

“!”

His eyes went wide as saucers. Fredrica informed him that this was a surprise party to celebrate his birthday.

“And it was all planned by Sly!” I said.

Sly had disguised herself as jello inside a glass bowl, but now she popped up and waved at Garr.

It seemed to finally hit Garr that this was his birthday party after we gave him our presents. Our surprise was a total success.

An excited Captain Ludtink held up the celebratory wine.

“All right. I’m openin’ Lord Lichtenberger’s booze!”

“It’s for Garr, Captain Ludtink!”

“C’mon, just let me taste it.”

Only Sir Aiskoletta, Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, and Garr drank the wine. The rest of us stuck to forest apple juice.

“Take it away, Ulgus,” the captain said.

“Whaaat? You want me to lead the toast again?”

“Just get it over with.”

“Urk… Okay…”

Poor Ulgus. But there was no rejecting an order from the captain. I was mentally cheering him on.

“Um, all right then… Cheers to a wonderful birthday for Garr, and to the love between Captain Ludtink and Marina now that they’ve made up!”

“Screw you, Ulgus!”

We ended up toasting to the sound of “*Screw you, Ulgus!*”

Everyone was smiling. Garr and Fredrica were laughing together. The party was off to a wonderful start.

Before anything else, I wanted Garr to try the forest apple cake with candied apples.

“Fredrica made this cake for you, Garr,” I said.

“Oh my! That cake must be full of love.” Marina’s comment made Fredrica blush.

“I-It wasn’t just me,” she said. “We all worked on it together.”

But that didn’t change the fact that Fredrica’s cake was full of love. She sliced up the cake, looking a bit stiff, and added a helping of candied apples. Everyone watched over her with concern when we saw that her hands were trembling.

“Here, Garr.”

Fredrica, with a look of obvious nerves, handed a slice of forest apple cake to Garr. This made Garr equally as nervous. His ears perked up and his facial hair started to twitch restlessly.

“You oughta drink some water first, Garr, or you won’t even be able to taste it.” Captain Ludtink handed him a cup of water, which Garr gulped down in one go. After he caught his breath again, he took a bite of the cake.

For a moment, his eyes went so wide that I thought they might fall out of his head. Fredrica’s mouth was hanging open, so I knew I had to be the one to ask for her.

“How…do you like it?”

Garr started to shed tears. He said he was incredibly happy to eat such a delicious cake on his birthday.

He gently took Fredrica's hands in his and thanked her. The whole room was filled with the warmth we could see the two of them sharing. They were such a lovely couple—even I felt bliss just watching them.

But that heartwarming moment didn't last very long.

"All right! Let's drink up!"

Captain Ludtink sent the cork in the wine bottle flying up toward the ceiling. The party was about to go into full swing.

As for me, I grabbed a small cookie and ate it in a single bite. What hit me first was the rich taste of butter.

"Aaah! Your sweets are the best, Zara!" I gushed.

"Glad to hear it. You just made all my hard work worth it."

"If you opened a bakery, I'd visit every single day."

"Gosh, Melly! I'll bake for you whenever you want."

"I'd love that!"

Amelia and Blanche ate their fruit together.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh."

"Meow?"

Amelia was moved by the fruit cut into the shape of swans. Blanche was more interested in eating than appreciating the beauty of her food. She'd started to eat fruit and honey on her own lately too.

Ulgus was eating the roast bird Charlotte had carved up.

"Eat lots, June!" Charlotte encouraged him.

"I will, thanks!"

They were so much like a doting older sister and her little brother. Although, Charlotte was actually the younger one.

Vice Captain Velrey and Marina were trying the food together.

"Hey, Marina. Stop chit-chatting with Velrey and come hang out with me,"

Captain Ludtink pouted.

“I’m having much more fun talking to Miss Anna than some drunk.”

“Miss Anna? What the hell’s that about?!”

I completely understood how Marina felt. I, too, would prefer a pleasant chat with Vice Captain Velrey instead of entertaining a drunken Captain Ludtink.

I suddenly realized that Liselotte wasn’t at the table. But all I had to do was turn around to find her staring at Amelia and Blanche with a wine glass in one hand. She needed only mythical beasts, not food, to enjoy her alcohol with. I didn’t even know Liselotte drank. But I decided to leave her alone, since she was clearly already having a good time.

“*Old man, this one is tasty too.*”

“Try this one next, Master.”

“Very well. I thank you both.”

Album and Komerv were on either side of Sir Aiskoletta, the three of them enjoying themselves in their own way. I found it strangely cute.

That was when I noticed the guests in the corner who were having a very different party experience than the rest of us.

Fredrica was feeding Garr bites of cake off of her fork. The couple looked truly happy—as did Sly when she looked on at the two of them. Seeing the expression on her face made all of the strenuous party preparations worth it.

The party raged on for about five hours in total. There were no neighbors around us to complain, so we could be as loud as we wanted.

By the end, Captain Ludtink was stumbling drunk and fiercely proposing marriage to Marina.

Marina loved this, despite how red she was turning. They were the most exciting characters of the night if you excluded the guests of honor, Garr and Fredrica.

But then Garr stunned me too. At the very end, he took out an engagement ring and presented it to Fredrica. He told us he’d planned to give it to her on

their way back from the party. Fredrica wept, but she was overjoyed.

For whatever reason, the whole thing made my heart flutter.

“Marriage is such a wonderful thing!”

Zara responded to me with a soft “I think so too.”

A previous desire returned to me in that moment. I wished that, someday, I could marry someone I wanted to share the rest of my life with too.

Chapter 4: The Woman of the Sea and a Seafood Boil

THE night of the party subsided all too soon, leaving us to face a normal day of work the next morning. Captain Ludtink…had a hangover. I'd expected as much—he really had gulped down the liquor he brought to the party with him.

"Ugh…"

I handed a cup of warm milk to the captain, who was clutching his head and groaning. It would probably help him sober up. I'd been taught that milk was used for hangovers as it contained components that helped boost liver function.

"This is stuff kids drink," he grumbled.

"They say that milk can also help relieve head pain. Please think of it as medicine and be sure to finish your cup."

"Damn it!"

"This is what happens when you have too much alcohol."

"I didn't even realize how much I was drinkin'."

He'd probably started because Vice Captain Velrey was keeping Marina all to herself. Zara tried to stop him, but he refused to listen.

"Do you remember much about last night?" I asked.

"Lemme think… I remember that Marina wouldn't stop talking to Velrey."

"That's all?!"

He seemed to have forgotten his proposal to Marina in front of everyone. They were things he probably never would have said if he was sober.

"Marina's bein' real sweet today… It's creepy…" he groaned.

Of course she was. The captain's proposal had been passionate enough to make even Liselotte blush.

"You shouldn't call her creepy, Captain Ludtink!" I scolded.

“Yeah, I know. You and Marina both really love to yell in my ear, huh?”

That was when an emergency bulletin arrived for the groggy Captain Ludtink.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“It’s a mission.”

“A what?!”

With his bandit’s face, he glared at the innocent knight who’d come to deliver the bulletin. I felt bad for the man, so I told him he could leave now.

“Damn it… Why did this have to come now…?!” Captain Ludtink looked it over and then clicked his tongue. He ordered me to call the other members into the office.

Once they’d gathered, Captain Ludtink scowled at the paper and started to relay its information to us.

“We have a mission. Fishermen…in a port town… Ugh, you read it, Velrey.”

“Yes, Captain!”

Captain Ludtink’s head was hurting too much to read the bulletin. He downed his cup of warm milk in one gulp.

“A dispute within the fishing industry has broken out in a port town. Head there at once to act as their arbitrators.”

“Damn it! My head’s already throbbin’ enough as it is.”

“Why not stay behind, Captain?” I suggested.

“I’m goin’ with you, obviously!”

A carriage to the port town had already been prepared for us. The groggy captain led us toward it. He decided to sit next to the driver on the outside of the carriage, telling us he would throw up inside. The cold breeze made him feel a little better.

Poor driver…

It sounded like the fishing industry in this port town had devolved into arguments with each other. One side made their living by free diving and

harvesting shellfish, while the other side was now starting to free dive after using nets to fish up to this point.

They'd promised not to harvest any shellfish, but when the original free divers were starting to find less and less shellfish of their own, they accused the net fishermen of stealing their shellfish, and this escalated into a real dispute.

The knights at the port town tried to stop them, but men who lived off of the sea were stubborn, brawny types. It was like trying to reason with wild monsters. That was why the expeditionary squadron was called for help.

Ulgus told me there were other reasons too. "The town's knights said it wouldn't go over well if they tried to force the fishermen to drop the argument. They're usually on good terms with the knights, but when the knights tried to step into the argument, the fishermen were only further enraged, demanding they take a side. It's a tricky situation."

Vice Captain Velrey agreed with Ulgus's conclusion.

"Didn't you grow up in a port town too, Vice Captain?"

"I did. But it's a tiny town far away from here, not close to the capital like this one." Vice Captain Velrey really did feel like a woman of the sea. "We ate fresh shellfish and fish instead of sweets in my town."

"Is that like how they say the children of farmers eat vegetables for dessert?"

"That's right."

"Did your town's fishermen get into fights or arguments too?"

"Yeah, they did. It wasn't all the time, but I remember them getting into it now and then."

There were no knights' barracks in Vice Captain Velrey's hometown, so if any fights broke out, only vigilantes could intervene and mediate.

"But it wouldn't be a fair outcome if any of the vigilantes were friends with the fishermen. I'm sure this port town's knights and fishermen have known each other for years."

I wondered if the knights ever thought their good friends would cause such serious trouble like this.

We arrived at the town in our carriage. The local knights greeted us and immediately led us to the scene where we were needed.

The confrontation appeared to be centered around a harbor. More than fifty fishermen were gathered there. I could feel the tension between them all.

“The fishermen are armed with harpoons and oars. No one’s been injured yet, but they’ve been in a standoff for half a day now.” This knight told us that the two fishermen’s unions had stopped all shipments of seafood and the fish market was completely empty. At this rate, it was even going to affect the royal capital’s fish market eventually. “Forgive us. We weren’t able to solve this ourselves.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just focus on gettin’ the market under control.”

“Yes, sir. We appreciate the help.”

Now how was Captain Ludtink going to mediate? I was eager to see what tricks he had up his sleeve.

“Hey, fishermen, tell me— Urp!” He clapped his hand over his mouth and sprinted into a nearby shop. It seemed the hangover was still going strong. All he’d accomplished was gathering everyone’s attention before disappearing.

We were at a definite disadvantage without the scary-faced Captain Ludtink there with us.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“I’ve never seen any of ’em before!”

The men glared at us, somehow growing even more intense than when Captain Ludtink was there. How did it come to this?

Liselotte remained composed, but I was scared. Garr let me hide behind him. It was Vice Captain Velrey who took a fearless step forward.

“Can you put your weapons down and talk to me?”

“This has got nothing to do with the likes of you! Stay out of it!”

“Yeah, what he said!”

“But the market is in chaos because of your fight,” she said.

“What’re we supposed to do about that? We only sell shellfish, and these guys are stealin’ ’em!”

“No, we’re not!”

“Liar! Our hauls started comin’ up a fraction of what they used to be, and it all started a week ago!”

It was hard to prove who was doing what. I didn’t know how we could stop this dispute.

“It can’t go on like this. Let us step in and listen to—”

“And why the hell would we listen to a little lady who doesn’t know the first thing about fishin’?”

“Yeah! He’s right!”

“You’re saying that I can’t dive?”

When Vice Captain Velrey asked that question, a warm breeze blew past us. The weather that day was strangely hot despite it being the middle of autumn. It was as if the fury of the fishermen was warming the whole area.

Still, it was unthinkable to say that someone from a port town like the vice captain couldn’t go diving.

I sensed an indescribable intensity coming from her back.

“Will you speak to me if I free dive and come back with at least one shellfish?” she asked.

“U-Uh, well…”

“You’ve gotta prove you can actually do it first.”

“I see. Good. I’ll do it right now.”

Someone whistled, signaling that they didn’t believe her. Indeed, free diving wasn’t something any amateur could do.

Vice Captain Velrey stripped down to her normal clothes. Some of the fishermen cheered her on for this.

“Let’s do this at the rocks. I doubt I’ll find any shellfish here,” she said.

“Someone better keep an eye on her, or she might come back with one she got from the market.”

“But there’s no shellfish in the market right now, since we can’t catch any.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

But a few fishermen ended up following her. I knew they were probably curious to see if she would succeed.

We left the harbor and headed for the rocks on the beach. A strong wave struck a boulder, spraying the surroundings with water. I hoped she would be okay with waves this dangerous.

“Um, Vice Captain…”

“Don’t worry, Medic Risurisu. My hometown had much rougher seas than this.”

“I-I see. But please don’t overexert yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Vice Captain Velrey left her belt, with her twin blades attached to it, to Ulgus. Then she removed her boots and socks and moved to the rocks. With her knife in one hand, she dove straight into the ocean without a second of hesitation.

“She’ll need a change of clothes after this,” I said.

“Ah, I’ll go buy some, Medic Risurisu.”

“But won’t it be difficult for you to buy women’s clothes, Ulgus?”

“Ah! Th-That’s true.”

“What’s this? Sounds like a job for little ol’ me.” Zara took off before I could respond. He was a man too, but he knew a lot about women’s clothes, so it probably wouldn’t be an issue.

I also took out a large cloth for Vice Captain Velrey to dry off with and draped it over Amelia’s back. After that, I retrieved my fire starter and lit a fire that I used to boil a kettle. It was a warm day, but I knew she’d be cold coming out of the ocean. What better relief could I provide than a warm drink?

Garr headed to the inn to ask them to prepare a bath. That was probably

everything we needed for now. All that was left was to wait for her to come back up.

Vice Captain Velrey's head emerged from the water time after time to get more air. I leaned forward to see how she was doing.

"Please take a break the next time you come up for air, Vice Captain!" I called.

"I will. Thanks, Medic Risurisu."

With that, she went back down again. I knew her visibility had to be poor in such rough waters.

The fishermen were laughing amongst themselves during this.

"I knew a young lass like her didn't know how to free dive."

"Even we don't go fishin' when the sea's this rough."

"She's gonna get swept away if she doesn't give up soon."

"O-Oh no…"

Even the fishermen wouldn't go in the water on a day like this.

I watched the sea with a racing heart until I saw her head break the water's surface again. Not only that, but she was clutching a bivalve creature this time.

“Whoa! A shellfish!”

She climbed back up to the beach and I put the cloth around her as soon as I could. Then I passed her a cup of warm tea.

Garr told us that the rooms at the inn were booked and she would have a bath and change of clothes waiting for her too.

“Thanks, everyone.”

Furthermore, Vice Captain Velrey had returned with more than one shellfish. She opened her leather pouch to reveal seven fist-sized shellfish inside.

“That’s amazing, Vice Captain! You harvested all of these when the waves were so rough?” I asked.

“Yep. I found a cluster of them down there.”

“Incredible!”

The fishermen’s mouths were hanging open in shock. They couldn’t believe Vice Captain Velrey had managed to free dive successfully.

“Now can we sit down and talk for real?” she asked.

“S-Sure…”

“A promise is a promise.”

“You’re not too shabby at that…”

“Then head back to the fishermen’s union and don’t cause any more trouble. I want to investigate before we talk.” She sent the fishermen away, though they were quickly replaced by Captain Ludtink who’d come and found us.

“Are you doing all right, Captain?”

“I feel better after pukin’.”

“I see.”

“More importantly, why’re you soakin’ wet, Velrey?”

“You see…” She recounted the story to Captain Ludtink.

“Hm. I see how it is. Head on back to the inn and get your bath. You must be

freezin'."

"Yes, Captain. But take a look at what I found at the rocks before I go." Vice Captain Velrey held out a coin with foreign text inscribed on it. "This is a three link coin from the next country over."

Our kingdom had become more cautious about dealing with this foreign country's coins after a counterfeiting scandal. Foreign currency was now exchanged before entering the kingdom's borders. That meant there was no plausible explanation for a foreign coin being found here.

"I have a theory that fishermen from the neighboring country might be the ones harvesting the shellfish," she explained.

"It's possible. All right. You head back and change while we look into this."

"Roger that."

After Vice Captain Velrey left, we split into two groups to conduct our investigation.

"Garr, Risurisu, Zara, and Amelia. You four look into foreigners around town. Ulgus, Lichtenberger, and I will investigate the coastline. C'mon, let's get a move on."

Ulgus had disappointment written all over his face, but he replied with, "Understood, Captain." He knew what he had to do. I could guess that he would've preferred to investigate with the kindhearted Garr.

"You got something to say, Ulgus?"

"Not at all!" he replied with a look of dissatisfaction.

"What're you makin' that face for?"

"That's just my face."

"Ugh. Forget it. Let's get goin'."

"Okay!"

Our group was ready to head out too.

Lodges and inns were places in town that would have lots of people coming and going. We went to our inn and waited for a moment when the receptionist

wasn’t busy. She was quick to cooperate when we showed her our knight’s bracelets.

“Excuse me. Have you had any foreign customers lately?” I asked.

“Foreigners? Why yes, now that you mention it. They asked if they could pay with link coins, but I refused. Remember that counterfeiting scandal with links three years ago? We stopped taking them after that, since we couldn’t exchange them anymore. So I turned them away from our inn.”

“I see. Did they have any identifiable features?”

“It was a group of three men, and they wore hats pulled down low so it was hard to see their faces. But I remember a slim man, a short man, and a tall, muscular man. I’d guess they were about thirty years old judging by their voices and behavior.”

“And when did this happen?”

“About a week ago. They had a lot of luggage with them and were carrying some sort of spears.”

“Spears…?!”

Those were probably harpoons for fishing, not spears. Garr, Zara, and I exchanged nods.

“Thank you for your help.”

“I’m just glad I could be of use!”

Next, we visited a pawn shop hidden away in an alleyway.

The cluttered store reeked of dust, irritating Garr’s sensitive nose and making him cough. I lent him my handkerchief and told him to keep it over his mouth and nose.

Scattered about were boat parts, fishing equipment, life preservers, and other things typical of a port town. But they also stocked paintings, bronze statues, pots, and many other works of art. It seemed they dealt in wares of all varieties here.

In the back of the shop was a man—probably the shopkeeper—asleep with

his head on a scale like it was a pillow.

“Excuse me. May I ask you some questions?” I began.

But he still wouldn’t wake up. Zara stepped in for me instead.

“We’re with the Enoch Royal Order. We wanna talk!” He did a better job projecting his voice than me, waking the shopkeeper up immediately.

“Wh-What do you knights need?”

“Can you answer a few questions?”

“S-Sure…”

“Appreciate it. So, let me ask you. Have you had any foreign customers over the past few days?”

“Foreigners…? Well yeah, I did! They asked if they could exchange their links.”

It seemed they’d been to this pawn shop too.

“Y’know, we used to do that here a long time ago, but it got banned after the counterfeiting incident a few years back. They came here asking me to buy their coins. The metal is worth a fair amount, but I had to turn ’em down, since it’s illegal for a pawn shop to buy foreign money.”

“I see. Was this a group of three men with their hats pulled down low? One was slim, one was small, and one was muscular?”

“Uh-huh, you’ve got it. I think they came in here a week ago now.” The shopkeeper explained that they ended up selling a personal item when they failed to get money for their coins. “Here it is. It’s a Fore Elf bone knife.”

“Huh?”

I’d never heard of a Fore Elf bone knife before. What could that possibly be?

“They said a legendary elf made this bone knife from the antlers of a great elk living in their forest. It’s an extremely unusual type of weapon and it even has a spell engraved on it. Supposedly, the magic blade can cut through anything it comes in contact with.”

“Um, sir, I think that might be a fake,” I chimed in.

I'd never heard of great elk living in the Fore Elf woods, nor did we have any tradition of making knives from bone.

"Looks like you were duped," Zara said.

"I-It can't be! They even had a letter of authenticity…" He showed me the fresh ink written on a piece of parchment. It was pretty clear to me that the parchment had been purchased locally and the text scribbled on without much thought. "I can't read this ancient language, but they said it was a masterpiece forged by a famous Fore Elf craftsman."

"But this isn't a traditional art in the Fore Elf village," I said. I looked even closer and saw that the carvings were fresh. They'd definitely engraved the spells onto a knife they already had. "This is most definitely a counterfeit."

"B-But I paid three gold coins for it!"

I sympathized, but it was hard to call him anything other than unobservant. Zara tried to cheer up the rattled shopkeeper.

"We're tracking down those foreigners right now. Don't you worry, because the fake knife will just get added to their charges."

"Urk…!"

At least we'd managed to gather more evidence now. Vice Captain Velrey was probably finished getting ready by this point. We returned to the inn and waited for her to come out.

"Sorry you guys had to wait for me," she said.

"We actually just got here too."

We reported the findings of our investigation.

"I see. So it's possible they've been poaching fish."

"That's right."

We would have to meet up with the others now, so we headed toward the shore where they said they'd be investigating. It was a brief walk along the coast until we spotted Captain Ludtink, Ulgus, and Liselotte.

"Did you three manage to find any evidence?" Captain Ludtink asked.

“Yes, lots!” I responded.

“What about you guys?” Zara asked.

“We found remnants of a camp. Someone’s definitely been harvestin’ shellfish around here.”

They probably waited to harvest at night when they were less likely to be spotted.

“Can you see anything in the ocean when it’s nighttime?”

Vice Captain Velrey responded to Zara’s question. “Fishermen use magic stone lights that function underwater. It’s pretty easy to fish if you have one of those.”

Supposedly, the sea at night was easy to navigate with one of these magic aquatic lights.

“Can you fish without one, Velrey?” Captain Ludtink asked.

“Only if you’re nocturnal beastfolk.”

“Got it. Let’s wait in town until nighttime, then we can watch over the coast. We should spot ’em pretty quick if they’re usin’ magic aquatic lights.”

With that, it was time to head back to town for a while. Captain Ludtink headed for the local barracks while the rest of us went to the fishermen’s union.

Once we stepped inside, I saw that the fishermen’s opinions of Vice Captain Velrey had changed dramatically.

“Oh, the little miss is back.”

“Good work today.”

“……”

Why are they calling her “little miss” now…?

“I can’t believe you were able to harvest something underwater when the sea was so rough!”

“It didn’t even take an hour and you came back with all those huge shellfish!”

“I wish you’d come work for my shop!”

Their new attitudes were like a breath of fresh air. It seemed they were very accepting of anyone who could prove their skills in the sea.

The vice captain informed them of our investigation up to that point. “We’ve discovered that there may be poachers in the area.”

When they heard that, the men raised their harpoons in the air again—ready to chase down the poachers in their rage.

“Calm down. Taking care of the poachers is our job as knights of the Enoch Royal Order,” she said. “You men only need to stay here and wait it out. Please let us protect your town and your waters.”

I could tell her words touched them. The fishermen lowered their harpoons and settled back down.

“If you say so, little miss.”

“No one’s ever asked to protect me before…”

“Me neither.”

These were no children, but the vice captain had managed to make them blush. She meant business, all right.

“All right. Wait here and we’ll be back with good news.” With that, Vice Captain Velrey turned on her heel, her cape fluttering behind her as she left the fishermen’s union. Even her exit was swoon-worthy.

We waited at the barracks until night started to fall, going out into the town when the light outside was dim.

“Damn. It’s cold at night,” the captain complained.

“It certainly is.”

Garr had the best night vision and led the way for the rest of us. We made our way along the dark coastline.

Once we came across some trees, we decided to hide behind them and wait for the poachers to show up.

“Aren’t you cold, Medic Risurisu?”

“Ngh… Y-Yes, I am.”

When I answered her, Vice Captain Velrey wrapped her cloak around my shoulders.

“It’s just one night. Do what you can to make it through this.”

“Right.”

Amelia warmed me with her wings after that. Liselotte joined me under her wings with a look of pure bliss on her face.

Soon, the lights in town faded. It was nearly midnight now.

That was when I saw a glimpse of light in the darkness.

“Over there…” I whispered.

The poachers had come. I could make out two lights, so one person was probably on lookout duty.

“Just you wait… You’ll be hurtin’ when we’re done with you.” Captain Ludtink was muttering scary things to himself. I didn’t know he’d been waiting there with such deadly intentions. He probably wanted to give them one good punch in the face.

We couldn’t arrest them right away as we needed to witness the moment they harvested shellfish. All we did was stare at the lights from our hiding spot.

Garr would use his night vision to alert us when the poaching occurred. An hour and a half later, the men emerged from the ocean.

“!”

Garr told us they were holding things that looked like shellfish.

“All right! Let’s go!” With that cry, Vice Captain Velrey took off like a gust of wind.

“Hey, don’t go so fast, Velrey! …She’s not listenin’.”

Garr, the second fastest behind the vice captain, was keeping up with her. Vice Captain Velrey introduced herself as a knight from the Enoch Royal Order and asked them to explain themselves. But they didn’t answer. Instead, they chucked their harpoons at her. The two divers’ harpoons soared straight at the

vice captain.

Then they used the opportunity to take off sprinting in the opposite direction.

“Wait!”

It was Garr who sped up next to catch up to them. He passed Vice Captain Velrey and grabbed a poacher’s arm.

“Gyah!”

He yanked him back like he was pulling weeds, sending the poacher tumbling to the ground. Vice Captain Velrey didn’t let him get off the ground before tying his hands behind his back.

“Aaah! That hurts!”

“Hold still!”

After that, Garr managed to grab the other two poachers by the arms and get them on the ground in the exact same fashion. Captain Ludtink and Zara took on the role of binding the poachers’ hands.

“All right. Tell us what you’re doin’ out here.” Captain Ludtink was licking his lips as he questioned them. I knew his lips were probably just dry, but at a glance, he really looked like a bandit eyeing his prey.

“Wh-What we’re doing? We’re not doing anything…”

“Liar! Why else would ya be all soakin’ wet?”

“Captain Ludtink, I got their shellfish!”

“Kreh kreh!”

Ulgus and Amelia had recovered the harpoons and shellfish they ditched during the escape attempt. We’d acquired the evidence we needed.

“You’re comin’ with us to the knights’ barracks. No buts.”

“Eeeek…”

That was how we apprehended the poachers. Were they screaming because they’d been captured, or because Captain Ludtink’s face was so scary? Only they held the answer to that question.

PEACE returned to the port town. The warring fishermen appeared to have settled their differences. They'd gotten along just fine before this, so I was very relieved to see them being friendly with each other again.

"It's all thanks to you, little miss!"

"You really saved us!"

"No, I was only able to get this situation resolved because I have such wonderful comrades. I also have you men to thank for helping the investigation," the vice captain said.

"Little miss…!"

"What a wonderful woman…!"

They tried to present her with fresh seafood as a thank-you gift, but knights weren't allowed to accept such gestures. Although, I remembered recently being in a similar situation.

"I appreciate the trouble…but I can't accept it," she said. "It's the thought that counts."

"No way!"

"This fish is the thought!"

That was when Captain Ludtink stepped forward and tossed the fishermen a single coin.

"Huh?"

"Wh-What's this?"

"For the seafood. If you don't need it, then donate it to the Royal Order."

"Ah, I see!"

"We'll do that!"

That allowed us to accept the seafood the fishermen really wanted us to have.

"You oughta head to the beach for a seafood boil while you're here!"

“We can get the coal for you!”

Seafood was best when eaten fresh. Captain Ludtink was nodding his head enthusiastically too.

There was already a grill for us to cook our fish at the harbor. All they had to do was put charcoal in a large bin and place the grill on top of it.

Vice Captain Velrey had also tried to return the shellfish she harvested yesterday to the fishermen’s union, but they told her to share it with the rest of us instead.

I wasted no time in placing the shellfish on the grill. An appetizing scent started to waft toward us as they cooked.

“How shall I season these?” I wondered.

I had salt, pepper, butter, powdered herbs, and cheese among other things. I decided to go with the standard choice of butter for our seafood meal, slathering the inside of the open shells with them. The grilled shellfish melted the butter with their remaining heat, turning it into a glistening golden liquid. They were probably ready now.

“Hang on there, miss. It’ll be hard to eat like that.” A fisherman helpfully cut away the adductor muscle with his knife.

“Thank you!” I scooped the meat out with a spoon and stuck it straight in my mouth. “Whoa! It’s hot!” I huffed and puffed to cool my mouth off before chewing the shellfish itself. Instantly, my mouth was filled with the savory taste of the sea. “Aaah…it’s delicious!”

The more I chewed, the more umami I tasted. The autumn shellfish were incredible. Everyone else was choosing their own seasoning of preference to combine with the shellfish.

Next, it was time to eat the large grilled fish. I decided to use salt as my only seasoning. The fishermen told us this was their biggest catch of the day and they wanted to share it with us. One of them sliced up this fish for us too.

“You’re the littlest one, missy, so be sure to eat up!”

“Thank you!”

Indeed, I was the smallest, but I was still known for my above-average appetite. I gratefully took him up on his offer.

I bit into the fresh fish. It was still steaming from the grill.

“This fish…is incredible too!”

The meat was fatty and just salty enough to bring out the flavors, rather than overpower them. Everyone was digging in with looks of pure bliss on their faces.

The fishermen continued to grill up more and more fish for us. They even brought in more from somewhere when we finished the first batch they’d prepared. Thanks to this, I completely filled my stomach.

“I can’t eat any more.”

“Good! That’s what we like to hear!”

I swore I’d never eaten such delicious seafood in all my life.

Such delicious blessings of the sea could make it to our dinner tables thanks to the hard work of fishermen like them.

Once again, I was filled with gratitude for the men.

Chapter 5: The Missing Mushroom Tourists and Autumn-Flavored Sweet Potato Soup

THE incident at the port town had left me with a craving for seafood. That was why Charlotte and I decided to spend a few days preserving seafood to take on expeditions.

“Fishy, fishy! Charlotte loves fishies too!”

Some fish I pickled in salt, grilled, cut up, and packed in jars. I also pickled bivalves in olive oil and dried some until they were nice and crisp. There were many ways to preserve the shellfish. I made sure to prepare sweet pickled veggies and dried vegetables too to maintain a balanced diet.

“Now that it’s autumn, I feel like having mushrooms!” I said.

They would probably be cheap at the market since they were in the harvest period.

“I love mushroom soup!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“So do I.”

I used to eagerly hunt mushrooms every fall. It was usually a race to see who could spot the most delicious mushrooms before they were all gone.

“There were lots and lots of mushrooms in my forest too,” Charlotte said.

“Were there?”

“But sometimes, my people ate poison mushrooms and got sick.”

“Goodness, that’s scary.”

There were far more poisonous mushrooms in the world than edible ones. Some even looked like perfect copies of edible mushrooms in disguise. Getting sick was the preferable outcome when some poisonous mushrooms could actually kill a person.

“You can’t go mushroom hunting unless you’re thoroughly prepared,” I said.

“Yes. If you can’t point out bad mushrooms, buy them at the market to be safe!”

“That’s exactly right.”

That was when Captain Ludtink called for a meeting. If he was summoning us at this time of day for an announcement, it could only mean that an emergency expedition had come up.

“We have a mission.”

I suppressed the urge to say “I knew it.” Ulgus was covering his mouth next to me too. He’d managed to contain a dissatisfied whine today.

I understood how he felt—we’d only come back from the last expedition two days ago. We went from having two expeditions a month this time last year to one a week now. This was probably because the Second Expeditionary Squadron had seen so many successes.

What could have happened on such a nice autumn afternoon? I waited for Captain Ludtink to explain.

“It says five participants and one guide haven’t come back from a mushroom-picking tour that wasn’t supposed to last more than a day. Local hunters couldn’t find ’em when they went up into the mountain.”

They’d gone missing at a mountain famous for its mushrooms. It was about three hours away from the royal capital by carriage.

“We’re headin’ out now. Bring blankets and clothes in case we run into the guys.”

The mountain was occupied by many wild animals, although no monster sightings had been reported. It was still best to be on guard after the previous run-in with the great boar.

Charlotte helped me finish up my preparations. Soon, it was time to leave.

“Be safe, everyone!”

“You be safe on the way home too, Charlotte!”

“Okay!”

“*I’m comin’ too!*”

“I know, I know.”

I stuffed Album into my pouch and began to prepare.

Charlotte waved goodbye to us as we departed.

Three hours later, we exited the carriage at the entrance to a forest. The mountain trees had turned red now that it was autumn, and they were really breathtaking. We took a short break, when Zara pointed out a red star-shaped leaf to me.

“Look, Melly. So pretty!”

“Wow, you’re right!”

We gazed fondly at the scenery while a smiling Liselotte, on the other hand, chose to gaze at Amelia. She definitely preferred to look at mythical beasts over red leaves. Album used the time to hunt around for mushrooms.

“Let’s go, Album.”

“*Okaaay.*”

He didn’t seem to find anything. The disappointed creature crawled back into my bag. Meanwhile, Sly and Garr were looking around for the prettiest fallen leaves on the forest floor. They stuck the red and yellow leaves into their hair to look extra fancy. I heard Amelia praise Sly for her lovely taste in accessories.

“We’re not here to fool around!” Captain Ludtink’s orders made us realize that we couldn’t let our guards down, even during a break. Everyone’s faces stiffened right up. “Let’s head out!”

There was a small shack at the foot of the mountain. Its caretaker, a middle-aged man, explained the situation to us.

“I watched the tour group head up into the mountain yesterday afternoon. They were supposed to return before nightfall. By the time the sun started to set, I thought something might be wrong, so I went up to their trail from the opposite direction. But…”

There were no traces of the tourists to be found. He followed half of the course before returning to the foot of the mountain and calling for others to help search, but they still couldn't find them, even after making a full sweep of the planned route.

"It seems they got lost somewhere along the way."

The caretaker and his group returned to the foot of the mountain at that point, since it would be dangerous to search at night. They tried again the next morning with the help of some hunters to no avail. The village at the foot of the mountain decided to call the knights for help when night fell again.

"They do have water and food, but no equipment they'd need to get through a night on the mountain. You have to find them as fast as you possibly can."

"Got it. Let's head out right away."

The caretaker handed us a hand-drawn map of the mountain with red lines marking where they'd already looked.

"You heard him. We're headin' in."

"Yes, Captain!"

Our first stop along the mountain was a river that hadn't been searched yet. It was far from the designated tour course, but people who got lost on hikes were said to often aim for bodies of water. Although, some would end up losing their lives after the water area proved to be even more dangerous.

"How can there be no traces of the tour group at all…?"

One would expect to find remnants of snacks or signs of a campfire somewhere, but we couldn't find a single trace of them. The reason given for that was how vigilant the mushroom-picking tour was.

"They give their customers stern warnings not to dirty the beautiful mountain with their trash."

"That's important when you're climbin' any mountain."

In case of an emergency, it was smart to drop a rope or something obvious on the path—this way, rescuers would be more likely to find the area where you went missing.

“Keep a close eye on the ground.”

We climbed the riverbank, little by little. Fish darted past us in the crystalline river water. It was almost hard to believe how peaceful the mountain was.

“Don’t see ’em around the water.”

There was no trace of any people resting near the river, no matter how high we climbed. The river turned into a waterfall up ahead, so we opted to return to the mountain path.

There were mushrooms growing everywhere—it was called a mushroom mountain, after all. Album stuck his head out from my bag and began to shout about the nearby edible mushrooms.

“Risurisu! No harvestin’ anything!” Captain Ludtink ordered.

“I know that.”

Some tree branches were sagging with the weight of all the nuts growing from them, but I had to ignore those. Ever since I got lost in the act of foraging and was almost attacked by a monster, I’d been given a complete ban on foraging during missions.

I was depressed, but I certainly couldn’t defy orders.

“All right, let’s rest here for a while.”

There was a small opening in the path ahead of us. Sunlight streamed through the gaps in the leaves, warming the area. I wasted no time looking at the ground between the trees.

“Ah! I knew it!”

There was a cluster of edible mushrooms growing there. Album came up to me and gleefully began to pluck them.

“Can you eat those mushrooms, Medic Risurisu?” Ulgus asked.

“Yes. They’re called fragrant mushrooms because they smell incredible when cooked.”

“Wow, I bet they’re super tasty!”

As Ulgus and I picked the fragrant mushrooms, something plopped down on

my head.

“What’s that thing, Medic Risurisu?!”

“Th-This is a nut that goes really well in soups!”

“Really?!”

I left Album in charge of collecting the nuts. We’d managed to obtain many ingredients during our short break. I was going to turn them into today’s lunch. I rinsed the fragrant mushrooms, roasted the nuts, and then had Sly swallow them. She spit the nuts back out without the shells so I could cook with them.

“Here’s the main dish!”

“Oooh… Hmm?”

I removed a long, reddish-purple potato from my bag—a sweet potato.

Ulgus stared intently at the sweet potato, having never seen one before. “What is it, Medic Risurisu?”

“This is a sweet potato that comes from a foreign country called Satsuma. They say it perfectly captures the taste of autumn.”

“A sweet potato? I can’t even imagine that.”

“I’ve heard it tastes like a mountain chestnut.”

The traders from Satsuma told the people of this country that the sweet potatoes could be eaten steamed or added to a nice soup. It would be my first time trying this food as well and I felt the mountains’ mushrooms and nuts would pair perfectly with it.

I didn’t bother peeling the skin—I’d heard that step wasn’t necessary for sweet potatoes.

“Wow!”

“It’s such a bright yellow!”

“It really is.”

The sweet potato turned out to be a beautiful yellow color on the inside. Now I understood why people compared them to mountain chestnuts. I cut the

sweet potato into large pieces so that it wouldn't fall apart as it cooked.

"All right, let's leave it to steam for a while."

I filled my pot with water, then I added dried mushrooms, vegetables, and smoked meat to make a broth. I added the nuts and fragrant mushrooms after it had cooked for a while, then included the sweet potato at the very end. It simmered for some time, causing foam to form on the surface that I scooped away. Then I seasoned it with a dash of salt, pepper, and other spices. The broth would be rich enough without having to add more flavor to it than that.

After enough time over the fire, my "Autumn-Flavored Sweet Potato Soup" was complete.

"Lunch is ready, everyone!" I announced.

I poured the soup into bowls and distributed them to each member. Vice Captain Velrey stared at the sweet potato soup like she was confused by it.

"Vice Captain, it's a soup made with foreign potatoes called 'sweet potatoes.'"

"I see. So these bright yellow pieces are sweet potatoes? I like how thick the soup is too."

"That would be because the sweet potatoes dissolved."

I'd tried to stick to large pieces, but I still needed to go bigger. They'd dissolved from the heat as I predicted.

"But it looks great. I'm eager to try it."

"Please do."

My heart was racing as I watched her try her first bite.

"Oh… I've never had a soup like this before. Just when I noticed the strong mushroom taste, I got hit with a subtle sweetness. The nuts are really fragrant and accent it well. It's a great soup."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

The others praised my soup too.

"Aaaaah! That was so good!" Ulgus flopped over in bliss.

“Ulgus, lying down after a meal makes it harder to digest,” I informed him.

“I know…but I’d be so happy if I could go to sleep right now.”

“I understand exactly how you feel.”

“I wish my life was nothing but eat, sleep, eat, and sleep again.”

“But you can’t eat unless you work.”

“Yeah, reality is painful.”

I took Ulgus’s hand and pulled him up.

“I’ll have to push through it a little longer.”

“Indeed.”

The mushroom-picking tour group was somewhere on this mountain, waiting to be rescued. There was something inside me telling me that we would find them soon.

I put the lid on my pot of soup and tied it up with a rope so that I could share it with the tour group when we found them. I also wrapped it in a thick cloth so that it would stay warm. I stuck it at the very bottom of my backpack to take with me.

Captain Ludtink gave us our orders when the break was over. “Let’s get back to the search.”

We hiked the steep, mountain path until Garr discovered a cave along the way. He told us he caught the scent of cooking meat in the air.

“M-Meat?!”

It was wild animal meat that he smelled. I’d shuddered for a moment, thinking someone was cooking the tour group themselves.

“That’s…a man-made cave.”

“It certainly doesn’t look natural.”

Someone had tunneled into boulders and reinforced the entrance with wood. Despite its age, we could still tell that it was originally man-made.

“Okay, let’s go save th—”

“Wait, June.”

Zara grabbed Ulgus’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong, Ahto?”

Vice Captain Velrey was the one to answer him. “Those are animal pelts attached to the entrance, aren’t they?”

“Y-Yes…”

“That means someone lives here.”

“I th-think you’re right.”

It wasn’t as if the mushroom-picking group had stumbled across this cave and taken up temporary refuge.

Garr said that he could hear multiple people inside.

“They must be bandits.”

“Yep. If it’s just bandits, we can throw tear essence in and round ’em up in one go,” Captain Ludtink said.

Tear essence was a tool developed by the Monster Research Bureau to combat monsters by blinding them. It would definitely be useful here, since the wind just happened to be blowing into the cave. But we couldn’t do that if there was any chance of the tour group being inside.

“What should we do?”

That was when Sly knocked on the inside of her jar.

“Huh? What now?”

Sly jumped up to Garr’s chest when he unscrewed the lid. Garr translated the plan she’d come up with.

“What? Sly is going to check inside for us?”

Sly gave a thumbs-up before transforming into the exact color of the rocks.

“I see. You’ll camouflage yourself to avoid being spotted.”

She would definitely blend in with the dimly lit cave. Captain Ludtink told her to go ahead, so Sly hopped off toward the entrance.

The rest of us hid behind trees and waited for her return.

Fifteen minutes passed before Sly exited the cave. Using hand and body gestures, she conveyed what she saw inside.

First, she transformed into the shape of a mushroom and sprouted six arms from her body. She was showing us that the mushroom-picking tour's customers and their guide were inside.

Next, she took the shape of a bearded man who looked like a bandit. I sort of got the impression that he resembled Captain Ludtink, but that was probably just my imagination. More importantly, that meant there were bandits inside. Sly continued to bend her arms and pop out some muscles. These bandits were muscular. Finally, she transformed into the shape of a pruning knife before holding up a single arm.

"So the bandit is a single, muscular, bearded man with a pruning knife?"

Sly responded with a big thumbs-up. She even took a stick and sketched out a map of the cave's interior on the ground. The cave didn't seem that spacious inside. There was a passageway about twenty feet long that led into a larger room.

Now we had all the information we needed about our foe.

"But wait, are you a genius, Sly?!" I couldn't help but give her a round of applause. She bashfully scratched her head, denying me humbly.

Captain Ludtink crouched down, scowled at the map, and discussed a battle plan with Vice Captain Velrey. "No waitin' around. We're goin' in to rescue 'em."

We responded with a unanimous "Yes, Captain."

The plan was simple. Captain Ludtink was going to lead us into the cave, and once we saw the bandit, he was going to charge the man and knock him out.

We called this strategy "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a bandit for a bandit."

Quietly and carefully, we drew closer to the mouth of the cave. I listened closely and made out voices from the inside.

My squadmates and I peeked into the cave from behind the boulders.

The bandit was, as Sly reported, a bearded and brawny man. I didn't find him that frightening—probably because I was used to looking at Captain Ludtink.

One of the six hostages was an old man with gray hair. He had to be the tour guide. Three of the tourists were men, with one of them being a boy about the age of ten. A middle-aged man and another young man had their hands and feet bound, resting up against a wall. The other two tourists were middle-aged women.

The interior of the cave itself was surprisingly homey. The bandit probably hunted wild animals to live off of. He was sitting on a giant fur rug, but I also spotted some sort of jerky hanging from the cave walls. There were square lanterns strung all over the room, giving the cave a faint glow.

The tourists were illuminated enough for us to see the despair on their faces. We needed to rescue them quickly.

"You there. Rub my shoulders. You make dinner, and you bring me my booze." He was barking orders at the tourists. Their voices were trembling when they responded.

I hadn't expected the bandit to be using them as servants. *How horrible!*

Captain Ludtink silently unsheathed his sword. I looked over at his face and saw something much more frightening than the sight of any bandit.

We held our breath and crept forward, watching the dark passageway grow brighter and brighter around us.

The bandit's voice echoed louder. I knew we were close.

It was time for the plan to be set in motion—but just then, the tourists made the first move. The younger man had managed to slip out of his restraints and tried to make a run for it, but he stumbled and hit the ground. The bandit delivered him a quick punch before grabbing the child and pointing his knife at his throat.

"Hey, knock it off! Try anything funny and I'll split this brat's head open!"

"Waaaaaah! Waaaaaah!"

“Shut your mouth! Stop cryin’!”

To my total shock, the bandit started to drink his booze with the hostage in his arms.

The captain’s expression turned deathly grim. We couldn’t enact “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a bandit for a bandit” so long as it was a hostage situation.

What was going to happen? I waited for the captain’s orders. He reached into his pocket, retrieved a paper, scribbled something down, and handed it to me.

I could hardly believe what I was reading.

“*Mission name: Little lost elf girl with no sense of direction.*”

“……”

I would be an elf who lived deep in the mountains, one who got carried away with excitement while she took in the blessings of autumn. She got lost somewhere along the way as she hunted down mushrooms and nuts in the woods, eventually stumbling upon this cave and entering it, completely unaware that it was the bandit’s dwelling.

“*Pardon me. My name is Mell and I’m from a local elf tribe. May I rest here for a while?*” I would say that, then show him my slightly thick, but healthy legs. It wasn’t very tempting at all, but with no eligible women around, the bandit would take the bait. Then the captain would run in and beat him up.

“Wh—!”

I wanted to scream and ask what the heck he was talking about, but I quickly clasped my hand to my mouth.

Captain Ludtink signaled me to head in. I shook my head furiously. I was far too terrified to run out in front of a bandit on my own. Besides, the thing about my thick legs and not being tempting was really mean!

What would I do if the bandit wasn’t interested? I mouthed to him that this strategy was completely reckless.

That was when Captain Ludtink mouthed a very surprising response. “*Then you come up with something.*”

The others put their heads together to think of a new plan too. The first person to raise their hand and write something on the paper was Ulgus.

"*Mission name: War of the bandits!*"

There once was an evil bandit living in the wilderness. He was constantly kidnapping innocent people and committing wicked deeds. But that was when a savior emerged. It was a good bandit who lived in the royal capital. He was a chivalrous criminal, and despite his bandit-like appearance, he possessed a pure heart.

The good bandit had come here to defeat the evil bandit. He snuck into the evil bandit's secret hideout where he set his captives free.

"*Take thaaaaat!*"

The good bandit startled his foe with that scream and defeated the evil bandit with his bare fists. Finally, the hostages were freed. The evil bandit was defeated and the good bandit became a hero.

And they all lived happily ever after.

When Ulgus was finished writing all that, Captain Ludtink yanked him hard by the ear. It was a silent way of rejecting his idea completely.

That was when a strategy of my own came to mind.

"*Mission name: The miracle of Album?!*"

Album, a fairy who lived in the wild, would stumble across the bandit's hideout randomly and discover his captives. Knowing that he couldn't just ignore this, Album and his partner, Sly, would rescue the hostages together.

Sly would be the one to free them while Album distracted the bandit.

I looked to Captain Ludtink for a reaction. He nodded firmly. We had our plan.

Album hated this, of course. He only agreed enthusiastically when I whispered a promise to make him a mountain of pancakes once we were home. Sly didn't say anything but gestured that she was ready to help us.

It was time to begin. I watched Album while my heart raced in my chest.

Sly climbed on top of Album. Her body started to ooze over his back and

toward the ground, but she tensed her face and stiffened her body until it pulled taut.

Album took a step forward. He had a very intense look on his face. Album's white fur stood out more as he crept forward to the lit room. He was going slowly enough that the bandit didn't spot him.

That continued for a while, little by little, with the bandit none the wiser. Sly used this opportunity to dismount Album and approach the child being held hostage.

Everyone was in place now. Album raised his voice.

"*H-Here's Album!*"

His words echoed off the walls of the cave.

With a jolt, the bandit jumped to his feet. He tossed the boy to the side when he did.

Sly instantly extended her arms, grabbed the boy, and pulled him toward the wall. He was startled to see her, but he didn't resist either.

"Who's there?!"

Captain Ludtink responded by springing into action. "We're from the Royal Order! Stay where you are!"

"You're what?!"

The spooked bandit did something no one expected. He raised his knife, which was anticipated, but then he dropped it and jumped backwards—straight toward one of the middle-aged women. The knife didn't hit her, fortunately, but the woman tried to take off running. That was when the bandit grabbed her and used her as a hostage.

"I-If you don't want her to die, turn around and get out of here!"

"What are you going to do with these people?"

"I'll just make 'em hunt for food, cook, and wait on me. Y'know, like servants. I hate havin' to do stuff on my own. I won't abuse 'em, but I've got plenty of things to use 'em for."

It was so cruel. We could never allow such a thing.

Captain Ludtink obeyed when the bandit demanded he drop his weapon. The bandit was empty-handed too. He must have decided that he would win if they ended up fighting hand-to-hand.

What was the captain going to do next? As I waited anxiously, something in the corner of my eye started to sparkle.

“…Huh?”

It was Ulgus’s magic bow, Acedia, that had started to glow. The name Acedia translated to “sloth.” A magic circle, radiating with light, appeared over the bow.

Ulgus muttered under his breath.

“…Enjoying an easy life without having to work? I’m really jealous.”

“U-Ulgus?”

Just as I called out to him, Ulgus drew his bow. A blue light in the shape of an arrow appeared in place of a physical arrow. He didn’t take a second to think before firing it at his foe.

Ulgus’s arrow struck the bandit in the brow.

“Ugh!” He collapsed to the ground with a groan.

“What the hell was that, Ulgus?” That question from the captain seemed to make Ulgus snap out of his daze.

“Huh? Wh-What was what?”

“You little…”

Fortunately, the bandit didn’t look injured. Garr approached him to be sure. The bandit was merely out cold.

Acedia turned out to be a very peaceful weapon that did nothing more than put a target to sleep.

The captain tied the bandit up while he was still unconscious. Vice Captain Velrey turned her attention to the tour group.

“You’re safe now. Is anyone injured?”

The boy started to wail. I could only imagine how scared he’d been. Even the adults had tears in their eyes.

We took them outside to let them tell us what happened.

“That bandit found us on the way back from our mushroom-picking trip. We offered him our mushrooms because we thought that’s all he wanted, but he ended up taking us back with him…”

Once I heard that they hadn’t eaten since they were captured, I knew it was time to treat them to helpings of my “Autumn-Flavored Sweet Potato Soup.”

“Aaah. The gentle flavor of this soup just seeps into my whole body.”

“He’s right. It really does.”

“This is delicious.”

The tour group members had looks of relief on their faces once they finished their soup.

We rested for a while before Garr, Vice Captain Velrey, and Liselotte led us down the mountain. Sly rested on Garr’s shoulder, waving at the tourists to get them to follow.

The rest of us—Captain Ludtink, Zara, Ulgus, Amelia, and me—escorted the bandit.

“C’mon! Get a move on!”

“Y-You scum!”

“*You’re* the scum. That’s why you’re in this damn situation!”

Ulgus, Amelia, and I merely watched this back-and-forth between bandits with mixed emotions.

Zara prodded the culprit with the handle of his battle ax when he refused to walk. “You better do as you’re told,” he said menacingly. That seemed to do the trick. The bandit, now white as a ghost, began to take nice, healthy strides.

THE case had come to a close.

A few days later, we received a report about the incident. Supposedly, the cave where the bandit was living had been dug out by a single person after hearing that the mountain held gold.

I wondered if I should praise that person for their dedication to digging such a big cave, even though there was no guarantee they would ever strike gold in the first place.

But he was said to have given up when he failed to find any.

Instead of gold, all he ever came across in his searches were mushrooms. That was when it occurred to him that mushrooms could be a better way to make money than gold. This business idea turned into the mushroom-picking tour still

running today.

I thought the kidnapping might make them lose customers, but it seemed the exact opposite had happened. The owner had turned the bandit's den into a new attraction for tourists to come see.

It seemed there were all kinds of ways to make money in this world.

Well, all that mattered was that we'd resolved the case. It was happily ever after for everyone except that bandit.

Chapter 6: The Lowland Gourmet *Supreme Beef Tendon Stew*

THERE were a whole lot of unmarked shops in the lower part of the city. Some were run by just one person, and others only catered to a small group of regulars. Shops might not feel a need to advertise for all sorts of reasons like these.

However, there were *some* unmarked shops that the kingdom couldn't allow to operate. These were the places that sold illegal drugs—maybe even slaves.

I'd been given a mission to investigate these places, so I was out on the town using the alias "Crow Leeric" instead of my real name, Crow Ludtink.

Today's target was a red brick building in an alleyway of the lowland without any signs on the outside. It just looked like a normal civilian house at a glance, but looks could be deceiving.

It wasn't my first time doing this, but I still got nervous every time I stepped into one of these unmarked shops. I took a deep breath, let it out, steeled my nerves, and went inside.

The door opened with a terrible creak. I suddenly got a whiff of some sort of stew coming from inside. But what spooked me the most was that the inside looked like the entryway of a normal house. I was staring down a totally ordinary hallway, almost like I got the address wrong. I'd definitely get reported to the Royal Order if a civilian saw me in their house.

Not too long ago, I went out on a mission in my normal clothes and had someone in town report me as a "suspicious-looking man prowling around."

Even the knight who showed up didn't believe me when I told him who I was, so I had to show him my knight's bracelet to get outta trouble.

That memory had me about to turn around and leave in a hurry. But I froze when I heard a "Welcome!" from somewhere in the house. An old man in his

sixties poked his head out from a room down the hall and waved me in.

“C’mon in. We’re open.”

“S-Sure.”

There was no mistake now. This was definitely an unmarked shop.

We’d gotten a report that a group of brawny men had been spotted going into this place a few days ago. Rumors said it might be an information broker’s shop where nefarious sorts gathered.

I walked down the creaking hallway until I reached the room with the old man.

The place looked like it had just opened up. There wasn’t a single customer anywhere in sight. This room had four tables, each seating four people, and about ten more chairs at a counter. The man who greeted me was stirring a big pot in the kitchen behind the counter.

This place was a restaurant disguised as a civilian house, so the interior wasn’t very well put together. It was a lot more like a canteen you’d expect to find in the lowland.

I was just standing there and scanning the place, so the owner called out to me.

“Have a seat wherever you like.”

I went for the counter. It’d be easy to keep an eye on things that way.

“Want a drink?”

“Huh?”

I looked around the room but couldn’t spot a menu. I now knew this was a canteen, but everything else was a mystery.

“Got any aged white wine?” I ventured.

If this place entertained important figures of the underworld, then they’d definitely have high-class booze sitting around. I used this as a chance to investigate.

“Sure do.”

He set down a bottle of thirty-year-old wine. It was a really fancy brand that I hardly ever saw. I…needed to make sure it was the real deal. They'd be in trouble if they were serving fake wine too.

This was a job, so the Royal Order would pay for my food and drink. I hardly even realized I was licking my lips when I ordered a glass.

The man poured the white wine into a crystal glass and served it to me. He even gave me some chocolate to eat with it. I didn't like sweets, so I just set those aside.

I held the glass of wine up with my fingertips.

The bubbling wine was a pretty amber color. I took my first taste. After the rich flavor of fruit, I felt a sting on my tongue. This was real wine, all right. A normal bar wouldn't have this stuff. So what was it doing in a canteen in the lower part of the city?

I wanted to know how they got their hands on it too.

"Another glass, sir?"

"Yeah, I'll take one." I'd polished off my glass and ordered another one. Just to be safe. "Good stuff."

I said that out loud for some reason, even though no one was around. There was no response, obviously. After I set my glass down and sighed, the owner served me some food.

"Thanks for waiting."

"This is…!"

"It's our famous beef tendon stew. It's the only thing on our menu."

So this place was just a beef tendon stew restaurant. The man set a warm glass of beer down next to it.

"Beer goes best with our stew. Take my word for it."

I looked down at the bowl. The stew was full of beef tendon, radish, and two whole eggs. It was even topped with grated spices. This was definitely the source of that delicious smell in the house.

But I still needed to be careful. It could've been a trap. I wouldn't know unless I gave it a taste.

I started with the beef tendon. I stuck a piece with my fork, but it slid right off and sunk into the broth. It looked like it'd been cooked nice and tender. I brought the piece up to my mouth.

The meat practically melted as soon as it was in my mouth, and I could taste the juices each time I chewed it. Then I washed it down with a gulp of beer.

"Damn, that's good!"

That got a reaction out of the owner. He turned around and grinned at me, almost like he was saying "Told ya!"

Next, I went for a radish. I cut off a bite with my knife and saw that it'd been well-cooked all the way down to the center. I was really surprised when I tasted how soft it was and how much flavor it'd absorbed. The radish itself had a really subtle sweetness too.

I split one of the eggs in half and realized why he'd served them to me without slicing them. "Oh, it's soft-boiled."

He must have cooked them in a different pot. The yolk dribbled out of the egg and into the stew.

"Try the yolk on some beef tendon. It's delicious."

I answered the owner with an "I see" without even thinking. I instantly dunked the tendon in the egg yolk and tried a bite. "Holy crap! It's like the perfect sauce. The egg yolk takes the already rich beef to new heights!"

After that, I just repeated the process of eating beef tendon and washing it down with beer. I ended up polishing off three glasses of beer and two bowls of stew. After my meal, the owner set down a cup of forest apple sherbet for me. It was sour and creamy on my tongue, like a reset for my mouth after all that beer and stew. It seemed to kill the buzz I had going too.

Their stew was supreme, they served the finest booze, and the dessert was like something fit for a king. I didn't understand why a restaurant on this level wouldn't be advertising. The place didn't seem suspicious to me. Maybe the old

man just had very specific taste. I was curious, so I chose to ask him outright.

“Hey, old man. How come you don’t have a sign outside?”

“Because I don’t like being busy.”

“Were you some sort of famous chef or somethin’?”

“Not famous, but I spent thirty years working in the kitchen of a prominent nobleman.”

He explained that this nobleman loved parties. He filled his house with guests whenever the social season came around, throwing lavish parties night after night. The kitchen, of course, had to frantically whip up feasts for all of these events.

“My life consisted of cooking, going home, sleeping, and coming back without a break. I even got called in on my days off sometimes. My wife took the kid and left since I never had any time to spend with them. Then one day, I realized my life was empty outside of cooking.”

“So you quit workin’ for ’em?”

“No, they wouldn’t let me quit, so I ran away.” He told me he spent three years on a trip to flee the royal capital. “At least I had money. I just did whatever I felt like on the whole trip.”

He wanted to find a new way of life on that journey, but whenever he ate someone else’s food, he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about the flavors and how it was made.

“I’m a chef down to my core. I can’t live any other way. That’s what it took me three years to realize.”

During all that, he heard that the nobleman he used to work for had gone bankrupt. It made perfect sense to me, seeing as how the guy was spending money on parties like it grew on trees.

“I thought I’d head back to the royal capital at that point. I opened up this unmarked restaurant so that no one from my previous career would ever find me.”

“I see.”

“Was that enough for you?”

“Yep. Makes perfect sense.”

“So can I ask you a question of my own?”

“What’d that be?”

“You come from nobility, don’t you, sir?”

“How’d ya figure that?”

“You dress and act like a normal blue-collar worker from the lowland, but I can see it in the way you use your fork and knife.”

“I wasn’t even thinkin’ about that.”

“It wasn’t anything like how my usual customers eat. If you came here to investigate me, I’d recommend being a little more careful.”

“Looks like I’ve been caught.” I really thought I looked like a normal city laborer. But I’d been sloppy. I scratched the back of my head and sighed. “Why’d you come clean about your background?”

“Well, I figured you came here to look into my restaurant, but I could tell you really enjoyed your food and drinks. A bad guy would never make such delighted expressions while he ate my cooking.”

At that point, I couldn’t hide my identity anymore. I lifted up my hand to show him my knight’s bracelet. “I’m a knight.”

“I thought so. That was the feeling I got. And what business does a knight have with my little place here?”

“Keep this between you and me, but I’m investigatin’ suspicious shops around the lowland.”

He burst into laughter when he heard that. “Ah, I see! I guess this place does look suspicious! Well, thanks for investigating, Mr. Knight.”

Ugh. At least I’d found a great restaurant.

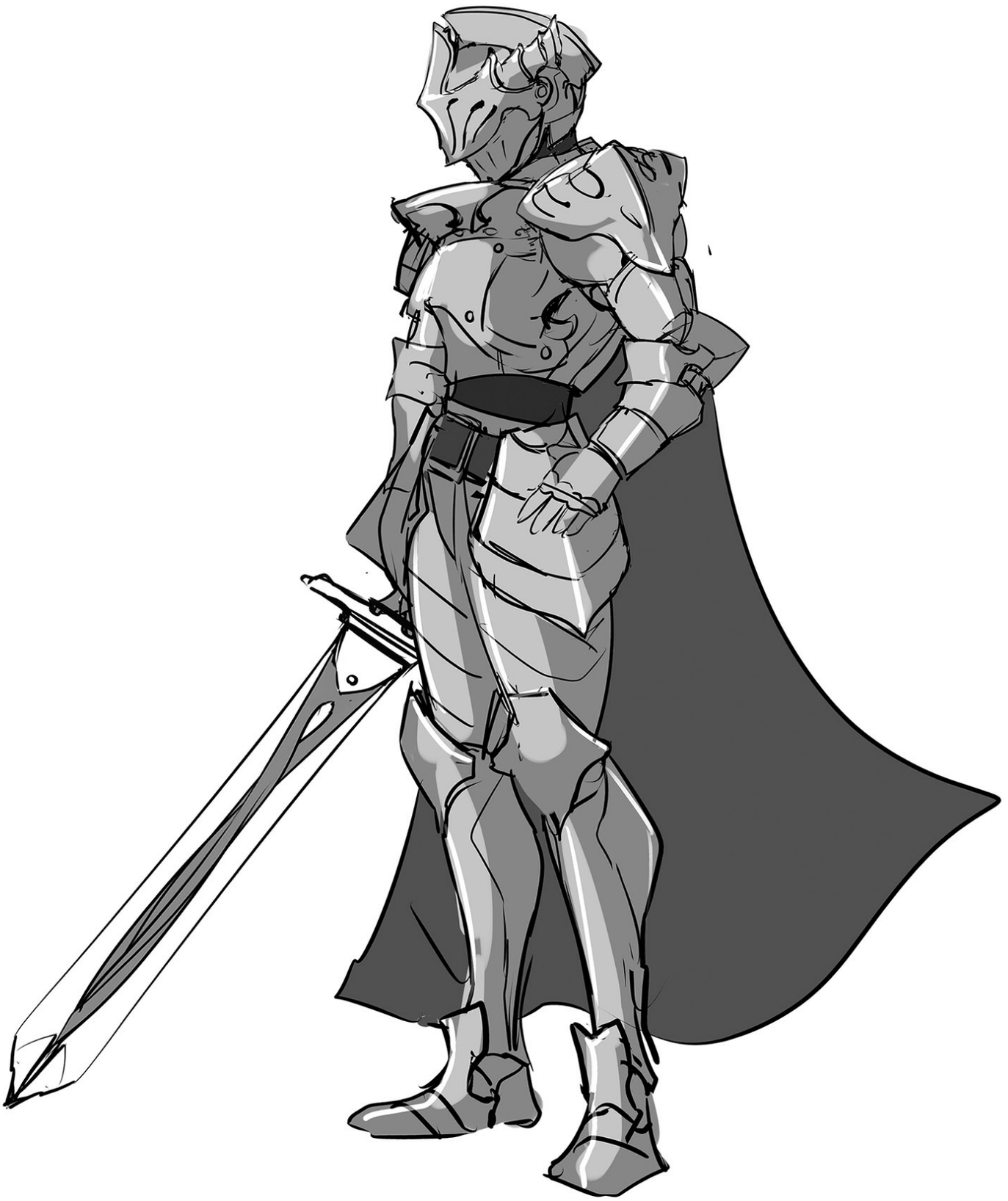
“I like this place. I’m gonna come here on my own sometime.”

“Ah, thank you. You’re welcome here as long as you don’t bring any big

groups.”

That was how I came to reveal the true nature of a suspicious shop in the lowland.

I’d stumbled upon a canteen that served tasty beef tendon stew, the finest wines, and was run by a guy completely dedicated to his craft.



Chapter 7: Leaf-Steamed Autumn Salmon and a New Mythical Beast?!

MY life with Amelia was supported entirely by the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. We were shipped fresh fruit—Amelia's favorite meal and her main source of food—every single day. She was also permitted to enter restaurants and cafes around town with me. The wonderful organization went as far as to help me groom her feathers and brush her.

The bureau was funded with Lord Lichtenberger's personal fortune and held to the goal of protecting mythical beasts. I'd heard they had more than three hundred employees working for them, all of whom shared a passion for mythical beasts and were ready to put their lives on the line to keep them safe.

For a time after I adopted Amelia, she held an intense hatred toward Lord Lichtenberger because of the fight I got into with him. But Amelia had managed to address those feelings. For the first time, she learned how to forgive someone.

These days, Amelia was growing into a fine young lady. She emerged downstairs with yet another carefully chosen ribbon tied around her neck today.

"Ameliaaa! You are sooooo cute!"

"Absolutely adorable!"

Charlotte was the first one to praise Amelia, followed by Liselotte, who'd come to visit me. Zara had made her ribbon out of velvet and lace stitched together.

"Kreh kreh!"

"That is cute too!"

"Brilliant!"

Liselotte blushed and stared at Amelia with teary eyes. Her love for mythical

beasts was impossible to deny.

Charlotte went to the garden to fetch Sir Aiskoletta, who was making candles, and bring him in to show off Amelia's adorable ribbon. I thought Liselotte might follow her, but she stayed behind in the living room.

With an awkward look on her face, she took out something wrapped in cloth from behind her back and set it on the table.

"What's this, Liselotte?"

"W-Well…"

I'd been curious ever since her arrival. I saw her stick it behind her back when she sat down. Something was obviously suspicious about that.

She unwrapped the cloth to reveal a letter detailing a prospective marriage partner.

"L-Liselotte, are you getting married?" I asked.

"No, it's not for me."

"Don't tell me…it's for Zara to find a wife?"

"No. Not him."

Then who was getting married? I questioned Liselotte further, but she just stared off into the distance. It would be faster to look at the letter myself.

I reached out, opened it up, and let my eyes go right to the attached portrait.

"Th-This is…"

He had glistening silver hair, a pair of sharp eyes, a perfectly curved beak…

"Wait, a *beak*?!"

The portrait depicted none other than a griffin.

"You want to arrange a marriage for Amelia?"

"Yes, that's right. She's an adult now, no? We received word from a distant Mythical Beast Management Department that they had a male griffin and were looking to find him a mate."

I see. I had no idea. So Amelia is of marriageable age now.

“There simply aren’t many female griffins out there…” Liselotte said.

“Is that so?”

The Mythical Beast Management Department looked after three griffins, but they were all male.

“They say he’s the youngest of the bunch and has a quiet personality.”

“I-I see…”

The department probably wanted to breed them.

“But they’ve never successfully bred mythical beasts artificially.”

Marriages between mythical beasts and marriages between humans functioned very differently.

“Most mythical beasts propose marriage as soon as they find a suitable partner,” Liselotte explained.

“It’s like love at first sight?”

“Yes, exactly.”

That was why mythical beasts never produced children when forced by humans to couple up.

“You don’t want to put Amelia through this, do you, Mell?”

“Well…it depends on how she feels. Her opinion matters more than ours.”

“Right. That’s true.” Liselotte seemed to have predicted how I would feel about all this. It was why she was keeping the letter hidden from me. “Father told me you’d hate this when I spoke with him. But the bureau’s goal is to stop griffins from going extinct, so he wanted me to ask you anyway.”

I felt like Amelia was enjoying her current life here at our house. But she wasn’t a person, she was a griffin. Who knew how she felt about going the rest of her life without meeting a griffin friend or a partner?

“I’ll bring it up with Amelia,” I said.

“Yes, thank you.” Liselotte smiled, relief written all over her face.

Once she’d returned home, I decided to talk it over with Amelia.

“Amelia.”

“Kreh?”

“Have you ever thought about meeting another griffin?”

She cocked her head. My question had come out of nowhere.

“I mean, you’ve never even seen another griffin besides yourself, have you?”

“Kreh.”

“I was…just wondering if you were lonely.”

“Kreh kreh!”

“*Not really!*” she’d said casually.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh?”

“Urk! That’s a good point…”

She’d asked me if I ever felt like meeting another elf.

“I don’t really get that urge, no. Just because we’re both elves doesn’t mean we’ll get along,” I admitted.

“Kreh kreh, kreh.”

“I see.”

Amelia felt the same way I did.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh.”

“Yes, I agree.”

She told me bluntly that she wasn’t lonely when she had me around. It was a sentiment I shared.

That was the answer I needed for this potential marriage arrangement. She wouldn’t be going through with it after all. The male griffin would probably be just as perplexed to have a strange female griffin show up at his doorstep, after all.

“Kreh kreh?”

She asked me why I brought the subject up in the first place. As always,

Amelia was a sharp creature.

“Um, well, the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau asked if you’d be interested in marrying one of their griffins.”

“Kreeeh.”

She told me she suspected as much. I’d tried to play it cool, but she saw right through me.

“Do you have any desire to get married, Amelia?”

“Kreh? Kreh kreh.”

Not in particular, she told me before asking me the same question.

“Who, me? Well…when I first came to the royal capital, I was determined to be independent and live a life of leisure. But the more I saw couples like Garr, Captain Ludtink, and their fiancées, the more I started to think of marriage as something that could be nice, depending on the circumstances. I mean, you can freely choose your own partner here in the royal capital.”

This came as a shock to me—someone who had a fiancé picked out from the moment I was born.

“If I met someone who always told me how much they loved me, and if I loved that person a lot too…I think I’d like to marry them,” I said.

“Kreeeeh!”

“Do you think someone like that exists?”

“Kreh!”

Amelia told me she was sure of it.

“Thanks, Amelia.”

Perhaps my true dream was to bake bread, cook soup, and wait for my beloved to return home to me.

THE next day, Lord Lichtenberger came to the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s barracks for a visit. He was carrying a magic staff that was shaped

like a gentleman's cane and dressed in a thick overcoat. It was a different look than usual.

He stood next to Captain Ludtink during our morning meeting, causing all of us to feel on edge.

"Let's see. Since Lord Lichtenberger's here today, he'll probably have something a little different for us. We have a special mission this time."

The marquess would share the details.

"A griffin, a type of second-class mythical beast, has been spotted in a forest near the royal capital."

Wh-What?! Lord Lichtenberger explained that traders traveling from the royal capital to the harbor had seen this griffin flying overhead. It had dislodged feathers from its body when it flapped its wings, sending them down to the ground below.

"This is one of those feathers."

It was a striking jet-black color. But I saw what looked like blood at the base of the feather too.

"He appears to be injured."

We had to capture him quickly before monsters got to him first. It was a very dangerous situation.

"The griffin is completely black and has been flying back and forth over the same area, as if he's looking for something."

After patrolling the area, he'd flown off somewhere in less than ten minutes, according to His Lordship.

"This is our first time dealing with a black griffin. There have been no reports before now."

So it had to be a variety that was extremely rare.

"We suspect that mythical beast traffickers might be after him because he's so unusual."

Mythical beast traffickers were the eternal adversary of the Royal Mythical

Beast Preservation Bureau. They'd tried their best to drive them away, but different groups were still infiltrating the kingdom's borders.

"We want to capture this griffin, get him under our protection, and treat the injury as fast as physically possible. I've come here to ask the Second Expeditionary Squadron for your cooperation." Lord Lichtenberger bowed deeply to us with this plea. "Please help us rescue this griffin."

Something as rare as a mythical beast was a common source of conflict. Supposedly, that was why the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau had permission to order the knights to participate in their investigations. But that also meant there was no need for Lord Lichtenberger to bow to us like this.

Everyone had looks of bewilderment on their faces.

"I'd like to ask for your help too!" Even Liselotte started to bow to us.

"We have no right to refuse orders from higher-ups. We'll be headin' out soon." After he said that, Captain Ludtink ordered the rest of us to prepare.

"What does one need for tracking down a mythical beast…?" Uncertainly, I filled my bag with fruit that griffins loved—and some rope, just in case. Although, the bureau said they'd provide the tools we needed to actually capture the griffin. Then I remembered Amelia. She cocked her head inquisitively when I turned around to look at her. "U-Um, well…it sounds like a griffin has been spotted. How does that make you feel?"

"Kreh kreh."

"Ah. Right."

Amelia gave me a casual "I hope they find him!"

Everyone finished packing, so it was time to head out.

I jumped when I arrived at the meetup spot and caught a glimpse of Lord Lichtenberger. He was wearing a griffin mask and had a pair of wings strapped to his back. He'd completely transformed into a griffin.

Was he dressed like that to stop the wild griffin from seeing us as enemies? Nervously, I looked over at Liselotte.

"O-Oh, you're not dressed as a griffin, Liselotte."

“You really think that’s enough to fool a griffin?”

“No… Ah, well, I-I don’t really know.”

“I just think it makes him look like a creep.”

Liselotte was so mean to her father. I felt like he was just being extra careful after they failed to capture Amelia in the past.

Amelia was staring at the marquess like he was the most pitiful creature in the world.

“Stop that, Amelia,” I chided her.

“Kreeeh…”

Captain Ludtink was the last to arrive, letting out a “Pffffft!” when he saw Lord Lichtenberger’s costume. His Lordship looked at the captain questioningly, wondering why he was laughing at him.

“This is mortifying, Father! Everyone’s staring at you.”

“N-No, you’re just imagining that.”

Captain Ludtink had stifled his laughter. He began to describe the “black griffin recovery plan.”

“We’re splittin’ up into three groups today. Risurisu and Lord Lichtenberger will make the first group.”

“Aww… No, I mean, i-it’s a pleasure to work with you.”

Lord Lichtenberger glared at me, so I smiled in return.

“I’ll also put Amelia, the Lichtenberger girl, and Album in your group.”

Album appeared out of nowhere with his chest puffed out proudly. The captain had probably foisted him on us because the fairy could be hard to deal with. I scooped him up to stuff him into my bag.

“The next group is me and Ulgus.”

“Aww… No, I mean, i-it’s a pleasure to work with you.”

“I’ll remember that, Ulgus.”

Zara turned out to be the final member of their group. Ulgus’s face was overcome with relief.

“Finally, Velrey, Garr, and Sly. You’re the last group.”

Ulgus and I simultaneously looked over at Vice Captain Velrey and Garr. Then we locked eyes, silently signaling that we wished we’d been in each other’s groups.

“Good. We’ll travel separately for three hours and start on our hunts. Light your smoke bombs if you manage to capture or spot the griffin at any point.”

“Yes, Captain!”

The Lichtenberger family, Amelia, Album, and I decided to take horses up to a river an hour away from the royal capital.

“Father, it’s dangerous to ride a horse with a mask on.”

“No, riding this horse is *why* I dressed like a griffin.”

With that, the disguised Lord Lichtenberger mounted his horse. Suddenly, it all became clear. He looked…nothing like a real griffin. All I could see was an old man dressed in a weird costume on a horse.

“It’s hippogriffs that are horses on the bottom, not griffins, Father.”

Hippogriffs were mythical beasts born from the coupling of griffins and mares. It was yet another rare variety of mythical beast.

“The griffin might still take an interest in me if I look like this. Let’s head out.”

“But why even dress like that when we have Amelia with us?”

“Did you say something?”

“…No, nothing.”

Liselotte mounted her horse and began to follow him from a short distance. I got on Amelia’s back and joined the line.

Lord Lichtenberger led us deeper and deeper into the forest.

Seeing the wings bobbing on his back as he charged forward really made me laugh. I clenched my muscles to keep the laughter inside, but it was just too funny. I snickered to myself as we charged through the woods.

An hour later, we arrived at the site of our search. It was a quiet river surrounded by boulders and trees—the perfect place for an animal to use as a watering hole.

“I don’t see any griffin droppings or tracks.”

“Let’s give it a thorough search. What we need is evidence.”

Lord Lichtenberger had lost all air of authority with the griffin mask on his face. Liselotte nodded at his orders quietly, as if she was already used to seeing

him like that. Meanwhile, I still struggled to contain my laughter. My shoulders trembled at the sight of him.

“This is serious business, Risurisu.”

“S-Sorry.” I still wasn’t scared of him at all. In fact, I was really amused. “Ngh… Heh!”

A snicker escaped my clenched stomach. Amelia spread her wings to hide me laughing and spare me a scolding from the marquess. She was such a good girl.

I glanced over at the river just to be safe. To my surprise, I saw a large fish swimming by.

Album reacted to it before I did. “*Wow, autumn salmon!*”

Autumn salmon were mysterious fish that were born in the river, raised in the ocean, and returned to the river to lay their eggs. The name “autumn salmon” came from how they always returned to the river to breed in the fall.

As I stared at it, the salmon jumped out of the water with a big splash, only to land on the shore as if it leapt at the wrong angle.

“I-It’s…!”

I didn’t know if I should return it to the river.

“*P-Pancake girl, let’s eat it.*”

“B-But it came all the way from the ocean to lay eggs in this river.”

“*But it jumped onto the land and everything.*”

Album was trying to tempt me. I’d heard that autumn salmon were a fatty, delicious kind of fish. But I couldn’t eat such a thing when I knew why it was in the river in the first place.

“I’m putting it back in the river.”

“*Awwww!*”

I ignored his pleas and approached the fish. But it was completely limp. I took a closer look and noticed blood draining from its head.

“Oh…did it hit its head when it jumped out?”

“*Looks like it’s dead.*”

“I-I see…”

Well, that settled it. It would just sink to the bottom if I returned it to the water now. It would be better for us to eat it after all.

I decided to slice up the fish while Lord Lichtenberger was searching for the griffin. I returned its guts to the river, kneaded salt into the meat, wrapped it in a large leaf I found nearby, and tied it up with vines.

“That should be good. I’ll cook it when it’s time for lunch.”

“*Yaaay!*”

That was when Lord Lichtenberger told us we were going to head forward again.

“The griffin’s not here. We better hurry.”

“Okay!”

I trailed behind him on Amelia’s back.

We spent another two hours searching the area, unable to come up with a single trace of the griffin—not even a feather.

“Your Lordship, why don’t we take a break and have lunch?” I suggested.

“I suppose.”

We decided to stop for lunch alongside the river. Amelia brought me rocks in her beak, stacking them up to make a simple stove.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Th-Thank you.”

I lit a fire under the stove.

That was when I glanced over at the Lichtenberger family. The father was seated, the griffin mask still affixed to his face. I watched him looking all over our surroundings, probably still suspecting the griffin was nearby. The daughter just kept looking at her father and sighing. I certainly sympathized with her.

“*Pancake girl, what are you gonna make with the autumn salmon?*”

“You’ll have to wait and see!”

“*Awww! What could it be?!*”

I wasted no time. I was ready to get cooking.

First, I peeled some potatoes and cut them into thin slices. Then I sliced up the salted autumn salmon.

I filled the large leaf with potato slices and topped them with a small layer of cheese. Then I placed the fish on top, followed by mushrooms and boiled mountain chestnuts to fill any empty space. I gave it a sprinkling of salt, pepper, and grated cheese. Finally, I topped it with dried lemon and fennel I picked nearby, making sure to tie up the leaf nice and tight so none of the ingredients fell out. It was ready to steam. I filled my pot with water, placed a bowl in it, and set down the leaf filled with fish and toppings. All it needed to do was sit and cook for a while.

For my second dish, I cooked some autumn salmon in breadcrumbs, placed cuts of it in between bread slices, and drizzled them with tartar sauce.

“*Wow! This looks yummy!*”

“You sure love tartar sauce, don’t you?”

“*Uh-huh!*”

The steamed salmon appeared to be ready now.

I selected a flat boulder to serve as our table where I laid out the food. Then I placed Amelia’s fruit on a leaf.

“Lunch is ready, everyone.”

Finally, Lord Lichtenberger removed his griffin mask. Now he was simply an old man wearing wings, and I had to bite my tongue to stifle my laughter. I wished he would have thought of taking them off too.

“I call it ‘Autumn Salmon and Tartar Sauce Bread’ with ‘Leaf-Steamed Autumn Salmon.’”

“Wow, that sounds great.”

I unwrapped the leaf from the steamed salmon by cutting the vines with a

knife. The fresh scent of lemon wafted up toward us.

"*Smells yummy!*"

"Please take a step back, Album. You're in the way."

"*Okaaay!*"

I placed the autumn salmon in leaf plates to hand out. Lord Lichtenberger stared at the leaves curiously.

"What's this…?"

"We always eat off of leaves on expeditions, Father."

"But why?"

"Because you don't have to wash dishes after your meal."

"Ah, I see." He was probably used to having servants wash his dishes after eating. I never imagined a leaf plate could be so confusing. His Lordship was also staring at the steaming leaf like it was totally incomprehensible. "Risurisu, is it customary for Fore Elves to cook food wrapped in leaves like this?"

"We don't just steam anything in leaves. This dish is special."

"I see…"

I served the fidgeting Album his portion before his drool dirtied our table. Then I served Lord Lichtenberger, Liselotte, and dished up a portion for myself at the end.

"All right, let's eat!"

"*Yeah!*"

I thought Album had already started, but it seemed he'd been waiting for the rest of us to be ready. I patted his head and called him a good boy, getting a strange "Deheh!" chuckle out of him.

I said my prayer of gratitude for nature's blessings before digging in.

I started with a big bite of the autumn salmon and tartar sauce bread.

"Mmm! This is delicious!"

The outside of the autumn salmon had a nice crunch thanks to the

breadcrumbs. Once I got to the fish inside, I tasted the savory fat oozing into my mouth. The tartar sauce only brought out the flavors even more!

Album was stuffing his cheeks, his face already smeared with tartar sauce. Lord Lichtenberger and Liselotte ate a lot more elegantly. They wiped their mouths carefully in between bites.

“Do the two of you like it?” I asked.

“Mmm. It’s very good. Maybe it’s nice to eat outside once in a while.”

“Mell’s cooking is always delicious. Thanks as always, Mell.”

“O-Of course.”

Liselotte’s praise made me feel shy.

“Ah, let’s eat the steamed salmon too before it gets cold.”

This was a very special meal packed full of the flavors of fall. I cut off a bite of salmon with my knife, added a mushroom and water chestnut on top, and stuck them all in my mouth together.

The first thing that hit me was the delicious smell of lemon. This was followed by a delicate acidity on my tongue that combined with the autumn salmon into something utterly heavenly. The potatoes had also absorbed the umami flavors of the mushrooms and fish, making them delicious on their own. I became totally lost in the act of eating.

Before long, I’d finished my meal in the blink of an eye. The others had done the same. I was glad to see they enjoyed my cooking.

“What an unexpectedly tasty meal. I appreciate the work, Risurisu,” His Lordship said.

“I’m glad to be of help.”

“Thank you for the feast, Mell.”

“Really, it was nothing.”

I wiped the sauce from Album’s face. Amelia, on the other hand, had eaten her fruit without getting any juice on her beak. Liselotte cleaned my pot and Lord Lichtenberger even extinguished the stove’s fire. I went ahead and buried

our leaf plates. Our lunch had officially come to a close.

Album was lying on the ground with a protruding belly.

“Let’s go, Album.”

“*Mmmph. I’m so full… Zzzzz…*”

It seemed he’d fallen asleep with a full stomach. Darn that blissful little fairy. I had no choice but to pick him up and stuff him in my bag, which now felt strangely heavier than before. I’d been glad to lighten my load of cooking ingredients, but Album’s increased weight was canceling that out.

“Ready, Risurisu?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

Lord Lichtenberger donned his griffin mask again. Liselotte, watching this from his side, muttered under her breath.

“You just want to dress up like a griffin, don’t you, Father?”

I couldn’t stop myself from bursting into laughter.

We left the river to start searching in the woods, but it was no use. There still weren’t any tracks or feathers to prove the griffin had been there.

“I wonder where that griffin went off to.”

“Kreh…”

I just hoped that he wasn’t attacked by monsters while he had that injury…

“Kreh?”

Amelia suddenly looked up at the sky.

“What is it, Ame—”

That was when I noticed a black speck overhead. I squinted my eyes to get a better look. Bugs wouldn’t be so high up, but it wasn’t flying like a bird either. Was it a monster? Or was it…

“Ah! Whoa!”

The black speck started speeding toward us. This allowed me to get a better look at its details. The creature had a massive pair of wings, legs with talons like those of an eagle, and the body of a lion. There was no mistaking its identity now.

“L-Lord Lichtenberger! It’s the griffin! The black griffin is flying right toward us!”

“He’s what?!”

He was still too far away for the Lichtenbergers to make him out clearly. But I knew what I saw. The griffin was charging straight at us.

“Does he seem hostile, Mell?”

“I-I don’t know!”

I asked Amelia the same question, but she just called it “iffy.” Not that I had any idea what that meant. We’d have no way of defending ourselves if he attacked us in this position.

“You said he was injured, but he looks perfectly healthy,” I said. “I don’t see any missing feathers either.”

“Oho! So he’s in good health after all!”

“Father, that’s not our concern right now!”

It was chaos. Lord Lichtenberger and Liselotte had been developing a trap to capture large mythical beasts using a magic circle. All he had to do was land on the circle, and the spell would activate, producing a trap to snare him with. I just wished they would have told me all this beforehand, however.

“I hope he actually lands on it.”

“Right…”

We decided the best option was to hide behind some bushes.

“Over here, Amelia.”

“Kreh!”

There was no way of hiding her large body entirely, but it was better than keeping her out in the open. Liselotte crouched down next to her.

“This way, Father! Quickly!”

“No, he might have come here because he saw my costume. I’m going to wait here for him.”

“That’s definitely not what happened!”

The young lady of the esteemed Lichtenberger family threw her arms up in the air and howled those words at him. But Lord Lichtenberger wasn’t listening.

“He’s almost here, Liselotte.”

“I-I know…”

The marquess had his arms spread toward the sky, ready to greet the griffin.

The griffin came more and more into focus.

“That’s the black griffin.”

“It’s so beautiful.”

Liselotte was right—the black griffin was absolutely gorgeous. He had sharp slits for eyes, a pointy beak, talons like razors, glossy black feathers, and a lion’s coat that resembled black velvet. He was definitely more masculine-looking than Amelia and noticeably larger too.

I glanced over at Amelia. She was staring at the black griffin intently.

He flapped his wings just before hitting the ground to weaken the impact, but the wind he kicked up was strong enough to knock Lord Lichtenberger off his feet.

“Father…that’s why we told you to hide…”

“Y-Yes, she’s right…”

Lord Lichtenberger rolled across the ground until he crashed into a large tree trunk. His well-loved griffin costume was torn up in the process.

The griffin touched down and folded up his wings elegantly. The first thing he did was look at Amelia and begin to chirp.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh kreh.”

Somehow, his chirps sounded “cooler” than what I was used to. It was a deep,

subdued cry compared to Amelia’s bird-like chirps.

I couldn't understand him, since I hadn't entered into a contract with this griffin. Amelia's eyes were wide open and her beak hung ajar.

"Um, Amelia, what is he saying?" I asked.

"Are you okay, Amelia?" Liselotte patted Amelia's shoulder and this seemed to snap her out of her daze. It was strange to see such a levelheaded creature like Amelia be so out of it.

I tried one more time.

"Amelia, what did the black griffin say?"

"Kreh kreh, kreh…"

"What?!"

"What did he say to Amelia, Mell?"

"U-Um… He said…" My mouth hung open in shock just like Amelia's. Liselotte gently stroked my back.

"Calm down, Mell."

"R-Right…"

"Take it slowly."

"O-Okay." I took a deep breath and exhaled. After a few more rounds of that, I finally found my composure. "Th-The black griffin…said he'd come…to fetch… his bride…"

"His bride?!" Lord Lichtenberger got right back on his feet when he heard that.

It seemed the black griffin had been searching for Amelia all this time. He stared at Amelia, eventually speaking even more to her.

"Kreh kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh."

He had a lot to say. Amelia got an uncomfortable look on her face and cried, "Kreh…"

"What did he say, Amelia?"

"Kreh kreh, kreh."

“Ah, I see.”

Apparently, the black griffin had spotted her on our last mission. He thought about approaching her, but the sight of Captain Ludtink scared him off.

I couldn’t believe another griffin fell in love with Amelia at first sight… She was my adorable little girl, so I felt simultaneously proud and upset by this. Amelia had grown attached to me as her mother figure, but somewhere along the way, she grew into a beautiful adult griffin and even attracted a mate. I knew this would happen someday, but I still had many contradicting feelings about it.

The black griffin approached Amelia slowly, step by step.

He’s going to take her away! As soon as I realized that, I burst into tears.

“Kreh, kreh.” Amelia wiped my tears away with her wings, chirping softly in my ear. “Kreh kreh, kreh kreh.”

“Ameliaaa!” I wrapped my arms around her neck and let out a wail.

“Um, I’m sorry to interrupt an emotional moment, but what did Amelia tell you, Mell?”

“Sh-She said she wasn’t going to get married. That she’d stay with me forever.”

“Oh my!”

“Kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh.” She stated bluntly that the proposal was of no interest to her. The black griffin squinted his eyes.

“Kreh kreh, kreh?”

Amelia translated the black griffin’s words.

“He said, ‘You won’t marry me? What an amusing girl you are.’”

He was quite the cocky, domineering type. He didn’t even seem bothered when Amelia glared at him. The pair continued to squawk back and forth in what sounded like an argument. I could only understand Amelia’s side of the conversation.

“*I can’t marry someone I don’t even know!*”

“*I’m supposed to take the time to get to know you? Making demands like that*

won't win me over!"

"*I reject your marriage proposal!*"

I got a sense that the black griffin had a lot of confidence based purely on Amelia's responses. It didn't sound like they were coming to an agreement at all.

I looked over at Lord Lichtenberger, wondering what we should do now. But he was just gazing at them both in a blissful trance.

"You're no help at all, Father."

"He really isn't…"

Lord Lichtenberger simply loved mythical beasts down to his core.

"Is the black griffin injured, Liselotte?"

"No, not that I can see. Maybe that blood on the feather wasn't his own."

"W-Wasn't his own?"

He *did* seem very strong. Maybe he'd been attacked by a black bird monster and ended up taking out the enemy instead. The feather likely came from his enemy.

"In that case, there's no need for us to capture him," I said.

"Right. Spirited, independent mythical beasts like him are better left in the wild. I don't think he'd get along with the other griffins in a sanctuary."

"Th-That's a good point…"

We decided to give up on capturing the black griffin. That meant it was time to head home. However…

The griffin took a step forward. Amelia stepped backwards. They kept up this process, step after step, with no end in sight.

I decided to light my smoke bomb and throw it at the black griffin. It couldn't hurt to try.

"Kreh?!"

The area became enshrouded in a blanket of white smoke.

“Come on, let’s run away now.”

“Y-Yes!”

“Kreh!”

The Royal Order’s horses were well-trained—the smoke didn’t bother them whatsoever. They took off galloping when we instructed them.

“Kreh, kreh kreh!”

“Whoa! He’s chasing after us and still chirping something!”

The black griffin, refusing to let Amelia get away, was hot on our trails. *He must be really attached to her!*

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh…”

Amelia told me that she would have at least entertained the conversation if he acted more gentlemanly. That made sense to me. It was impossible to have a real discussion when one side was acting like he was above you.

“Maybe we can call today your first date and get him to leave for the time being.”

Not that my words would sway him whatsoever… In fact, he was catching up to us quickly now.

Being chased down by a griffin larger than Amelia was incredibly frightening.

I turned to look at the black griffin and saw the bulging muscles of his front legs. They were nothing like Amelia’s dainty, curvy legs. I wouldn’t last a second if he decided to use those muscles and talons against me.

Somebody, please save us! The moment I thought that was when I heard the sound of hooves.

“Ah!”

Captain Ludtink had arrived on his horse from up ahead of us.

“Captain Ludtink!”

“Hey. Looks like you found the griffin, Risurisu.”

“We did!”

The captain had been heading towards the smoke bomb I lit.

Suddenly, the black griffin realized who was here and came to a total stop. I remembered how he'd said he didn't approach Amelia the first time because she was with Captain Ludtink.

It seemed that this griffin was frightened by our captain.

Maybe that meant we could use him to drive our pursuer away. I raised my voice and shouted.

"Captain, we're being chased! Please save us!"

"You're not capturin' the thing?"

"No. Not only is he uninjured, but he's very independent, so we don't think he'd do well in a sanctuary."

"Fine then." Captain Ludtink dismounted his horse, raised his fist, and approached the black griffin. "C'mon, you! Get outta here!"

It was an outdated way of threatening someone, but it did the job much better than expected.

"Kreh?!" He flinched and fell back when Captain Ludtink got too close. Finally, he looked at Amelia and cried one last thing. "Kreh, kreh kreh."

Amelia translated for me. She said he'd promised to come back for her.

"But no one wants that…" I sighed.

"Kreh kreh!"

"*Exactly!*" she'd responded.

The black griffin turned around, spread his beautiful wings, and took off into the sky.

We stood and watched until we couldn't see him up there anymore.

The case was officially resolved. I worried about his promise to come back for Amelia, but at least we'd be safe so long as Captain Ludtink was around.

Once again, we'd been saved by Captain Ludtink's sheer "banditness."

I knew I could always rely on him.

Mythical Beast Notes

Mythical Beast Preservation Treaty

Ownership and contact with dragons, a first-class mythical beast, is strictly forbidden.

Second-class mythical beasts may only be owned or approached by those with certification.

Third-class mythical beasts may be owned by anyone by applying for permission with their local government.

First-Class Mythical Beasts

Dragon: These extremely rare creatures, with an abundance of magical energy, are known as the strongest beasts in the world. They're usually only spotted once a century, causing specialists to fear that they've gone extinct without anyone noticing. A dragon's scales, teeth, meat, blood, bones, and eyes are usually traded on the black market, fetching high prices. Naturally, anyone who violates the ban on capturing or poaching them will be strictly punished. Dragons have also become a symbol of the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

Second-Class Mythical Beasts

Griffin: These beautiful beasts possess the upper body of an eagle and the bottom half of a lion. They are noble creatures who rarely warm up to humans. Their pure white feathers contain magic of the light element.

Hippogriff: Hippogriffs were born by breeding griffins with mares. Their bodies are half eagle on the top, half horse on the bottom. Since there are so few hippogriffs in the world, some believe they only exist in fiction.

Fenrir: These are solitary wolf creatures with glossy black coats. They refuse to live in packs and avoid being seen by people. Fenrir have violent temperaments, resulting in many reported attacks on humans.

Lycus: These clever wolf creatures have shiny white coats. They live in packs and will sometimes appear in places that humans inhabit. With friendly, dog-like personalities, there are many reports of humans and lycus entering into contracts with each other.

Monoceros: A sacred horse with a horn sprouting from its head. They are said to love virgin women and sometimes carry them on their backs. Anyone else attempting to ride them may cause these vicious mythical beasts to stab them with their horns.

Gargoyle: A mythical beast that can take the form of a stone statue. Since ancient times, people have entered into contracts with gargoyles to protect their homes.

Alraune: These are purple-bodied mythical beasts with leaves sprouting from them. Most are gentle creatures who can be easily captured. The leaves that grow on their heads are sometimes referred to as wonder drugs that can cure all illnesses.

Carbuncle: These adorable mythical beasts resemble rabbits and have magic stones in their foreheads. Carbuncles are very endangered these days, as they used to be used as magic catalysts long ago.

Whittier: A giant cat that can grow up to twenty-six feet long. Despite their size, they're adorable creatures with white coats and stripes. No whittier sightings have been reported in the past half century.

◆ Third-Class Mythical Beasts ◆

Ilves (Mountain Cat): These large cats grow to about five to six and a half feet long. They're friendly and easy to keep as pets, although they crave attention, so they like to sleep in their owner's bed. Ilves are native to snowy regions.

Lezard: A gigantic lizard that grows anywhere from six and a half to sixteen feet long. Most live in volcanoes and can breathe fire. Lezards possess bright red scales.

Tigraki: A large cat ranging from three to six and a half feet long with yellow fur and stripes. Many tigraki are aggressive.

Snow Fox (Snowsora): These small mythical beasts are about one and a half feet long with beautiful coats. Many possess fickle dispositions.

Silver Rabbit (Inreps): A tiny rabbit less than two feet long. Inreps inhabit snowy areas and have long limbs. Despite their sweet appearances, these are vicious beasts, so it's wise not to approach them unless prepared.

Gem Deer (Jamhart): These deer possess beautiful, gem-like horns and eyes. These mythical beasts were overhunted out of a desire to capture their beauty, meaning few exist today. Most are gentle creatures. Jamharts are considered a nearly threatened species.

White Squirrel: A tiny mythical beast that can fit in the palm of one's hand. They are fast and nimble to avoid enemies. White Squirrels are easy to keep as house pets, making them a favorite of mythical beast lovers.

Bonus Chapter: Mell and Sir Aiskoletta's Expedition Cooking

"HELLO, my name is Mell Risurisu. I'm coming to you today with a wonderful new guest."

"I am Ciel Aiskoletta."

"Sir Aiskoletta, you're a great hero from a foreign land, isn't that right?"

"You speak too highly of me."

"I'd expect nothing less from a hero of your magnitude. You're so humble…!"

"Anyway, let us commence with the cooking."

"Of course! Today's expedition cooking is butter-fried oysters."

"I see. I'm ready to begin."

"Our ingredients are oysters, butter, onions, parsley, and medicinal garlic."

"That's all?"

"It's a very simple dish. Sir Aiskoletta, could you mince the onions, parsley, and medicinal garlic?"

"Understood."

W-Wow…! He's chopping so fast my eyes can barely keep up!

"Phew. How's this?"

"Ah, yes. You did very well."

"What's next?"

"C-Could you mix up those chopped ingredients with butter?"

"Leave it to me."

"I'll open the oyster shells and begin cooking them over the grill."

"Smells pretty good."

“It’s the best time of year for oysters. They’re delicious when eaten raw too.”

“Mhm. I like them with lemon juice.”

“So do I! It looks like the oysters are done, so now we’ll slather on some butter with medicinal herbs mixed in. Please only use a little so that it doesn’t melt and overflow from the shell.”

“I see. It’s hard to get right.”

“I understand. You feel like you want to use lots of butter, right? But you’ll just be wasting it if it spills over.”

“Is this right?”

“Yes, it looks good. Once the butter is on, you can find a big leaf to put them on and steam the oysters with that.”

“That simmering sound works up an appetite.”

“I know just how you feel. I think they might be ready now.”

“They look delicious.”

“Don’t they? All right, let’s taste them.”

“Indeed… Mmph!”

“D-Did you not like it? I’m sorry…”

“No, this is incredible!”

“Ah, I-I see. Th-That’s good.”

“The oysters are jiggly and that butter flavor fills your entire mouth! What a rich taste of the sea!”

“I-I’m just glad you enjoyed it.”

“Try it for yourself, Miss Mell.”

“Y-Yes, I will… Ah, it’s really good. It’s not too heavy, but it’s still so rich.”

“I’d like to have these oysters with a nice drink.”

“I think they’d taste good with a dry liquor.”

“I see.”

“The leftover butter can also be eaten with bread.”

“Then how about we give it a try?”

“Here, I prepared some hard bread for us.”

“Many thanks… Oh!”

“How is it?”

“Brilliant! The butter still has a slight oyster taste. What more can I say? It’s simply brilliant!”

“It’s a favorite food of mine too. I always gobble it up.”

“It’s like a fancy sauce.”

“Absolutely.”

“And shall we accompany this meal with some wine? I have a special white wine just for the occasion. I even prepared a sweet wine just for you, Miss Mell.”

“Y-You don’t mind sharing?”

“It’s the least I can do. You’ve treated me to a delightful meal.”

“Thank you very much.”

“To a wonderful meal of oysters!”

“Cheers!”

“A most splendid night it is.”

“Agreed! And with that, our expedition cooking segment comes to a close. Ah, white wine is really yummy…”

“I’ll be back to learn more!”

“I look forward to it!”

Afterword

HELLO. I'm Mashimesa Emoto. This has been volume 5 of *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights*. I hope I've managed to fill another book with the lively activities of the Second Expeditionary Squadron. I've written many different works, but *Enoch* is my first series to have a fifth volume published. I never thought it would get this far, so I'm very, very happy to have reached this point.

On a different subject, just like with volume 4, this volume's stories are entirely new. The new character, Ciel, arrives in a completely different manner than the web version. There are many other stories not included in the published version, so I hope you'll give that a read too. (https://ncode.syosetu.com/n2542dr/) The third volume of the manga edition of *Expedition Cooking* is also releasing around the same time as this volume in Japan. Renji Fukuhara-sensei has done a fantastic job of capturing the characters' appeal. This will be the book that depicts the long-awaited arrival of Amelia. She looks so squishy as a baby and she's downright adorable. Amelia's charm is also depicted brilliantly thanks to Fukuhara-sensei's way of drawing her many expressive faces.

This volume of the manga will also cover the appearance of Liselotte and Lord Lichtenberger. Their obsession with mythical beasts is displayed to the max in the manga edition, so I highly suggest you check it out. The inside of the cover also includes a bonus episode of "Expedition Cooking with Mell and Ulgus," so I'd be pleased if you enjoy that too.

Volume 3 of the *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights* manga is out in Japan on May 9th. I hope you decide to give it a read.

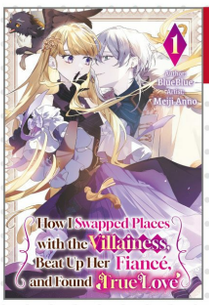
As for recent events in my life, I've seen plays, gone on trips, and taken walks outside when the weather is nice. I'd like to visit Hokkaido during Golden Week, but I haven't decided on any plans yet. I'm hoping to have a more relaxed year after the previous one, where my schedule was so packed that I felt like I never had time to do anything.

Finally, I offer my sincerest gratitude to everyone involved in this book's publication and sale. I'd also like to thank the readers who support me. *Expedition Cooking* exists because of all of you. Thank you for everything, and I hope we meet again in the next volume.

Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato Illust Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue Illust Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!

How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken Illust Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.

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