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Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

BY You FUGURUMA

ILLUST. NAMA



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Part 1: Proof of Remembrance

Chapter 1: A Most Troublesome Client

1

The room was a refined one, filled with glossy amber furnishing. The young margravine, Annelie Lovner, sipped elegantly at her cup of tea, upon a sofa upholstered in gentle velvet. She smiled at the elderly baron sitting opposite her.

“But it must be said, Vesal,” she said. “You’re so dutiful. Especially considering your health.”

The Lovner family was a prestigious one, and had been since the nation’s founding. Visiting the head of the family was a tradition within the family line, intended to maintain strong relations. And indeed, it was a duty among collateral lords who had taken up the Lovner family name.

However, this particular elderly baron had in recent times been largely bedridden, and was unable to visit very often. Still, on his better days he made the journey, and it spoke volumes of his conscientious, steadfast character. In his younger days he had been devoted to the support and protection of his lands, and it was for this reason that he was so respected by his people.

“Well, I must thank you for taking care of my grandsons,” Vesal said, and then more jokingly, “I’m barely able to sleep when I think of the trouble they must be causing you.”

“Well, to you I suppose they’ll always be mischief-makers,” replied Annelie, covering her mouth as she laughed. “Both Dennis and Walt are capable young men. I couldn’t possibly ask for more perfect aides.”

“I am honored you would think of them such.”

But the margravine’s words were no mere kindness—they brought deep

wrinkles to Vesal's face as he smiled.

"Well, I'd best return to my office," said Annelie, "but please feel free to take your time, you two."

Her words were directed at her two closest aides and were a generosity—they rarely had the chance to return to their childhood home. A silence fell over the room as the two grandsons sat in the company of their grandfather.

"To think she would say such a thing," said Vesal, eventually breaking the silence. "If it ever comes to be too much, you are always welcome to return home. If it is simply to rest, that is fine, but I will gladly help you find work or begin marriage discussions. It bears stating that there is happiness for you outside of this place too."

"I appreciate the gesture," said Dennis, who until now had been silent behind Annelie. He let a smile rise to his lips. "But I'm fine. My happiness is found in the service of the margravine. As long as she still desires it, I will not deny her."

Dennis nodded lightly, a show of appreciation because he knew his grandfather worried for him.

"I...I see. I cannot help feeling there are more appropriate places for you, and yet..." Vesal's eyes narrowed with a slight sadness as he smiled. "Well, it is what it is, I suppose."

But Vesal's other grandson, Walt, of the main family line, saw more in the expression than just concern, and a hint of suspicion rose to his own eyes. Walt had seen that look on his grandfather's face countless times, but did not know what it meant—he merely felt some dim, dark emotions from it, and it always sent a chill through him.

Work or...marriage discussions...

The pieces were beginning to move, silently bringing together the young margravine of the distinguished Lovner art family, her aides, and the adventurers who would be woven into their story.

“You’re working together, then?”

Zack had taken a break from his office work to listen to them, and then he lapsed into an ominous silence. Shiori couldn’t help but grin—she had expected this very reaction. She knew all too well that her older brother was forever overprotective of her.

“Is there going to be a problem?”

“Hm. No, no, I don’t think so,” said Zack, putting his documents on the desk. “I’m just a little surprised, is all. But none of that lovey-dovey flirty stuff in front of clients, you hear?”

“‘Lovey-dovey flirty stuff’...?”

“Do you really think we’d do anything so shameful?” asked Alec.

He glanced at Shiori and the two of them chuckled. They hadn’t said a single thing to give that impression, but Zack seemed to picture their relationship as different than it actually was.

Still, it’s like a dream...

As Shiori looked up at Alec, she thought of how they’d gone from trusted companions to lovers.

We’ve come so far, now that I think about it.

Four years ago, Shiori had been on her way home from work when she had suddenly been pulled into a space-time warp. In that moment, she had left Japan for another world. Her only possessions were the suit she wore and one of her shoes. She’d had to learn a new language from scratch, and start a life in a world she knew nothing about. The words, the weather, the culture—she had been thrown into an experience like no other, where nobody knew who she was. On the bright side, the country she’d ended up in was a comfortable one, and the people who had found her were kind and good.

Zack had been the one to discover her, collapsed on the ground. He’d helped her recover, become her guarantor, and even watched over her like a brother. Nadia had taught her how women carried themselves in the nation. Clemens had taken time between his work duties to help her learn to read and write. She

had been able to survive by leaning on the help of many, and had carved out a place for herself thanks to these kindnesses.

However, homesickness and loneliness would sporadically burrow their way into Shiori's heart. She was pained by the fact she could never speak of the place she had come from, and deeply saddened that she had no proof of the memories of the life she had built in her home world, and the friends and family who existed there.

Shiori had lived a life that lacked a certain sense of reality. And it was here, as she worried about her own vague existence, that the "Akatsuki Incident" took place. It was here that the partners she believed she could trust had betrayed her. Even now, she did not know for certain what it was that had motivated them to do such things.

All the same, they had abandoned her deep in a dungeon and left her to die. They had left her weakened and exhausted, taken everything she had, and said simply of the act, "She's an outsider. We'll be fine." The terrifying experience had only intensified her feelings of loneliness and self-torment.

Is there no place in this world for an outsider to call home? No place for an outsider to belong?

Shiori had no means of returning home, and she was tortured by the thought that as an outsider, there was no other option than to live the rest of her life alone. Just as she was beginning to feel crushed under the weight of her emotions, Alec appeared. He had been patient with her—he listened to her, held her in his arms, and kissed her warmly. His actions had melted the ice surrounding her heart. She was suddenly engulfed in warm feelings for him, and he had reciprocated in kind.

I'm...so happy.

When she looked up at Alec standing by her side, he looked back at her, his eyes narrowing as he smiled.

Behind her, she heard whisperings, but when she turned to face the eyes she felt upon her back, all avoided her gaze—people were staring at the Guild noticeboard as if nothing had happened, or otherwise perusing client requests. Still, she felt as if she were being watched.

She spotted Clemens staring vaguely out the window. By his side was Nadia, with something of a wry grin on her face. When Shiori caught her eye, she shrugged. Rurii was hanging around Clemens's legs for some reason, occasionally poking him. Puzzled by the somewhat unnatural behavior of her friends, she turned back towards Zack.

"You must be glad, Shiori," he said to her, smiling. "And as your brother, I'm relieved you'll be working with someone trustworthy."

It would also mean Zack wouldn't have to worry so much every time Shiori was invited on an expedition with a new party. She was unsure how to turn such offers down, and there was some awkwardness whenever she did. This hadn't escaped Zack's notice. She'd made him worry, and she felt bad for it.

"I am, thank you," she said. "But I'm also sorry for making you worry so much."

"Nothing to apologize for," replied Zack. "It was never your fault. At least this way it'll be easier to form parties for quests. Ah, speaking of which..." He flipped through the documents on the desk and stopped at one in particular. "A request came in asking for you in particular, Shiori. I was actually hoping to talk to you about arranging a party for it."

Shiori took a closer look.



Request for exploration and protection through the Tower of Silveria. Client: Lord of the Lovner family plus two aides (total: three people). Requesting the assistance of a housekeeping mage, and at least three seasoned adventurers.

“Wow. The Lovner family, huh?” said Alec, with some awe in his voice.

“Do you know them?” asked Shiori.

“They’re a very distinguished family with a history that goes back to the nation’s founding. They’re renowned for being a family of the arts. Extremely wealthy too—they privately own their own territory in the kingdom.”

“Oh. Well, that’s...rather nerve-wracking...”

Alec wanted to be considerate of Shiori’s anxieties—it was quite something to be requested by such an esteemed family—but he couldn’t help frowning at the first line of the request.

“The Tower of Silveria, though? They want to explore a location like *that* in a season like *this*?”

“Is it a troublesome area?” Shiori asked.

“Not in the summer, no, but dangerous magical beasts appear in the area during winter. There’s also the fact that it’s easy to get to it from town because it’s been made a sightseeing destination—the place has been so well explored there’s practically nothing of value there anymore.”

“Midtier adventurers go there to polish their skills outside of winter,” added Zack, “but it’s not the kind of place you’d ever choose to go to in the colder seasons—there’s nothing worth going for.”

“I see. Then why would they ask for me?” asked Shiori. “There’s so little for me to help with.”

“They don’t want to place too much stress on the family lord. Apparently, they want to make things as comfortable as possible.”

“Stress...? Are we talking about someone weak or sickly?”

“No, the lord is in full health. But, well, she’s also a young, single woman. The worry is that she’ll catch a cold or a chill or something like that.”

“In that case, I can’t help but think they’d be better off waiting until after winter. Summer is a much better season for exploring.”

With all the unrest in neighboring nations this particular winter, the knight brigades had been spread thin, and there was a chance there would be an increase in suppression and security requests. Zack knew that Alec’s disapproval was based on this fact—they didn’t have time to play along with a request that was deliberately set in a dangerous season.

“Well, I tried suggesting that too,” said Zack. “But apparently there’s something there they can only see during winter.”

The Lovner family were very influential, and were on friendly terms with the Torisval margrave, who watched over this domain. That made the request particularly difficult to refuse outright. Alec was prepared to go anywhere his work required, but he still wasn’t happy about it.

“I see,” was all he said.

“In terms of a party, so far we have Alec and myself,” said Shiori.

“Indeed,” replied Zack. “As for the others, well...considering the location and the clients, A-rankers would be preferred. And at the very least, a mage capable of handling fire magic...”

“Then I’ll go.”

“Count me in too.”

Nadia and Clemens jumped in, having at some point overheard the conversation. Rurii trembled in agreement.

“Wow... Is it really so dangerous?” asked Shiori. “This is quite the amazing party we’re putting together.”

Outside of herself, all three of the prospective party members were top-class, experienced adventurers. Hiring them would cost quite the sum.

“Yep—but you get snow bears in those parts,” said Clemens. “As an added bonus, it’s also a nesting ground for snow jellyfish.”

“There’s a ninety percent chance of encountering snow jellyfish,” added Nadia, “which means you’re bound to meet them at least once on a round trip.

And because they travel in swarms, high-level wide-area fire magic is essential.”

“And a thirty percent chance of encountering snow bears doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence. You have to be ready.”

Both magical beasts were considered at least A-rank in terms of difficulty. Facing off against the monsters in snowy terrain was one thing, but on top of that, the party would also have to protect three people while they did it.

“How many days will we need?” asked Shiori.

“It’ll take around five days from the town of Silveria. If there wasn’t any trouble, you could do it in three, including the exploration, but...there aren’t many visitors during the winter, so the paths will likely be covered in snow. Factoring in monster encounters, five seems about right. From Tris, including travel time, I’d say give yourself a week.”

“Got it. Should I prepare the usual amount of rations and food? I wonder if we’ll have clients with big appetites...”

“Oh... The client has said they’ll bring enough for themselves, but you’ll want to bring enough for an extra three people just in case. No more than usual, however.”

“Okay. But then...”

There seemed to be more to Zack’s statement than he was letting on. He chuckled.

“The client said they’re used to outdoor travel and they’ll come prepared, but I can’t help feeling worried all the same. It seems to me this will be their first time in real winter conditions. There’s a chance they might not be adequately prepared. I told them that equipment checks prior to departure are a rule, so please be thorough. And, uh... It bears mentioning that one of the clients apparently hates immigrants.”

When Zack had informed the clients that Shiori was a foreigner—something he did as some previous clients took issue with it—one of them had initially refused outright until the margravine had admonished him. At that point, he had backed down. After all, a housekeeping mage was essential to ensure that the margravine received adequate rest and did not endure excess strain on her

body. Her two aides knew this also, and the margravine had assured Zack that her traveling companions would mind their manners.

“A hatred of immigrants...”

Nadia and Clemens could do little but shrug. Alec frowned as he put a hand across Shiori’s shoulders. The Kingdom of Storydia was full of immigrants, but there were no small number of times that there was trouble as a result of differences in language, culture, and customs. Storydia was comparatively more tolerant of foreigners, but some discrimination was unavoidable.

A most troubling client...

The words passed through Shiori’s mind as she listened to Zack get into the particulars of their request—she knew it would be best to mentally prepare herself for anything.

A few days later:

Shiori looked out the window of their carriage at the passing landscape as they headed for the town of Silveria. There was a forest of conifers lining the road, and though magical beasts rarely appeared near the outskirts of human settlements, many dangerous monsters lived in the depths of the forest where people often did not tread.

In summer, the far-off tower gleamed white and the surrounding deep forest scenery was a sight to behold. During the sightseeing season, many travelers gathered to see this scenic beauty, but winter was when dangerous, savage magical beasts made the place their home. Very few ever ventured into the depths of the forest unless their goal was snow bear pelts.

The Silverian region was once part of the neighboring Dolgast Empire’s territory. The tower in the center of the forest had been built back then to serve as the site of an initiation rite for the territorial lord’s sons—they were to navigate traps and magical beasts to acquire proof that they had “captured” the tower, at which point they became men. Shiori had imagined this to be quite the excruciating experience, though in truth the rite was not particularly difficult—the lord of the territory would gain nothing from losing a precious heir to such a tradition.

The tower was, however, abandoned when the kingdom moved in and occupied the territory, and everything of value had since been taken from it. Now, it was little more than a way for adventurers to test their skills and a place to practice for expeditions.

Shiori couldn't help but wonder who this woman was—this lord of a count's family who had made it a point of visiting the tower in the winter. The family was known for producing a great many artists, and the lord herself was a painter of much renown. This was, in fact, the very point of the request—Annelie Lovner wanted to experience a particular scenic view that could be witnessed at no other time.

But as for her attendant who had a distaste for immigrants...

"We'll be arriving soon," said Alec, seated next to her and organizing his things.

Shiori leaned forward, putting her face close to the window, and saw a town in the distance. In the summer she was sure it would be a colorful palette of rooftops, but at the present time all was blanketed in white.

"Well then, let's get to it," said Nadia.

Gone was the woman's usual glamorous makeup, replaced on this occasion by a simpler and neater look. She caught Shiori's eye and winked.

Shiori had been specifically requested for this job, and it was the first time she'd received an official request from a noble family. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves, and felt Alec's hand pat the back of her hand reassuringly. It was only slight—so slight that neither Clemens nor Nadia had noticed—but she saw the hint of a smile at the corners of Alec's lips as he stared out the window.

Shiori smiled to herself when she thought of his consideration for her.

3

As soon as she stepped from the carriage, Shiori felt the piercing cold on her skin, and she shrunk into herself.

I can't understand why anyone would want to sleep outside in this kind of

weather...

Even though that was exactly the work she had come here to do, the freezing temperature was enough to make her wonder. It was truly impressive to think that even then, winter requests were accepted for not just monster suppression but also gathering and protection. They were simply par for the course for snowy countries.

Nonetheless, it had been quite the shock for Shiori when she had started out in her adventuring career. The people who lived in cold places were nothing if not durable. There was an abundance of winter items and equipment for adventurers, which allowed for work in the colder season.

“Is this it?” Alec asked aloud, looking up at a particular inn. “I think this is the place they specified.”

It was, most likely, the best lodging in town. It had white walls and a deep red triangular roof, and was noticeably bigger than the buildings around it. They entered the lobby, where a refined older gentleman welcomed them with a nod. He appeared to be the manager.

“We’re from the Tris Adventurers’ Guild,” said Alec, as the group’s leader. “We’re here by request from Miss Annelie Lovner.”

They were directed to a room where the client was waiting for them. The manager knocked before speaking.

“Your guests have arrived, Miss Lovner.”

They heard some sounds from behind the door along with voices, and then the door opened and a young man peeked out. He had orange hair and eyes the color of forget-me-nots—an appearance that was reminiscent of Zack—but his nervous demeanor and suspicious glare was quite the opposite. He left something of a chilly impression.

The young man gasped when he noticed Shiori. After a moment of silence, he pulled himself together, with a look as if he were preparing himself to endure something. However, he could not hide the displeasure in his face, and it was quite clear that this young man was the one who took issue with immigrants.

The kingdom was tolerant of foreigners and, in fact, promoted immigration,

but when it came to Easterners, things were slightly different. Because there were so few of them within the kingdom and their appearance was so unique, many reacted to them with caution. When Shiori had first started looking for work, she had felt this firsthand, and had even been immediately turned away from some jobs for this very reason.

The man confirmed Alec's request ticket and contract, then motioned for the party to enter the room. However, he held out a palm towards Shiori before she could enter. He looked down on her coldly.

"So you are the housekeeping mage?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't allow a strange foreigner to even breathe the same air as Lady Annelie. Be sure you are on your best behavior."

He's not even trying to hide it!

All the same, Shiori felt a wry amusement more than any anger or frustration. She held her feelings back and bowed to show she understood. Alec, however, felt none of Shiori's humor at the situation.

"Do you not need to check your own behavior?" he asked. "Is this how you speak to the one you specifically requested for this trip?"

His voice was hard and low. Clemens and Nadia remained silent, but they knew by Alec's expression that he was ready for battle. Rurii wriggled nearby as if it were trying to say something.

The red-haired young man flinched under the gaze of the veteran adventurer, but did not lower his eyes—he was steely in his own way.

Though uncommon, it was unfortunately true that on the rare occasion, a contract was canceled when the client and adventurer did not get along. Just as Shiori was thinking that someone would need to clear the air, a dignified voice rang out from the back of the room.

"Dennis," said the voice, "he's right. You are being very rude. Please let our guests inside, right away."

"But Lady Annelie..." said the man called Dennis.

However, all it took for him to back down was a glare from the young woman with blonde hair and dark brown eyes. She was in her midtwenties, and not beautiful in the traditional sense—her beauty was in the way she carried herself, and her noble expression. Her very presence was attractive.

“This woman has earned the trust of Count Enqvist, who recommended her. Let us not also forget the words of Zack Ciel, renowned adventurer and confidant of the Torisval margrave. He gave his own stamp of approval. Are you now telling me you doubt the words of these men?”

Shiori had met the Enqvist family in the fall when one of their younger family members, a boy, had gone missing. Shiori was shocked to learn that it was this family who had been responsible for her recommendation.

Dennis was silent. He let Shiori into the room with a frown. When Shiori nodded at him politely, he averted his gaze. Her polite manner towards him was a sort of revenge for his lack of manners towards her, but not to the extent that she feared she would be called out for it.

The margravine Annelie, who had been relaxing on a long sofa, stood to welcome them inside. She looked at Shiori and smiled.

“Such exquisite black hair,” she said. “It’s like silk.”

“Thank you.”

Shiori wondered if the slight sadness she noticed in the woman was just her imagination. There was something in the way the margravine regarded and complimented her hair.

“My apologies, mage,” Annelie went on. “We seem to have forgotten our manners.”

“Think nothing of it,” replied Shiori. “Your aide was thinking of your safety, so please don’t let it bother you.”

That said, Shiori had actually once found herself in a situation not unlike a kidnapping, caused by an aide who was overly worried about his lord. She tried not to focus on those unpleasant feelings as she thought back on the Enqvist family.

There was one more aide in the room. In contrast to Dennis, he wore a bright smile as he introduced himself as Walt Lovner. He was from a branch family, and, like Dennis, was employed as Annelie's aide. During their excursion he would also be working as a servant.

Annelie had them sit on a comfortable long sofa while Walt put out tea and light snacks. Dennis, still frowning, took up a position just behind Annelie, and introduced himself. His full name was Dennis Fryden. He was Annelie's secretary and servant, and like Walt, came from a branch family. Perhaps the difference in his last name was because of his mother.

When Shiori met his gaze for an instant, Dennis looked suddenly awkward. He had expressive features.

He's quite the easy one to read...

There was something about Dennis that made him difficult to outright dislike. Perhaps the fact that he was in the close employ of one so kind meant that he, too, was not a bad person at heart.

"If it's okay by you," said Annelie, "I'd like to get straight into the details of our request."

With the introductions out of the way, Annelie elegantly crossed her long legs and smiled. It was common to think of noble women as extravagant, but Annelie wore quite a simple outfit. She was dressed in a comfortable shirt and loose, olive-colored pants that looked like they wouldn't show dirt and grime easily. She also wore low-heeled boots. Her garb was refined but practical. It seemed that she really was accustomed to traveling outdoors.

"As I'm sure you've already heard, there's a scenic view I absolutely must see. I want to make it the motif of my newest work. I am aware that it will not be the safest of journeys."

The view in question was a snowy landscape that could be seen only from the highest point of the Tower of Silveria. Annelie wanted to see it before the snow grew too thick.

"To be honest, I've wanted to see it for many years now. However, a certain stubborn someone has long insisted that it's too dangerous."

A certain stubborn someone...

Shiori looked at Dennis. Annelie and Walt did the same.

“You can’t blame me,” said Dennis. “However important the view is to her art, I can’t just allow Lady Annelie to traipse into a place we know is very dangerous. And this is not even taking into consideration that the trip requires camping in the snowy wilderness.”

His reasoning was, of course, correct. There were problems with his attitude, to be sure, but as with his statement about foreigners, Dennis was only thinking of his master. Shiori understood this, though admittedly it did not make her feel much better.

“And there you have it,” said Annelie. “However, when I heard there existed a mage who could make outdoor camping a more pleasurable experience, that certain stubborn someone finally acquiesced.”

“But who could have guessed they’d be a forei—?”

Dennis suddenly leapt into the air, his face scrunched up. Annelie had pinched his arm. Alec and Clemens both cringed at the attack, while Nadia and Walt laughed. Annelie released her grip as if nothing had happened, and Dennis straightened himself back up. He did, however, make sure to keep a bit more distance from the young woman, and his arm trembled ever so slightly. The pinch looked like it hurt.

“Is this a master-servant comedy act?” whispered Shiori without thinking.

“Did you say something?” asked Alec.

But before Shiori could reply, Annelie straightened herself up and smiled at them once more.

“Is it all true?” she asked. “I’ve heard that you can prepare hot meals, a warm place to sleep, and even baths.”

“Yes,” replied Shiori. “Though it will be a little difficult in a space with too much piled snow. Where the snow is only one to two meters deep, it is possible. You are also welcome to wash your hair in the bath, as I am able to dry hair to help you avoid chills. I also wash clothing upon request.”

“Amazing. It’s like a dream come true.”

“You are far too kind.”

Annelie and Walt’s eyes sparkled with anticipation and curiosity, though Dennis’s steely gaze remained unchanged. Shiori made a mental note to really do her best so as not to let them down.

Alec then went into a general explanation of points of concern before their departure. It was of course true that Shiori was the one who had been requested, but while they were working together, it was smoother to leave such explanations and negotiations to Alec, who had far more experience.

“As outlined in our Guild rules,” he said, “anything gathered or acquired during the expedition is ours. We’re happy to negotiate should any items of great value be found, so in the case we find something you would like to keep for yourself, please don’t hesitate to say so.”

“Understood.”

“When would you like to depart?” he asked.

Annelie glanced at her two aides, and they nodded their approval before she spoke.

“Would tomorrow morning be acceptable? I know you’re much more experienced with itineraries, so I’m happy to leave the particulars to you.”

“We appreciate that, and can have a detailed schedule ready for you by the evening. Do you mind if I ask about your experience in the wild to help with our preparations?”

“Not at all.”

“And also,” said Alec, glancing at Shiori for a moment before turning once more to Annelie. “I believe you would have heard this from Zack already, but we would like to confirm your traveling equipment and baggage before departure. Shiori, Nadia, do you mind helping out with this?”

“I already *told* Sir Zack,” snapped Dennis. “We are experienced with the outdoors. We did *not* come unprepared.”

“I apologize, but these are the rules,” said Alec. “It is our duty to check and

confirm all equipment and baggage in advance of any protection request that includes camping in the wild. There are no exceptions. The smallest lack of preparation can mean the difference between life and death. It's laid out very clearly in the contract that was prepared... Did you not see it? I'm certain this would have already been explained to you."

Are you going to disregard the contract?

This was what Alec's words implied. Dennis fell silent, save for a short groan.

"We do not do this to show you any disrespect, Sir Dennis," said Alec.

"However, accidents in the wild are met more often by those who are experienced than those who are just starting out. These accidents are most common in the lowlands and near human settlements, *not* in high mountain terrain or the deep forests. Do you know why?"

"I do not..."

"The biggest factor is negligence. We *think* we'll be fine because we have experience, or because we are not far from a settlement. However, the people who think this and leave insufficiently prepared often meet with disaster. The death rate jumps even higher when cold weather is a factor. So please understand—reaching your goal on an expedition means nothing if you cannot survive the trip home. If your equipment is fine, then there's nothing to worry about. If it happens to be insufficient in some way, then we'll buy what we need before we depart. With just a small amount of extra care, our chances of survival increase."

Annelie smiled, having listened to the back-and-forth in silence.

"Alec speaks the truth," she said. "Please have them inspect our equipment."

"Yes, my lady..."

Dennis was a proud man, but he was not so stupid that he would completely ignore what he had just been told. His shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

They watched as Dennis showed Shiori and Nadia to a separate room. Alec sighed.

“I know it may seem like a trivial annoyance, but...are you sure you’ll be okay with a man like that by your side?”

Though the distance for their expedition was not long, it was still one in which survival played a key factor, and Alec’s fears were not completely allayed. And besides, did this not have an impact on the family’s business?

“I’m truly sorry,” said Annelie, her eyebrows drooping apologetically. “I know he hasn’t left a great impression, but he really is very capable. It’s the very reason I made him my secretary. Among my staff, I implicitly trust him most. However...” Annelie paused for a moment to look at Walt, and then her eyes grew sad. “There was an...incident, and it left Dennis with a distrust for immigrant women. He’s especially sensitive around those with darker skin or hair. Depending on the work, he does not always accompany me for business.”

Alec and Clemens glanced at one another. So there *was* something behind Dennis’s behavior.

“In truth, he does not hate immigrants or foreigners as much as he may seem to. He is the son of immigrants himself, and he is well aware of how difficult life can be for them. It’s just...” Annelie paused once more. She told them that due to the personal nature of it, she could not speak in detail. “Just before Dennis was to become a legal adult...his father was involved in a double suicide with a female adventurer from a southern nation. He left Dennis and his mother. This is where Dennis’s feelings stem from. It would seem that the female adventurer in question also had...black hair.”

A female immigrant with black hair, and an adventurer. That explained his attitude towards Shiori. It also explained his stance towards adventurers in general, and why Annelie had noticed Shiori’s hair immediately upon meeting her.

“I knew that Shiori was an immigrant,” said Annelie, “but I hadn’t imagined she’d have black hair, also. I apologize for any unpleasantness she might have felt earlier. Please rest assured I will apologize to her myself again later.”

“Thank you.”

Dennis’s dislike of foreigners was illogical, but there was little that they could do about it. Alec, too, could relate in some ways to having an irrational dislike of

certain things. But however talented Dennis was, Alec could not understand Annelie having this man as an aide when she had to be so careful about what work she brought him along for. Among nobles, it could be called a fatal character flaw.

Annelie seemed to notice what Alec was thinking by his expression.

“Though it is indeed a dire flaw in the man, it is also valuable in noble society,” she said with a gentle smile. “There are so few who are as open and honest, and that is why...I cannot bear to part with him.”

4

The work of checking baggage and equipment was usually done over several meetings, where necessary items could be discussed and prepared ahead of time. However, in cases like this one where the client was particularly busy, the checks were done prior to departure.

Dennis brought Shiori and Nadia to a separate room and told them to use the table in the center of it. As was to be expected of a noble’s lodging, the furniture was exquisite, and the table was big—providing more than enough space for them to lay out and inspect everyone’s baggage.

“Well then, we’ll go ahead and get started inspecting your equipment.”

“You’re looking at everything? Not just one person’s?”

“It’s to be on the safe side,” said Shiori. “I hope you understand. However, in the case of underwear and sanitary equipment, we won’t insist on seeing things ourselves—an explanation will more than suffice.”

Shiori understood now that Dennis was, above all else, worried for his master, and knew how to choose her words to ensure his understanding. Because she stressed the need for safety, Dennis responded with a frown, but he also nodded in agreement.

“Very well,” he said. “I will open the baggage and line it up so that you may look at it.”

“Understood.”

Dennis opened each knapsack and placed their contents on the table while Shiori and Nadia began inspecting them. Rurii was curious to watch the work they did, but was sure to stay in a spot where it wouldn't get in the way. Occasionally they asked questions, and Dennis answered them. Despite his initial reluctance, Dennis's answers were quick and precise, and they finished their work quite quickly.

"I see..." muttered Nadia, noticing an issue.

"Hm..." added Shiori, who had noticed the same thing.

It was common for nobles to bring an excess of valuables and luxury goods, but Annelie and her aides had packed only what was most necessary. This showed that they really were experienced with expeditions of this nature.

However...

"What is it?" asked Dennis, noticing the troubled expressions. "Is there a problem?"

He had been full of confidence during the inspection, but now seemed rather worried.

"For a short hiking trip, even in the winter, this is sufficient," said Nadia, "but...I'm a little concerned because this will be a longer expedition."

"There is not enough food," said Shiori. "The baggage is also unevenly split between Dennis and Walt, which means that Annelie isn't carrying enough. If for some reason she were to be separated from the group, this could prove extremely dangerous."

"You also need to be better prepared with protection against the cold. With only this, there's a chance you'll freeze to death before we get to nightfall on our first day."

Dennis went completely pale.

"Please, tell me in detail what is lacking from our baggage and equipment so I can better prepare in future."

Yes, he was impulsive and unpleasant at times, but Dennis was at heart a very conscientious type. He reflected on his own mistakes and endeavored not to

make them again. He took out a notepad with a serious look on his face.

“First, there is the imbalance in your luggage. In particular, it’s not good that you carry the entirety of the party’s food and medicine. It’s fine for an ordinary journey, and in fact it’s more efficient, but in harsher environments where exploration and camping is involved, it can prove fatal. If you happen to get separated from the group, the other’s lives are at risk.”

“Ah, I see. As it stands, should I be separated from the group, Annelie and Walt will be lacking supplies.”

Some would say, *“That’s exactly why we hired you adventurers,”* but even adventurers could not promise that a party might not get split up. It was a hard rule: when venturing into unpredictable environments, you prepared for the very worst.

“It may make your baggage slightly heavier, but it’s best if you all carry the same things.”

“All...carry...the same...” Dennis repeated as he hurriedly and conscientiously scribbled into his notepad. It looked like it was well used. “You mentioned protection against the cold?”

“I’m most concerned with your underwear,” said Nadia. “The margravine wears silk, which is fine. On the other hand, the cotton underwear you and Walt have may be comfortable, but doesn’t dry quickly. Once it’s soaked with sweat, it’s likely to make you cold.”

“Oh, is that so...?”

“Your coats too. Wool is indeed very warm, but in the snow it will get heavy as it gets wet and, like your underwear, it will take a long time to dry. This will make things colder again. I recommend we swap these coats for something made of magical beast material—you’ll be able to get something woolen that is both waterproof and quick-drying.”

“We’ll also want to look at ensuring your food and medicine don’t freeze,” said Shiori. “I see that you’ve done so already, but over a longer journey this won’t be enough. If it freezes over, you won’t be able to use any of it when you most need it. The best idea is to put it in a bag made of the appropriate

material.”

Each time something new was pointed out, Dennis let out a moan.

“Would it be safe to say that until now, your hikes in the winter have either been short or otherwise in locations that a carriage can reach?” asked Nadia. “You’ve managed by purchasing equipment for nobles looking to spend some time outdoors, yes?”

“Yes... You’re exactly right,” said Dennis, raising his hands in defeat, his notepad and pen still clutched in his hands.

“Fortunately, there’s a specialty adventuring shop here in town. We can buy everything we need there.”

Requests were sometimes refused if the baseline safety needs weren’t met, but Silveria was home to Enandel and Co., a supplier of adventuring equipment. Zack had made sure of this before agreeing to the request. However, Dennis looked worried.

“Dressing Lady Annelie in adventurer gear...?”

He did not seem particularly keen on the idea of dressing his master in equipment meant for adventurers. Nadia smiled.

“There’s no need for concern,” she said. “Enandel and Co. are an offshoot. Originally they were part of Holewa and Co. I’m sure you’re familiar with the name.”

“They have a long history and many powerful clientele in the kingdom,” said Dennis. “They’re even friendly with the duke’s family...”

“Yes, the very same Holewa. There’s quite a few adventurers who hail from noble origins. There was a demand from many who were particular about their equipment, and a small group from Holewa went independent and formed Enandel and Co. They were founded around ten years ago, so it wouldn’t be too surprising if you’ve never heard of them. Their equipment is very much up to the expectations of the nobility, and they handle high-class noble brands, also.”

I had no idea!

Naturally, the prices matched the clientele, making the equipment beyond

the reach of ordinary adventurers. Everything in their lineup would be something of an expensive purchase for Shiori.

“In which case,” said Dennis, “there’s nothing to worry about in terms of quality. Very well—would you mind if we left now? I’d like to take this opportunity to buy everything at once.”

Dennis was at least sold on the need to purchase the necessary extras, and was adequately convinced of the reasoning. Shiori had been worried at first, but Dennis was at heart willing to listen to reason.

She and Nadia shared a smile, and Rurii trembled excitedly.

“We’re just heading out to do some shopping for supplies,” said Nadia. “We’ll be back before evening.”

And with that, Nadia, Shiori, Dennis, and Rurii left the lodging. They walked through the snow towards Enandel and Co., located some ten minutes away. Though Nadia sometimes spoke and Shiori sometimes replied, there was little else in the way of conversation. Dennis trudged on with a look of dissatisfaction and defeat upon his face.

They shook the snow from their coats and hats at the entrance to Enandel, and then Shiori cast a warm breeze to dry the water on their clothes. When she received permission to do so for Dennis, he frowned and remained on guard, but his expression turned to one of awe as the drops of water on his coat evaporated around him.

You certainly are an expressive one, aren’t you?

Nadia held back the urge to laugh, and opened the door into the shop. It was not the size of the shops in Tris, but it was well stocked with everything they needed. There was no Guild branch in town but adventurers were active in the area, which meant there was always a demand for equipment.

Dennis maintained his somewhat dissatisfied expression but looked around the store with interest, unable to hide the light of curiosity in his eyes. Nadia heard him muttering that the quality was far better than he’d expected.

“Well then, where shall we start?” she asked.

Dennis was looking at the miscellaneous goods on the shelves, but at Nadia's question he turned his gaze deeper into the store.

"I'd like to start with the clothes."

"My specialty. What would you like to do, Shiori?"

"I'll take a look at the other items they have in stock," said Shiori, looking at the food and miscellaneous goods sections. "If there's anything we need, I'll buy it while we're here."

"Excellent. Well then, Dennis. Shall we?"

"Please."

Overall, Dennis had softened somewhat, but was still stony when it came to Shiori. However, he was not the same way with Nadia, who herself was also a foreigner. He had to have noticed by the color of her hair and her height that she was Litoanyan, and the difference in the way he treated them irked her.

It was true to say that at a glance, one could see from Shiori's light, creamy skin and jet-black hair that she was an immigrant from a far-off land. The countries of the east were distant and largely unknown, and there were no nations in the vicinity who held diplomatic relations with them. And simply because Shiori had the same characteristics of those peoples, she had found herself the subject of discrimination.

That Shiori had even made it to the point where she was trusted and requested—in just four years!—was a testament to the blood, sweat, and tears she had poured into her work. She had come to the country with literally nothing but the clothes on her back, as if she had been abandoned in the forest.

How hard had she worked—both physically and mentally—to carve out a place in this world to call home?

For Nadia, who had watched over Shiori's efforts, anyone who ignored the woman's work and judged her purely by physical appearance alone deserved a dose of the most potent fire magic. In this moment, however, seeing as Shiori herself was so smoothly letting the issue slide, Nadia was content to do the same.

“Is something wrong?” asked Dennis.

Nadia snapped back to her senses, and realized her thoughts must have shown on her face.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Let’s take a look at the equipment, then.”

Nadia glanced at Shiori, who was selecting some treats for Rurii from the familiar goods section, then turned back to Dennis.

“It may be tempting to buy thicker items to help with protection against the cold, but it’s more common to wear layers of thinner warm clothing.”

“Layers? Wouldn’t a thick coat help lessen our baggage load?”

“If you’re just on an outdoor hike, yes. However, on a longer trek through the snow, you get quite hot. A thick coat can quickly get drenched in sweat. That said, you can’t simply take off your coat in extreme cold either.”

“I see...”

“This is where layers come in handy for maintaining the right body temperature. Remove some if you get hot, add some if you get cold. With time and experience you’ll begin to get a sense for how many layers you require. Let’s lean on the cautious side for this expedition.”

“Good idea.”

It did not take long for Dennis to select things like socks and underwear for himself and Walt, though he was not comfortable selecting such equipment for his master, and so Nadia did so on his behalf.

“Streed merino wool is warm, comfortable, and durable. It will last a long time, and on top of that it dries quickly and has scent-deodorizing qualities too. It’s perfect for cold-weather exploration.”

“I had no idea. And there are other clothes of the same material?”

“There are indeed. It’s lightweight and not too thick, which makes it very portable.”

After scribbling the information in his notebook, Dennis took to selecting clothing. It was clear that he had a good understanding of Annelie and Walt,

both in terms of their sizes and their preferences. He avoided anything that was too fine and delicate, and selected only simple articles of clothing. Perhaps Annelie and Walt weren't fond of clothes that were too showy. This extended to Dennis's selection of hats and gloves.

"You were certainly right about the quality," muttered Dennis as he put things in his shopping basket. "The make of these clothes is utterly charming."

"Let's look at coats next," said Nadia.

"Yes, please."

"Without a doubt, you'll want something made with erve four material. It will provide wind protection, is water resistant, and is difficult to get dirty. Seeing as you'll be painting at your destination, it's likely just what you'll need."

"That sounds fantastic. And how is it when it comes to warmth?"

"Erve four might not be enough on its own, so I recommend something with an inner lining of Tris hare fur. It's often used for winter blankets because it's both warm and comfortable. If you're worried you might also purchase a vest of streed duck feathers to bring along. Ah, here we are—this shelf contains all the popular Rosendahl designs for noble families."

Dennis nodded and began taking a closer look at the items. It seemed he wanted to be more particular when it came to their coats. After much deliberation and a few trips to the fitting rooms, he came away with two men's coats. After looking at the women's selection, he selected one in a fresh green color. He seemed quite taken by an olive-colored coat, but after further thought—it seemed the design of the sleeves left him uncertain—he regretfully went with the green.

"I believe that's all the clothing and equipment," Dennis said. "I'd like to move on to the food and miscellaneous items, now."

"That would be Shiori's specialty."

"You mean the forei... Miss Shiori, then."

At the mention of her name, Dennis's expression shifted. Nadia was at least glad he corrected himself and called her by name instead of simply "the

foreigner,” but she was none too pleased by the look on his face.

“If you don’t mind my asking...” she said, “does she bother you that much? You realize that I, too, am an immigrant, no? What difference is there?”

Nadia was from a country quite some ways from the kingdom, but in appearance she was rather similar to the locals. If differences could be pinpointed, they were in her strawberry-blond hair and her taller-than-usual height. It was perhaps for this reason that she’d never found herself the subject of discrimination. Most of the people who disliked immigrants tended to direct their hatred towards the more obvious cultural and physical differences. She wondered if Dennis was the same.

“Er, no... It’s simply something...about her appearance. That black hair, in particular...”

He had his reasons, then—though it was clear they had nothing to do with Shiori. Dennis dropped his gaze, suddenly awkward.

“I am well aware that the problem lies with me. She has committed no crime. She has done nothing wrong. However, it’s just...I cannot stand the memories her appearance brings forth.”

“I will not push you to share any of them with me. But believe me when I tell you that Shiori is worthy of your trust. She is much loved by the people around her, and she has never once received a complaint for any request she has completed. That is, outside of her being an Easterner.”

Dennis turned his forget-me-not blue eyes towards Shiori.

“My great-grandparents on my father’s side were both from the Empire. I’m a fourth-generation immigrant, and at times it has caused me pain. I understand the excruciating nature of oppression—of being looked down upon for reasons that mean nothing to you personally.”

Dennis said he understood how awful it made him, to know this ache in his bones and yet to carry an irrational anger and hate towards immigrants as he did.

“But it was more than ten years ago. It is high time that I moved on,” said Dennis, letting out a long sigh before waving a light goodbye to Nadia and

walking towards Shiori.

“I can’t say I understand,” muttered Nadia, “but I hope it is something you can move past.”

She had no wish to see Shiori harmed for any reason ever again.

“Excuse me, Miss Shiori.”

Dennis approached Shiori just as she had finished purchasing some extra food and some snacks for Rurii. He looked to be in something of a bad mood, and there was an awkward air about him. Shiori hadn’t expected him to even talk to her, but she tried not to let her surprise show.

“You’ve finished with the clothing, then?” she asked.

“All that’s left is the food and miscellaneous goods. I would appreciate your assistance.”

“As you wish. This way, please.”

It was best to start with food—they could look at buying bags after they had a clearer idea of how much food to bring. As they walked to the shelves, Rurii bounced along behind them, its bag of snacks on its head.

“Do you do much in the way of cooking?” Shiori asked.

“Usually just heating up canned or bottled goods. Outside of that, simple stir-frys. It’s best when we can bring a chef or cook, but such a thing is unfeasible in the outdoors. In such cases, the responsibility falls on me.”

“I see...”

Shiori took Dennis to the food shelves. Dennis let out an awed gasp.

“There’s so much more than I thought,” he uttered.

The shelves were packed with dried meat and biscuits, rations, and canned and bottled foods.

“All of this can be eaten as it is, which makes it very convenient,” said Shiori. “But sometimes they can be a bit rich with fat or otherwise too strong in terms of flavor, so I use them as ingredients while cooking at the campsite.”

“You cook? You don’t simply warm the food?”

“That’s correct. Take this canned corned beef for example—it makes for a most wonderful side dish when fried with potatoes, onion, and a little salt and pepper. It’s also quite delicious with eggplant and tomatoes.”

Dennis was intrigued by the very idea that nonperishable food could be made delicious. Like everyone else who traveled, he too liked the idea of eating well while exploring the outdoors.

“You make it sound quite simple...”

“If that proves difficult, then... Ah. Is there a cold storage for freezing items at your home?”

“In the kitchen, yes. Not quite the size of those you see in the shops, however.”

“That’s fine. If you ask your chefs to prepare mashed potatoes and finely chopped onions to keep in the freezer, you can easily take them with you to cook while traveling. As long as you keep them in an antifreeze leather bag, they’ll stay frozen for at least a whole day, even during the summer.”

“Are you quite serious?!”

“I am, yes.”

Though the leather bags were made to ensure that food and medicine didn’t freeze, Shiori had heard that they functioned by keeping the bag’s interior at a set temperature. When she tried it out herself, sure enough, they also served as refrigerator bags of a sort. Though they did not work over long periods of time, she could extend their usage by casting freezing spells when necessary. This had been a tremendous help as she expanded her expedition cooking repertoire.

“By freeze-drying vegetables, you can bring them along without creating too much extra weight. They work just as well in fried dishes as they do in soups. Very convenient.”

Shiori had actually hoped she might be able to bring some of her portable foods along on this trip, but she was still unable to mass-produce them.

Perhaps I should start looking for someone who can help with that.

Though demand for Shiori’s portable foods had increased, she could not keep

up with it. Still, she was intent on finding a way to cater to everyone the best she could, and decided to confer with Zack when she next had the opportunity.

“I see. So you can preserve ingredients in advance to bring along on your journey.”

“Indeed. Some jerky can help make for a good soup stock, and canned bread can be a delicious addition to soup because of how it swells. All of that together with dried vegetables, and just soup and bread can make a filling meal.”

Dennis scribbled into his notebook, utterly impressed, and began looking through the different foods.

“For now, let’s buy extra field rations,” suggested Shiori. “You and I can carry anything we need for cooking, and everyone else can carry food that can be eaten on the go.”

“When you say field rations, you mean...?”

“Anything we can eat while standing or walking that doesn’t require preparation or cutlery. Usually light and nutritious. They’re common in knight brigades, but the selection here has been improved for adventurers. There’s a flavor for almost everyone.”

“Food you can eat while walking?”

Dennis couldn’t seem to believe it. Perhaps nobles rarely considered the idea of eating on the move.

“In the snow, it can sometimes be difficult to find a place to sit and eat,” said Shiori. “Do it wrong, and you’ll cool your body to the point where it can be difficult to get moving again. With this in mind, it’s important to consider situations where you’ll be eating as you move. You expend a lot more energy in the winter than you do in the summer, so it’s important to keep your nutrition and energy levels up without getting too cold.”

Dennis picked his jaw up off the floor before speaking.

“I knew our trip was a dangerous one, but it is far more merciless than I could have imagined. Stopping Lady Annelie from going until now was certainly the right move.”

“I agree. Your decision was the right one.”

She hadn't meant anything in particular by the comment, but it still brought a look of surprise to Dennis's face, followed by the tiniest hint of a smile.

Oh? Was that a smile?

He was, if nothing else, a man of many expressions. Whether or not that was good or bad, however, depended on who was on the receiving end of them.

“We'll split the food up between everyone so nobody is overloaded while we travel. I'll do my best to make sure we can sit and eat somewhere warm during our breaks, so try not to worry. We'll just want to prepare in case we can't, so it's good to carry a slight excess of field rations.”

“Understood.”

Dennis's smile quickly vanished under his usual frown. Perhaps that was his natural state of being.

“I must say,” he uttered, “there certainly is quite the range to choose from...”

“Apparently the selection grew out of a desire to meet customer demands.”

Dennis dropped into thought, troubled by the variety and unsure of what to choose. The selection was impressive—along with plain rations, there were those containing dry fruits, nuts and seeds, cheese, smoked meat, and even some with liquor in them.

On their budget, he could easily buy a bit of everything.

Of course, Shiori was not about to make such a reckless recommendation, instead aiming to help as best she could.

“When in doubt, it's best to choose an even mix of sweet and savory. We sometimes think we want something sweet when we're tired, but oftentimes what our body really craves is something salty. In terms of amount, we're looking at around eight rations per person per day, and then a bag of the dried fruits and a bag of the dried nuts. That should also cover a reserve amount of one day, in case of an emergency.”

“That much?! Oh, I see—so we need to allow for more than three meals a day worth of rations.”

Unlike the world Shiori had come from, there were no convenient shops or mountain lodges here. That meant you had to be very careful when it came to preparations. What was easy to hunt and gather in the summer was much more difficult in winter. The only advantage was being able to make drinking water from snow.

“I will carry enough food to cover breakfast and dinner for the entire party, so outside of field rations, there’s no need to carry anything too heavy.”

Dennis nodded and, following Shiori’s advice, selected a mixture of sweet and savory—dried fruit, cheese, and smoked meat. He also put a bag of dried fruit and grains and some canned food in his basket. He did not worry about anything bottled for this particular trip.

With food out of the way, it was time to look at miscellaneous essentials.

“Let’s look at storage bags and pouches,” said Shiori, directing Dennis to the appropriate shelves. “All the items on this shelf are made of antifreeze materials, so let’s select what we need from here. When it comes to food storage bags, it’s good to have smaller bags in which to pack a day’s worth of field rations. You can put that in a belt pouch or your coat pocket so it’s easy to access while you’re on the move. It’s also very common to use these pouches for medicinal items. Everything else you can put in a bigger bag.”

“I see... What exactly are these antifreeze bags made of? Animal skins?”

“They’re hides from magical beasts that are most active in the winter. People realized that they could be used this way because those animals don’t freeze in colder weather.”

“And they can be used for things outside of just foodstuffs?” Dennis asked, staring at the leather bags.

“Yes... For example, many women use them for carrying their makeup. Men commonly use them for storing small bottles of alcohol. Do you have something particular in mind?”

“I’m just thinking about Lady Annelie’s painting tools. On a past winter trip, they froze completely and were made useless.”

That explained perhaps why they had come this time with simple sketching

tools. Dennis selected a few big bags and put them in his basket, clearly thinking about potential future trips.

With their bags selected, they had everything they would need. It was quite the amount for three people. Shiori was sure it would come to more than a few gold coins, and the total was just as she'd expected.

And to think I labor so much over the spending of even a single gold coin...

But Dennis looked entirely unfazed by the amount as he paid it, and Shiori was once again reminded that nobles were in a different league entirely.

"Is that everything, then?" asked Nadia, who was chatting with the manager at the counter. "No last-minute purchases?"

Shiori took another look at her checklist, but everything was covered. Dennis, on the other hand, looked hesitant.

"Is something wrong?" Shiori asked.

"Er, no..."

Dennis's voice trailed off as he glanced deeper into the store, at the clothing section.

"There's no need to rush," said Nadia, checking the time, "so feel free to take another look at anything you're still considering."

Dennis said he would be back shortly and left for the clothing section. He returned not long afterwards, carrying the olive-colored coat.

"Ah, that..." said Nadia, smiling.

"What is it?" asked Shiori.

"When he was selecting coats for the margravine, he couldn't quite decide between that and a separate green coat. Seems like he's decided to buy both... And what's this? That's not the wallet he was using earlier, is it?"

Indeed it was not. Instead of the margravine's wallet that had covered their travel expenses, Dennis was using a smaller leather wallet, most likely his own. That would mean...

"Quite the man," said Nadia, "I wonder if he's paying with his own money to

give it to Annelie as a present?”

“Wow...”

Shiori felt herself feeling suddenly bashful and a touch embarrassed, even though it had nothing to do with her.

Still...

As Shiori watched Dennis return with the wrapped coat in his arms, she remembered something.

She thought about how Dennis had argued with Annelie. How he worried for her when she revealed she was happy to go somewhere dangerous for the sake of her art. How conscientiously he had gone about selecting clothing and food items for her journey. And how happy he looked with the coat he had just bought.

He looked like a man with deep, considerate feelings for another, and...

“He’s like an overprotective brother worrying over a little sister,” Shiori whispered.

She remembered her own brother then, and how he was far, far away, in the world she had left behind.

5

The party had dinner in the lodge’s adjoining dining hall. The meal also served as an impromptu meeting. Though the lodge was the best in town, it was thankfully not too painful on the wallet. The meal was a simple one, but it was considerately prepared, and satisfying both in terms of taste and amount. Rurii seemed to enjoy the barbecue skewers, trembling happily as it ate.

Though Shiori was somewhat sensitive to the staring eyes around her, she was more or less used to it now and able to brush them aside. Alec, on the other hand, was concerned enough to ask her if she’d prefer to take breakfast in her room. She politely told him it wasn’t necessary, but all the same he told her not to hesitate if she changed her mind. His thoughtfulness made her happy.

The lodge did offer room service, which was how Annelie ate. She had wanted to try the dining room herself, but Dennis would have nothing of the sort—there were far too many who wanted to approach the single and famous young artist, and he wanted to avoid standing out where possible.

All the same, Dennis assured Annelie that he had seen the menu and ordered her something she would like, so he was not quite the “stubborn someone” she enjoyed calling him. Though he was quick to stop her from anything he deemed unacceptable, in every other way he did his very best to deliver Annelie all that she desired.

Thinking about him in this way made Shiori chuckle. She could see how conscientious he was, and it inspired the same feelings in her own work.

“What are you planning? An early night, perhaps?”

Alec asked this question as the four adventurers stood before the two rooms that had been provided for them.

“Yes, we’ve got an early start tomorrow,” said Nadia, “so I think I’ll do just that.”

“I’d like to look over my weapons another time before turning in,” said Clemens.

“Same here,” said Alec.

Unlike Shiori and Nadia, who didn’t carry weapons, for Alec and Clemens they were lifelines. It was important to take care of their weapons every night so as to ensure there wouldn’t be any problems.

“Well, good night then,” said Nadia.

“See you tomorrow,” said Clemens.

As they were all heading into their rooms, Alec whispered to Shiori.

“Do you think you can meet with me a little later?” he asked.

She gave a slight nod, and the corners of his lips turned up into the hint of a smile as he went into his room.

I wonder what he wants?

Shiori pondered this as she went into her own room. It had been reserved by Annelie's family, and though not as large as the margravine's room, was still quite spacious. The furnishings were both comfortable and luxurious. The linen was clean and soft to the touch, and the beds felt like they would offer a good night's sleep.

"I think I'll take a bath before bed," said Nadia. "How about you?"

"Hm," said Shiori, thinking. "I'll tidy up my baggage a little first, so please take your time."

"Oh, really? Thank you."

Nadia took a change of clothes and her makeup bag and went into the bathroom. Shiori watched her go, then opened her knapsack and readied everything she would need for the following day.

Soon after, she heard the sound of the door to the next room opening, followed by footsteps—presumably Alec's. They stopped in front of her door.

"I'm heading out for just a moment, Rurii," Shiori said. "I'll be right back."

The slime was doing its nightly stretching routine and gave her a wave: *Have fun!*

Shiori slipped out of the room. Alec turned from the window and saw her. She timidly took the hand he reached out to her, and he pulled her into one of the lodge's meeting rooms.

"Um...what is it?" she asked as she was pulled silently into Alec's embrace, trapped within his gentle grasp.

"I wanted to check on you," he said.

"Check on me?"

"That aide... Are you okay?"

She knew exactly what he was talking about.

"I'm fine," she replied with a smile.

"You're sure? He's not causing you any excess stress?"

He'd asked her at dinner too, but Alec was like Zack in that respect—he had a

tendency to worry about her.

“I’ll be fine. I’m very used to that kind of attitude now, and he’s not quite as bad as I thought he would be.”

Though Dennis never seemed to be particularly comfortable around her throughout the course of the day, Shiori was surprised at the fact they’d been able to have otherwise cordial conversations. He listened to her suggestions when they went shopping, and asked questions earnestly.

“Okay, well... That’s a relief,” said Alec with a chuckle. “You have a tendency to push yourself, after all.”

“I’m sorry I worried you,” Shiori said.

“It’s not your fault at all. I just wanted to make sure, that’s all.”

“Thank you.”

She felt him gently rub her back as she stayed there in his arms. His big hands were so warm and comforting—she closed her eyes and drifted in the warmth of his body.

“To be honest, I had one more reason for asking you out here.”

Shiori had almost dozed off right there in Alec’s arms when he whispered in her ear, and she almost jumped.

“Hm? What is it?”

“We won’t be able to do this while we’re out on the expedition, is all,” he said, smiling as he lifted Shiori’s jaw. “So I wanted to make sure I refueled before we left.”

Before Shiori could grasp exactly what he meant by these words, Alec’s lips pressed against her own. They pecked at her, and then his tongue traced the edges of her lips. Shiori was too surprised to resist, and remained there at Alec’s mercy.

After a short time he pulled away, and she heard a light chuckle.

“Relax,” he said, “I won’t do more than this.”

“You’d better not do more! Not here!”

He seemed to enjoy seeing her flustered.

“Are you saying I *can* do more if we’re...somewhere else?”

“Um, what? No, that’s not what I—”

But while she was stammering to explain herself she found his lips once more pressed against her own. This time she felt him devouring her, his tongue pushing inside of her mouth. She was held in place securely by his hands on her back and the nape of her neck. Just as she thought she might crumble into the deep passion of his embrace—a feeling like he was indeed filling himself with her—he released her. While she was left panting for breath, Alec looked rather satisfied.



“Not as much as I’d like, but perhaps it’s time we got some sleep,” he said.

Not as much as you’d like?! Certainly more than I expected!

It was something she had sensed when they’d first met, if only faintly at the time.

This man...he’s practically a carnivore!

He helped her back to her room as she stumbled on unsteady legs, and saw her off, this time with a simple peck on the cheek.

“Nothing like a late-night snack,” he said, before happily heading back to his own room. “Until tomorrow.”

“Oh? Did you stop by the lodge’s store?”

Clemens asked the question as Alec entered the room. He was polishing his twin blades.

“I was thinking about having a drink before bed, but nothing caught my fancy,” said Alec.

Truth be told, there was nothing more delicious than what he’d just indulged in, but he didn’t let it show in voice or manner.

“I happen to have brought a selection of rare drinks with me,” said Clemens, motioning with his jaw to his bedside table. “How about it?”

“Rare, you say?”

“Indeed. Of the Eastern variety.”

The idea was indeed appealing to Alec, and he approached the table, which was lined with small bottles. Clemens had prepared travel-sized beverages for the journey. Alec opened one of them and took in its scent. A unique aroma floated up to his nose—it was likely grain-based.

“What you’re holding is called ‘A Hundred Million Years of Solitude.’ There’s also ‘Light of Tears,’ ‘All Alone,’ and ‘Heartbroken Herbs.’”

Alec was silent. He put the lid back on the bottle, and returned it to the table. There was something rather...distressing...about the collection. Why was

Clemens walking around with such ominously named liquor?

“Decided against it?” asked Clemens.

“Probably best if I hold off,” said Alec. “I’ll save the rarities for when we get back home.”

“Suit yourself...”

Perhaps it was just his imagination, but he felt something like disappointment emanating from Clemens as he sat down dejectedly and took out his own gear for polishing his sword.

Alec felt like the taste of Shiori had gone the slightest bit sour.

Chapter 2: Proof of Remembrance

1

The following morning, after breakfast and their final preparations, the traveling party met at the entrance to the lodge.

“What’s wrong?” asked Shiori.

Alec was staring at Clemens with an odd expression on his face. Clemens was facing away from them as he put on his knapsack.

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing,” muttered Alec.

Shiori tilted her head, curious. There was something decidedly dejected in Alec’s expression.

She looked up at the sky, which even now seemed a little overcast. It was before sunrise, at seven in the morning. Had they been traveling as a group of adventurers only, they would have departed earlier, but they decided on this time in consideration of their clients. Daybreak in the Storydian winter was quite late, and it was not always easy for the inexperienced to navigate snowy paths in the dark.

It would be about another hour before sunrise—just enough time for them to go over final preparations and make it to the forest paths that would take them to the tower.

“If you find the conditions too difficult, please don’t hesitate to say something,” said Alec, who wanted to stress that nobody should do more than they could handle. “Depending on the conditions, we’ll consider turning back.”

“Very well,” said Annelie, her face stern.

In the next instant, however, she lit up and spun where she stood, dressed in the new equipment Dennis had bought for her the previous day.

“I must say...” she said, “I’m so surprised! So light and yet delightfully warm.”

“Indeed,” said Walt in agreement. “I was worried the coats were *too* light initially, but pro gear is certainly of a different level.”

Dennis said nothing, but there was something of an air of satisfaction in his expression. However, Annelie was wearing the fresh green coat he had bought for her, and not the olive-colored coat he had purchased with his own money. It seemed she deemed the lovely design on the sleeve openings unsuitable for work, and had decided to keep it for when she went out in a dress.

“He could have just said it was a present, but he didn’t,” Walt had told them secretly. “Instead, he hid it among everything else he bought for the journey.”

Based on what she’d seen and heard since meeting them, Shiori felt she had a sense of the relationship between her clients, and she and Nadia shared a smile. Though they were all initially worried about who they might be working for, their clients were more honest and open than expected. The trip might even be quite enjoyable in its own way.

“Last chance in case you’ve forgotten anything,” said Alec, surveying the group. “If not, let’s head off.”

Everyone nodded. They were ready.

“Lead the way,” said Annelie.

And so their journey began.

The roads that led to the forest paths to Silveria Tower could be navigated by horse and carriage. The entrance was off the main road, in a location dotted with farms. By the entrance was a small hut: a watchpost for the local knight brigade. In the summer, they kept watch over travelers, and were ready to move at a moment’s notice in case of any emergencies. In winter, they kept watch—partially out of curiosity—over whatever odd types decided to go trudging through the snow. Shiori and her group could see two knights at the window of the hut, looking on as they approached.

They alighted from their carriage. Annelie let out a small gasp of surprise as she put on her knapsack with help from the coachman.

“Are you okay?” asked Shiori. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no,” replied the margravine. “I was just thinking about how much we carry to be on the safe side of things.”

Until now, Dennis and Walt had carried Annelie’s share of the baggage for her, and she was suddenly surprised at the weight one person was expected to carry. Still, among the party, Annelie’s baggage was the lightest—she carried six days worth of food and water, a change of clothes, a blanket, and a sheet with a waterproof lining on one side. Her art equipment and the heavier canned foods were split between Dennis and Walt.

“Just for reference, would you mind if I tried your knapsack on, Shiori?” asked Annelie.

“Absolutely. But please be careful,” said Shiori, removing her knapsack and passing it over. “It’s quite heavy.”

Annelie let out a shocked gasp.

“Lady Annelie?!”

Annelie struggled to keep the knapsack from falling. Dennis and Walt leapt in to help her hold it up.

“What the...?” muttered Dennis.

“Miss Shiori, are you quite certain you’ll be walking around with this?” asked Walt.

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

Shiori hefted the knapsack onto her back once more as the three nobles stared at her, dumbfounded.

“I can’t help thinking it’s unfathomable for a girl to carry so much. Are you sure you’re all right?” asked Annelie.

Though Annelie was surprised, for adventurers heading out on a long expedition, Shiori’s baggage was about par for the course. She was also fortunate for Alec and Clemens, who between them were carrying the bath tent and bathing items.

“I’ll be fine,” said Shiori. “I must admit that it was quite difficult when I was just starting out, however.”

Since then, Shiori had developed a considerable amount of strength and stamina. She was confident she was as capable of physical labor now as the average male individual back home in Japan. That said, she certainly wouldn't be rushing into situations like the one in Brovito Village if she could avoid it.

"If you're carrying that much, then the men must be carrying quite the load, I imagine."

"That's how things work out," said Alec. "It depends on the circumstances, but the stronger team members lead by example."

Annelie thought about the words for a time.

"I understand that this is work you are hired for, and work that we're paying for, but knowing what I do now, I'll be more careful before putting up requests so quickly."

"We're just grateful that you understand the depth of our work. There are still those who request adventurer protection, thinking they're going off on grand adventures, and..." Alec paused as he realized how his words might come across. "Er... Not that I'm saying *your* request is like that..."

Dennis looked uncomfortable at the unintended insinuation. Clemens then jumped in to pick up where Alec had left off.

"Whether or not a request is accepted is up to the particular branch the request goes to. At the Tris branch, we turn down any request that is too dangerous, or where the client refuses to listen to our recommendations."

If the request was too reckless and dangerous, it didn't matter if an influential or powerful noble had made it—Zack would never agree to it.

"Hm... We'll simply have to think more carefully for future outings then, won't we?" said Annelie with a wry grin.

"That we will," muttered Dennis.

"Well then," said Nadia, clapping her hands to get everyone's attention. "Do you mind if I run over the general rules before we get started? Clemens and I will take the lead along the forest paths. Alec and Shiori will take up rearguard positions along with Rurii. Annelie, you will be in the center with your aides."

“Understood.”

“Should we take up positions by Lady Annelie’s sides, then?” asked Dennis.

“That’s a good idea. Please rest assured we’ll be doing our utmost to protect you, so be sure to follow our instructions at all times. Please avoid running off on your own whenever possible.”

“Okay, got it.”

“I’ll be making a path for us to walk on so we’ll have an easier time than with regular snow paths, but all the same, please don’t overdo it. If it starts to get too difficult, please say something immediately.”

The three nobles nodded obediently.

“We’re aiming to reach an observation deck some five hundred meters from the tower,” said Alec. “That’s where we’ll camp today. The observation deck already has barrier stakes set up, so we’re assured something of a safe rest.”

The interior of the tower was dangerous even in the summer. It was for this reason that most tourists went as far as the observation deck, where they could enjoy the view. It was closed in the winter so you couldn’t enter the deck itself, but the area around it could still be used for camping.

“Sunset will be at around four in the afternoon. We’ll need to allocate time to set up camp, so we’ll be aiming to arrive at the observation deck by three. So long as nothing sudden comes up, we should arrive without issue. As for breaks, we’ll take ten minutes every hour to rest, and thirty minutes for lunch. Please be sure to eat and drink something during each small break.”

“You mean we’ll be eating every hour? That’s quite the amount.”

“Walking through the snow for long periods of time takes a lot of strength and endurance. The amount you’ll need to consume will vary from person to person, but it’s important to get at least a little sustenance during each break. That said, this will be easier to understand once we’re moving.”

“Got it.”

“Shiori, there’s no need to use your search magic. Focus more on maintaining your energy levels, both physical and magical.”

“Okay.”

With the explanations out of the way, it was time to depart. Seeing that they were ready to start moving again, one of the knights left the watchpost.

“You lot adventurers?” he asked.

“We are. Four adventurers and three nobles,” said Clemens. “We’re heading for the tower.”

The middle-aged knight frowned slightly.

“Mind telling me your rank and branch?”

“We’re from the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. Three A-rankers and a B-ranker... Is there a problem of some kind?”

“You should be fine, then. As for the problem, well...”

The knight took a look at each of the adventurers, then turned his gaze to the forest paths.

“The day before yesterday, a party of adventurers ignored our warnings and stormed off for the tower. One of our younger knights was on duty and they forced their way past him. It’s quite worrying, to be honest.”

The four adventurers looked at each other.

“Worrying? What do you mean?”

“Apparently they were a group of three: an A-rank mage with a swordsman and a physicker, both of them C-rank. On top of that, the mage wasn’t carrying anything but his staff—the two C-rankers were carrying all their baggage.”

Shiori couldn’t help but sigh. Her friends looked equally as shocked.

“I don’t know how strong that A-ranker is,” said the knight, “but there’s no getting around the fact they were lacking the requisite strength for these parts.”

“Indeed,” said Nadia, “and I can only hope that they’re not using that C-rank vanguard as bait.”

Shiori was curious about the party’s structure and internal relationships—they sounded less like adventurers and more like servants traveling with their

master. Based on her expression, Annelie seemed to have gotten the same impression.

“If it’s a couple of regular citizens we can knock a little sense into them,” said the knight, “but adventurers are responsible for themselves. If you happen to see them, will you check on them for us? That is, if they’re, uh...still alive...”

The knight’s last muttered words filled the air with a strange tension.

“We have to prioritize our clients first and foremost, so we can’t promise anything.”

“And that’s fine. Just keep it in mind. Oh, and...” The knight paused for a moment, as if he wasn’t sure whether or not to go on. “We’ve noticed damage to villages around the edge of the forest. Looks to be a large magical beast. No injured people yet, but a few farm animals were taken. No eyewitnesses, but we think it might be a snow bear. Be on guard, you hear?”

A tremble of fear went through the group as they took heed of the warning.

“Got it. We’ll be ready.”

“Good, good. Well then, I wish you all safe travels.”

The knight gave them a salute, then returned to the watchpost.

“You heard the man,” said Alec. “We’ll want to be ready for anything. Depending on how that other party is faring, we may want to lend them a hand too...”

“But of course,” said Annelie. “I don’t mind at all.” She chuckled, then, and whispered to Walt, “It seems that just as there are all types of nobles, there are also all types of adventurers.”

“Yeah. Just imagining what might have happened if that other group had taken up our request gives me the shivers,” he replied as they looked at each other’s coats.

Dennis said nothing, but put a hand to his coat. It seemed he was having similar thoughts.

“I feel a little embarrassed to think that group is in the same line of work as us,” whispered Shiori to Alec.

“You and me both,” he replied, putting a hand on her shoulder. Rurii bounced at their feet.

“Well, let’s get to it,” said Nadia. “Not long until dawn.”

The sky to the east was beginning to turn white. This was how their journey began—a journey that had the air of trouble on the horizon.

2

“Fire Arrows! Flamme Pils!”

The incantation fell from Nadia’s lips smoothly, and fire magic flew from her supple fingertips. The fire arrows soared forth, casting a warmth that melted the snow covering their path and opening enough space for them to walk side by side.

Dennis and Walt let out gasps. Annelie’s eyes went wide.

“Wow...”

“Incredible...”

“Ten basic fireballs and I was stuck in bed for a whole three days...” muttered Shiori.

Shiori did her best to accept that her magical power was on the low end of the spectrum, but when faced with the difference between herself and a true mage, it was hard not to feel disheartened.

“Shiori...” said Alec, putting a reassuring hand to her shoulder.

When Shiori was in training as an apprentice and Nadia was teaching her basic magic, even casting ten fireballs had been such an effort for Shiori that she fainted from magical exhaustion. Those three days of bedridden recovery were still a sore spot for her. Even apprentices could cast ten fireball spells in a row with ease.

“I could never have imagined your magical energy levels would be so low...” Nadia had muttered at the time. “We’ll have to think a little more about how to make use of them.”

It was those words that marked Shiori giving up on the path to becoming a full-fledged mage. Still, she wanted to make use of the magic she had, even if there wasn't much of it. So, she went on studying magic and working at the Guild doing odd jobs, when it occurred to her—perhaps she could use magic to improve everyday life. She had a feeling then that even her small amount of magic would be enough to make things easier while traveling.

As a result of her work and innovation, Shiori was officially recognized as a B-rank adventurer. She wanted to think that she'd done well, but doubts still lingered within her.

"How many fireballs can you cast now?" asked Alec.

"About thirty, I think? I was told I probably won't be able to cast much more than that. What about you?"

"I've never counted...but I would guess around two hundred or thereabouts."

A mage that was outdone even by a magical swordsman was the lowest level of mage.

"I knew an answer like that was coming, but it still stings..."

Shiori's gaze was distant. Alec gave her another pat on the shoulder, and Rurii poked her in the legs.

"Let's move," said Nadia.

Shiori lifted her head and took a breath to pull herself together again. She took a few steps and then something came to her.

"Oh, there's a thought," she said.

"What's up?" asked Alec.

"Perhaps we should close the entrance to the forest paths. It would be even more trouble for the knights if anyone weird got through."

Nadia's magic had cleared enough space that a small horse and carriage could almost make it through. This made it look as if the paths were easy to walk, which in turn might make people underestimate the danger.

"That's a good point," said Alec. "Shall we make the path narrower on both

sides by a few meters?”

“Got it. Whirlwind.”

The spiral of wind magic pulled in the snow from either side of the road, covering up the trail. Then Shiori used a light wind to level the snow so it would look like fresh snow had fallen across the path.

“Nobody can beat you when it comes to delicate and detailed work like this,” said Alec.

“Thanks.”

Shiori saw the knight from the watchpost poking his head out to watch. He smiled and nodded, which told Shiori she’d made the right decision. She nodded back at him politely, then walked towards the others with Alec.

The snow crunched under their feet with each step. Their travels were made easier thanks to both Nadia’s pathmaking and the way they were matching Annelie’s relaxed pace. But the journey was still quite grueling for the three nobles. They were certainly in better shape than most other nobles, but Annelie was lightly panting for breath, and both Dennis and Walt walked on largely in silence.

“It’s about time, so let’s take a short break,” said Alec, checking his pocket watch.

The three nobles looked at one another, relieved.

“For short breaks like this one, it’s best not to take your knapsacks down,” said Nadia. “You’ll use just as much energy putting them back on afterwards.”

“Would it be okay to sit down like this, then?” asked Annelie. “Or is it better to remain standing?”

“If it was just us, we’d usually have no choice but to stand. However... Shiori, would you mind?”

“Not at all,” said Shiori with a nod.

Annelie and her aides watched with great interest. Alec did too, because unlike Clemens and Nadia, this was his first time on a proper winter expedition

with Shiori.

“This looks like a nice spot,” Shiori said.

She cast ice magic, and crafted it into the shape of two long rectangular blocks, wide enough for a person to sit on. Once she had hardened them to make sure they wouldn’t break, she took a fur with waterproof lining from her knapsack and placed it along the impromptu bench. She also made a basic windbreak. In mere moments, it was ready: a simple bench with a fur rug to help ward off the cold.

“Amazing!” said Annelie. “What a wonderful use of magic.”

“Please, feel free to take a seat,” said Shiori.

The three nobles all sat as they muttered to each other, awestruck. Sitting on the ground placed too much strain on the legs and back, so it was always better to have a proper place to sit down. Shiori had made the same thing last year for adventurers while on expedition, and they’d loved it.

“It’s so nice to have something to sit on,” said Annelie. “It really is so much more comfortable than the floor.”

“Sometimes when you’re exhausted and you sit down on the floor, it hurts just getting back to your feet again.”

While everyone sat down to rest, Shiori took out wooden cups and whipped up some hot water, with which she made restorative herbal tea with an outdoor tea set. It was special tea from the herbalist physician, Nils, and had a soothing effect.

“This is an herbal tea made by one of the Tris Guild’s A-rank herbal physicians,” she explained. “It will help warm the body.”

She passed cups around to everyone. Annelie and Walt took their cups and studied them curiously. Dennis looked as though he wasn’t sure if he should let his master drink the concoction, but seemed relieved when the adventurers casually drank from their own cups. He sniffed carefully at the contents of his cup, then took a timid sip. He let it sit in his mouth for a time, then swallowed.

“It is as she says,” he announced. “Herbal tea. You may drink it without

worry.”

“Excuse me,” said Nadia, “but Shiori hasn’t put anything in your tea.”

“I merely wanted to be certain,” said Dennis. “I can’t let Lady Annelie put anything strange in her body.”

“Oh, Dennis,” said Annelie in a calm, clear voice, realizing that an argument might be about to start. “Have you forgotten everything you put Zack through to be absolutely certain of my safety? The food and drink was part of it, as I remember. He’s an S-rank adventurer who gave his own personal seal of approval. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Be that as it may...”

Just as the argument was about to shift to that between master and servant, Walt burst into laughter.

“You are the *worst*, Dennis. Why, just last night you told me that Miss Shiori was worthy of our trust.”

“I said no such thing! I merely said that she was very conscientious about her work!”

“Oh, I see. Right, right, whatever you say...”

It was like listening to kids bickering, and it made Shiori giggle. It seemed that Dennis had, at the very least, acknowledged her somewhat. Clemens and Nadia shared a wry grin, while Alec lifted an eyebrow.

Rurii, meanwhile, was scooping up snow from around their feet and absorbing it into its body. Shiori offered the slime some water, but it seemed satisfied with the snow. She wondered if this was how the slime got its water intake when it was living in the forest.

“I’m actually quite peckish,” muttered Walt as he and Dennis were putting an end to their back-and-forth. “Which is surprising. It hasn’t even been that long since breakfast.”

“Now’s a good opportunity to eat one of your field rations,” said Shiori. “How about you two?”

“I believe I’ll be fine,” said Annelie. “Dennis?”

“I think I’ll eat something just to be sure. I have a feeling I’ll need something soon.”

The two nobles fished hands into their pouches and selected a ration to eat. Shiori did the same.

“Wow, this is actually really good,” said Walt. “Just the type of flavor I like.”

Walt had selected a cheese ration. Like the smoked meat flavor, the just-right level of saltiness made it popular among male adventurers.

“Hm...”

Dennis gave little more than a grunt in terms of sharing an impression, but it seemed that he, too, was impressed. Chewing on the ration brought the hint of a smile to his eyes.

“While walking long distances, you can be hit by fatigue,” said Clemens. “It’s a symptom of exhaustion, but if you leave it unaddressed you may have dizzy spells and leg cramps, which can inhibit your freedom of movement. By taking breaks and eating before that can occur, you have a chance to recover so long as your symptoms aren’t too bad.”

“You may also feel symptoms similar to dehydration,” added Nadia, “so be sure to regularly drink from your canteens. No need to drink a lot all at once. Just get in the habit of taking a sip or two every now and again. It can also be helpful to do the same with nuts and dried fruit.”

The three nobles listened carefully and Dennis, as always, scribbled fervently into his notebook. They were all good students, in that sense. The feeling that they would be difficult to deal with had almost entirely vanished.

“When traveling alone it’s easy to set your own pace,” said Clemens, “but in groups there can be a tendency to push yourself so as not to let your partners down. Sometimes it can feel awkward bringing up any physical issues you’re having too. On expeditions like this one, we have to look out for one another.”

“Get out of here with that pitiful expression! Real adventurers don’t let their pain show.”

“First you slow us down, now you go and get yourself injured. Medicine isn’t

free, you know. Take care of it yourself.”

As Clemens advised the nobles on how to proceed, voices from the past scratched at the back of Shiori’s mind. Back then, compared to their stronger companions, Shiori and Rachel couldn’t help but slow the party down. But even though they’d once encouraged one another to do better, eventually even Rachel had turned on Shiori in frustration.

The words her old party had spat at her were awful and harsh, but there was also a sliver of truth to them. This was why Shiori had worked so hard—she wanted to be stronger, and she didn’t want to slow her companions down. Who she was now was the result of that hard work—of her efforts to better support her fellow travelers. All of these experiences had shaped her—that was the truth of the matter.

“Are you okay? Are you feeling unwell?”

Alec, seated next to her, asked surreptitiously so that nobody else would notice. Rurii, too, poked her leg, worried.

“No, I’m fine. I was just thinking.”

“I see...”

He put a warm hand to her back and rubbed it reassuringly. Alec was kind in this way. The whole party cared for each other, and supported their weaker companions. Shiori was no different—she always watched the others as they ate and slept in case they weren’t feeling well.

This was how companions were supposed to be—it was how *people* were supposed to be. Her companions in the past, though, were all damaged in some way, and that included Shiori herself. It wasn’t until it was all over that she found out everything had been part of the same big scheme, masterminded by the guild master at the time.

Shiori now had scars that she would never lose, and her old partners had all either moved away or died on the job. Zack would not share the grim details, but to hear him talk about it, they had all lost what it meant to care for their fellow adventurers—which made survival in the already-harsh world of adventuring even more difficult.

Both companionship and teamwork were built on mutual support. Compensating for each other's weak points. Making up for where others were lacking.

"All right," said Alec, "let's get back to walking."

Shiori quickly gathered everyone's cups, washed and dried them with a little magic, then put them in her leather bag. At the same time, Nadia folded up the bench cover, put it in its carrying bag, and passed it to Shiori.

"Thank you, big sister."

Nadia's lips curled into a grateful smile as she went to the head of the party. Once Shiori had tidied up the last of her baggage and placed it in her knapsack, Alec helped her heft it onto her shoulders.

"Thanks, Alec."

"Mm-hm."

For her companions, these actions were natural—a matter of course. But even so, they warmed Shiori's heart. With these feelings lingering inside of her, she walked on with the group.

Their journey proceeded without major issues. They were still within range of human settlements, and there were no signs of any dangerous magical beasts. Occasionally a smaller animal would show itself as they walked, but it would bound away into the forest as soon as it realized it had been spotted.

The adventurers kept an eye on the three nobles and adjusted their pace to match. After a time the group settled into a comfortable pace. Weariness showed on the nobles' faces, but they were relaxed and at ease. Walt, who was of a stronger build than the other two, took Clemens's advice, eating nuts and sipping water at regular intervals. Dennis and Annelie seemed more averse to eating on the go, but they, too, occasionally and subtly ate and drank when they felt the urge to do so.

The group took another two breaks before it was time to look for a place to have lunch. But then...

There's something here.

It was the slightest change in the air. The other three adventurers, all more experienced than Shiori, had noticed it before Shiori herself did. Clemens unsheathed his dual swords and looked towards Alec, who nodded, placing his own sword at the ready.

"Miss Annelie, something is coming," said Alec. "I want you three to stick together. Wait for my orders if something attempts to attack us."

The nobles grew tense. Dennis and Walt quickly took up positions on either side of their lord.

"I know you may be scared," said Alec, "but the worst thing you can do is panic and run off on your own. We will do our utmost to protect you all."

"Th-Thank you. Dennis, Walt—I'm counting on you two."

"My lady."

Fear had turned them all slightly pale, but they were yet to panic.

"There's lots of them," said Shiori, "but they're small."

"Yep."

A group of energy readings was moving towards them. They covered a wide area as they approached, as if stretching across the sky. The air began to waver with magical energy. Rurii turned bright red.

"Enemies incoming! Snow jellyfish!"

The pack of jellyfish emerged from the forest trees like a white mist, large enough to fill almost their entire field of vision. As they moved in to surround the adventurers, a chill infused the air.

Annelie screamed.

"Whoa!" cried Dennis.

"What in the world?!" shouted Walt.

The three nobles were in awe at the sight before them.

"Wow..." muttered Shiori.

This pack of jellyfish was even bigger than the pack of snow wolves she'd encountered in Brovito Village. The wolves had swarmed over the ground, but these snow jellyfish stretched from her eyeline towards the sky, and the sheer number of them was an overwhelming sight.

The snow jellyfish drifted, crawling and twisting through the sky like sinuous and near-transparent white umbrellas. Including their tentacles, each jellyfish was about thirty centimeters long. They lived only in environments where the temperature fell below zero, and could not survive through the start of spring when the snow began to melt. The middling light from between the clouds colored them all a light blue, and they struck her as looking like the fleeting snowflakes that fell and melted with the coming of spring.

Beautiful as they were to look at, however, the snow jellyfish knew how to fight, and were especially aggressive towards anyone or anything that entered their turf. Their most noticeable behavior was an all-out pack attack. Though a rookie adventurer could easily stand up to a small number of jellyfish alone, the same could not be said when the pack measured some twenty meters in length. The jellyfish's tentacles contained a numbing poison, and as a group they pulsed with freezing magical energy.

Giant spiders, snow wolves—there certainly are a lot of magical beasts that move and strike in packs.

Any adventurer that had only encountered a stray snow jellyfish or two near human settlements was in for a rude surprise when facing off against a pack. Apparently, many adventurers expecting an easy battle had fallen to these greater numbers.

What was her name again...? The girl who'd died attempting to take on a giant spider nest with a teammate?

In the past, a group of three girls hadn't taken kindly to Shiori, and had been punished for breaking the Guild rules when they'd attempted to intimidate her. One of them had left the Guild, but the other two had—upon reentering the fold after their detention—taken up a request and then promptly run into trouble. One of the pair had survived, but the other had died mercilessly.

"Those stupid, foolish girls."

Such were the words that Ludger had spat when he went with the remaining survivor to confirm the death of her friend. Contrary to the harshness of his words, Ludger had been incredibly saddened. The girl who'd died had studied under Ludger for a time when she was still a rookie. However, she had grown conceited and refused to listen to his advice...and in the end, she'd paid the price.

Leading and guiding such personalities was perhaps the responsibility of senior adventurers, but reality was rarely so forgiving. The world of adventuring was one in which rookies were thrown into the thick of things as soon as they completed their training. They were considered professionals, and everyone took individual responsibility for each request they accepted—it was not a kind world, nor was it one where there was always someone to look out for you when you got yourself into trouble.

“It was arrogance. We just thought...we thought it would be easy...”

So spoke the lone survivor. That arrogance had ruined her relationship with her peers, and she could not find the motivation to mend those broken bridges. The shame was so great that she eventually transferred to a guild branch closer to her hometown.

“Miss Annelie,” said Alec, “the jellyfish target revealed skin. Please do your best to keep your face covered. That goes for you too, Shiori. Rurii, you’ll watch the back with me.”

“Got it,” said Shiori.

The three nobles nodded awkwardly. Rurii trembled in the affirmative, and circled around behind Shiori and the nobles.

“There’s a lot of them, and some may get through, so be on guard,” said Alec.

“Right,” said Shiori.

“Here they come!” shouted Nadia.

The area filled with magical energy, and the snow jellyfish flickered with a bright, fluorescent light. It was a sign they would attack.

Shiori kept the nobles behind her. She’d heard stories of the jellyfish a few

times, but this was her first time encountering them herself. Now she understood why Zack had insisted on a party of A-rankers with strong fire magic—it was the best way to fight off such a large pack while protecting the client. But if a few managed to break through, Shiori felt she could handle them. She kept a lookout as she thought back to what she'd read in the bestiary.

“Spiral Flames, Spirol Flamme!”

Nadia's area-of-effect spell burned the pack, which sizzled in the air. A segment of the snow jellyfish pack was immediately reduced to cinders.

“Nadia! Are you trying to roast me to death?!” Clemens shouted angrily, spinning his pitch-black dual blades and catching the nearby jellyfish.

“I had faith in your abilities of evasion!” said Nadia.

“Be that as it may, I'd still prefer *not* to breathe that kind of heat into my lungs!”

Though they bickered, neither adventurer let up their attack. They weaved through the chilly air, and Nadia took another group down with evaporating blasts of air while Clemens continued to cut down jellyfish after jellyfish. Smoldering corpses and a growing mountain of what looked like finely chopped vegetables piled up on the ground around their feet.

Alec, too, cut down swaths of the jellyfish, his sword alight with fire magic. Rurii, for its part, stretched out as far as its body would allow it, snatching jellyfish from the sky.

Still, they were up against a wall of jellyfish some twenty meters long, and half of the pack still remained. A few of them weaved around the adventurers' attacks and headed for Shiori. Dennis and Walt wrapped Annelie in their arms and shut their eyes tight. Shiori stood in place and unleashed a combination spell.

“Fiery Winds!”

The spell combined fire and wind, and was, in essence, a more powerful version of her hair-drying magic.

The snow jellyfish is unable to survive in snow-melting temperatures.

She recalled this fact from the bestiary, and her spell was inspired not by Nadia's direct attacks, but by the shock waves of heat that had followed in their wake.

Shiori knew she couldn't afford to be reckless with her magic, but she was confident she could cast the spell a few times in order to keep herself and the nobles safe. The jellyfish who came in contact with the wind quickly lost their moisture and soon fell to the earth, dead.

"Shiori!" shouted Alec. "Be mindful of your magical energy!"

"Got it!"

It would be unbearable if she exhausted her magical energy so early in the battle.

I'll try lowering the temperature to a simple warm wind.

Shiori tinkered with the warmth of the spell until it was about the level of what she used to warm a campsite. The jellyfish that entered the sphere of her magic couldn't withstand the heat and fell to the ground, where they evaporated.

"Great," she said. "It's still effective."

This was not like casting the spell within barrier stakes, where the effects would last for a set period of time. Out here, having to maintain the spell constantly sapped at her energy, but she had at least managed to create a barrier the beasts could not pass.

"Ugh..."

Clemens let out a groan. One of the snow jellyfish had scratched his cheek. With his blood coursing quickly through his veins from the heat of the battle, the poison was rapidly taking effect. He could feel his left hand going numb, and quickly sheathed his blade and retreated.

"Is everything okay?" asked Shiori, quickly fishing into a pouch and passing him an antidote potion.

"Yep—thanks."

Clemens downed the potion in a single gulp, then surveyed the battlefield as

he waited for the antidote to take effect.

“Doesn’t matter how many times you face them,” he muttered, “packs of magical beasts are always a handful.”

“Indeed.”

It was because these magical beasts were so weak on their own that they banded together like this. A group offensive like this could not be held off with a single attack. Unless you had some area-of-effect attacks, fighting packs was always a difficult proposition.

“But I must say—using your air-conditioning magic as a barrier? Not a bad idea at all. We’re almost done, so you just have to hold on a little longer.”

“Okay!”

The pack of snow jellyfish had been whittled down to about a quarter of its original size. With the effect of the poison now gone, Clemens flew back into the fray.

“Just a bit longer,” Shiori said to the nobles behind her.

Though they were all tense, they nodded and watched in awe as Alec and the other adventurers continued to do battle. When Shiori was sure they were okay, she took out a magical energy recovery potion and drank it. When she felt the cold air closing in, she raised the temperature of her barrier. Even then, however, the cold air cut through the barrier once, stinging her cheek.



But there were only a few jellyfish left now. The danger was soon to pass...

...Or so she thought.

“Wh-What?!”

A small portion of the jellyfish suddenly broke away from the pack and flew past Shiori’s barrier. As they did, a terrifyingly fast shape emerged from where they had been.

“We’ve got more company!” shouted Alec. “And it’s big!”

He moved to protect the nobles as all of them prepared to take on the incoming enemy. Whatever it was, it moved quickly through the snowy terrain. The only thing that made sense was a bear. And sure enough, a huge white snow bear burst through the fresh snow and out of the forest. The bulky four-legged beast stared at them with eyes that, though small for its enormous body, were filled with ferocity. Upon a closer look, however, it seemed that one of the beast’s eyes was shut, and dried blood stained the fur around it. The wound was fresh.

The bear apparently saw them as a threat. It stood on its hind legs and swatted at the pack of jellyfish as if they were little more than an annoyance, then let out a deep, savage roar. With its mouth open and its sharp fangs in clear view, one thing was obvious—if anyone was caught in those jaws, they would not free themselves so easily.

Annelie was rendered speechless at the sheer murderous intent that wafted from the beast’s presence.

“Dear lord...” muttered Walt with a moan.

It must have stood some four meters tall. However, having seen a manticore up close, this particular beast was to Shiori’s eyes still on the cuter side of the spectrum. This thought allayed some of the fear rising within her.

“It’s an injured snow bear,” said Alec, “possibly berserk. Talk about bad luck—we haven’t even cleared all the jellyfish yet.”

“Still, at least it’s not a manticore,” said Clemens. “We won’t want to underestimate its strength and power, but we’ll be fine so long as we don’t get

hit.”

The two adventurers were dead serious, yet equally calm. This was not just because they were confident, but because it was key to their jobs—fear and recklessness only led to openings for the enemy. Keeping a cool head was paramount.

“Nadia, we’ll leave the remaining jellyfish to you!”

“I’m on it!”

Alec and Clemens, both experts when it came to fights that were up close and personal, prepared to face off against the enormous bear. Nadia was more than capable of handling what remained of the jellyfish.

“I know you’re scared,” said Shiori, “but whatever you do, please don’t run. The snow bear prioritizes fleeing prey. So we’re going to back up slowly and create some distance.”

Shiori kept the nobles behind her as the four of them slowly retreated. Rurii stretched itself even wider to protect them.

“If the snow bear rushes us for whatever reason, cover the back of your necks with your hands and lie down. Your knapsacks will act as impromptu shields and provide some defense.”

Everything Shiori told them, she’d read in the bestiary, but even then she knew her advice was important—better to have some knowledge of survival tactics than none at all.

“Understood...” said Walt with a nod.

“I’d much prefer to not even think about it,” said Annelie. She and Dennis seemed to be struggling to keep their composure.

But I know we’ll be fine.

Shiori felt strength in Alec and Clemens’s calm. They did not falter. Perhaps this was why the nobles, too, stayed calm in the face of their fears.

In the next instant, Alec and Clemens ducked low. Clemens closed in on the snow bear quickly, weaving under the arc of the beast’s arm and leaping at its face. His right sword hit the beast in the strong part of its jaw, but the left blade

gouged into its softer nose. Blood sprayed from the beast's head, coating the snow.

The bear roared from the pit of its being, sending reverberations through the very air itself. But the roar did nothing to stop the adventurers, and Alec, who had spun behind the beast, cut into its legs as it stood tall. In effect, he'd stopped the bear from moving before it could change targets and cause any further damage. With another swipe of his magic sword, Alec sliced the tendons in the bear's legs. No longer able to support the weight of its own frame, the bear tilted and collapsed into the snow with a tremendous thud.

The monster flailed wildly with its upper body, roaring and enraged by the foe who had rendered it unable to move. It was blinded by its desire to kill. If they did not finish it here and now, it would come after them, hungry for blood, with or without the use of its legs.

"You were right. It really was easier to handle than a manticore," said Alec.

"See?" said Clemens. "At least snow bears can't fly."

"All that's left now is..."

"To finish it off."

The two adventurers had worked together long enough that the flow of battle required little in the way of discussion. They each knew what the other was going to do, and could attack enemies almost as if they shared the same mind.

"Looks like Nadia has finished up too."

Nadia was fixing the bangs of her strawberry-blonde hair as she walked towards them. Behind her was a mountain of charred snow jellyfish, a smoky scent wafting through the forest around them. A final roar rang into the air as Alec and Clemens put an end to the snow bear. With one blade in its remaining eye and the other in its heart, the beast shuddered and was still at last.

"When only strength will bring an enemy down, it's best to leave it to those two," said Nadia.

"Indeed," agreed Shiori.

The two men pulled their blades from the body of the beast, and, after

making sure it was dead, returned to the others. Nobody had suffered any noticeable injuries. There was a small welt where Clemens had been cut, but the poison had been expunged from his system, leaving only a wound to be disinfected.

I'm glad nobody got hurt.

As the nervousness in the air dissipated, everyone relaxed. The battle was over—there was nothing left to fear.

“Is everybody okay?”

Shiori let out a sigh and turned to the three nobles. They all stood close together, their faces pale, and none of them spoke.

“Are you all okay?” she asked again.

Perhaps they were in shock at encountering magical beasts at such close proximity. Even Shiori, who was used to seeing monsters, had been frightened by the huge pack of jellyfish, not to mention the unexpected arrival of a murderous wild beast.

“Um...?”

Shiori was beginning to worry that they might faint where they stood, and her voice wavered with her concern.

“Oh,” said Annelie, the first to come back to her senses. “My apologies. This is all very new to me.”

She was shivering in the arms of her aides, but she managed to find her voice. She gave the arms around her a pat and the two men loosened their grip. Dennis and Walt also slowly came back to their senses.

“I remember you saying that we might encounter these beasts, but at the same time...?”

“Now I understand why you said to always prepare for the worst...”

The two aides glanced at each other as they muttered. It had only been a few hours since they had departed, but they were now very aware that they had entered dangerous territory. If one considered the chance of having such an encounter, thirty percent wasn't particularly high, but it was always best to be

prepared when you were wandering through a beast's home. It was not a world you stepped into merely hoping for the best.

"Are you all okay?" asked Nadia gently. "It's more than okay to say so if you'd prefer to turn back. We can still refund your down payment."

"No," said Annelie, shaking her head. "I'm okay. I want to keep going. We've already come this far. But..." Annelie looked around at the fallen jellyfish and the dead snow bear. "If you deem this expedition to be too dangerous, then I will listen if you recommend that we return."

Her two aides nodded in agreement, just as Alec and Clemens returned to the group. Neither had been hurt in their battle with the bear.

"Good work."

"Thanks."

Alec's brow furrowed as he wiped the bear's blood from his face.

"Shiori," he said. "You're cut."

"Oh?"

She felt a jolt of pain run through her cheek where he touched it. When she felt it herself, she realized that it was slightly swollen.

"You're right," she said.

It must have been the cold air from the snow jellyfish. It stung, but when she looked at her fingers after touching her cheek, there was no blood. The cut was minor, and would be fine so long as she disinfected it and rubbed some medicine into it.

"We're just about due for a break anyway," announced Nadia. "A good chance for us to see to our minor wounds and such."

"Good call."

"In that case..." said Alec. "Yes, let's take our lunch break a little further ahead. We'll want to put those corpses out of our minds anyway."

"Thank you," said Annelie. "We're grateful for what you've done. But are you sure we'll be okay?"

Annelie and her aides were worried that another beast might be drawn by the scent of blood in the air. And such scavenger-like magical beasts did indeed exist.

“Snow bears aren’t the type of beast to have their own turf, so they can appear wherever you go,” said Clemens. “Snow jellyfish, on the other hand, *do* stake out their own territory. If that pack we ran into lived in this area, then we won’t be seeing any others for quite some time.”

The words came as a relief to the three nobles. The party quickly put some distance between themselves and the battlefield, taking their break about twenty meters away.

“I’ll create our rest area, then,” said Shiori.

Everyone wanted to use this time to rest and recover, to make sure they had the energy and enthusiasm to make it through the last leg of the day’s walking. With her ice magic, Shiori carved out a space for seven people and one slime by the side of the road where the snow was piling up. She created a long bench complete with a backrest, with a small table in the center of it. Perhaps the backrest didn’t encourage the greatest table manners, but having something to lean against as they ate would help everyone rest a little easier.

Annelie and her aides let out sighs of joy, put their bags down, and practically collapsed onto the bench. It seemed to Shiori that, in the face of their weariness, good manners were the least of their worries.

Shiori received permission to treat everyone’s wounds and quickly got to work. As she was going through her medical supplies, Walt raised his head from his rations as an idea came to him.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “snow bear pelts fetch quite the price on the market. Are you certain it’s okay to leave it there?”

“Under normal circumstances we’d gladly skin the beast, but time and energy are concerns here. We’ll leave it be this time around.”

“Ah, I see...”

Upon hearing that they’d be abandoning the valuable material, Walt looked somewhat regretful. He ran his hand along the fur that covered the bench on

which they sat, which itself happened to be made from snow bear. The gesture seemed to say that he understood their reasons, but still wasn't entirely convinced.

"Do you know how to skin and dissect animals, Alec?" asked Shiori.

She'd just rubbed ointment on her cheek and was reaching out to look at Clemens's cut when Alec stopped her. He took the ointment from her hand.

"Basically, yeah," he said, rubbing some ointment into Clemens's cut with a rough touch. Clemens looked a little sour. "I used to think there's no way I could do it, but...I once happened to stumble across quite the catch and absolutely ruined it with my lack of know-how. I never wanted to go through that again, so I knuckled down and learned how to cut beasts up."

"Ah, you're talking about that duck, huh?" asked Clemens. "Yeah, there's no other way to look at it—that was a complete and utter waste of good meat."

"That's the one. Unforgettable...and not in a good way."

The two adventurers shared a regretful chuckle. The two of them had, long ago, come across a delicious-looking duck. However, because neither knew how to defeather and gut the animal, they'd simply cooked it as it was. In the end they were left with only foul-smelling meat because of it—their opportunity for a feast gone entirely.

"That is...truly unfortunate," said Shiori, giggling as she prepared some warm drinks. She'd brought along some bottled candied ginger, which she melted in cups with hot water to make an impromptu ginger tea.

"I truly don't mind if you'd like to take the time to skin the beast," said Annelie, smiling as she took in the scent of the ginger tea. "That is, assuming we have the time for it."

"I appreciate your kindness, but...just based on the sheer size of that bear, we're looking at about two hours of work."

Rurii had been nibbling on a snack for familiars while everyone talked, but took a moment to give Shiori a poke in the leg.

"Hm? What is it?"

The slime went out to the walking path and pointed towards town.

“Something over there caught your attention?”

Rurii ate up the last of its snack and trembled. Then it moved just a little farther down the path that led back to town.

“Oh...you mean the place where we just were? Don’t tell me—you want to eat the fallen beast?”

Shiori’s guess was on the money, and the slime trembled in the affirmative. Shiori turned back to her fellow adventurers, who all nodded their permission.

“Well, none of us mind so long as Rurii makes it back here in time for us to leave,” said Alec. “That means thirty minutes. How does that sound?”

Rurii waved a “hand”: *No problemo!* It then swiftly turned into a puddle and left for the snow bear corpse.

“I have to admit, I was rather perplexed when I first heard about your slime familiar, but it really is capable of communication,” said Annelie. “I never imagined that slimes were capable of understanding human language. They’re actually very expressive, aren’t they? Even I feel like I understand what he—is it a he?—is trying to say.”

“Yes, I was just as surprised,” added Walt. “Did you see it in that battle earlier? It was able to respond to the battle as it was happening to make decisions as to what to do next. Much smarter than I would ever have thought possible. He seems very comfortable around people, and I must say he’s quite adorable to boot.”

It made Shiori happy to hear them talk about Rurii like this—the slime was her friend, and she was proud of it. And the more people that understood the slime’s nature, the better. In some ways, it was the same for Rurii as it was for Shiori as an Easterner—it was almost impossible for people not to have preconceptions about the slime when they first encountered it.

As she thought about it, Shiori felt warm to her core—and not just because of the ginger tea.

“Speaking of slimes,” said Dennis, “I’ve heard rumors that His Majesty

recently made a magic contract with a slime himself.”

“Kerhoff?!”

Alec choked on his tea before Dennis could finish, and Shiori leapt to her feet in surprise. He was able to cover his mouth in time so as not to spit on anyone, but it still left him with wet gloves and knees. He coughed harshly, feeling Dennis’s cold gaze on him.

“Are you quite all right?”

“My apologies,” said Alec, clearing his throat. “It seems some of my tea went down the wrong pipe.”

Alec took the handkerchief Shiori passed him and dabbed at his lips, his face turning red. But his coughing went on for a little longer, and it was only when Shiori gently rubbed his back that he finally began to calm.

“That is certainly quite the extraordinary rumor. Where in the world did you hear such a thing?”

“One of Count Enqvist’s servants visited us recently on business,” said Dennis. “That’s where we heard about it. Apparently it happened while the king was out on one of his covert outings.”

“Are you talking about one of Klaas’s people?” asked Walt. “He’s not the type to go spreading unfounded gossip.”

“Indeed. From what I’ve heard, it’s a peach-colored slime and His Majesty is quite taken with it. Sometimes it even sleeps with him. There were enough details that the whole thing sounds quite likely to be true.”

Alec quickly gulped down the ginger tea still in his mouth, as if to ensure he wouldn’t go spitting it out a second time, but it left him with tears in his eyes. Clemens and Nadia looked at him with some pity in their gazes.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” asked Nadia.

“Just...just golden,” muttered Alec, who in actuality looked a bit gaunt and suddenly tired.

In this way, everyone ate and drank and then got themselves ready for the second leg of the day’s journey. Alec seemed to have lost his appetite, and put

what remained of his rations back in his pouch.

“Oh... This has...” muttered Dennis. He was looking into a small leather pouch as he readied his bags.

“What’s wrong?” asked Walt.

“I put a little of our food in one of the bags we’d *intended* to bring, as a little experiment. It’s frozen over.”

Dennis had been walking with the bag attached to his belt, just as they’d originally intended. The bread inside had frozen solid. The canteen as well—when Dennis took off the cap and turned it upside down, nothing came out. Walt let out a squeal of shock, and Annelie’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Glad we did as we were told...” Dennis muttered, his face going pale.

They had understood how dangerous it was to travel in the snowy wilderness and attempted to prepare, but now they truly knew the extent to which they had underestimated the harshness of the conditions. Annelie put a gentle hand to Dennis’s shoulder and shot Shiori a meaningful glance as she smiled.

At this, Shiori couldn’t help but wonder: was there not perhaps more to this journey than simply art motifs?

I wonder if she hoped this might be...a chance for something to change?

Shiori looked at Nadia, who replied with an easy smile before looking behind her, at the path they’d walked.

“Is Rurii back yet? It’s almost time to go,” she said.

“Good point. Ah, there it is.”

The lapis-colored slime appeared from the snow with a wave, as if to announce its return.

“Welcome back,” said Shiori. “Did you eat well?”

The slime trembled with supreme satisfaction. Then it stretched out a feeler and pointed at the path behind it.

“Hm? What is it?” asked Shiori, looking farther down the path before letting out a shriek.

“What is it?! Something wrong?!”

The other three adventurers came rushing over. Annelie and her aides attempted to follow, curious, but were stopped.

“It might be better if you don’t look,” said Shiori.

“Huh?”

“But now I’m even *more* curious.”

“It’s, well...it’s quite the sight...” said Shiori. “It’s the snow bear, from before.”

“You don’t mean to say the slime brought leftovers with it...?” asked Dennis. He was not about to let his lord be privy to such a sight.

“Well, no,” replied Shiori, “leftovers might not quite be the right word...”

“It looks as though the slime overheard our conversation,” said Clemens, “and prepared us the bear’s pelt.”

“Oh, I see,” said Nadia. “So considerate in its own little way.”

The two adventurers smiled. Meanwhile, Alec ran over to inspect the slime’s gift.

It was the snow bear, all right. Rurii had carefully cleared out the bear’s insides, and brought back what remained. The slime had even left the bear’s claws and teeth intact.

“Truly amazing!” uttered Annelie.

“Why, you could almost put it on display as it is!” said Walt.

Shiori and Dennis had tried to stop them, but to no avail. With their first battle behind them, Annelie and Walt were strangely excited. Dennis put a hand to his brow and let out a sigh, while Shiori could do little more than chuckle.

“You’re amazing, Rurii,” she said to the slime. “I bet you must be full, huh?”

The slime nodded. Shiori guessed it wouldn’t be needing another meal for quite some time.

“Do you think this might have been the snow bear that was attacking the villages nearby?”

“Good question,” said Alec, tilting his head in thought. “There must be other bears in the forest, so it’s hard to say for certain.”

There were no eyewitnesses for the attacks they’d heard about. It wasn’t impossible that it could have been the work of a different beast.

“Still,” said Clemens with a frown, “something about those scars...”

One of the snow bear’s eyes had been closed when it attacked. There was dried blood on its fur and, around it, burn marks and cuts. All of these wounds were all quite recent.

“I’d say these were all inflicted in the last few days,” he added.

“Which could mean...”

It was potentially the work of the party that had ignored the knights’ warnings and headed for the tower. They already knew for certain that one of them was a mage and one of them was a swordsman.

“So they either managed to injure the beast enough to make a run for it, or...”

Or they’d been eaten, and now lay dead.

There were no other signs of the other party, apart from what they had already found. Even if they had left any footprints, by now the snow would have hidden them completely.

“Whatever the case, let’s stay on guard,” said Alec. “We still don’t know anything about the kind of party they are.”

Alec gave the slime a thankful pat, then rolled up the snow bear pelt, put it in a leather bag, and put that in his knapsack. The pelt was quite heavy because it still had yet to be processed and properly prepared, but Alec was strong enough that it wasn’t much of an issue.

“Thank you, Rurii,” he said.

The slime responded with a proud wobble.

3

The party continued at a steady pace, the snow continuing to fall around

them. The nobles seemed more used to things now, and even dropped into casual conversation at times. Perhaps the fact that they were also nearing their campsite for the evening lightened their spirits as well.

Since lunch, they'd had one other beast encounter—another pack of snow jellyfish. However, there was no confusion the second time around, and Annelie and her aides seemed to understand they were safe so long as they put their trust in the adventurers and followed instructions. That said, at the mere sight of the beasts, they had all huddled together behind Shiori at once so she could cast her fiery wind barrier.

The sight of another large pack of snow jellyfish blotting out the sky made the nobles shake in awe and fear. Annelie's face paled slightly as Dennis and Walt kept her protected in their arms.

There's more to these three than your regular master-servant relationship, Shiori thought.

It wasn't just the way Dennis and Walt protected their master that made Shiori feel that way—it was a deep trust between all of them, and in their familial way of communicating with each other were strong feelings that connected them like siblings. This was especially noticeable in Dennis, whose every action showed that Annelie was more than just his noble master. He looked every bit the picture of a doting older brother.

"I worry about you. I know you can take care of yourself, but you're absentminded sometimes."

Shiori's brother had spoken these words to her when she first started living on her own. He'd probably doted on her even more than her parents had, and was always generous. The reason why she trusted Zack, and felt safe in his presence, probably had something to do with his resemblance to her brother.

Shiori's brother was nothing if not a worrywart. She remembered laughing when her mother had called to say he'd practically collapsed with worry when he'd heard that Shiori had come down with a fever while trying to get used to life in a new city. Even now, she could only imagine how worried he must be.

She wondered if he was doing well. She prayed that he was in good health.

“What’s wrong? Tired?” Alec whispered.

Shiori felt herself float back up from the pool of her memories. She frowned at herself—it wasn’t good to get sidetracked on the job.

“No, I’m fine,” she replied. “I was just thinking about my brother.”

Slight confusion flashed across Alec’s face.

“Zack?”

“Oh, er...no, not that brother. My actual brother.”

Alec’s eyes went wide.

“You have a brother?” he asked.

“Yes. He’s seven years older than me, and has a tendency to worry too much.”

“Hmm. Feel like I know someone just like that...”

“I’m sure you do...”

That single characteristic brought to mind someone they both knew well, and they shared a smile as they arrived at the day’s checkpoint. The place was an observation deck, and it offered a wonderful view of Silveria Tower when the weather was good. At present, however, the sight of it was hidden by the falling snow. The party looked around the main square of the area.

“Hm? What’s that?” asked Clemens, who was at the head of the party.

There were no signs of any other creatures nearby, yet he had his swords at the ready.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look,” said Clemens. “The entrance to the observation deck.”

It was hard to make out in the falling snow, but he seemed to be gesturing at the door into the observation deck.

“Huh. It’s...broken?”

The doors, which were normally shut tight, lay open. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that one of the thick wooden doors was bent out of shape.

“Was it magical beasts, or...?”

They crept closer to the broken doors, but the destruction didn't look like the work of monsters.

“No. People did this.”

Up close, they could see that the door was charred by fire magic, and that its hinges and lock had been hacked at with a blade of some kind. All signs pointed to it being recent too. Everyone shared worried glances, and Annelie looked anxious.

“There's no trace of human or beast in the vicinity,” said Clemens.

“Shiori, what do you make of it?” asked Alec.

Shiori used her search magic across the observation deck, but felt nothing.

“Not even any smaller wildlife,” she said. “It's deserted.”

“I see...”

After thinking for a moment, Alec nodded to himself.

“I'm going to take a look inside. Wait here,” he said.

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

Alec lit a lantern with his magic, then squeezed between the broken doors and stepped into the observation deck's interior.

“Can we assume this is the work of that other party of adventurers?” asked Shiori.

“Looks like it. The marks on the door are very recent,” said Clemens.

Traces of magic could still be felt in the burn marks, and the marks gouged into the door, which was otherwise faded and discolored with age, had a noticeable brightness to them.

“We're not going to find them lying dead in there, are we...?” muttered Walt.

Annelie and Dennis cringed at the thought, clearly hoping it was not the case. After about ten minutes, Alec returned.

“Well?” asked Clemens.

“The shops and cafeteria have been raided, but I don’t think they found whatever they were looking for. Looks like someone took their anger out on the place with their magic—the chairs and shelves have been thrown around. There are signs that they used the fireplace too. I’m willing to bet they spent the night here.”

A moan rang out across the party, and a strange, nervous atmosphere settled over them.

“You think they were looking for food, then?”

“It’s possible,” said Alec. “From what I could see, they didn’t really touch any of the other rooms.”

They didn’t know how prepared the group of adventurers had been when they’d set out, but they did know that the mage wasn’t carrying anything, so there was a good chance they didn’t have enough food.

“Ill-prepared and all out of rations...” uttered Annelie.

Dennis and Walt looked at each other, keenly aware that they had managed to avoid meeting a similar fate. Walt, who appeared to be carrying more food than the other two, put a quiet hand to the rations he kept in his chest pocket.

“What should we do? Now that the door is open, we could conceivably take shelter in the observation deck,” said Clemens.

It was true enough that the location was more than sufficient as a campsite. Still, Annelie shook her head.

“No. It might be safe in there now, but...I don’t want anybody thinking we might have been responsible for what happened. I’m sure the knights will want to investigate the place later too, so it might be best to leave it as we found it.”

“You’re exactly right,” said Alec. “Let’s set up camp in the square, as we’d originally planned. Shiori?”

“Understood. Oh—is this area paved, perchance?”

The other adventurers, who had been to the deck in the warmer seasons, nodded.

“The observation deck is in the center, and there’s probably fifty meters of paved ground.”

“Well then, that makes things easier.”

“Ah, you mean *that*.”

“Yes. It’s much easier to shape than dirt and earth.”

“Aha. That’s good to hear.”

When it came to making a bath, it often took a decent amount of time to find a clear, open span of earth. Shiori also had to harden the earth enough to ensure the hot water would not simply soak into the ground below. Given that viruses and bacteria could sometimes be found in the ground, she also had to consider sterilization. When creating earthen beds in locations where tents couldn’t be set up, she would run a hot wind through the dirt not merely to dehumidify it, but also to sterilize it.

Working with stone and brick made all of this much easier. All she needed to do was shape it with her magic. And sterilization was as easy as running fire magic over the surface of the ground, or creating a shower of boiling water.

“Please stand back,” said Shiori.

The three nobles took up a position behind Alec and the other two adventurers.

“Pressure Snow,” she uttered.

The air pressure of Shiori’s wind magic pushed a square into the snow and pressed it closer to the earth, readying it for melting.

“Snow Thaw.”

Then, Shiori used a hot wind to melt the snow. It wasn’t as quick and instant as one of Nadia’s spells, but the snow steamed and melted all the same, revealing a four-sided space, at the bottom of which was paved ground.

Voices of awe rang out from the nobles, which made Shiori feel a little awkward, but she tucked the feeling away and moved on to her next task. After creating shallow gutters around the sides of the space with her earth magic, she made holes for barrier stakes. Clemens and Nadia, who had seen this before,

immediately went to work putting the stakes in. Alec was a little slower to respond, taken aback by what he was seeing for the first time. Meanwhile, Rurii patrolled the area around them, keeping an eye out for danger.

“Now, what to do about the layout...” muttered Shiori.

After a little thought, she started by making a kitchen in the corner. She crafted an oven out of the ground along with a washbasin, and a counter on which to place food. She then made a dining table and two benches, and laid furs along the benches for people to sit on.

“We still have a little more preparation to do,” she said, gesturing to the benches, “so please take a seat and relax here while we work.”

“Thank you. You’re marvelously dexterous,” said Annelie.

“Many thanks,” Dennis added.

Shiori quickly prepared some herbal tea and passed it around, then returned to her work. It looked like Alec and the others had already finished placing the barrier stakes.

“Time for the air conditioner.”

Shiori filled the space within the barrier stakes with warmth, which melted the snow as it fell, making it evaporate in the air. That which didn’t evaporate did fall in light droplets, but Shiori intended to keep an eye on that.

Next up—beds.

“As for your sleeping habits,” she said to Annelie, “would you prefer sleeping on the ground or having a simple bunk?”

Annelie sipped at her tea and thought for a moment.

“A bunk would indeed be nice...but how are you going to do that?”

“I can make simple mattresses from earth. We have tents without floors, so I’ll prepare your beds inside one of those.”

The paved ground was easy for Shiori to shape, so it wouldn’t be a problem for her to make walls for the bath. Since this rendered the bathing tent unnecessary, the nobles could sleep inside of it instead.

Shiori created more openings for barrier stakes in a space facing away from the observation deck, and Clemens and Alec set up the tent. Once it was done, Shiori crafted three beds inside of it, each slightly bigger than the ones she'd crafted in the first aid tents at Brovito Village.

The three nobles wandered over from the table, drawn by their curiosity, and were once again audibly awestruck. Dennis looked as stern as always, but his expression was a touch more relaxed—it seemed he approved of the bedding.

“If you place a waterproof fur or coat over this, it will help with the cold, and you won't have to worry so much about the stiffness of the bed. Be sure to wrap yourself in a blanket as you sleep.”

“In that case, I'll prepare the beds,” said Dennis, not meeting her eyes. “Feel free to move on to another task.”

Perhaps he felt awkward about Shiori handling that, or perhaps it was simply her appearance that bothered him. Such thoughts swirled through Shiori's head, but she was nonetheless grateful for the assistance.

“Thank you very much,” she said.

Upon leaving the margravine's tent, she found that the remaining tent had already been erected and prepared. Their baggage, too, was already inside of it.

“I guess that leaves the bath, then.”

In an open part of the campsite, Shiori crafted two rooms with walls about two meters tall. Within those walls she made bathtubs and drainage gutters, then sprayed it all with hot water to ensure it was sterilized. This also allowed her to warm the rooms. When she was done, she had simple baths ready for both the men and the women. It might have been better to have a roof over the top, but Shiori was a little worried about how safe that was structurally, so she'd opted for an open-air bath with a snowy view.

“Wow!” said Walt, who had seemingly come out of nowhere to watch her at work. “Does this mean you could make a whole house out of magic?”

“If you knew everything you needed in advance, I suppose so, yes,” said Shiori. “But I'm no architect or house-builder, so this is about as good as it gets for me.”

“Right. Still, it’s amazingly convenient, isn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t it be interesting if mages could train to be like Shiori in terms of housekeeping and crafting abilities?” added Annelie.

“Indeed,” said Nadia. “There may well be many out there in the world who aren’t well suited to using attack magic, and might prefer this kind of work.”

Until now, the practice of magic was largely a militaristic endeavor. Outside of magic lanterns, the use of magic in everyday life had only started some thirty or forty years ago. There was still much room for research and development. Just as Annelie implied, there might one day even be a demand for schools teaching exactly the skills Shiori had taught herself.

While Shiori was thinking about this, Nadia and Annelie chatted with each other, and Alec passed her a magic energy recovery potion. It looked like he’d finished his campsite inspection.

“Make sure you’re staying on top of your energy levels,” he said. “Otherwise the magical exhaustion will turn physical.”

“Oh—thank you. But...I have my own potions, you know?” She carried a surplus of them just to be on the safe side.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” said Alec, “so take this one for now, and keep yours for when you really need them.”

“But...”

Alec grinned.

“No need to worry,” he said. “I keep a stock of them for myself here, and then a stock especially for you over *here*.”

There were two medicine pouches on Alec’s belt, one on each side. While one was well used, the other was new—he’d clearly purchased it quite recently. Alec went on to explain that he carried high-grade recovery potions for himself in the older pouch. When he showed her what was inside the newer pouch, she saw that it was stocked full with low-grade recovery potions. He’d prepared the extra pouch and potions especially for traveling with her.

Shiori was left speechless by his consideration. Meanwhile, Annelie and Walt

burst into laughter.

“And here I was thinking that Dennis is the only one who’s always overprepared!” said Walt. “But this is just like something he would do!”

“You’re not wrong,” said Annelie with a giggle. “They make for rather intriguing rivals!”

Shiori went bright red with embarrassment. Alec, on the other hand, appeared proud and supremely satisfied. Dennis, standing beside his laughing companions, remained stone-faced and silent. Clemens chuckled as he went through some luggage, and Nadia held herself back from laughing outright.

“It’s like I’ve got *another* overprotective person looking out for me...” Shiori muttered.

There was her brother in her home world, her brother in this world, and now Alec too. Shiori felt completely and utterly at a loss. Her slime, Rurii, poked her in the neck, a gesture that seemed to suggest she’d be better off just giving up and letting it happen.

“There’s a lot of love packed into that new pouch of his.”

Nadia’s words regarding Alec’s new overprotective tendencies flushed Shiori with a warmth that went right to the core of her being. She decided to remove her coat for the rest of her work in order to cool down.

It was still a little before four in the afternoon, and with campsite preparations just about done, the sky was starting to grow dark. The country’s latitudinal position meant that sunset came surprisingly early. Magic lanterns were lit around the campsite and in the baths.

“Oh, by the way,” Shiori said, passing some brand-new bathing utensils (which had been prepared especially for the margravine) to Dennis. “Will Annelie require any assistance in the baths?”

While looking carefully at each of the items, as though inspecting them, Dennis shook his head.

“No, Lady Annelie prefers to handle most things on her own. That includes

while she is on outings like this.”

Annelie’s assistants had prepared her baggage for her, but when it came to her own clothes and makeup, bathing, and handling her own person, she did most things on her own. Shiori could understand now why she traveled with so few aides.

“I see. And what about you and Walt? If you’d prefer to bathe separately, I will change the water for you.”

“That won’t be necessary. On summer expeditions we’ve bathed together in lakes and the like. Of course, we couldn’t let Annelie do such a thing.”

Shiori imagined this was something Annelie *wanted* to do, and thus something they had to stop her from doing. She could just picture Dennis having to hold back the enthusiastic margravine, and it was so believable of a scene that she almost let out a giggle.

Shiori had expected the nobles to be more uptight, but now realized they were easygoing because they had experience with the outdoors. This made sense to her—they never would have wanted to go on a winter expedition in the first place if they’d lacked that experience.

“And what will you do about your bath?” asked Annelie, eagerly taking out a change of clothes as well as her makeup.

“We’ll take our baths after dinner,” replied Shiori. “The other adventurers will keep guard while you bathe, and I will start preparing dinner.”

“Oh—if that’s the case, then how about bathing together?” asked Annelie. “I don’t mind if dinner is a little late.”

“What?!”

“Lady Annelie!”

Shiori’s eyes went wide as saucers, and Dennis’s eyes nearly bulged out of his face.

“I couldn’t possibly do something so rude as bathing with a respected noble...”

Though they were of course the same gender, Shiori was unsure if it was

acceptable for a commoner such as herself to even look upon the naked body of a noble. Would it not cause some sort of problem? Though Shiori had done her utmost to study the culture of the world she now called home, she was still unsure of the finer details of noble life—its rules and etiquette.

“Lady Annelie, one must not ask such a thing. The thought of you revealing your naked flesh to an outsider...”

“I’m asking her *because* I don’t mind. Doesn’t it make things easier if we both take our baths now? And, of course, I’m happy for Nadia to join us too. This group of adventurers is, it must be said, very strong. I’m sure leaving the two men on guard should be more than enough, no? And we don’t have to take an especially long bath.”

Dennis tried to stop her, but Annelie wasn’t interested in listening. Though she was usually quite understanding, on this occasion she was standing her ground. Alec and the other adventurers ran over when they heard the commotion.

“Is everything okay? Is something wrong?” they asked.

“It’s Lady Annelie. She...”

“I was merely asking whether Shiori and Nadia would like to join me for a bath. Wouldn’t that just be easier? And besides, nude—”

“*Lady Annelie!*”

Before she could finish her sentence, Dennis covered her mouth with a panicked hand. Walt, too, who until now had been enjoying the bickering, jumped into the fray.

“You mustn’t be so selfish!” he cried. “Think of the trouble you’ll cause everyone.”

“Hngh!” spluttered Annelie, breaking free of Dennis and Walt’s grasp. “But they’d make such wonderful mod— Umfgh!”

While Dennis and Walt once again covered their lord’s mouth, Alec and Clemens looked confused and worried, unsure of how they should enter the conversation.

“Um... As appreciative as I am of your offer...” Shiori began to say.

She paused for a moment, unsure if she should speak the words that were to come next. However, she knew that Annelie had some reason for wanting to bathe together, and she felt this would be the best way to ensure that she listened.

“Due to the nature of my work, my body is scarred,” Shiori continued. “It is far from beautiful to look at. I apologize for this, but I hope you’ll understand.”

Shiori spoke in a way that she hoped would not make the subject seem too heavy or dark, but she still heard a light gasp from someone in response. The scars on her arms and legs were things that, until now, she had never spoken of openly, and often tried to avoid even thinking about. She’d used meal preparation and laundry as excuses specifically to avoid bathing with her companions.

A long time ago, Shiori had been told that scarred women were hated, detested, and to be abandoned. Now she knew that, in truth, it was only a belief that had been held a long, long time ago, a belief that was no longer prevalent. But all the same, she could not rid herself of that thought—however mistaken it was—which had stubbornly intertwined itself with the fear lingering in the depths of her heart. That she could now face the problem head-on was in no small part thanks to...

A large hand touched her gently on the shoulder, and she knew who it was without even having to look. The feel of it was encouraging and empowering.

It’s in no small part thanks to you, Alec.

He was patient with her, he was there by her side, and he spoke to her warmly. He told her he would never abandon her. And because of him she could face her past, and come to the realization that there was still a future to look forward to, and a life she wanted to live.

“I, too, have a scar running down my back,” added Nadia. “Though I like to think it’s mostly faded by now, I’m sure it might still shock those who aren’t used to seeing such things.”

This was true. Shiori remembered seeing it on Nadia’s back in the warmer

seasons—the faintest hint of a scar that the woman herself felt no shame about. The spearmaster Marena, too, had a scar along her arm from something that had tried to pull at her. And it wasn't just them—almost all female adventurers bore some sort of scar or another, and very few went out of their way to hide them. Shiori could see now that she had felt so trapped in the past, so cornered, that this had never even occurred to her.

Annelie stopped struggling against Dennis's grip and began to relax. It seemed Shiori's words were enough to make her take note. Dennis, too, slowly let her go.

"I will not force you, given such circumstances," Annelie said. "I do apologize."

The margravine looked genuinely apologetic as she meekly went into the bath alone. A collective sigh filled the air, and the party's mood lightened somewhat.

"I apologize that our lady went too far," said Dennis, who, in a rare turn of events, also apologized.

"No, I should be sorry too," said Shiori. "I was taken completely by surprise. Scars are common among people in our field, and I hope she doesn't take my refusal too heavily. It's just, well...it's not particularly pretty to look at."

Sensing that Shiori was being considerate of her client—their master's—mental state, Dennis and Walt looked at one another with some relief, and shared a pained grin.

"Er... How should we put this? The reason we stopped Lady Annelie was not due to any dissatisfaction with you, specifically," said Walt, before giving Dennis a pleading look. "It was, er...you know?"

Dennis looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"It's a bad habit of hers," he said. "Under ordinary circumstances she is very considerate, but when it comes to her art, she tends to lose sight of the world around her..."

He trailed off, unsure of how, exactly, to continue.

"Well, what is it?" said Nadia, raising an eyebrow in frustration. "Spit it out."

"Lady Annelie...also dabbles in nude figure art."

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

“Hm?”

“Sorry?”

At these unexpected words, everyone grew rather tense.

“Nude, huh...?”

“She was talking about it all last night,” said Dennis. “Miss Nadia’s perfect artistic symmetry, and her...ahem...bodily proportions...and Miss Shiori’s smooth, silky hair and the beauty of her delicate physical features. We believe it’s likely she had her eyes on the two of you as potential nude models.”

Shiori let out a moan of embarrassment. What was Dennis even saying? That Annelie was looking at her as if she were a *model*? She realized the words were complimentary, and yet she could not help feeling embarrassed. She went bright red, even though none of this was her doing. Nadia didn’t seem to take it quite as badly, but Clemens covered his mouth and looked the other way, while Alec’s face twitched. There was no smile in his eyes.

“You think I’ll let her see *that*...when even *I* haven’t gotten to yet?” he muttered.

But however soft Alec may have intended the words to be, they echoed in everyone’s ears.

“Huh?”

“Wha?”

“Hm?”

Clemens and Nadia’s eyes looked as if they would pop out of their faces with shock. Alec tilted his head, puzzled by their reaction, and then it hit him.

“Yet”! He’d said “yet”!

Shiori gave Alec a slap on the chest, torn to pieces by the sheer shame caused by his words. Alec’s breath caught in his throat, but she ignored him and looked away, turning red. Nadia and Walt burst into laughter. Dennis looked around

awkwardly, unsure of how to react, and Clemens put a hand to his head, unable to speak as Rurii gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder.

Curious about the commotion and noise, Annelie poked her head out from the bathroom quietly, looking decidedly more relaxed without her coat and boots.

The laughter did not stop for quite some time.

I think I'm going to die of shame...

After having made his awkward confession, Alec went back out on guard as if nothing had happened while Nadia and Walt gave him mocking looks. Meanwhile, Clemens and Dennis, feeling the very height of discomfort, silently stole glances at Shiori. Shiori felt their eyes on her back, and put her hands to her flushed cheeks.

He said he still hasn't seen it yet...

Did that mean that, in time, he intended to? But rather than just seeing, his manner made it clear that he wanted even more. And it was true that he had already been indulging in her person, so to speak.

Though that doesn't mean you have to go telling the world about it!

To take her mind off her reddening face, Shiori went through her knapsack and messily took out everything she would need to prepare the night's meal. She took out her beloved cooking utensils and pots, ordered especially from Enandel & Co., along with bottled ingredients, smoked meat, and freeze-dried vegetables, which she lined up along the kitchen counter.

Still...

Alec had told her he didn't have a problem with who she was, but Shiori still felt some reluctance when it came to showing others her body. She still hadn't even told him that she came from another world yet. Would knowing something like that make him lose interest in her? Without thinking, she rubbed her own arms as if wrapping herself in a quiet hug.

At that moment, she heard someone walking up behind her, and turned. It

was Dennis, holding bathing items and a change of clothes.

“Is something bothering you?” she asked. “Perhaps you need something...?”

“No... I think I’ll take my bath later. I would like to observe your dinner preparations.”

“Oh. Then please, be my guest...”

It seemed that Walt had already taken his bath for the evening, but she saw Alec send a sharp gaze in her direction when he noticed Dennis was with her. Rurii had been patrolling with the others, but quickly returned, having perhaps sensed something was going on.

Ah—perhaps Dennis doesn’t trust me.

It might have been only natural that Dennis would want to make sure of what his lord would be eating that evening. However, Shiori did not detect the usual tension in Dennis’s features—he was noticeably more relaxed.

Sensing that something was slightly amiss, Shiori crafted a chair near the kitchen counter, placed a fur upon it to use as a seat cushion, and invited Dennis to take a seat. He nodded politely and did as he was told.

Ooh... Talk about pressure.

Dennis’s gaze, and its precise nature, were unclear to Shiori, but all the same she set fuel cubes into the stove and cast some fire magic to light it. First there was the sound of oil melting, followed by a *woomf* as the stove lit up. The fuel cube was made especially for long spells of cooking—it consisted of charcoal from trees in Storydia’s south, coated in magical beast fat. It wasn’t just for adventurers either; knights also often used them. In places that were damp or snowy, or anywhere else where lighting fires was difficult, the cubes were a necessity.

Shiori washed her hands quickly then sliced the smoked meat into rough strips, which she further cut into neat cubes. She added oil to a pot and began frying some garlic. When the scent of it started to fill the air, she added the smoked meat along with frozen onion and celery, and carrots and potatoes which had been steamed and frozen. When they were all fried to the right level, she added water and left it to simmer. This was a local dish from the Storydian

north—beast meat and vegetable soup.

While occasionally scooping the scum from the top of the soup, Shiori began preparing the bread. Tonight, baguettes were on the menu. She cut them into thin slices, then covered them in garlic oil and butter, and sprinkled dry herbs over them. Then she just needed to skewer and toast them.

She'd already planned on making pork shogayaki to go with the soup. It was one of Alec's favorites, and it was especially good for helping people recover their energy and stamina, so she liked to serve it at least once per expedition. The flavoring was bottled and ready, so all she had to do was keep an eye on when Annelie left the bath, and then she could just fry it up.

"What's that bottle?" asked Dennis.

He was looking at the pork meat, intrigued.

"It's pork meat marinated in soy sauce, cooking sake, and ginger."

"Soy...sauce?"

"It's a seasoning made from fermented soy beans. It's used in a lot of Eastern cuisine, as often as salt is here."

Shiori still remembered that moment, perhaps a year after she'd arrived in this new world. It was just as she was beginning to pine for the taste of home, and beginning to feel homesick, that she happened to find soy sauce at an import goods shop. Though it went by a different name, she'd asked about it, and upon tasting it, knew that what the bottle contained was indeed soy sauce. It was perhaps a little expensive, but she'd bought it on the spot.

"Eastern, you say..."

Dennis's brow furrowed in thought. Shiori had never once received a complaint regarding her use of soy sauce in her dishes, but it was possible that nobles felt some aversion to seasonings used by commoners. If they didn't like this, she'd have to prepare something else for them.

"Um...perhaps you'd like to taste some?" she asked.

"Is that quite all right?"

"It's only a little, so it's no problem."

Dennis was more enthusiastic than she had expected.

“Please wait just a moment,” Shiori said.

She put a pot on the fire and added some cooking oil to it, then took a slice of pork from the bottle and started frying it. It sizzled and the scent of it wafted into the air. Rurii responded with the hint of a tremor, but was otherwise quiet—probably still full on the snow bear it had eaten earlier. When the pork was ready, Shiori put it on a plate and passed it to Dennis along with a fork.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

He took the plate in hand and looked at it for a time, taking in its scent.

“This aroma certainly whets the appetite,” he said.

“Yes. It’s much more aromatic than salt is, and there’s also the scent of the ginger. Ginger is known to stimulate the appetite.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. And it helps to remove the odors from meat and fish, as well as warming the body.”

“Wow...” Dennis muttered, whipping out his notebook to scribble a memo.

He’s all about that note-taking!

Once he finished writing his note, Dennis took the fork in hand and timidly put the pork in his mouth. He chewed it carefully and thoughtfully to get a sense for the taste, then swallowed.

“Delicious...” he uttered, and then added, “It’s simple but it accentuates the dish’s flavor. I have a feeling Lady Annelie will enjoy this.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“This soy sauce you speak of is quite something. I simply can’t put its fragrant flavor into words.”

“There are quite a lot of people who enjoy the taste of the sauce even more than the meat itself. Everyone likes to mix it with their rice and bread to ensure that none of it goes to waste.”

This had been exactly the case when Alec first tried pork shogayaki. Upon finishing the meat, he'd been left staring somewhat glumly at the sauce still left on his plate until he noticed Clemens mixing it with his pilaf. Shiori could still remember the way his face had brightened as he'd followed suit. It had been such a cute expression that Shiori couldn't help but giggle.

"Where can one get some of this soy sauce?" asked Dennis.

"Um... You can find it at the Tris import goods shop, Casero. I believe you can also purchase it at Eastern grocers in the kingdom. That said, they don't sell it in small amounts, which means you'll probably end up buying a cask."

When Shiori had inquired at Casero about purchasing soy sauce on a more regular basis, she found out that it was possible to buy it in casks by way of the kingdom's Eastern grocers. At the time, she'd given up on the idea because of the price and the size, but as her soy sauce dishes grew more popular, she decided to invest in having some on hand. It was, after all, essential for many of the dishes people liked best, including pork shogayaki, karaage, and yakitori.

Because she couldn't fit a cask of soy sauce in her apartment, Shiori had talked with Lache, her apartment caretaker, and borrowed a little space for it in the apartment storehouse.

"A cask... I see..."

Dennis had clearly taken a liking to the soy sauce, but the idea of an entire cask of it clearly troubled him. It was far too much for simply trying the seasoning out in a few dishes.

"Did you enjoy the soy sauce?" Shiori asked.

"I did. I was just thinking about how much Lady Annelie would enjoy it. She prefers simpler flavors. The idea of buying some is appealing because I could make something she would enjoy with simple ingredients."

It was clear the man was passionate when it came to his margravine. Shiori could tell just how important she was to him.

"In that case... Shall I share a little of what I've brought with you? If you would like some more, I have a cask of it at home. I'd be happy to put some in a wine bottle and send it to you."

Dennis seemed moved by the suggestion. After mulling over it for a time, he eventually nodded.

“I apologize for the trouble, but...would you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Shiori took a small bottle of soy sauce from her seasoning pouch and poured half of it in an empty bottle, which she then gave to Dennis.

“Thank you.”

He took it politely in his hands and opened it, then sniffed the contents. His face scrunched up immediately.

“Well... I must say it’s quite pungent on its own like this.”

“Yes, it’s sometimes off-putting to those who aren’t used to it.”

Fermented produce was always regionally distinct, and could smell unpleasant to those who weren’t accustomed to it. Even in her own world, though soy sauce was now accepted overseas as a teriyaki ingredient, this had not been the case when it was first introduced—for a time many avoided it entirely, going so far as calling it “bug juice” for its pungent aroma.

“With a little heat, the scent quickly becomes pleasant, like the pork shogayaki I just made you. I also recommend mixing it with butter for a simple, delicious sauce.”

You could fry it with meat and mushrooms, but it worked just as well as topping for steamed potatoes. As soon as Dennis heard that, he pulled out his trusty notebook and got to writing. Shiori then whipped up a little butter soy sauce, warmed up some of the mashed potatoes she’d brought with her, and poured the sauce over them. She then fried the last of the butter soy sauce with a slice of smoked meat and some mushrooms, and served them to him on a plate.

Dennis showed no signs of hesitation this time around, and upon tasting the dish, his eyes grew wide with surprise.

“Why, this is utterly amazing. Are you telling me you can make a sauce this thick and delicious just by mixing these two ingredients?”

“Fermented produce is naturally very rich in flavor. Butter and soy sauce are both fermented, and they work very well together.”

“I see, I see. With something like this, perhaps even I could cook some simple dishes.”

Dennis then took once more to his notebook, adding that it would be a chance to cook something to Lady Annelie’s taste while they were out in the wilderness. Shiori gave Dennis a brief rundown of the amounts to use along with the temperature of the flame, and Dennis conscientiously jotted this information down as well.



“Lady Annelie truly is very dear to you, isn’t she?” asked Shiori.

She’d said it without thinking, and at first Dennis looked surprised, but then turned his gaze away bashfully.

“Well... Hm. She *was* kind enough to make a person like me her aide. I wish to do everything in my power to give her what she wants.”

She could see the smile taking shape in his forget-me-not eyes, relaxing his usually tense lips.

Oh, that expression...

That’s not the face of a servant who respects his master, but one who adores and loves her.

Oh my...

Shiori looked away, having caught a glimpse of the feelings hidden in Dennis’s heart. She went back to her soup, stirring it and adding salt, pepper, and spices, and a touch of butter for flavor.

“Mm...delicious,” she said after a little taste.

The soup was a recipe from the rural areas north of the kingdom, and for many adventurers who now lived life in the cities, it was also the taste of home. Perhaps it was for this reason that it was a dish very popular among adventurers.

Shiori realized that the man was once again watching her.

“Please, try some,” she said.

She put a little of the soup in a small bowl and passed it to him. Dennis took a sip and once again, his eyes went wide with surprise. Afterwards, he spent some time in silence, merely looking at the bowl. Shiori felt something quite deep in the gesture.

“Um... Is there something about the soup that doesn’t meet your standards?” she asked apprehensively.

“No, not that,” said Dennis, snapping back to his senses and shaking his head. “It’s not that at all. It’s delicious.”

“Oh, well, um... In that case, I’m very glad.”

Shiori still felt suspicious, as though something had changed in the air about Dennis, but she went about setting the cutlery and plates on the counter so that dinner could be served at a moment’s notice.

“Miss Shiori,” said Dennis, “you seem to have a wide range of knowledge in this area. Where did you learn it all?”

The air felt a little awkward as he changed the subject.

“I learned most of it where I came from,” said Shiori, feeling unable to simply shrug the question off.

“Your home country?”

“Yes...”

This was not a topic Shiori felt comfortable discussing. Depending on where the conversation went, she would have to evade giving detailed answers.

“For an immigrant, it’s... Oh, do excuse me. But your knowledge is so wide-ranging. You give very clear and logical explanations that are very easy to understand. It’s like you’ve learned your skills in a place that taught you likewise.”

“Most of what I know about cooking, nutrition, and housework, I learned from my mother. The rest I learned at school.”

“I see. Your mother was educated in a similar such school, then? Impressive to think that these exceptional talents have continued through two generations.”

“Um...well...”

Though Dennis was placing her on a pedestal of sorts, Shiori’s mother had actually only graduated from high school, after which she had attended technical school. Shiori felt at a complete loss for how to respond.

Though the nations around Storydia were the most advanced when it came to culture, it was still very rare to see educational institutions like schools. And even where they existed, only a select portion of the population were able to attend—namely, nobles and the wealthy. Graduating from school was in and of

itself a marker of status. It was the opposite of Japan, where attending school was simply a matter of course.

“Er... Where I’m from,” said Shiori, “it is compulsory for the young to attend school. Every citizen enters school from the age of seven, and is educated for the following nine years. It is there that people study and learn general skills. Outside of that, it is up to individual students to study topics of their own interest through books and such.”

“Education made compulsory by the state? How incredible. But if you were in a place where such specialized reading material was available, you must have been quite exceptional, no? After all, you would need to be of the appropriate standing to even acquire them, let alone read them.”

This is getting way out of hand...!

Shiori screamed internally. Her attempt to talk down the difference of their cultures wasn’t working at all. She knew she should have just shrugged off all talk of her hometown, but now she was in too deep.

“I apologize for my curiosity, but may I ask where you’re from? I must say, I’ve never heard of such a refined nation in the East.”

Where I’m from...

Shiori felt a pain in her heart. It was something she’d been asked countless times since arriving in this world. Zack had asked when he’d discovered her, and the knights had asked persistently. Naturally they were curious and suspicious—she was an immigrant, but she had left no trace of crossing the border.

Now that she had learned the language and read up on the circumstances of the kingdom, she knew—the neighboring Dolgast Empire had for some years been in decline, and this had caused tension in neighboring countries. This was likely why Shiori, an immigrant, was suspected of being a spy, or otherwise having entered the country illegally.

It wouldn’t have been surprising if she had been locked up, and at one point, Shiori had been tied with rope and almost dragged off by the knights. That she had escaped that fate was thanks to Zack’s protection. Later she’d found out that he’d offered to become her guarantor, and that he’d convinced them not

to be overly suspicious of her circumstances—she had collapsed in the forest with nothing but the clothes on her back, she didn't know a single word of the local language and couldn't possibly have been faking that. Based on where she'd been found, he said, it was most likely that she'd been abandoned by a trafficking group for some reason or another.

She was nothing if not lucky. She'd fallen into a good country, and been discovered by a good man. Had she fallen into the Empire, she would have met a far more terrifying fate. She truly believed that it was something like a miracle that she was able to live as she did.

But even now, many still thought she was the survivor of some ruined nation. And for this reason, recently she had been using that misunderstanding to avoid conversation on the topic. She did not especially enjoy doing this, but her life was much easier when there was a limit to people's questions.

"I'm from Japan," Shiori said. "Unfortunately, you won't find it on any maps, which makes a more detailed explanation difficult..."

She felt her voice growing a touch raspy. Dennis looked suddenly pained, realizing what her words might mean.

"No, I apologize. I was rude to ask so bluntly."

"Please, don't worry. I've grown used to it."

An awkward silence descended upon them. Rurii trembled and poked Shiori in the leg: *Everything okay?* She looked down and smiled at the slime, which seemed to relax at her response.

"Still," said Dennis, "I believe it is true to say you were raised in a good family."

"Hm?"

The statement felt rather sudden, and Shiori looked up to find Dennis peering down at the pot of soup she had prepared.

"This soup," he said.

"Yes?"

"It's a rural cuisine, from the north... It tastes just like a soup my mother used

to make. A soup this good can only be made by those who know the warmth of a good family.”

The warmth of a good family. Shiori remembered how happy she was to have been raised where she was. The memories were clear as day. But all of them existed in the world she had left behind. Japan existed on no map here, and the only map she’d seen had depicted a geography she did not know. There was no way for her to prove the existence of a single part of the world she had come from, nor the life she had lived there. The one thing that she had once possessed—the suit she’d been wearing on the day she was discovered—had been sold by her old companions, leaving her nothing of who she once was.

All that remained were her memories. It was so painful that she wondered for a time if Japan, and the family and friends she’d had there, were merely delusions, and that she had in fact been born here. For four years she’d often wondered if her real memories—those before her discovery by Zack—were in fact simply gone.

But...

She felt a heat in her chest, and a tickle in her nose. And before she had a chance to even realize what was happening, she was in tears.

“Miss Shiori?!”

Dennis stood in shock. He was completely thrown by the sudden turn of events, but eventually rifled through his coat pocket and brought forth a handkerchief.

“Oh...” muttered Shiori.

In her mind, there was nothing worse than crying on the job. She politely refused the handkerchief, and as she wiped at her eyes she heard footsteps rushing over.

“Shiori!”

She was pulled by her arms into a strong embrace.

“What did you do to her?” said the voice, hard and cold. “Explain to me, right now, why you made her cry.”

“Oh... Alec?”

Shiori looked up to find Alec glaring at Dennis, fierce and intense.

4

No. No.

These were the words that ran through Dennis’s head when he first saw the Easterner.

Annelie wanted to visit Silveria Tower in the winter, and Dennis had wanted nothing more than to grant her that wish, but it was not the kind of place that could easily be visited on a one-day trip. And however much experience they had traveling in the wilderness, he could not simply subject his lord to sleeping in the snow. And so, for some years, the trip had been postponed.

Though the option to hire adventurers had always been there, Dennis had wanted to avoid it. He was particularly wary of hiring anyone from the Lovner branch of the Adventurers’ Guild, being that his father—as much as he detested calling the man that—had been a member.

However, during a particular trade meeting with Martin of the Enqvist family, Dennis had learned of the so-called “Housekeeping Mage” from the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. She was a woman of some renown who had the ability to craft pleasant and relaxing outdoor campsites, and she also handled several other chores. Dennis had pounced all too quickly upon the chance, thinking it a means to make Annelie’s dream come true.

The moment he’d heard that the Housekeeping Mage was an Easterner, he realized he’d made a terrible mistake, but by then it was too late. Annelie had refused to budge, holding fast to the idea that this might be their last chance. Zack Ciel also had complete trust in the woman, and the man was a confidant of the Torisval margrave. Dennis had had no choice but to allow things to proceed.

Still, the people who hailed from the Eastern frontiers were largely unknown. And to make matters worse, the Housekeeping Mage had a head of black hair—she was a black-haired foreigner, just like the woman who had stolen his father from himself and his mother.

Dennis's father was a third-generation immigrant from the Empire. Immigrant, however, was perhaps too kind a word—Dennis's father's great-great-grandfather was a refugee who had crossed the border to flee Imperial oppression. Having experienced much hardship, Dennis's father chose to become an adventurer. His decision to settle in the Lovner domain was due to it being a city of art—the many traveling students that passed through the lands made it more open to foreign cultures.

Dennis's father made a humble living as a hunter of sorts, often gathering plants and ore for painting materials that would be used in portraits and other artwork. It was through this that he met Dennis's mother, the daughter of a branch family within the greater Lovner line. She had inherited the family's generous and broad-minded approach to freedom, and so turned down all marriage proposals to settle upon the hand of Dennis's father. Though there was of course some resistance to the idea of her marrying a third-generation immigrant, in the end it was Vesal—Dennis's grandfather—who gave his permission and allowed Dennis's father to enter the family.

As far as the young Dennis could see, his mother and father had been close. However, at some point unbeknownst to the young man, their relationship had fractured. Or perhaps it was that something had changed in his father when he had enlisted the Southern woman as his companion. This woman appeared almost asexual, with tanned skin and wavy black hair.

Dennis had never met the woman face-to-face, though he had seen her several times from a distance, when she had come to the house for expedition planning. From these few meetings, he could see that it was not just his father, but also his mother who was friendly with the woman—she had given the woman one of her own dresses, and even had her try it on.

His mother had trusted the woman—both as her father's companion, and as a friend. And so it was that a few days after their wedding anniversary, Dennis's father had headed out for work and then never returned. His mother's wailing and screaming—some weeks later, when the bodies were discovered—had been quite a traumatic ordeal. Nothing had come back to them of the man but hair, and it was only through the whispered rumors during the empty coffin

cremation that Dennis had learned of the truth. The anger that flooded him then was a feeling he would never forget.

“They were found with their hands clasped.”

“And there was a flower between those hands, one that means ‘eternal love.’”

“It was a double suicide.”

“How...? Why did it have to be like this?”

So spoke Dennis’s mother, through her tears. And so distraught was she that eventually she could barely stand, dying of a lung disease before winter of that same year.

Ever since then, Dennis had found himself unable to tolerate immigrants—particularly females with black hair.

He could not trust them. He could sympathize with them, knowing they had fled their homes because of circumstances beyond their control, but it also made so many of them greedy for a life of stability. And the longer someone had to travel to arrive in the country, and the further away their homelands were, the more obvious their greed became. When these immigrants learned that someone was of wealthy standing, they would do their best to grovel and gain that person’s favor—and when it went well, the true intentions of many an immigrant would become clear to all. As someone who was an immigrant himself, it was far more than Dennis could stand.

“Ordinarily, I wouldn’t allow a strange foreigner to even breathe the same air as Lady Annelie. Be sure you are on your best behavior.”

He had spoken the words without any hesitation, and yet, surprisingly, the Easterner hadn’t wavered even in the slightest—she’d simply lowered her head and acquiesced. If anything, it was the woman’s companions who had been enraged. He could understand the anger of the two men she’d brought with her—they were likely wrapped around her little finger. But he’d found himself surprised that the other woman—a woman with a unique head of strawberry-blonde hair who looked to be a Litoanyan exile—had also been quick to defend the one called Shiori. It was only later that he’d come to realize the three

adventurers all recognized her as one of their own.

A most unusual woman. That was what I sensed.

His distrust of Shiori had not completely dissipated, but she was different from the immigrants he'd met before. She had a wealth of general knowledge, made calm and accurate decisions, wielded high-level magic, was dexterous, and went about her work with passion and respect.

She appeared to take no pride in the praise she received for her work, and shrugged it off with genuine humility. If anything, it seemed that in her home country, this was a natural response. Though it was a surprise to hear she was well-educated, this was not entirely unheard of.

Dennis had never heard of a country in the East with such an exceptional educational environment and technological know-how. Curious, he had asked for more information, but came to understand from Shiori's answer that the nation was no more. This gave Dennis a clearer sense for the almost transparent nature of her being that he sometimes felt—as if some part of her were fleeting, or perhaps transient.

Nonetheless, he had asked her a most impolite question merely to satiate his own curiosity, and yet when he'd attempted to apologize for it she told him, a little awkwardly, that she had grown used to it.

So she is accustomed to such questions...

There was no doubting that there were many who would be intrigued by the woman purely due to the rarity of encountering an Easterner. It was the same for Dennis—people saw him as the son of a man with the blood of the Empire in his veins, and so he was scorned and thought of as savage. He was seen as the son of a man who had forced his way into a noble family, only to run off and kill himself with a foreign woman. He and Shiori were both popular topics of gossip, and they were likely both sick of being asked about it out of some misplaced interest or curiosity.

But the silence in the air between them had been so awkward that he'd felt compelled to fill it, and so he'd mentioned the flavor of her soup. It truly did bring him back to the taste of his mother's own soup, made in much happier times. Any woman who could recreate such a taste—the taste of his own

mother's care—was not someone unknowable to him. At the very least, they had to be someone who had been raised in a good, stable family, and were themselves a good human being.

And it was at that very moment—when he'd tried to express as much—that it had happened.

“Miss Shiori?!”

Dennis had leapt to his feet in surprise. Shiori's relaxed expression had crumbled as tears filled her eyes. Dennis had tried to offer her his handkerchief and Alec had come running. He'd pulled Shiori into his chest, hiding her tears from the world.

“What did you do to her? Explain to me why you made her cry.”

The eyes that glared at him then were fierce and hard, and it was no different for the other two adventurers, who came running once they heard the commotion.

“Ah! Now you're making her cry?! Do you really detest her so much?!”

Even Walt had harsh words for Dennis after his bath, but it wasn't until he heard the female voice from the bath—“He made her cry?!”—that Dennis truly began to sweat. Annelie had little patience for the unreasonable, and there was every chance she might fly out of the bathroom still undressed.

He heard the hurried sounds of her dressing in the bathroom, after which the margravine joined them. Though fortunately she was fully dressed, her hair was still drenched and her shirt was hastily buttoned up, leaving the valley of her chest in full view. It was no way for a noble woman to be seen, but Annelie did not care in the slightest—she walked up to Shiori to check on the woman, then turned on Dennis with a glare.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked. “I want an explanation.”

“It's... It's a misunderstanding...” muttered Dennis in reply. “Though I suppose there is no denying the truth that I *did* make her cry.”

Dennis was in a bad spot. That he had been excessively hard on Shiori was an undeniable truth. It was also true that, although he did not know the reason, it

was he who had brought the tears to her eyes. But *why* she had cried—when so little had fazed her until now—was a complete and utter mystery to him. Perhaps she had simply reached her limit for tolerating his attitude. Indeed, that she had *not* cried under such confounding pressure from a person she had only just met was perhaps even more unusual. And Dennis acknowledged that he had been hard on the woman.

“Though you are our clients, we can only tolerate this behavior for so long,” said Clemens. “Unfortunate as this is, we may have to seriously consider canceling this request.”

“As Clemens has said, if we are unable to trust one another, it could mean our lives,” added Nadia. “I would like a full explanation.”

But under their stern gazes, Dennis was left lost as he struggled for some way to interpret what had just happened. A tense air fell upon them all, but the one who finally broke the silence was none other than Shiori herself.

“Um...” she uttered hesitantly, from within Alec’s arms.

Shiori tapped his arm and Alec begrudgingly released his grip. She slipped out of his embrace and wiped her tears, and with her eyes still red, she looked straight at him.

“Dennis did nothing wrong,” she said. “He simply... He said something that made me so happy that...well, before I realized it, I...”

“Happy?” asked Dennis, perplexed. “I don’t recall saying anything of the sort...”

All he had done was compliment her soup.

But even then, Shiori smiled at him.

“But you did,” she said. “You said that I know what a warm family is, and that I was raised in a good home. Since coming to this country, I have had nothing to show of my past. It is for that reason that even when asked, I cannot prove any part of what I say...”

Alec put a hand to her shoulder—a gentle touch and an empowering gesture. Shiori looked back up at him, a glance that showed she trusted him implicitly—

enough to entrust him with her heart.

Ah, so these two, they're...

They have feelings for one another. They are just like Annelie and myself.

“Because I have no way to physically prove the existence of the place that I called home, I sometimes find myself feeling as if my very memories of the place are mere illusions. But Dennis acknowledged my past...by acknowledging the memories of my family. It filled me with such joy that I was brought to tears.”

Her eyes drooped for a moment, and then she went on.

“I apologize for crying while on the job,” she said with a deep bow.

Dennis could tell that she truly did feel greatly embarrassed by what had happened, and it made him feel likewise. He suddenly realized with great clarity the depths of the impoliteness he had pressed upon her.

“No...” he said, “I should be the one to apologize. That I was unkind to you is the truth. If anyone should apologize, it is I. I beg your forgiveness.”

Dennis then bowed deeply himself.

The tension in the air lifted, and the harsh gazes relaxed. Though parts of what had happened were yet unclear, all seemed to be forgiven, at least for the moment.

“I am responsible for the behavior of my subordinates,” said Annelie, “and I truly am sorry, Shiori.”

The margravine, too, bowed deeply, and Dennis once again followed suit. Shiori looked rattled to see the two of them doing that, but at least her companions seemed to have let go of the anger that had risen in them.

Walt gave Dennis a pat on the shoulder, and Annelie brought her gaze up to his own. Though there were questions in her eyes, there was also something like relief in them, and they thinned as a light smile spread across her face.

He had been a nuisance to her, and worried her, ever since that particular day. Ever since his father had abandoned them and died, and ever since his mother had faded away and left him all on his own.

Dennis's dislike of immigrant women with black hair was not entirely extinguished, but for the first time in his life he realized with great solemnity that it was time he reconsidered the feelings of discrimination that had become nestled inside his being. And surely, it was this interaction with Shiori that had been the catalyst for this change in him. He would not let it go to waste.

If he could overcome the harsh experiences that had scarred him as a youth, then surely it would bring relief to the kindly Lady Annelie. Then she could be at ease, and enter discussion of marriage without fear or worry.

And perhaps, until that day of happiness arrived for her...

...You will allow me to remain by your side, won't you, Annie?

He was not worthy, and yet even then he longed to protect his dearest friend—the woman he loved—to the best of his abilities.

5

Shiori washed her face of her tears.

"They're a little red but that's fine," said Nadia, trying to cheer her up.

Still, having broken into tears at work had left Shiori feeling somewhat anxious and awkward.

"It's nothing to worry yourself about," said Nadia.

"Thank you, big sister."

Though everyone was still a little worried about her, they returned to guard duty. Alec gave her a light rub on the back before heading back out with Rurii in tow.

Annelie and Walt were both seated at the table where Shiori had directed them to, so she could dry their hair. Dennis seemed uncomfortable to the point of not even knowing where to stand, and as he went to sit down his two companions summarily shooed him towards the baths. Shiori saw this as a kindness on the margravine's part, who likely felt he needed a little time on his own. Though Dennis showed a touch of resistance, he eventually gave up and plodded obediently away.

“Very well, I’ll begin drying your hair now,” said Shiori.

“It feels somewhat awkward after what just happened, but...if you wouldn’t mind.”

Annelie had tidied her clothes, and her eyebrows drooped as she looked up at Shiori apologetically. Her hair was still damp to the touch, so Shiori dried it a little with a towel first before facing her palms towards the margravine’s platinum-blond hair and casting a warm breeze. The margravine’s hair was soft to the touch, and clearly well looked-after—it floated gently in the breeze, sparkling in the light of the magic lantern. When it was fully dried, it had a lustrous sheen to it.

“All done,” said Shiori.

Annelie had lost herself in the warmth of the air and the massage-like nature of Shiori’s fingers, and hearing the mage’s words seemed to wake her from a dream of sorts. She ran a hand through her hair and smiled.

“Thank you. I could certainly get used to that. Most wonderful. Dennis is quite skillful, but it’s even nicer with you around.”

Shiori blinked.

“Hm? Dennis?”

“He’s the one who always brushes Annelie’s hair,” explained Walt. “If he doesn’t, she just ties it up into a lazy ponytail or the like while it’s still wet.”

“Oh... I see.”

It was something of a shock to hear that Dennis was the one who usually took care of the margravine’s hair. Annelie was friendly and easygoing, which made her much loved among her servants, but she had a touch too much of the bohemian to her also, and because of that she was a little too much for ordinary maids. This was why Dennis had taken to looking after her appearance, which meant that he was the one responsible for the sheen of her hair.

Hm... It’s almost motherly.

He was even more attentive to the woman than Shiori had thought. She wondered if, except for his dislike of immigrants, those around him were

actually quite fond of him. Imagining him silently helping those in need with his ever-stoic expression brought a fun little giggle to Shiori's lips.

"Next up, would you mind seeing to my hair, also?" asked Walt.

"Of course."

Shiori stood behind the somewhat nervous and fidgety Walt, and set to work drying his hair with a warm breeze.

"Whooooa..." he said, awed.

Walt seemed to enjoy it as much as Annelie. All three of the trio's feelings were all quite easy to read, now that she thought about it. Being that they were nobles, it was unlikely that they were always like this—this seemed more like their natural state, when they were allowed privacy. More than anything else, Shiori was glad to know that they could relax like this, unworried about prying eyes.

"Okay, all done," said Shiori.

"Wow! It's really dry! Thank you ever so much, Miss Shiori. I think I could get used to this too."

"Right?" said Annelie. "It felt so good, I think I'm ready for a good night's sleep!"

The two of them spoke the way close friends would. It was entirely different from what Shiori had experienced when a particular noble had gotten lost, and there had been a very clear line drawn between servant and master in their interactions, regardless of the emotional bonds that existed between them.

"What is it, dear? Something wrong?"

Annelie's question brought Shiori back to the present, and she became aware that she'd been staring. She apologized for her impoliteness but her apology was shrugged off. Annelie didn't mind at all—she truly was open-minded and above all, generous.

"I just... I couldn't help noticing how well you get along," said Shiori.

Annelie and Walt looked at one another and laughed.

“Oh, we’re well aware that we don’t fit the mold of the usual master-servant relationship,” said Annelie.

“When we were just boys, Dennis and I were essentially ordered to become Lady Annelie’s playmates,” added Walt.

Walt had been selected because he was part of a branch family and had baron lineage, and Dennis’s mother happened to be born into that same baron’s family line. Another factor that had landed them the roles of her playmates was their being close in age.

“There were other children who were brought to be my playmates, but they were all so difficult to get along with. Of course, there was the matter that they were a little older than me...”

“I remember my dad told Dennis and I, ‘You run off and have as much fun as you like—just don’t get into anything dangerous,’ and then he sent us away. But it seems like the other kids were told something different.”

“Something...different?”

“Basically, they were probably told to swoop in and collect the Lovner family heiress,” said Annelie. “That meant either they’d been told to make me do as they pleased, or else they’d do whatever I pleased. You can’t have fun or play freely under circumstances like that. It’s so dreadfully boring.”

Those children had known in their hearts that their goal was to win the heiress over, and so none could simply let themselves go and enjoy the moment.

“I see. So that’s why...”

Playmates. Only Walt and Dennis had truly understood what that meant. The other children were thus distanced because their obvious ambitions set them apart.

“Choosing the ‘playmates’ of the Lovner family heir or heiress is the process of selecting their future aides,” said Annelie. “We do not need people who will only be a hindrance.”

“The Lovner family is firstly the owner of a domain, and secondly a family of

artistic endeavors. Maintaining a stable and safe domain is a noble's duty. Art is at once both a means of self-expression *and* a means of acquiring further wealth. It is not the Lovner family without both of these aspects."

"Oh, I see."

The conversation had suddenly ballooned in scope, and though surprised, Shiori felt drawn in by her own curiosity.

"Any person who has their eyes on the family name or its vast riches cannot execute their duties," said Annelie, "so they are out of the question. I also detest anyone who sees our family's artistic work purely as means of making money. As Walt just mentioned, art is a means of self-expression, and I won't have anyone getting the wrong idea."

"At the same time," said Walt, "anyone blindly obedient to their lord isn't a suitable aide either. There are times where a harsh word or two is a necessity."

"And so it was only Walt and Dennis here who made the cut," said Annelie. "They'll listen to what I want, but they'll tell me what they want, also. Oh, I had such fun when we played together. Of course, they told me off when I tried to do anything dangerous. Still, it all felt so natural and easy..."

"How wonderful," said Shiori. "So..."

So the ease of their relationship as servant and master came from them having grown up as close friends.

"All that said, I still remember afterwards the way my dad told me sarcastically, 'You got in real good with the heiress. Top job, boy.' But then again, my dad and my aunt—er, that is, Dennis's mother—they were both well-mannered and kindhearted people. I think when they told us to go out there and play, that's really all they meant. I remember their smiles when they told us of how big and fun the Lovner gardens were..."

"What are you talking about...?"

Dennis appeared behind Walt, having just finished his bath, and Walt jumped with fright.

"Dennis! Oh, we were just talking about old times. When we were kids. How

are you feeling? Cleared your head a bit?”

“Oh. Um... I suppose,” Dennis said with a nod, his gaze seeming to waver ever so bashfully. When Shiori saw the water dripping from his wet hair, she stood to her feet.

“Please allow me to dry your hair,” she said.

“Er, that won’t be...”

Perhaps he still felt uncomfortable regarding what had happened earlier, but Annelie wouldn’t let him make any excuses.

“Sit down and let her do it. You’ll catch a cold, otherwise,” said the margravine.

“Er, in that case,” said Dennis, sitting down obediently, “if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“None at all.”

She sent a warm wind through her hands, and it blew through his stiff red hair. With a polite “Excuse me,” Shiori gently touched his hair with her hands. Dennis’s shoulders relaxed just a little, and as he sat back and let her work, the stress in his shoulders gently dissipated.

“There we go,” said Shiori.

She peeked at his face in profile, and his eyes had narrowed, like a cat that had just been comfortably brushed. His mouth was relaxed and at ease.

“Thank you...” he said.

And Shiori opted to pretend she didn’t hear the words that slipped from his lips in an unintentional whisper.

Like a mother’s touch.

6

The air filled with the delicious scent of sizzling meat, and Walt was growing excited as he took a seat at the table. Next to him, Annelie was immersed in her sketchbook. Shiori was curious as to exactly what Annelie might be drawing, but

then she was more concerned—that is to say, she couldn't avoid thinking about—the two people who were currently standing on opposite sides of her person. She let out a near indiscernible sigh.

On Shiori's left was Dennis, watching her as she went about work and diligently writing his thoughts in his notebook. On her right was Alec, who, under the pretense of "assisting" her, was in fact glued to her side like a bodyguard. Though Dennis was simply passionate about learning as much as he could, Alec was still on guard, watching to make sure he didn't speak out of line. Whenever Dennis spoke, Alec hit him with a searching gaze.

They're actually both making my work even more difficult...

She knew Alec meant well, and she knew Dennis was harmless. But she couldn't exactly say this directly to either of them, so she was stuck with them stuck to her, which made it very difficult to focus.

Rurii was on guard duty in place of Alec, and when the slime rolled into the kitchen, it gave her a poke in the back as if laughing at her predicament, which made her feel decidedly awkward.

"Where on earth did it learn to do that...?" muttered Shiori.

"Hm? What was that?" asked Alec as he shot Dennis an intimidating glare.

"Rurii's gestures. I feel like it's learned some rather strange ones recently."

"Oh, that. People have been teaching it all sorts of things. I think even Linus was teaching it some new thing or another just the other day."

"Oh my..."

She had no reason to suspect Linus of anything too outlandish, but she did worry that the slime might be picking up some odd gestures.

"I don't think you need to worry," said Alec. "Rurii doesn't use anything rude or obscene. They say familiars grow to take after their masters, anyway. In that way, Rurii is just like you: well-mannered."

"Oh, I see..."

That was nice to know, at least.

“If that’s the case,” said Shiori, “I wonder if the king’s slime will come to be strict, but also wise and generous?”

The kingdom’s current ruler was known for being quiet in manner, but also fierce—he was famed for being a wise and intelligent king. If he had adopted a slime, that slime would likely mature into something equally respectable. When she remembered her discussion with Annelie about choosing playmates and brought it up with Alec, however, his shoulders twitched and his expression became somewhat difficult to read.

“Uh... Yes, perhaps,” he said. “But *that* particular slime may actually pick up a few questionable behaviors...”

Shiori heard the agreement in Alec’s voice, but couldn’t quite make out the muttered second half of his sentence.

“Huh?” she asked, to no avail.

In this way, the meat was finally prepared. The toasted baguettes were also looking ready to serve. She put the pork shogayaki on wooden plates with the baguettes, then added some green pickles to brighten the look of the meal, and put the soup in cups.

“Allow me to help,” said Alec.

“Oh, thanks,” replied Shiori, passing him plates to take to the table.

“I’m happy to help also,” added Dennis, putting his notebook in a chest pocket and holding out his hands. “Shall I take this to the table for you?”

Shiori hesitated for a moment. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate the gesture, but...

“Take a seat,” said Alec, filling the silence. “We try not to put work on our clients where we can avoid it.”

He’d done it very much to help her, but his tone of voice also made it sound very much like the warding off of an unnecessary evil. There was a smile on his face, but there was no trace of it in his eyes.

Dennis looked momentarily stunned, but did as he was told and went to the table, where he took a seat next to Annelie, who was still completely lost in her

work.

“My, my. I see he’s not just on guard, but also a little jealous, perhaps.”

Nadia had arrived, sensing that it was almost time for dinner, and whispered jokingly in Shiori’s ear.

“Jealous?”

“Well, that noble is practically stuck to you, isn’t he? I understand that he’s not a bad person, but Alec doesn’t seem to enjoy it very much, seeing another man following his woman around.”

“Oh...”

His woman. To be spoken of in such a way, and so suddenly, made Shiori feel rather embarrassed. She felt her face growing hot and dropped her gaze, looking for something to do to keep busy. At that moment, Clemens arrived, and his brow furrowed as he looked over at her.

“Do you have a fever, Shiori?” he asked. “You’re all red.”

Alec reacted immediately. He reached out a hand and placed it on her forehead with a frown. Everyone was suddenly getting the totally wrong idea.

“Oh, it’s just because I’ve been working around the fire,” said Shiori. “It’s not a fever, I’m absolutely fine.”

Nadia laughed. “I was just teasing her,” she said. “That’s why she’s all red. Relax, you two.”

Clemens and Alec both grimaced at the same time, then glared at Nadia. Annelie and Walt, who had been watching it all, laughed too.

“She is so loved by her friends, isn’t she?” said Walt.

“So true,” agreed Annelie. “It’s utterly heartwarming.”

“Lady Annelie... Walt,” said Dennis, admonishing the two playful nobles.

I swear I’m going to die of embarrassment...

Shiori went about setting the table as invisibly as she could. Though dinner was ready, Rurii decided to remain on watch, likely because the slime was still full. It waved a feeler to let them all know to eat without it. Shiori waved back

an acknowledgment and sat down together with Alec. She pretended not to notice the way that everyone had left the space next to him empty for her.

“On the menu tonight we have pork shogayaki, a northern-style soup, and buttered baguettes. There’s enough soup for seconds, so please don’t hesitate to let me know if you’d like some more.”

After Shiori’s explanation, everyone ran through their pre-dinner rituals and then picked up their cutlery.

Shiori watched her companions as she sipped at her soup. She enjoyed the way that everyone approached what they ate in quite a different order. Alec always went for his main dish first, and if he had some liquor, he’d drink some of that before starting his food. He seemed to enjoy saving his soup for last. She couldn’t help but smile at the way he happily chewed on his pork shogayaki, his expression softening adorably as he savored his food. Nadia and Clemens almost always started with their soup, and moved on to the rest of the dish once they’d finished it. Sometimes the order of what they ate first differed depending on if it was served with bread or rice.

As for the nobles, they all looked at their meals with great curiosity before starting with their bowls of soup. Annelie and Dennis were both quite delicate in their handling of it, while Walt approached it with a much heartier appetite. After tasting the soup, a few happy sighs drifted up into the air around the table.

“It really does have a nostalgic taste to it,” uttered Annelie.

“This flavor...” said Walt, taking another sip as if to confirm something. “It reminds me of my aunt’s soup.”

“Ah, yes. You’re right. It does have a similar flavor...”

Dennis watched them silently with a flicker of a smile.

“Is it really so similar?” asked Shiori.

“Oh yes, quite,” said Annelie. “It’s gentle and kind, as though it’s made with a heart for those who would enjoy it.”

“That was how my mother approached her cooking,” said Dennis. “She liked

to say something along the lines of, ‘If you always consider your diners and put your heart into the dish, there will always be a warmth to its flavor.’”

There was kindness in Dennis’s words. Shiori’s mother had also thought along similar lines. Perhaps that was why Shiori’s own soup so resembled that of a person she’d never met before. Alec’s hand went to her back, and he smiled down at her with a gentle affection in his eyes.

“Be proud,” he said. “They speak highly of your work, and your efforts to get this far.”

Everyone’s words made Shiori feel warm. It was as though she had been given permission to acknowledge her history—her memories.

“Thank you,” she said.

The atmosphere around the table was relaxed.

“Can I have seconds?”

“I’d also love some.”

“And, er...me too.”

The three nobles all held out their now-empty soup cups.

Shiori smiled, fighting hard to hold back the tears that threatened to flood.

“Of course. Be sure to eat well!”

A dinner in the midst of a winter camp. Outside of the barrier was severe cold, but it could not touch the warmth of their campsite that evening.

Though Shiori had made an abundance of soup, by the end of dinner it was entirely gone. Everyone loved the pork shogayaki too. And just like Alec, the three nobles had all stared somewhat sadly at the leftover sauce on their plates until they saw him and Clemens soaking their baguettes in it. With mischievous grins quickly filling their faces, they followed suit and ended their dinner supremely satisfied—it seemed they were happy to table their table manners when out in the wild.

Perhaps because she felt so relaxed in both mind and body after a bath and a

good meal, Annelie began to doze off. Dennis and Walt, too, couldn't hide the sleep that was quickly creeping into their eyes. Their bodies were crying out for rest.

"It's so strange. I never usually feel sleepy so early in the evening..." said Annelie, taking out her pocket watch to find that it was only just after seven in the evening.

"Please, feel free to get some sleep," said Shiori. "It's been a very long and exhausting day for all of you."

"I believe I will do just that," said the margravine. "Good night."

With her two aides helping her along, Annelie stumbled off towards her tent. The entrance flap to her tent was folded closed, there was the sound of changing clothes, and then the magical lantern in the tent was extinguished.

"They must all be very tired," said Nadia.

"They put in an admirable effort too," said Clemens. "I didn't hear a complaint out of any of them."

"I could do without one of them, though," said Alec.

"Alec..."

The adventurers spoke for a time in hushed voices before deciding the order of baths and guard duty. The two females would bathe and sleep first, and they'd decided to do three-hour shifts on guard duty. Rurii would, as per usual, sleep as it felt like it and wake together with Shiori.

"One thing still bothers me..." muttered Alec, with a furrow in his brow.

He looked off towards Silveria Tower. He couldn't see it through the falling snow and the darkness, but they all knew it was not very far away—perhaps five hundred meters from where they were camped. With Nadia's fire magic making them a path, they could get there in about an hour.

"We still haven't seen the trio of adventurers the knights told us about," he said.

"If they're alive, it seems likely they'd have entered the tower already," said Nadia.

The trio had ignored the knights' warnings and entered an area of great danger. On top of that, by all accounts they were lacking in terms of preparation and supplies. Then there was the state of the observation deck—none of it painted the trio of adventurers in a particularly favorable light.

"Do you think it's possible they might attack us in search of food?" asked Shiori.

"It's possible. That said, I don't much like thinking that such barbaric adventurers exist."

"All the same, it's probably best that we don't get tangled up with them if we can avoid it," added Nadia.

Their attention fell on their tent, where their baggage was kept.

"In any case, we'll have to make sure we're vigilant when we're on guard."

"Understood."

Upon finishing in the bath, Shiori quickly washed the clothes that had been put out for her. Fortunately, unlike during summer, there was nothing particularly muddy for her to have to worry about, so it was all quite straightforward. The only minor difficulties were in washing the snow bear blood from Alec's and Clemens's coats—but even then all she had to do was wash the bloodied areas and dry them.

"Here are your coats," she said.

"Oh, thanks."

The two adventurers grinned at getting their coats back nice and clean, and quickly put them on. Shiori had cast air-conditioning magic earlier, but it was always best to keep your coat on in case of the unexpected.

"If you're all done, get some rest," said Alec. "We'll wake you when you're up for guard duty."

"Okay. Good night."

"Night."

As Clemens turned his back, Alec swooped in, planting a surreptitious kiss

upon Shiori's lips. Then he grinned and returned to his post. Nobody had seen a thing, but Shiori still felt her cheeks flush, and hurriedly entered her tent.

Nadia was already fast asleep, and Shiori could hear her light, slumbering breaths. Rurii, too, was in a corner of the tent, spread along the floor at rest. She took up a spot next to the slime, and covered herself with a fur pelt.

And to think he told Zack he'd avoid lovey-dovey flirty stuff while on the job...

Just like at their lodging the previous night, it was likely Alec would look for opportunities when nobody was looking to get up to more mischief.

"I'm going to have to keep my eyes open..." Shiori whispered, putting a finger to her lips.

But the fact that she was also happy about it showed that she had quite the case of lovesickness.

"Alec..."

She whispered the name of her lover. She was still far too embarrassed to speak her feelings aloud like the heroine of a great tale, but someday...

Shiori whispered the words without making a sound, and even that alone filled her heart with joy, warming her to her soul. She closed her eyes as a smile came to her lips, and she fell into slumber as the image of her beloved drew itself in her mind.

Interlude 1: Two Men and a Wasted Feast

“Oh, by the way... You mentioned that when you were young, the two of you ruined a good waterfowl because you didn’t know how to dress it and prepare it for cooking. What happened there?”

Clemens, who had been patrolling the area around the campsite barrier, stopped in his tracks when he overheard Alec and Shiori’s conversation. His eyes met Alec’s—who, until that point, had been glaring at Dennis in a most intimidating fashion—and the two shared a wry chuckle.

It was the story of a great failure. It was also the reason both had taken it upon themselves to learn exactly how to gut, skin, and prepare game meat. That would have been fourteen or fifteen years ago now, but even touching upon the memory of the ordeal filled their mouths and noses with the stench of chicken coops.

“It was the kind of foul taste that even now, just remembering it, I feel a shiver down my spine,” said Alec. “It was like stuffing your mouth with a fistful of feathers from the floor of a chicken coop.”

“Ew...”

It was a flavor and taste that was difficult to describe, but Alec’s words at least did it some justice. Shiori put a hand to her mouth in shock and disgust. Clemens couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight, and he began to tell this tale of their youth as the memories came flooding back.

“I think we had both just entered our twenties when it happened...”



“No doubt about it... It’s dead. We did it... We survived.”

The two-headed lizard was dead—it floated in the water, its charred belly facing the sky. Clemens got to his feet after inspecting the beast, and wiped the monster’s blood and other bodily fluids from his coat. His silver hair hung down across his face, dripping with monster innards. Alec cringed at the sight.

At the same time, however, he felt the tension in his shoulders dissipate at his friend's words. He flung the blood from his sword with a sharp swing, then returned it to its scabbard.

"I thought we were in real trouble for a moment there," Alec said.

"As did I. Never would have imagined the eyewitness report we got was wrong."

The two men shrugged. They'd taken a request to slay a giant lizard, but had received some misleading information. It was supposed to be a B-rank request—that was the norm for giant lizards, magical beasts which made their homes in rivers and swamp lakes and which occasionally wandered away from their turf to hunt smaller wildlife. The lizard the two young men were looking for had, at some point, started snatching livestock from a nearby village. With no way to handle it themselves, the villagers had put up a suppression request, and Alec and Clemens had answered the call.

"Never would have imagined we'd be facing a two-headed lizard either," said Alec.

He dropped his gaze to the monster corpse in front of them. One of the heads had been chopped clean off its body, while the other hung limp, its long tongue dangling from its mouth and its eyes staring blankly off into the underworld.

The request was for two giant lizards, but Clemens and Alec had instead found themselves facing one giant lizard with two heads. The two-headed lizard was a variant of giant lizard. Clemens and Alec, who had only just hit B-rank, could handle two ordinary giant lizards, but the difficulty rating for a two-headed lizard was unknown. The beasts were incredibly rare, and information about them was practically nonexistent. All that was known was that they were fierce in battle, and that they were silver—a completely different color from ordinary giant lizards. The moment they'd seen the monster, both men had had the same word flash through their minds.

Retreat.

The two heads of the lizard had worked independently, one unleashing ice spikes and the other spitting poison breath. Though the poison wasn't so bad it was death-on-first-breath, it was still strongly paralytic. It was not something

either man wanted to deal with—and the bones of the wildlife and magical beasts scattered around the area was all the proof they needed.

The two-headed lizard immediately spotted them, and moved quicker than they could have expected, given its size. It was on them with magic and poison in the blink of an eye, and the two adventurers were quickly covered in scratches and welts.

Somehow, Alec and Clemens managed to regroup, each man focusing on a different head. Though the creature had one body, they came to realize that the heads worked independently, making it a wiser strategy to treat each head as a separate beast. And their tactic paid off—Clemens's superior agility allowed him to evade the ice magic of one head and eventually cut it off, while Alec used his magic sword to close the other head's poison glands and stab it through the head, where he finished it off with lightning magic, using his sword as a proxy lightning rod. Alec then struck the final blow against the lizard's body, which continued to writhe even after both heads were dead.

The battle had taken twenty minutes, and at the end of it, both men were covered in wounds, and drenched in the blood and bodily fluids of the lizard. They could only chuckle at the sight of one another.

"Talk about a mess," said Alec.

"You said it. Bringing a change of clothes was the right call, after all."

Their specially tailored adventurer gear was ripped and torn, revealing blood stains from the wounds beneath. Their immediate priority was washing the gunk from their bodies and disinfecting their cuts. They did not want to deal with infection or disease on the journey back home.

"I'll collect proof of suppression," said Clemens. "In the meantime, you go ahead and get yourself cleaned up."

"Thanks. Lucky for us, we got this request in the summer. Wouldn't fancy a dip in this water in the colder seasons."

Alec's still-boyish face twisted uncomfortably as he took a hold of his gunk-covered shirt and unclipped his armor. The body underneath had once been thin and gangly, but was now rippling with hard-earned muscle.

Clemens watched as Alec jumped into the water, then went about cutting up the dead lizard for evidence that they had completed their task. To prove they had faced a two-headed lizard and not just a giant lizard, he put each head in a specially prepared leather bag and pulled the drawstrings closed tight. He then went about carefully cutting off all the parts of the magical beast that could be used for medicine, equipment, and handcrafts, which he also put in leather bags or otherwise airtight containers.

“Well, at least I’ve reached the point where I can stomach *this* much...”

Clemens’s words drifted into the air, spoken to nobody in particular. Until he had left home to become an adventurer, Clemens had never even seen meat or fish before it had been cut and prepared.

He’d been born into a wealthy family of the kingdom’s merchants, and the life of an adventurer—something he had only ever known in stories and rumor—had been one of shock upon shock. It turned out that their job was not just exploring and fighting monsters. Expeditions often meant days without baths, having rations as your sole source of food, and nights with only the hard ground as your mattress.

On the face of it, adventurers were paid well enough to make the work worth it, but when you factored in the effort and the expenses, the earnings were not as abundant as they first appeared. It was a harsh, demanding job. But Clemens had been devoted to becoming a tried-and-true adventurer, and with training and experience, he quickly grew used to his new lifestyle.

The one thing he couldn’t get used to, however, was gutting magical beasts. He was accustomed now to cutting and shaving bits and pieces from them after battle, but that was a far cry from gutting them for their meat and organs, which still made him sick to his stomach. Though the meat of many a magical beast was said to be delicious, this was not reason enough for the young adventurer to learn the skill of butchering them.

Most of Clemens’s friends were also either ex-nobles or city-bred individuals. They, like him, often left the work of gutting and dressing to somebody else. Clemens was, perhaps surprisingly, just one of many.

“Found us a little treasure,” said Alec, rousing him from his thoughts.

Clemens had just finished his work on the two-headed lizard, and Alec, who had just finished washing himself, was carrying something in his arms.

“Wow, that’s a waterfowl,” said Clemens. “Looks delicious.”

The animal had somehow been caught in the midst of battle and killed. Other than that, it looked no different to the waterfowls often seen in restaurants in town. It was plump, and certainly looked good for eating.

“Shall we roast it for dinner tonight?”

“Not a bad idea,” said Clemens. “Beats another night of the same old jerky, that’s for sure.”

The two men grinned. Then it dawned on them—yes, they were in possession of a most delicious meat, but the animal was completely unprepared.

Don’t we have to clean and dress it to prepare it for roasting?

Clemens looked at Alec, but the young man tilted his head as if reading Clemens’s thoughts.

“Uh... I know you fillet fish, but...”

Alec had spent his youth surrounded by the nature and pleasant greenery of Tris, and like many others from poor families, he’d often gone fishing at the nearby rivers. He knew how to fillet a fish, but birds were completely foreign to him.

“Have you done this before?” Alec asked.

Clemens had no choice but to shake his head.

“Sorry... I mean, you already know I was raised with a silver spoon in my mouth.”

“Well, there’s nothing better than fully gutting and dressing them, but I’m pretty sure with birds we just need to drain the blood and then we’re good to go,” said Alec. “When you roast animals on a spit, you just put them on the spit, right?”

“Yeah, okay, that makes sense,” said Clemens, nodding.

They looked at the waterfowl in Alec’s hands. Sure, they didn’t know how to

dress it, but that didn't seem reason enough to just give up.

"So how do we drain the blood, then?" asked Clemens.

Alec pointed to the animal's neck, as if trying to remember something.

"I'm pretty sure you just cut the head off and hang it upside down."

"Oh, I see."

Clemens quickly sliced off the waterfowl's head, and the two men hung it from a nearby tree with some rope. They dug a hole in the ground underneath it for the blood to fall in—that way all they'd have to do afterwards was fill the hole.

While they waited for the blood to drain, Clemens washed himself in the water, and they helped each other disinfect the cuts that they couldn't get to on their own. Clemens frowned at the sight of Alec's back. It looked like there were claw marks running along it. Though they weren't long, they were by no means shallow, and his skin had been gouged out. If he didn't see a physicker, they'd scar.

"When we get back, the first thing you should do is see a doctor or a physicker about these deeper cuts," said Clemens.

"I had a feeling that might be the case. Hurts bad enough."

Clemens carefully disinfected the cuts, rubbed ointment into them, then wrapped them in clean bandages. But those weren't the only scars Alec's back was home to—his flesh was a collection of some that were healing, and others that had, over the years, taken on a skin-like tone.

A far cry from the spotless boy he was when we first met.

There was almost no trace of the smooth, white-skinned youth Alec had once been. And to think that if things had been different, the young man would never have needed to hide himself away, in a life that would be filled with scars like these...

Clemens had never heard directly from Alec about his past. However, he knew that Alec had been brought into the fold by Zack, who came from a duke's family himself (one that was famous for its place in the knight brigade and as

the royal family's aides), and who had once been an officer in service to the now-dead second prince. With that in mind, it was all too easy to infer that Alec had not come from an ordinary background.

Alec was, in fact, the missing and illegitimate third prince. At a young age he had been forced to bear the weight of the battle for the throne—the work of greedy and ambitious nobles. Some believed he had been assassinated, and others believed he'd taken his own life. But had things gone differently, Alec might right now be the crown prince, working on the political stage as an aide to the young king.

Such a horrid affair...

All the same, it seemed that Alec himself vastly preferred the life he now lived, and there was no reason for Clemens to feel sorry or hurt on his behalf. Still, the whole matter made his skin crawl.

"Looks like all the blood has drained," said Alec, who had gotten changed into his spare clothes while Clemens was daydreaming. No more blood dripped from the body of the hanging waterfowl, and its feet were completely cool to the touch, though its midsection remained warm.

"First things first," Alec said, "let's find a place to set up camp."

Neither man wanted the campsite to be in sight of the beast they had just slain, and there was also the chance that scavengers might appear too. Their safest bet was to put some space between themselves and the lizard corpse.

"How about that hill?" asked Alec, pointing.

The location was close to water, but not so close that they'd be in trouble if there was flooding. They filled the hole they'd dug for the blood, got their baggage together, and filled some leather bags with water. Then they set off for the hill. Once there, they hammered in barrier stakes and put together some stones for a basic fire.

"So how do we cook it?" asked Clemens. "We just...run a stick through it and put it over the fire?"

"Hm... Probably, yeah."

Neither man had ever *really* done any cooking—both were more used to heating canned food over a fire, or grilling whatever fish they caught. They'd never dealt with anything remotely poultry in nature. Faced now with the challenge directly in front of them, the two adventurers shared a nervous look.

"I mean, with fish, you just cook them as they are, right?" muttered Alec.

The innards of the fish from the nearby rivers were actually quite delicious. With those fish, all you needed was to sprinkle a little salt on them and grill them to taste. If you didn't like the innards, you could always just not eat them.

But was it the same for waterfowl?

"You really think we can just roast it like this?" asked Clemens.

"Well, to be honest... I'm not sure..."

By this point in their careers, both men had cut down their fair share of monsters, but had always left the preparing and dressing of meat to their companions, and never actually seen it firsthand. Neither had seen the particulars of meat preparation, but both had the sneaking suspicion that you took the innards out before you got to the cooking part.

A silence hung over the two young adventurers as they stared at the headless waterfowl.

"You can cook fish as they are and they're delicious," said Alec, seeming to finally make up his mind. "It's got to be okay to do the same with this."

"Yeah, let's do it."

The truth of the matter, when it came down to it, was that neither man wanted to deal with dressing the bird and removing its innards. If they could avoid it, they would. With this in mind, they lit a fire and ran a stick through their would-be meal.

"Come to mention it, what do we do about the feathers?" asked Clemens.

"If we roast them they'll just fall off, no?"

"Oh, yeah, of course."

Later, they would learn from a fellow adventurer—and former professional

hunter—that their biggest mistakes were not removing the feathers and not carefully removing all the innards but, at this point, neither man had any way of knowing what they were getting into.

They settled the waterfowl over the fire and watched as it began to cook. They heard the sound of flickering flames, and watched as the feathers began to burn, together with something neither man had expected...

“Ugh...” said Clemens.

“What *is* that?” asked Alec.

The two men covered their noses with their hands and spoke between moans.

“This stinks.”

“It’s awful.”

This was not the smell they had expected from the waterfowl meat cooking in front of them. It was, for lack of a better word, noxious. It stunk of the wild, and it did anything but whet their appetites.

Still, the meat continued to cook, and the two young adventurers watched on in silence. The feathers eventually fell off the meat, but parts of it were still uncooked, and there was something ominous about it—namely, that it simply did not look delicious. To call it spit-roasted was far too kind—it looked more like a bird that had happened to die in a fire.

And the more it cooked, the worse its stench grew.

“This stinks like a henhouse,” said Clemens, sniffing the air. “But we can eat it...right?”

“If the skin is no good, we can always just peel it off and just eat the meat.”

“Ah, I see.”

Finally, the waterfowl was fully roasted. They took it from the fire and, with great trepidation, cut away the skin with a knife. Though the skin of the waterfowl was black and burned, the meat beneath it was cooked just right. It looked, for all intents and purposes, delicious.

Clemens and Alec looked at each other and let out sighs of relief. They cut off slices big enough for the two of them and put them on plates.

“Well, uh...let’s dig in,” said Alec.

“Great...”

But neither man could dispel their sense of foreboding. Even now, the awful stench of burned feathers wafted around them. Clemens silently put a fork in his meat, while Alec went right ahead and put some of it in his mouth. For a moment, he didn’t move, but then his brow furrowed as he began to chew quietly.

“W-Well, how is it?”

After three chews, Alec froze.

“Bleh...” he moaned, tears welling in his dark magenta eyes.

“Alec...?”

“I can’t... I just can’t...”

That was as much as he could say before he sprang to his feet and disappeared behind the trees, covering his mouth with a hand. Clemens heard the frantic sound of digging, followed by fierce retching and coughing.

He looked vaguely at the shadows into which Alec had disappeared, then turned back to the meat on his plate. Slowly, ever so slowly, Clemens brought it to his mouth. He chewed once, then twice, and then it hit him.

“Hngh?!”

First there was the stink of burned meat, followed by something raw and wild, and utterly distressing. It was like taking a handful of feathers from the floor of a chicken coop and stuffing them into your mouth. One thing, above all, was certain—this meat was not fit for human consumption. Clemens felt a sudden deep respect for the magical beasts that simply ate wild birds whole.

Just like Alec, Clemens jumped to his feet and ran away, to a different clump of trees. He hurriedly dug a hole and spat out everything in his mouth. The air filled with the sound of his heaving and coughing, but even after he had expelled it all, the stench still lingered in his mouth—it did not seem the kind of

thing that could be easily rinsed away.

Clemens filled the hole and buried the meat, then quickly returned to the campsite. Alec was already there, tears in his eyes as he gulped from a small bottle of liquor.

Aha. Perhaps that'll get rid of the stench.

Clemens rummaged through his bags, and once he found his own stash of liquor, gulped from a small bottle. The mellow scent filled his mouth, but once it had passed down his throat, the horrid stench of wild bird returned with a vengeance.

"It's no good," he said. "We have to get rid of *that* before we do anything else."

Clemens took the remains of the waterfowl to a tree, where he dug a hole near the roots and threw the bird in. After burying it, he felt something like relief—the air was a little lighter.

"That poor bird..." Clemens said.

"Yep..." said Alec.

Not only had the waterfowl died in a battle it wanted no part of, it had then been cooked into a monstrosity, then buried without even being eaten. It was a pitiful end, and the two adventurers were correspondingly filled with pity...though to be fair, the waterfowl itself probably couldn't have cared less—its part in the proceedings had long been over.

Clemens and Alec looked at one another. The usually dignified Alec wore a twisted, miserable expression, and Clemens imagined that he looked no different.

"I, uh... I guess we learned better than to venture into unknown territory..." said Clemens.

"Yep."

"And I guess we should both knuckle down and just learn how to dress and gut the animals we encounter..."

"Yep."

They looked over at the patch of earth where the bird was buried, their eyes blank like dead fish, and their shoulders drooped in disappointment. Even now, their mouths were stained with that horrifying stench.

It was the bitter scent of their youth.



“That was the first time I’d ever eaten anything so bad I literally couldn’t keep it in my mouth. And I didn’t go near *any* poultry for a while afterwards either...”

“Eww...” Shiori moaned, covering her mouth with a hand. No doubt she was imagining the experience herself.

Even Dennis, who had been observing Shiori at work and was occasionally jotting notes in his notebook, put a hand to his mouth and frowned.

Clemens chuckled and gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder.

“It was a bitter pill to swallow at the time, but it was a good opportunity to learn how to dress and gut animals,” he said. “And now, thanks to you, I love poultry dishes—they’re one of my favorites. That yakitori of yours is truly marvelous. And so simple too—just a little salt and pepper and you’re good to go. I hope it’ll be on the menu again soon.”

“O-Of course.”

Clemens smiled as Shiori’s cheeks went red from his praise, but at that moment, a sudden chill ran up his spine like a spear in his side. A fierce gaze had fallen upon him, and as he turned slowly towards it he found the gaze of his closest friend, watching him with blades in his eyes.

Clemens gave a twitchy smile under the pressure of Alec’s deep jealousy, and slowly removed his hand from Shiori’s shoulder.

Interlude 2: The Diary of Pel, the Familiar

■ November △

We arrived at the kingdom. It's so big! So many beautiful buildings! So many deliciously fragrant shops!

I'd been hoping that my new friend Olivier would live in a big house, but whoa. It is *humongous*. I mean, it's so big that even the village near the Blue Forest could fit inside of it. It's even bigger than the biggest building I saw from the few times I went to Tris.

Turns out that in this country, the biggest houses are called "castles."

It's *amazing*. There are so many people living there. *Amazing*! So many black bugs too! I see some hunting in the near future.

Once we arrived at the castle, Olivier made a magic contract between us.

"To be honest," he said, "I'd love it if we could just be friends the way Shiori and her slime Rurii are, but you're just so adorable. I'd be lost if someone stole you, so I hope you don't mind becoming my official familiar."

Not in the slightest!

Edvard overheard, and he was like, "Yeah, no, nobody's ever going to steal it."

■ November △

I'm getting used to life at the castle. Everyone was surprised to see me at first, but little by little I'm making more friends. There's still a lot of people who are too scared to come close to me, though.

So I heard that apparently, Olivier is a *king*. He's the most important person in the country, and he works for the sake of the *whole* nation. He's like, busy every day, but he's very dapper when he's in work mode. It's totally cool. All the people in the castle like him. Olivier's mate—the queen—she *loves* him. And he loves her too.

It's so great when people get along.

Speaking of, I received word from my fellow peach-colored slimes. Apparently Rurii's friend Shiori became mates with Alec. They get along super well, every day. Happy days! They'll be popping out kids in no time! Olivier already has four of them, so I thought it would be nice if Shiori and Alec did the same, but they still haven't actually mated.

Seriously?

■ November △

Apparently, when you live in the castle, you have to be on your best behavior. It's called "manners." So I've been using the greeting that Rurii taught me, where you just roll out a feeler and wave. People were like, "How adorable!" when I first tried it. And even some people who were scared of me came a bit closer.

I hope I can make lots of friends. I'm going to practice my greetings.

■ November △

Edvard came to visit. He's a really high-standing knight. But he's going to quit that soon and work at the castle together with Olivier. I tried using Rurii's greeting and he was like, "Wow. You know how to greet people?" He was so surprised.

Edvard always looked at me like I was shady or suspicious, but when I greeted him, I felt like he became a little friendlier.

I mean, whoa. Greetings are *amazing*. Apparently they're super important between fellow humans too.

"Come to think of it," Edvard said, "your greeting is fine for friends, but if you're walking around with Olivier, you should learn the court greeting too."

So today I learned that the *type* of greeting is different depending on the place and the person. There's a whole bunch of different ones! Edvard taught me the court greeting, where you put a hand over your chest and you bow your

head.

Seems pretty hard for slimes and I'm not sure if I can do it, but I'm going to practice!

■ December ○

That court greeting? *Amazing*. I'd been practicing, and everyone was super excited when I tried it out. They said it was adorable *and* cute! I'm so happy! I'm making more friends. Looks like hard work really *does* pay off.

Olivier just heaped praise on me. He even gave me a familiar treat as a reward. I don't know what it was, but it was *good*.

■ December ○

Edvard's dad came to visit. He's called Frederick. He was friends with Olivier's dad. Sometimes he comes over to help Olivier with his work. Today while they were taking a break, they were rubbing my body and talking with very concerned expressions.

"Hm... I must say it feels not unlike the perfect female rump. Something about the enticing arc and curvature..."

"Oh, you think so? It strikes me not unlike the voluptuous breasts of my wife. A certain gentle suction to the sensation..."

The two men looked awfully serious about their discussion of breasts and rumps. I think they were probably talking about the livestock raised in the kingdom's farms. The people at the village near the Blue Forest would pat the breasts and rumps of the cows and talk of meat quality and milk amounts and such.

"Oh, that rump..."

"Those breasts..."

The two men were so passionate. So devoted. I bet the livestock they raise must be super delicious.

I can't wait to taste some!

■ December ○

Olivier told me I was free to go off and play today. I always have the most fun when I'm together with Olivier, but seeing as I had some time to myself, I decided to visit the Madam. She's a beautiful purple slime put in place as a purification system for the water running under the castle sewers.

She's been working here so long I decided to ask her if she ever gets bored. She said that being in a place with no worry for anything at all is a blessing—she has all the time in the world to ponder the beauties and mysteries of life itself.

I guess even slimes have their own ways of seeing the world.

■ December ○

I played with Bernhard today. He's Olivier's eldest son, and he'll be an adult in a few years. He said that in the future, he's going to be king. Anyway, he gave me a very serious look today and said, "Pel, I have a favor to ask. Will you hear it?"

Then he took me to his room. Turns out he just wanted to touch me.

I mean, if that's all you want, all you have to do is ask!

"Thanks! So... So this is...the feel of...a wife's breasts..."

Sounded to me like Bernhard was starting to get interested in livestock! But is there some meaning to touching my body while thinking about it?

"I... I apologize, Pel, but...can you make yourself more like...this? Like two mountains, side by side...?"

Of course I can!

As soon as I did, Bernhard's face went bright red and he poked at the bouncy shapes I'd made. I guess he must really like milk. But I agree, it's delicious! The stew I ate when I first came to the castle, made with fresh milk? *Amazing*.

Bernhard touched me for a little while and seemed to be satisfied.

"Thanks. I feel healed," he said.

Just glad I could help!

But I hope he's okay. His face was red the whole time.

■ December ○

Olivier looked a bit run-down and worn out today. I guess he must have been having a hard day at work. So I let him touch my body. I mean, when Bernhard did it he said he felt healed. With that in mind, I made the same double mountain shape for Olivier, and he burst into laughter.

“Wow! How interesting! It's just like my wife's breasts!”

He poked at the shape for a while, a beaming smile on his face the whole time. He seemed to like it a lot. I really hope he was feeling healed too!

In the middle of it all, Queen Cecilia entered the room.

“So *this* is where you've been...” she said, but then she stopped and her face suddenly grew quite frightening. It was like waves of death wafting through the air.

“Whatever are you doing, Olivier? Such *noble* hobbies you have, getting up to such indecent tricks with Pel here.”

Cecilia's voice was different. This was the “Knight Mode” I'd heard about. Knight Mode Cecilia is totally cool, and really popular among the castle women. Apparently Cecilia used to be a knight. But even though Cecilia looked really cool, Olivier went totally pale.

“I'm sure all that paperwork you've been drowning in recently has dulled your body's senses. Perhaps we should spar every once in a while.”

“Uh, well, this is...um...”

“Oh, don't be shy. Pel, I'm borrowing this one for a while. You just sit back and relax.”

And then Olivier was summarily dragged away by Cecilia.

Have fun! Come back refreshed!

I could hear Olivier's screams outside of the door. He was having so much fun

he was *screaming*. I was so happy he was getting properly refreshed!



■ December ○

Edvard came over for a work meeting. They were talking about things and it seemed very serious, so when one of those black shiny insects appeared, I snapped it up and ate it. Edvard went pale and fell over.

Edvard?! Are you okay?! I thought. Are you overworked?!

I sent a message through the slime network to Rurii, who told me not to eat the insects where people can see them. Rurii said lots of people dislike them so much they scream at the sight of them.

Guess I have to be more careful next time...

■ December ○

Today was a day for interrogating a person who got up to some seriously bad stuff. It gave me a bad feeling so I turned bright red, my warning color, and Olivier was really surprised.

“Ah, so this is the warning color I’ve heard about. I see. So this must mean that Count Isfeldt means me harm, yes?”

Apparently that was the bad man’s name. Count Isfeldt. He’s friends with the people that did those horrible things to the snow wolves in the Blue Forest. Only a bad person would do that!

I wasn’t going to let that guy lay even a single finger on my friend Olivier!

Partway through the questioning, Isfeldt tried to attack Olivier, so I swallowed him. I would’ve eaten him right then and there but Olivier said I’m not allowed to kill people. So I held off.

But because he’d been so rowdy I melted all his clothes. I’d heard that people stop moving when they don’t have clothes, and it turns out it’s *true*. When Isfeldt was naked he rolled up into a ball. *Amazing*. That means I can do this whenever anyone tries to do something to Olivier.

One of the king’s bodyguards whispered to his partner: “Guess we can add indecent exposure to the man’s list of crimes. This behavior is utterly ree-*dick*-ulous, if you catch my drift...”

I wonder what he meant by that? Human language is hard for me sometimes. Anyway, Isfeldt was taken away in tears. But if you're going to cry about *that*, you never should have done anything bad in the first place.

■ December ○

Every day is so much fun! I'm so glad I met Olivier! He even said I get to have my portrait painted. I'm ecstatic! I'm going to brag to *everyone* back home about it!

For whatever reason, though, the artist painting the portrait looked very befuddled.

Part 2: The Purity of Ever-Changing Scenery

Chapter 1: The Color and Shape of Twilight

1

The second change of guard duty came just before dawn. Shiori woke and got dressed. Rurii was already outside doing its usual stretching routine. Nadia had quickly applied a little makeup with a well-experienced grace. The woman had such a stunning natural beauty that she didn't need to do much to easily draw eyes—something Shiori had always been a little jealous of.

"I'll start on guard duty," said Nadia. "I'll leave breakfast preparations to you."

"Okay. I'll bring you some tea in just a moment."

Alec and Clemens were asleep mere moments into wrapping themselves in their blankets. The ability to sleep anywhere was a necessary skill of the trade, though it had been difficult for Shiori when she was just a rookie. These days, she'd grown used to it, but in the beginning she'd had difficulty getting comfortable on rocky, uneven ground.

"It's something everyone goes through," said one of her companions with a chuckle, "and there's nothing else for it but to just get used to it."

This varied from person to person, but it was usually those who were born into good environments—nobles or otherwise those born and raised in the city—who took the longest to learn to sleep well on the job.

Shiori was three years into her adventuring career, and was fully used to the erratic nature of sleep for adventurers. These days, whenever someone told her she'd helped them get a good night's sleep on expedition, she felt like all her efforts had been worth it.

"Well then," said Shiori to herself, "let's get to it."

She watched as Rurii finished up its morning stretches and headed out on

patrol, then took a deep breath and readied herself for the start of a new day.

She started by casting her air-conditioning magic again because the air temperature had dropped. Then she folded up the laundry she'd left out to dry and placed it neatly on the bench. Once that was done, she took apart the baths, which really just meant casting earth magic to bring the stone pavement back to its original form.

Next up, breakfast.

"Oh, before I get started..."

Shiori boiled some water and made some snow peppermint tea, which Nils had recommended as a good way to start the morning. It had a wonderfully refreshing scent, and just a sip of it helped Shiori to wake up. She put the tea in two cups, and melted a dash of honey in them to help them go down a little smoother before handing a cup to Nadia.

"Here's your tea, big sister," she said.

"Oh, why, thank you. What a wonderful scent."

Nadia enjoyed the fragrance of the snow peppermint as she sipped at the tea. The medicinal herbs and the honey soaked into her body with a wonderful sweetness.

"Would you like some, Rurii?"

The slime bounced over and thought for a minute, then reached out to Shiori with a feeler.

"You'd prefer some water, then?"

Rurii trembled in the affirmative. Shiori cast some magical water for the slime, and it happily gulped it down. Once it had drunk its fill of the water, it trembled a thank-you.

"And how about breakfast? Think you can eat?"

The slime waved a feeler left then right. It seemed Rurii was still full from the snow bear it had eaten the previous day.

"Okay. Then you just tell me when you get hungry, all right?"

The slimed once again shivered a “*got it!*” before returning to its patrol.

“What’s on the menu this morning?” asked Nadia.

“Pumpkin potage and sausage bread skewers. Oh—and apple compote.”

Ever the carnivore, Nadia grinned the moment she heard the word “sausage.”

“My, my, so much to look forward to,” she said, and then returned to guard duty.

“I guess we’ll start with the bread,” said Shiori to herself.

It was simple to make and required only flour and baking powder. No fermentation was necessary, and you could make it over a campfire, so it was perfect for the outdoors. Shiori put the flour and baking powder in a pot with a little salt, mixed it together, then added water and mixed it all some more. Then she put some sausages from Brovito Village on skewers, pulled the dough into long strips, and wrapped it around the sausages. All that was left now was to cook them when everyone woke up.

Shiori then turned her attention to the pumpkin potage. It was something she could whip up quite quickly using pumpkin paste and white sauce she’d prepared in advance. The pumpkin had been steamed and boiled with spices and whisked into a paste, and the white sauce had been made by melting butter into flour, then adding milk for consistency. Both of these were then put in lightweight, airtight metal containers and frozen, so they could be easily melted and mixed together.

“Hm...” muttered Shiori, looking at the two containers, “I suppose I should look at buying some more...”

She’d bought the containers at the general store not far from the Guild. They had apparently been created with magical beast materials to help preserve food for longer periods of time. They weren’t exactly cheap, but they made up for the price by being light in terms of weight, which made them delightfully easy to carry.

Shiori put some water in a pot along with some smoked meat to add a little flavor. Then, after bringing it to a boil, she added the pumpkin paste and the white sauce. She stirred it all until it melted, and after adding a little salt and

pepper, the potage was ready. She took a little from the pot to taste, and the gentle sweetness of the pumpkin and the pleasant saltiness of the smoked meat filled her mouth.

“Hm, just the right level of sweet and salty. Now all that’s left is to wait for everyone to wake.”

Once she had lined up the cutlery and the bottled apple compote on the serving counter, Shiori stood up. She stretched her arms up gently, and turned around just as Annelie was coming out of her tent.

Annelie’s hair was already done and she was fully dressed. All she had left was to wash her face and put on her makeup.

“Good morning,” said Shiori. “You’re up early.”

“Good morning. Yes, I just happened to wake up.”

Annelie said she’d gone to bed so early the previous evening that upon getting a good night’s sleep, she just woke up naturally. It had only just turned five in the morning, and there was still time before everyone was expected to be up and getting ready.

“I must thank you for helping me get such a good night’s rest,” said Annelie. “This all feels so completely different to ordinary camping. We’re in the outdoors, and yet we have warm beds—it’s nigh unthinkable.”

Shiori didn’t think her earthen beds were anything compared to what nobles were accustomed to, but the compliment made her happy all the same.

“I’m just so glad to hear you got a good rest,” she said, preparing some warm water in a washbowl and passing it to Annelie with a towel.

“Why, thank you,” Annelie said. “I’ll just be a minute.”

The margravine returned to her tent, and came back a few minutes later with some light makeup on. The speed at which she’d applied it showed that she was used to doing so in the outdoors. The fact that she didn’t mind showing her face before putting her makeup on made Shiori wonder if she wasn’t particularly fussed about the smaller things in life. She certainly was an odd one as far as nobles went. Then again, there were plenty of women who went on to become

adventurers and knights, and Shiori realized that perhaps it was not so odd after all.

“Thank you—I feel much better,” said Annelie.

“Great. I’ll take that washbowl from you.”

Shiori poured the water in the gutter which ran outside, then washed the bowl and towel and dried them with magic. At the same time, Annelie was laying her drawing equipment—a sketchbook and pencils—out on the table.

“I hope you don’t mind me using the table until breakfast.”

“By all means, please do,” said Shiori. “What are you drawing?”

She remembered the previous evening, when Annelie had been passionately working on something in her sketchbook.

“Would you like to see?”

“Are you sure that’s okay?”

“Please, go right ahead,” said Annelie, passing over her sketchbook.

Shiori took it carefully in her hands. It was a brand-new sketchbook titled Silveria, with the date written underneath. She opened it to find a picture of the town of Silveria on the first page. Next there were sketches of the exterior and interior of the lodging they’d stayed at, and of the people who worked there.

And even though the images were in black pencil, they were so detailed it felt as if they’d been cut out of reality and placed onto each page.

They’re like black-and-white photographs...

Was she going to use these sketches as drafts for work with canvas later? Shiori would have loved to see the margravine’s images in full color.

She turned the pages and saw a collection of images of Walt and Dennis. And after that...

“Whoa... They’re amazing...”

She’d spoken the words before she even realized it, and Annelie smiled.

“Aren’t they just?” she said. “It was the first time I’d ever seen adventurers in

battle from so close a distance. I knew I just had to draw it.”

They were images of her friends, locked in battle. The dignified beauty of Nadia, her graceful fingers outstretched as flames leapt from them. Clemens, as beautiful and courageous as the god of war as he flew at the enemy, his swords at the ready. There was even a spot for Rurii swallowing a snow jellyfish, and Shiori casting her wind magic barrier. And then Alec, his eyes sharp as he glared at the enemy, magical sword slicing through the air.

“So this is how he looks when he’s fighting...” Shiori muttered.

There was power in his eyes. The image was black-and-white, but the determination in Alec’s eyes, which would have been dark magenta, was so clear and vivid. She stared at it like she wanted to burn the image into the very recesses of her mind. Alec’s ever-gentle, ever-kind gaze was, in this picture, brimming and glistening with strength.

“You like this sketch, don’t you?” said Annelie.

Shiori snapped back to reality.

“Er, um...” she muttered.

“If you like it, I’d be happy to give it to you,” said Annelie, a playful grin on her face.

“Really?”

“The images like it best when they’re in the possession of one who truly appreciates them.”

Annelie tore the page from her sketchbook and passed it to Shiori.

“Wow... Thank you so much. I’ll treasure it.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Shiori stared at the sketch one more time. Then, as she let out a little sigh, Annelie giggled.

“Right now, you look just like Alec when he looks at you,” she said.

“Hm?”

They had the same expression? Shiori wondered how she looked.

“He looks at you with such kindness in his face,” Annelie said. “At first I thought he was going to be a little difficult to get along with, but when I looked more carefully I could see that he was very expressive. And when his eyes are on you he has such a gentle smile.”

“Oh...”

She should have expected as much from an artist. Annelie had been observing them rather closely, even over such a short time. The thought made Shiori a little embarrassed, and she dropped into silence, unsure of what to say.

That must mean I look the same way when I look at him...

“You two care for each other very much, don’t you? It’s such a wonderful thing. I must say I’m a little jealous.”

Shiori felt something like envy and defeat in the words that concluded Annelie’s comments. Shiori glanced at the woman as she looked down at her sketchbook—there was a smile on her lips, but a sadness in her eyes.

And those eyes fell upon a black-and-white portrait of a smiling Dennis.

2

Annelie continued to sketch, talking with Shiori until it was time for everyone to wake. Shiori neatly folded the sketch Annelie had given her and put it in her notebook, which she placed carefully in her pouch. She smiled to think that she could take the image out and look at it whenever she pleased.

Shiori prepared some warm water in a washbowl, then set about cooking the sausage bread skewers. Alec and Clemens woke soon after she’d done so, and used the water to wash their faces before putting on their equipment.

Dennis poked his head out from his tent, already fully dressed. He was surprised to see Annelie already up and at work, and ducked back inside. It wasn’t long before everyone heard the commotion from within.

“Ouch!”

“Hurry up! Wake up!”

Shiori and Annelie looked at each other and burst into laughter. They knew exactly what was going on. As the wonderful aroma of baked bread filled the air, Shiori warmed the potage and ladled it into cups, and put the bread on plates along with the apple compote. By the time she was done, everyone was at the table.

Walt was last to be seated. He ignored Dennis's glare—he had eyes only for the food.

Well, at least nobody has lost their appetite.

Shiori stifled a laugh and told everyone to get started. They did their pre-meal rituals, and then the air filled with the sound of clinking cutlery.

“There's ketchup and mustard if you'd like some,” said Shiori, pointing to two bottles in the center of the table.

Shiori found it interesting that everyone had different preferences for sauces. Clemens preferred mustard only, while Nadia liked a little of both. Shiori herself liked mustard with a dash of ketchup. Annelie appeared to be a ketchup fan, while Dennis and Walt went with mustard.

I wonder if Alec prefers something sweet...

She knew Alec would eat whatever was put in front of him, but based on his love of sweet, spicy sauces and vanilla ice cream, Shiori had a hunch that his heart would lie with sweeter options.

I'll have to ask him when I next have the chance.

Shiori thought about it as she bit into her sausage, which gave a satisfying pop as the skin broke under her teeth. When Annelie mentioned she might not be able to finish the rest of her sausage bread, Walt gladly took it off her hands. Shiori couldn't help but giggle at the way Dennis glared at him as he did so.

“Speaking of food—Rurii's not eating today?” asked Alec, reaching for his pumpkin potage.

“Rurii is still full from yesterday. It seems to be fine with just water this morning.”

Shiori glanced at the slime, which was patrolling outside, occasionally catching

some snow with a feeler and absorbing it into its body. Alec's expression grew a little uncomfortable.

"Well, I guess it *did* indulge in quite the feast yesterday..." he said.

"Yes, it certainly did..."

Easy conversation filled the table until breakfast came to an end.

"Most wonderful," said Walt, rubbing his stomach after two helpings of pumpkin potage. "Thank you so much."

"How about watching your weight a little?" asked Dennis.

"Best fill up while we still can. Who knows what's waiting out there."

"Could you be any more melodramatic?"

"I think it's instinctual," said Walt. "Perhaps it's because we can't get food very easily in these parts—I feel like my body is craving it."

Dennis seemed to have difficulty accepting the appetite of his friend, who was, in any case, clearly a bigger man to begin with.

"I still have half of my rations from yesterday," said Alec. "You can have them if you like."

"Oh, really? I'll gladly take them off your hands! Yesterday I ran out of rations midway through our trip—I was worried I'd have to dip into our reserves!"

So when it comes to food, Annelie is on the light side, Dennis eats about the standard amount, and Walt has a bigger appetite than both of them.

With breakfast over, the nobles went about preparing the rations they'd need for the day and packing their things. Shiori cleaned up after everyone, and the other three adventurers went about taking down the campsite. It was quite a big camp, but they were all experienced hands and were done in about thirty minutes. Finally, Shiori returned the kitchen and dining area back to its original form.

"Well then, shall we be off?" asked Alec. "Assuming we set a good pace, we'll reach the tower in about an hour. Just to be clear, the top of the tower is our goal, meaning we'll spend the night in the tower, yes?"

“That’s right,” said Annelie. “If possible, I’d love to explore the interior of the tower too. Do you think it will be difficult?”

“That depends on the circumstances. Let’s make a decision after we see how damaged the tower is and what sorts of magical beasts have moved in.”

The tower had been used as a coming-of-age ritual when it had been in Imperial territory, and its interior was not unlike a labyrinth of sorts. Alec had brought along a map of the place that was kept at the Guild, but things might have changed since the map had been made.

“Well, assuming it’s a possibility,” said Annelie, “I would very much like to see inside.”

“Got it.”

“I can make an emergency exit or a staircase outside the tower if necessary,” said Shiori.

She knew how to use her earth magic to create exits in times of danger. It was often a bit makeshift and hastily put together, but it was something she now had experience with—in the past, she’d had to help groups escape sealed chambers and traps.

“How very convenient,” said Annelie. “Is this something you’re capable of too, Nadia?”

“Unfortunately not. Were I to try, I’d likely make a hole in the tower that would bring it all crumbling down right on top of us. Delicate magic isn’t really my forte—that’s Shiori’s specialty.”

“Shiori’s magic has gotten us out of a number of tight spots,” added Clemens. “I can vouch for her ability.”

“Wow...” said Walt.

“That’s quite the relief,” said Annelie. “We’ll be counting on you, Shiori.”

“Got it.”

With that out of the way, the traveling party set off. Nadia melted the snow to craft them a path forward, and they walked on towards the tower. Shiori and Alec took up rearguard positions, with Rurii bouncing alongside them.

“You’re full of surprises,” said Alec quietly.

“Hm?”

“Using your magic for emergency exits. Everybody thinks of you as a housekeeping mage because it’s such a unique part of your work, but you’re a fully-fledged adventurer in your own right—both in battle and in exploration.”

“Thanks, Alec...”

The words brought a wonderful warmth to Shiori’s heart. Alec wasn’t just there by her side; he also knew the words she longed to hear—he recognized her efforts. But in truth, there had been many who had seen Shiori’s worth and praised her for her efforts. It was only now that she realized that the problem had been hers all along—she hadn’t been able to accept any praise. In order to become more positive, she was going to have to learn to take pride in her own abilities. It was far easier said than done, but with a man like Alec by her side, she felt sure it was a task she would one day accomplish.

“I’m glad to have you,” she said.

He put a gentle, reassuring hand to her shoulder, and they walked on.

The party encountered no magical beasts as they walked, and reached Silveria Tower earlier than expected. The name of the tower came from the language of the old continent, and meant “silver.” The tower itself seemed to wear the name with pride, gleaming amongst the white snow. As for the interior, however...

“You can feel it, can’t you?”

“Yep.”

The tower was indeed large enough for its labyrinth-like interior. The adventurers looked up towards the roof and felt something creeping in the air—the presence of magical beasts. Monsters had turned the tower into their winter home, just as the adventurers had expected.

“Shiori?” asked Alec.

“I can sense three people in the tower.”

Shiori's eyes drooped. She had scanned the whole tower, and sensed three human energy sources among the magical beasts.

"I think they're somewhere in the middle floors," she said.

"You think they're the adventurers we heard about?" asked Dennis.

"Most likely..."

The three nobles looked at one another uneasily. Annelie worried that they might have to deal with fighting not just monsters, but humans too—and given what they knew about the mysterious trio of adventurers, a confrontation was all too easy to imagine. Though there was a chance the adventurers were in need of assistance, Annelie was still uneasy and preferred the idea of avoiding them altogether.

"What should we do? Would you like to head to the top from the outside?" asked Alec.

This was one option available to them—take the client to the vantage point from the outside, while one or two adventurers went through the tower to check on the people inside. Annelie did not answer immediately. For a time she looked up at the tower, lost in thought.

"Lady Annelie," said Dennis. "We've come so far, and you've long dreamed of this very day. Let's make our way up from the inside. With the adventurers by our side, surely you'll be fine."

Annelie was surprised—Dennis always erred on the side of caution.

"This is not a place we can easily visit as we please," he added. "We should make the most of it while we have the opportunity."

"Dennis..."

Shiori had thought of him as a man who would pick the safe route at the slightest hint of danger, but perhaps that was not always the case. Perhaps, through this trip, something had changed within him. Annelie, too, seemed buoyed by his words.

"Yes, you're right," she said. "But please, adventurers, if you deem the tower to be too dangerous, you have my permission to create an exit at your best

judgment. Until such a time, however, I would like to see inside.”

“Understood,” said Alec. “While we’re looking around, please don’t touch anything. If you find something you’re curious about, speak to one of us, first. Parts of the tower are likely to be very fragile, and it’s not unheard of for magical beasts to mimic their surroundings. With that in mind, we’ll want to keep our voices down also.”

Though the tower was often explored in the warmer seasons, winter was another story entirely. There were no records of winter visits in the Tris Adventurers’ Guild records, and as a result, nobody knew if the beasts within the tower were those that roosted there in the summer, or something else. In other words, the tower was a mystery—they would need to be especially vigilant.

Annelie and her aides nodded.

“Well then, let’s head on inside,” said Alec.

The tower stood upon a huge stone foundation, and based on the locations of the windows, there were five floors. This matched their guild report. At the very top was the tower’s parapet. It was said that from there, you could look out over the entirety of the Silverian region—this was Annelie’s goal.

“Such beautiful stonework.”

Having received permission from the party, Annelie put a hand to the outer wall. Even in the overcast weather, the stonework glimmered white, as if covered in frost. There was likely something reflective in the stone bricks. She stood there for a time, staring at it, then nodded.

“Let’s move on.”

The party stood at the entrance to the tower. The once wooden doors had rotted and crumbled, and its remains now covered the floor. It had been a long time since anyone had actually been looking after the tower. Even the mayor of Silveria saw the tower as something to be admired from afar, and felt no desire to spend time or effort on upkeep.

“They’ve got barrier stakes here. Just like in the report.”

They could see sections dug into the ground around the entrance where barrier stakes had been hammered in. They were a little worse for wear, but they were relatively new. It was likely that adventurers had replaced the older ones, perhaps when they were passing through.

“But there are still magical beasts inside, meaning...”

“Parts of the walls have crumbled to reveal openings, so they either got in that way, or they’re monsters that are immune to barrier stakes.”

Still, Shiori hadn’t sensed any big or particularly dangerous beasts when she’d cast her search magic, which was something of a relief. Alec headed inside cautiously, and lit a magical lantern. He checked the floor, then came back and gave the all-clear. Clemens and Nadia entered next, followed by the nobles—who entered very timidly—and finally Shiori and Rurii.

“Wow, it’s lit up even on the inside,” said Annelie, awed.

The stone walls reacted to the light streaming in through the windows with a dim glow. It wasn’t especially bright, but they could see through to the rest of the floor.

“We’ll follow our map through each floor, but please let one of us know if there’s something you’d like to take a closer look at. We’re not in a hurry.”

“Thank you.”

The party walked down a hallway in the order they were now accustomed to. The corridor was easily wide enough for three people to walk side by side.

According to their map, the first and second floors had something of a convoluted main path, to which smaller rooms were connected. The third floor had one main corridor offering access to four large rooms and a main hall. The fourth and fifth floors were like the first two—labyrinthine in their design.

“Based on your map, it looks like it shouldn’t be too hard to navigate the tower?” asked Walt.

“Well, it *was* designed as a coming-of-age ritual for nobles,” replied Alec. “It’s unlikely they wanted it to be truly life-threatening.”

The last time there had been any ritual at all was some hundred and fifty

years ago, just before the territory had been taken back. But ever since then it had been abandoned. Over time, monsters had come through the broken doors and windows and made the place home.

“Hm...” murmured Clemens after a few steps.

“Oh?” added Nadia.

“What is it?” asked Annelie.

“A magical beast. Well, its corpse.”

The adventurers kept the nobles out of harm’s way and investigated. There were a few snow jellyfish that seemed to have been separated from their pack, and two large horned hares. All had been felled by a blade. The corpses were all frozen because of the low temperature within the tower, but were otherwise still quite fresh.

“Our trio of adventurers, again?”

“I’m guessing so.”

Though frozen, the corpses were still very recent, and though Dennis tried to shield Annelie’s eyes from the sight, she was far too curious to be stopped.

“It’s a clean cut. I’d guess the person who did it knows their way around a sword.”

“But such a waste,” said Nadia with a sigh as she looked upon the hares, which had been cut in half.

“If you’re strong enough to make it this far, a few hares should be easy to handle.”

“They’re edible beasts, and yet the internal organs have been crushed.”

It seemed that the mysterious trio—who had so desperately ransacked the observation deck—had completely wasted an obvious opportunity for food. Perhaps they’d killed the hares without thinking, or perhaps they hadn’t known that they were edible, but either way, it was a waste and a pity—the meat of the horned hare was tender and delicious. They weren’t too much effort to slay, and any adventurer worth their salt knew that the beast was quite the catch.

“What happens if the organs are crushed?” asked Walt.

“Whatever is in them taints the hare meat. It’s not just the scent either, unfortunately—it’s also a matter of hygiene.”

“Ah, I see. What a pity...” muttered Walt, his shoulders slumped and his thoughts on food. “Hare meat is so tasty.”

“We’ll catch one if we come across another,” said Alec. “That is, assuming we have the time for it.”

“Well, we’re not here for meat,” said Annelie, somewhat exasperated, “so we can think about it when and *if* we truly have the luxury of time.”

The margravine sent a knowing glance to Walt, and everybody laughed. Walt himself shrugged this off with a shy grin.

“Well, seeing as we’ve found them, we may as well collect the horns,” said Clemens, unsheathing one of his swords and chopping them off.

The horns were beautiful—mostly white with a hint of blue, and they made quite the impression. They also contained a little magical essence, which made them useful for making talismans and as medicinal ingredients.

The party began walking again, with Alec and Shiori taking up the rear guard once more. Curious, Shiori spread out her search magic to see what the three other adventurers were up to.

“Anything new?” asked Alec, who sensed her casting the spell.

“Nothing of note,” said Shiori with a frown. “They’re still in the same place, and they’ve barely moved.”

It had been about thirty minutes since they had entered the tower and Shiori had first cast her search magic. If the trio hadn’t moved, it could simply mean they were taking a break, but it could also mean that they were hunkered down. She knew they were all alive because she could sense them, but there was every chance they were at the limits of starvation and no longer able to move.

“You said they were somewhere in the middle of the tower, right?”

“Right. Probably the third floor. I don’t know why, but I have this feeling

they'll be more trouble than the magical beasts."

"You and me both."

Under normal circumstances, meeting another party during an exploration was a good chance to share information, trade items, and generally help one another. When one of the parties was of a less reputable nature, however, it could mean looting and—if things went especially badly—murder. As awful a story as it was, this was one reason that mixed parties were recommended over all-female ones.

Seeing the ransacked observation deck had left everyone with an ominous feeling about the trio on the third floor.

"Our best course of action is to keep moving and expect the worst," said Alec. "We can at least be grateful that they've likely taken care of any magical beasts up to that floor."

He and Shiori looked at the corpses on the floor and shared a wry chuckle.

The party continued on smoothly, heading upstairs and into the middle part of the second floor. They encountered much less in the way of magical beasts than they'd expected. Perhaps the mysterious trio of adventurers really *had* taken care of any beasts. The monsters that remained were strong enough to break through barrier stakes, but were little in the way of challenge for three A-rank adventurers.

"You adventurers truly are remarkable," muttered Annelie, now used to seeing them in battle. "Even with magical beasts making a home of the place, I still feel so safe."

She looked down at the corpse of an *is groda*, a kind of ice frog, with none of the fear she'd had a day earlier, but with a sharp, serious gaze nonetheless. Shiori wondered if at some point, Annelie would draw this too—she'd noticed that Annelie had looked at all the corpses they'd come across with the same pointed focus.

"Thanks to all of you, I've been able to see so many visual references! I only wish I'd brought more sketchbooks with me."

“You’ve no need to worry, Lady Annelie. I’m carrying five spare sketchbooks for that very reason.”

“Always prepared! I never should have doubted you, Dennis!”

So she is going to draw them...

Shiori couldn’t help but wonder if Annelie would draw them dead or alive. Ultimately, she decided not to think about it.

“You mentioned visual references earlier,” said Nadia. “Do you plan to draw pictures of the magical beasts too?”

“I was recently commissioned to do illustrations for novels and children’s books, and there isn’t very much to reference when it comes to adventuring... Being able to visit a place where I can see both adventurers *and* dangerous magical beasts is a truly priceless experience for me.”

The margravine was all smiles. Shiori had at first thought it odd—the Lovner area had its own Adventurers’ Guild branch, so couldn’t Annelie easily have put up a request? Then again, even then Annelie would be visiting locations she’d have to camp at, and Dennis certainly wouldn’t have allowed that.

“Would you mind showing me those magical beast materials more closely, later in the evening?” Annelie asked.

“Er, uh...all right,” said Alec, somewhat uncomfortable with the idea but agreeing all the same—he was placing the *is groda*’s poison sac in a bottle, because it could be used as an antidote ingredient.

Clemens twitched a little as he returned his swords to his scabbards.

“Your margravine is quite the lady,” remarked Alec.

“Sometimes even I can’t wrap my head around her decisions, and I’m used to her behavior,” said Dennis.

“You don’t think she’ll start a collection under the guise of using them as ‘visual aids,’ do you?”

“Don’t even joke about it. It may well happen.”

Shiori giggled at the sight of Alec and Dennis connecting over something so

daft.

“Well, as long as they’re getting along, that’s the important part,” she said to herself.

Rurii poked at the corpse with a feeler and trembled, as if agreeing with her.

Annelie elected to take a look inside the smaller rooms on the second floor, but just as she’d been told before they entered, the rooms no longer contained anything of any real value—they had been entirely explored and ransacked.

“Was this a magical lantern?” asked Dennis, looking at a candle stand. “Even this has been looted.”

Magical lanterns worked by way of light stones. They had been in use since long ago, but it was only in the last few decades that the lanterns had become cheap enough for use in everyday life. Anyone would be shocked to find that something now considered so cheap had been completely looted—the stones wouldn’t fetch much on the market, and were better off simply kept as spares.

“Oh. This is one of Lukyan Sarayev’s paintings,” said Annelie, letting out a sigh of admiration. “Such a shame...”

She was looking at a framed painting decorating one of the rooms, which was in very bad shape. If one looked closely, they could see the signature that identified the artist.

“Is he famous?”

“Indeed. He was an Imperial, an artist some hundred and seventy years ago. He was largely unknown while alive, but some decades after his passing, his work gained recognition. His work is quite rare now, though there may be more of it in the Empire.”

Shiori wondered if this painting had been here when the artist had still been alive, and still unknown. It would not still be in a place like this now if people had known its value.

“His scenic portraits are so simple and gentle. All his remaining work captures the memories of his youth. They’re all so delicate...and this, too, is beautiful. But for it to have ended up this way...”

Annelie looked sadly at the painting and let out another sigh. It had largely dulled and chipped away, and what remained had faded to the point that the original color was impossible to discern.

In the image, a young boy and girl held hands, their backs facing the viewer as they looked at something in the distance. Whatever they looked at was now torn canvas, leaving only a mystery. Was this, too, one of Lukyan's childhood memories?

"Let's move on," said Annelie. "This room makes me gloomy."

The other rooms on the second floor were largely the same. The doors were rotted and in disarray. The dressers, shelves, and treasure chests, too, had been opened and were now empty and abandoned.

"Look at this statue of the goddess. Someone's gouged something out of its forehead. Horrible stuff," said Clemens, staring down at the remains of the statue strewn across the floor.

"It's likely there was once a jewel of sorts in there," said Nadia. "One has to wonder why they didn't simply take the whole statue. I'm sure it would have been quite beautiful."

Perhaps it had once been a part of the ritual. Whatever the case, this was much less the work of adventurers than it was simply that of looters.

"I've come here once before," said Clemens in a low voice, careful not to let their clients hear, "but the place really doesn't have any worth outside of being a convenient training ground for mid-tier adventurers."

"Yeah..." muttered Alec, "it's only good for building experience."

The magical beast materials they had gathered so far were nothing particularly valuable. And that would have been even more so in the summer—they'd managed to collect a snow bear pelt this time around, but outside of that, it was all work for very little reward. There was no good reason to come out here unless it was specifically for a request. Shiori could understand why Alec had at first wanted to refuse.

"That said," he added, "the clients all seem to be really satisfied to be here, so as long as they're happy, I'd say that's..."

Alec's voice trailed off and his face grew serious. He reached for his sword. Clemens and Nadia also readied themselves, putting Annelie and her two aides behind them. Meanwhile, Rurii turned red.

Enemies were approaching.

3

The footsteps the party heard belonged to people, not magical beasts. Along with them were men's voices, locked in an argument.

"Wait!" cried one. "You can't be serious. Killing them?! Taking their possessions?!"

"Shut it! You dare speak back to your master?! If they don't obey my commands, then of course we kill them! I'm a noble, you realize!"

"All the same...!"

"Whose fault do you think it is that we're in this mess, anyway?! *You're* the one who threw away our bags!"

The voices faded in and out of earshot—likely because their owners were checking the rooms, searching.

But they can't sense where we are?

If this was indeed the trio of adventurers they thought it was, then they were made up of an A-ranker and two C-rankers. They should have had all the basic skills that came with those levels, but this was not always the case. Nonetheless, they had, at the very least, made it this far.

All the same, Alec frowned at the savagery of what they were discussing amongst themselves.

Kill them, take their possessions.

Of course we kill them.

This was not just a party with bad manners. They had every intention of killing in order to steal what they needed. The trio of adventurers drew nearer, and the A-rank adventurers signaled for Shiori and the nobles to take cover as they

assumed their positions.

“Found you...” said a voice.

Three figures appeared in the doorway. One was a blond mage, one a swordsman with sandy-gray hair, and one a brown-haired female healer of some sort. The trio matched the description the knights had given them before they set off—it was the very same trio.

But there was an odd contrast within the group. While the mage glared at them with a blatant arrogance in his eyes, the other two were timid and hesitant. There was also a vast difference in their equipment—the mage’s equipment was old, true, but it was all clearly made to order. The other two, however, seemed to be equipped with whatever cheap equipment they’d been able to get their hands on. It seemed much less like a party of adventurers than two lowly servants with their noble master.

“You will give us your food and your equipment.”

The blond-haired mage barked an order. He wasn’t merely asking for help—he was demanding their gear. It was likely the man was used to having people do exactly what he said. Clemens and Nadia could see where this was going—wry grins grew upon their faces.

But Alec’s eyes narrowed. He felt something in the tone and the rhythm of the man’s speech.

“What are you doing?! Do you not understand instruction?!”

The blond man spoke well, but at times there was the unmistakable hint of an accent in his delivery. It was an accent that, until just a few months ago, Alec had been accustomed to hearing on a daily basis.

“You’re Imperials, aren’t you?” Alec said.

The men flinched at his words. Since the civil war in the Dolgast Empire, many hid their identities while traveling outside of it, fearing persecution. Though some, like Marius, had defected long ago and no longer worried about such things, for those who had just arrived, it was a different story—and it was especially uncomfortable for those of the noble classes. But even then, it was not uncommon for the greed and arrogance they’d possessed in their former

lives to develop into arguments and conflict.

“Ah,” said Nadia knowingly, “I think now I finally understand their stupidity in coming out this far.”

The mage did not like Nadia’s biting commentary, and he lashed out.

“You wench!”

The man had intended to unleash his magic alongside his rage, but Alec had felt the quiver of magical energy and moved in, leveling his sword at the mage’s throat. The mage froze, his staff still held above his head as though he were about to cast a spell. The swordsman had not been able to reach his sword in time, and the pale face of the healer seemed to grow even paler.

“He’s...so quick...”

“You have to know that battles between fellow adventurers are strictly prohibited. And yet you intended to kill us and loot our bodies? Sounds like something we should bring to the knight brigade, if you ask me,” said Alec.

“I-It’s the Adventurer’s Emergency Escape Law! In times of emergency, such behavior is not a problem!”

The man spoke as if it were his right. Alec clicked his tongue in frustration.

It was a distorted reading of the law. The Emergency Adventurer Refuge Act stated that, in times of life-threatening danger on the job, adventurers could essentially abandon the wounded in their party without fear of repercussions. But nowhere in the act did it state that one could kill another in an emergency and take all of their things...because such a provision did not exist within the act. This was nothing more than the twisted logic Alec had come to expect of the Imperial nobility. It made him sick to his stomach to think that the Empire had deteriorated to the point where such excuses could be considered acceptable.

“There is no act nor law that permits murder and theft,” said Alec. “Your lack of care for the lives of others feels very much in keeping with your Imperial heritage.”

The mage glared at Alec, but it lacked force—he was trembling, anyway, and

his face was as white as a sheet.

“You came unprepared. That was your first problem,” said Clemens. “We heard that one of you wasn’t even carrying any luggage.”

“And even now it looks like you’re left with only enough for one between the three of you?” added Nadia.

“We sacrificed one of our bags to escape the snow bear,” said the swordsman behind the mage. “Thanks to that, we escaped with our lives. We had no other choice.”

The swordsman then dropped to his knees and placed his head on the floor.

“Hey, now...” muttered Clemens.

“We don’t have very much money,” the swordsman said, “and we don’t have anything to trade with. We are exactly as we appear. Please, I beg of you, if you have any spare food, may we have some? Even if it’s just enough for our master, please.”

“You twit!” cried the mage. “Idiot!”

Alec speared the man with a glare that told him to shut up, then glanced at the swordsman, who was on his hands and knees.

“We can’t give you much, but I don’t mind sharing what we can,” he said.

“But in return,” said Lady Annelie, unhappy to even be talking with the trio, “you will head back to town as soon as you are able. That is our condition.”

“You have my word,” said the swordsman. “Thank you.”

Annelie’s condition was a harsh one. That the trio had made it this far was something of a miracle—and now they would have to make it back. They had been lucky to get as far as they did, but there was no guarantee that their luck would hold out. Their equipment was dirtied and in disrepair. Their faces were gaunt, and there was no shine to their hair. They looked sick, as though they hadn’t eaten properly in quite some time. There was no telling if they would be able to make it back to town safe.

Nonetheless, this was the margravine’s judgment—whether kind or harsh, they would take responsibility for what they had wrought.

The trio accepted Annelie's condition, because they had no other choice. And all things considered, this was perhaps the best outcome—not only had they threatened Annelie's party and openly confessed to wanting to murder them, they had actually received food afterwards.

The mage's face twisted in frustration, but he spoke not a word. Slowly, he lowered his staff. The only act of rebellion he could muster now was the annoyed clicking of his tongue.

"Here's some food," said Clemens, putting a leather bag of rations on the floor in front of the trio. "Take it."

"Thank you so very much," said the swordsman, picking up the bag as though it were a precious treasure. "I am so dreadfully sorry."

At this, the mage left the room, spitting insults as he did so. The swordsman and the healer bowed deeply, then disappeared after their master.

"That's the first time I've seen an Imperial noble up close," said Annelie, "but I must say I can't believe it. Are they all like that? His companions seemed like they had their heads on straight, at least."

Clemens chuckled.

"They aren't all so unreasonable, but the adventurers of Imperial upbringing are often quite similar. They're reported quite a bit."

Walt put a hand on Dennis's shoulder. The latter had dropped into a deep silence, a frown etched into his features. Alec sheathed his sword and walked over to Shiori. Nadia, who had been holding Shiori close, made room for him. Rurii, who had returned to its usual color, was gently rubbing her leg.

"Are you okay?" Alec asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

She answered resolutely, but there was a tremor in her voice.

The Emergency Adventurer Refuge Act. As soon as the mage had spoken the words, Alec's worry had shifted to Shiori. The mage had spat the words to justify murder in the name of his own survival, and Alec knew that Shiori would be thinking of how her own old party had attempted to use that same cover to

hide her own near-death experience.

Shiori said she was fine, but her face was pale and she'd broken into a light sweat. The memories had crept once more into her mind. The deep scar that she carried in her heart was not one that would mend very easily.

Clemens took care of Annelie and her aides, drawing their attention, while Nadia shifted her position to hide Alec and Shiori from view.

Thank you, my friends.

Alec's eyes conveyed his gratitude to his companions, and then he wrapped Shiori in his arms. He held her like that until the trembling of her body ceased, rubbing her back softly and hoping that the nobles wouldn't notice them. Shiori's fingers hesitantly reached out and clung to his chest. She took a few deep breaths, then shifted herself away, once again looking a touch guilty. It was likely she thought she was causing everyone trouble again.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm fine now."

"Good."

Though the color had yet to fully return to her face, Alec was glad to see that the trembling of her body had ceased. His eyes met Clemens's own, and Alec nodded. Clemens subtly shifted the topic of conversation and led Annelie to the door. Neither she nor her aides noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"Do you think they'll do as we asked, and go home?" said Annelie.

"I pray they do," said Walt.

Nadia glanced at Alec and Shiori for just a moment, then took her spot at the front of the party.

"Shall we?" asked Alec.

"Yes," said Shiori, with something of a sad smile.

Alec gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder, and Rurii bounced along behind them, watching their backs.

"No matter how hard it gets, I will always be here by your side," said Alec.

They were words he had spoken countless times now. Shiori's face scrunched

up into a tearful smile and, had there been nobody else around, she very well might have broken into tears. Instead, in a moment, she was back to her usual, smiling self.

“Thank you, Alec...*daisuki*.”

“Uh... Eh?”

He hadn't quite been able to catch the words she'd spoken at the end of her sentence. There was something foreign in the pronunciation of them, and his confusion showed on his face, but Shiori merely tilted her head, curious about his reaction.

“What is it?” she asked.

He felt somewhat like she was deliberately playing coy, but when he saw the slight red returning to her cheeks, he decided not to push her about it. If she was back to her normal self, then that was enough for him.

Alec noticed Clemens glance back at the two of them, so he gave Shiori a gentle push and they picked up their pace. Perhaps he didn't know that “*daisuki*” meant “*I love you*” in Shiori's mother tongue, but perhaps he didn't have to either.

The rest of the tour of the second floor proceeded much the same as before. There was nothing out of the ordinary save for some frozen magical beast corpses, and the rooms were old and in disarray.

“Shall we move on to the next floor, then?” suggested Annelie, clearly growing tired of seeing the same thing in each room.

They moved carefully up the stairs to the next floor, which was designed quite differently to the previous two. There was a long corridor running through the middle, with two doors on both the left and the right of it. At the end of the corridor was a bigger hall.

“Hm?”

“Hm...”

“Oh...”

Each person let out a breath or exclamation as they came in touch with the unique aura in the air—it was like that of an enclosed space. There was a hint of rust and something raw mixed in with it, but perhaps that was just the age of the ruins.

“The air has changed,” said Annelie.

“Rumor has it that this floor is fully equipped with a warding barrier for magical beasts.”

“Now that *would* be quite the luxury,” said Nadia.

Barrier technology was originally used for religious facilities such as shrines and temples. The building materials were mixed with magic stone powder, which itself was infused with holy magic essence. Layering the base of a building’s foundation with a barrier was no simple task, and for an individual to do as such for their own private construction indicated they were a lord of considerable wealth and power. But such was the power that the Empire at the time had boasted.

“It is said that the third floor was used as a resting point, or a place of refuge back when the ritual was still held.”

And this was the very center of the labyrinth. Unlike the doors they’d seen on the floors below, these were of much stronger design, and reinforced with metal. Even after such a long time, they showed no signs of damage or degradation. The Guild thus believed that this location was used as a place of rest, after which the youth would go on to complete their ritual.

However, the barrier was not enough to keep high-level monsters out, and the adventurers could sense the presence of a few monsters farther down the corridor towards the doors. Based on the clumps of magic they could detect, they suspected the beasts might utilize magical attacks.

Alec and his fellow adventurers looked at one another. Each proceeded with their guard up. They headed down the corridor and arrived at the door on the right.

“This...this is not a magical beast,” said Clemens with a sigh.

“Hm? Then what is it?” asked Annelie.

“I think it’s the three adventurers we met just before,” said Shiori, pointing to the door. “They’re in that room.”

And it was true she could feel three presences that were different from the unique feel that monsters gave off. These were human.

“Ah... I see.”

“I wonder if they’re eating?” asked Nadia. “I hope they’re at least sharing.”

“Whatever they’re doing, I hope they’ll be on their way home soon enough,” said Alec.

“Let’s keep an eye on them,” said Annelie. “If they overstay their welcome we can give them another warning. I must say, however, I’m not expecting much.”

It had been less than an hour since the run-in with the Imperial trio. Annelie was generous in this sense, indicating it was fine to let them rest, but to keep an eye on them all the same. She made it clear that she didn’t want to waste any more of their precious time on the trio if it could at all be helped.

Alec stood in front of the door on the other side of the corridor, looking at it very carefully. He was no expert in the field, but he had some idea of what to look for when it came to trapped doors and the like.

“Looks safe...” he muttered.

Nothing seemed especially out of the ordinary, and the door was unlocked. He hadn’t expected it to be trapped as part of the ritual—it was meant as a resting point, after all—but that wasn’t to say that someone with bad intentions hadn’t trapped the place since. There was no harm in being careful, in any case. Just to be safe, Alec reached out with his non-sword-wielding hand and pushed the door open. Then he went in on his own and, after making sure the room was safe, motioned for the others to enter.

“Well...we could conceivably use this room if we cleaned it and brought in some furniture,” he said.

“We could. It might be worth keeping in mind for this evening,” said Annelie. “At the very least, it will be quite safe.”

It was unclear if the margravine was joking or not, but in any case, the room

was nice enough that she seemed to be genuinely considering it. Perhaps because there was no excess furniture, the room was in relatively good, clean condition. The shutters over the windows showed no signs of damage and were still quite sturdy. They were also still closed, showing they had done their job over the years. The floor and walls weren't as dust-filled as the other rooms they'd seen so far, and the amount of windows also meant that if the shutters were opened, quite a lot of light would come in. If the small amount of remaining dust was taken care of, the room would be quite usable.

However, though the room was in good condition, there was very little else worthy of any attention, and Annelie took a brief look around before deciding to move on. The party returned to the corridor, and the Imperial trio still remained in the room opposite.

"I've been wondering," said Annelie. "That mage was supposedly an A-rank adventurer, just like you, and yet he didn't seem nearly as strong."

"Oh... Yeah. About that..." Alec chuckled. Even a non-adventuring type like Annelie had seen it. "There are standards for gaining ranks, but for the most part the judging is left to the individual guild. Here in our nation that's not really a problem, but..."

"In the Empire, the standards for ranking up change depending on a person's status," said Nadia. "The higher your social standing, the easier it is to rank up. The reverse is also true, however—it's harder to rank up when you are of a low social standing. All that said, only the nobility can get any higher than B-rank, and apparently ordinary citizens are limited to C-rank. I've heard that with enough money, you can buy your way to S-rank, even."

In other words, you could conceivably earn a rank higher than what you really deserved.

"Whoa..." said Walt in utter disbelief, "talk about an abuse of power..."

"Are you saying he might, in actuality, be lower than A-rank?" asked Annelie.

"That's the gist of it," said Nadia. "Based on what I saw, that mage would be C-rank at best. He had magic power, that much is true, but he didn't have mastery over it. His focus level seemed low, which indicates it would take time for him to cast spells."

“On the other hand, that swordsman looked to be a higher rank than he’s been given. Based on the cuts to the monsters we saw earlier, he knows his way around his weapon. If he were tested fairly, there’s every chance he would be a higher rank than he is at present.”

While they were talking about adventurers in the Empire, they came to a large room near the main hall. The door to it was the same as the one they’d seen earlier. According to their map, the interior would be similar to the room they had just explored. And sure enough, upon opening the door, they found a room that, although dusty, was fairly tidy.

“Wait a second,” muttered Alec, his brow furrowing as he glanced at his companions. Rurii, too, seemed to sense something. “I’m getting a sense for something...raw. Perhaps stale. Am I imagining it?”

Dennis’s nose scrunched up as he became aware of it.

“I don’t think that’s your imagination at all. Look.”

He pointed to the floor near the corridor.

“It’s wet,” said Annelie. “Is this where the smell is coming from? But what of it?”

“The problem is how exactly this water hasn’t frozen in this temperature.”

Alec had first sensed this when they’d entered the third floor, but had initially put it off to the sheer age of the tower. Now, however, they knew where the smell had come from. The corridor was wet. The temperature inside the tower was indeed a little higher than outside of it, but that did not change the fact that it was still below freezing. Nothing in the tower should have been damp, and yet this part of the floor hadn’t frozen.

“What does it mean?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. But one thing’s for sure—water is leaking from this room here.”

The room in question was stagnant with wisps of powerful magical energy. A small amount of water leaked out from under the door. Upon closer inspection, they saw that the door itself was damp too.

“This gives me the creeps,” said Nadia, raising an eyebrow. “Perhaps a window or wall broke, causing puddles of rainwater?”

“In this weather? Usually it would freeze.”

Alec had everyone avoid getting too close to the door, then touched it gently. As expected, it was damp. He gave it a gentle push, but it showed no signs of opening. Given there was a chance that the doors were being held shut by water on the other side of the door, Alec wasn’t particularly keen on forcing the door open to check inside.

“Perhaps there’s a magical fire stone in there,” said Nadia.

That was what they could feel—a magical energy, wrapped in fire. When the carrier of this kind of magical energy died, it would fade. But because the energy they felt did not move, it seemed unlikely that it belonged to a magical beast—more likely, it was magic stones. Perhaps for some reason or another, magical fire stones had been dropped in the room, stopping the water from freezing.

“According to our reports, there was nothing out of the ordinary here even during the summer.”

The last time adventurers from the Tris Guild had visited Silveria Tower was August. Those adventurers had apparently checked each room, and they had written nothing in their report about this particular room. Had something happened here between then and now?

“What should we do?” asked Clemens.

Alec shrugged.

“I would very much like to collect those magic stones, but we should avoid doing anything too dangerous.”

Based on how damp the door to the room was, they could not rule out the possibility that the room had flooded to quite a height. The water was at least one meter high. It would be one thing if it was just a group of adventurers, but with clients to protect, Alec did not want to put anyone in unnecessary danger. Annelie looked somewhat disappointed, but she understood the risk.

“I must say I’m very intrigued by the possibility of there being magic stones behind that door, but that’s not why we’re here. I’m guessing that water looks rotten, and I don’t like the idea that there may be decayed corpses behind that door.”

“Very well,” said Alec. “Then let’s head on to the main hall.”

He was relieved to have an understanding client on this expedition. He knew that with Shiori’s smarts and detailed magical ability, it would be possible to drain the room of the water, but she had looked at it with something of a pained grin and an awkward expression—she too didn’t want to go doing anything dangerous if it could be avoided.

“I thought of a way to drain the water,” she whispered to Alec as they walked towards the main hall, “but I didn’t want to do anything reckless. There was a chance it could cause some of the tower to collapse, and there seemed to be quite a lot of water to deal with.”

“In any case, if you *were* going to do it, it would be much better to do it from outside the tower, *after* we’ve seen to the client’s request.”

“Wouldn’t want to go destroying a tourist attraction just to collect some magic stones, right?”

“Right...”

Though the tower was never looked after or well maintained, it was still a source of income through tourism. They weren’t bandits, and they didn’t want to resort to any strong-handed measures solely for personal gain.

The party made its way into the main hall, and looked around at the spacious area around them.

“Wow,” said Walt, awed by the size of it. “You could hold a party in here. Spacious *and* stylish.”

There was a raised stage at the back of the hall, and a spiral staircase in the corner. It seemed there were carvings in the walls and staircase, perhaps made to look like vines, leaves, and flowers. Years of deterioration meant that parts of it were gone and the original design was hard to make out, but there was a profound beauty in it, brought out by the wonder of the white stones into

which it was etched. It made one think of the luxurious excess and prosperity that the Empire had now all but lost—and there was a certain loneliness in that impression.

Everyone seemed to feel the same thing. Alec and his companions looked around in wonder—though they remained alert at all times—while Annelie and her aides did the same, observing the stage, the staircase, and the carvings.

“There’s a certain unique charm you can only feel in ruins...” muttered Annelie, pulling out her sketchbook.

She did a few sketches of various things around the hall, as well as copying the carvings in the wall.

“These designs are likely from the time of the Bazarova dynasty,” she said. “It was when the Empire was at its peak. But they weren’t solely focused on luxury—there was a real love for subtle and natural beauty, also. It was the last time they’d have a chance to appreciate such things.”

Murder and epidemics would see the end of the Bazarova dynasty, and by the time the Lomakina dynasty was established, the Empire had begun walking the path to its own downfall. A line of powerful and militaristic emperors would see policies of territorial expansion. As military costs rose to maintain the growing Empire, the national treasury was put under strain, which led to excessive taxes and even conscription to make up for shortages. As a result, the people grew weary and the lands grew barren. The lands they occupied were taken from them, and what remained of the Empire was forced into the harshest, coldest outskirts of its territory, where even now it was in its death throes. The Dolgast Empire was nearing its end, in no small part due to the large-scale unrest that had been caused by the scheming of neighboring nations.

After about an hour, Annelie carefully put her sketchbook away and turned to the party.

“I’m all done. I apologize for the wait,” she said.

“Shall we move on, then?”

“Yes, please.”

Annelie nodded, her expression somewhat distant, as if her thoughts danced

somewhere in the past. Perhaps it was the design on the hall, and the way it brought to mind days of glory and splendor that were now merely waiting for their own extinction.

“I’m so glad we came,” she said with a satisfied sigh. “I’ve been able to see so much I never expected.”

“And we haven’t even seen what we came for yet,” said Dennis with a grin.

“Oh, I’m well aware of that. It’s just...yes...if the fourth and fifth floors aren’t too different from the first and second, perhaps we don’t need to take such a close look. I’d like to head straight for the roof, I think.”

“Understood,” said Alec.

They formed their usual party order, and began walking the spiral staircase to the fourth floor. Before taking to the staircase himself, Alec looked behind him—it seemed the trio of Imperial adventurers still had yet to move.

“We don’t have very much money, and we don’t have anything to trade with.”

It seemed that the swordsman had spoken the truth. Their gaunt, tired faces; their dirty and tattered equipment. They didn’t have money to buy new gear, and even though they’d come unprepared, that was because they didn’t have the money to buy enough food either. It was like they were merely waiting for their own demise, as if they were mirrors for the state of the Empire itself at present.

Images flashed across Alec’s mind of the things he’d seen in the Empire—nobles greedily devouring the last of their prosperity, ignoring the demise they all knew was coming...and the general populace, left exhausted, struggling through each day as it came and scraping by as best they could.

He shook his head as if to purge the old memories, then smiled at Shiori and Rurii above him, and walked up the stairs.

Chapter 2: The Purity of Ever-Changing Scenery

1

“Hm... It would seem the trio of Imperial adventurers never came this far,” said Nadia.

A few meters from the entrance of the fourth floor, the party found a silvery-blue plant blocking the way forward. Its vines stretched out and weaved together, covering the floor and walls in an intricate pattern. Between the leaves they saw rose-like flowers of a dull red. At a glance, anyone would have thought it was just some kind of vine.

“Brambles...? So even plants can grow here?” asked Annelie.

“It may look like a plant, but it’s actually a magical beast,” replied Shiori.

She giggled as the nobles’ eyes grew wide with shock.

I bet that’s exactly how I looked when I first learned about this myself.

The vines and flowers were in fact a plant-type magical beast, one which snatched anything which wandered too close in its vines, and fed on it for sustenance—it was called a vampire rose. Based on the size of the one on the fourth floor, nobody had passed through the area in at least a month or two.

Shiori had indeed been quite shocked when Nadia had taken her into the forest on her first trip to explore the outdoors. Walking mushrooms, dancing wildflowers, vines that crept in search of prey—none of them looked particularly different from ordinary plant life at a glance. In fact, for a time Shiori found herself suspicious even of the ordinary plants she saw in and around town.

“Wow... It looks like any other plant. *This* is a magical beast?” exclaimed Walt. “I bet I’d walk straight into something like this. I’d never have thought otherwise.”

“It *is* somewhat hard to believe, isn’t it?” said Dennis. “The flowers are so delicate and pretty.”

“That’s exactly the point,” said Alec. “The vampire rose feeds on prey that mistake it for just another plant. We may even find some fertilized prey at the beast’s roots.”

Anything caught by the beast was slowly sapped of its life over time, and remained there as fertilizer while the beast waited for a new catch.

“Ewww,” moaned Walt. “For something so beautiful, it’s actually quite hideous...”

From a distance, it really *did* look just like a beautiful collection of vines. In the past, a noble had actually caught one alive to keep purely for viewing purposes. Unfortunately, the monster had taken root and grown within the noble’s manor, where many of those within had become its food. It was a whole incident, and in the end the knight brigade had to be called in.

“I’d much prefer *not* to end my life as plant fertilizer,” said Annelie.

“Well then, some fire should do the trick,” said Nadia, raising a hand to ready a spell. “Shall I?”

“Wait! Wait just a moment while we give you some room,” said Clemens, gesturing for everyone to step back. “We don’t want anyone getting caught by stray flames.”

“Goodness, Clemens...” muttered Nadia. “Just who do you think you’re talking to? There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Just a precaution,” he said. “It’s just a precaution.”

Clemens and Nadia had worked together for many years, but Clemens was always very cautious around her magic. There were rumors that he’d been burned before, so to speak, and it seemed the trauma still haunted him to this day.

Nadia raised an eyebrow in a dissatisfied if beautiful arc, then cast her fire spell. The wall of fire was kept deliberately controlled so as not to harm the tower itself, but the vampire rose burned under the heat. Its flowers and leaves darkened in color before turning to ash, but the creeping and writhing of the vines as it burned was quite the sight. Nonetheless, the beast crumpled after a time, spasming before going still.

“There, uh...there aren’t any people in all of that, are there?” asked Walt, his face pale as he looked at the ash and withered leaves.

“There were no reports of anyone missing in this area before we left, but I’ll check,” said Clemens.

Even if they *did* find someone, though, the victims couldn’t possibly have survived. Not as the beast’s sustenance, and not in this cold.

“There’s some blackened remains,” Clemens said after a time, “but fortunately nothing human. This looks like it’s a magical beast of some kind.”

The nobles looked relieved to hear it. Shiori, without quite realizing, let out a little sigh of relief herself, which Alec found humorous.

Annelie, Dennis, and Walt all walked timidly past the corpse of the vampire rose, with their protection in front and behind them.

“Did Clemens have some kind of a bad experience with Nadia’s magic in the past?” asked Shiori in a low whisper. “He seems especially sensitive whenever she uses fire magic.”

“It happened when they were both young, back when Nadia had trouble controlling her magic,” replied Alec, the hint of a smile crossing his face. “She was acting as support during a battle, but the fireball she cast was far too powerful. Clemens, who was acting as vanguard, was caught in the cross fire, and his hair set alight.”

Alec’s gaze went distant as he looked back into the past.

“I was just starting out, back then. Fortunately, Clemens escaped without any injuries. Less fortunately, however, the burned parts of his hair had to be cut, and it left him looking like a monk...”

Shiori had seen monks a few times at Tris Cathedral. At least two-thirds of their heads were shaved, from their necks up towards their heads, with only the hair on the top left to grow. You could perhaps have called it an undercut if you were being polite, but it was very much recognized as the hairstyle of a monk. It was adorably cute on a child, but always looked somewhat questionable on the head of an adult.

It was a truly unfortunate accident, and at the time, Clemens got by using a towel as a bandana. It was so harrowing, however, that he went to a barber the very moment they arrived back in town. He left with his hair cut short all around, and so for a time—until his hair grew back—he looked like a freshly recruited knight.

“Don’t you dare say a word to him about it,” said Alec. “Traumatic doesn’t begin to cover it—that incident’s followed him all this time.”

“I won’t speak a word of it. Never.”

Such free-flowing beauty trapped within a monk’s shaved head. A picture of it began to float up at the edges of Shiori’s imagination, but she hurriedly shooed it away out of respect for Clemens. A certain awkwardness hung in the air between her and Alec as they went on trailing behind the rest of the party.

Though they met a few magical beasts after the vampire rose, none were a match for the party’s A-rankers. All in all, and aside from the trio of Imperial adventurers, their journey had been quite smooth and uneventful.

“It’s just as I thought,” said Annelie, upon peeking into the first two rooms on the fourth floor. “Not particularly different from the first and second floors. Nothing of interest really, and nothing worth looking at. Let’s head for the roof, shall we?”

On their way, they took a lunch break in one of the rooms. Unlike yesterday, they had the luxury of time, and so Shiori passed around some homemade onion soup—one of her portable food creations—along with baguettes, toasted lightly with cheese and ketchup.

Though it was but a small treat for a day out exploring, Walt’s grin stretched from ear to ear as he sipped at his soup. As usual, Dennis was stuck to Shiori’s side as she prepared the portable food, which he found especially fascinating. He showered her in so many questions that Alec and Annelie were forced to pull him away to grant the woman some space. Nadia and Walt chuckled at the sight, and it even raised a wry grin out of Clemens.

After two days of traveling, they had come to know what to expect out of one another.

Refreshed after some warm food, the group continued on their exploration of the tower. They killed any monsters that sprang up, and made their way to the fifth floor. It was, to nobody's surprise, essentially the same as the floor below. The rumors that the tower was a mostly safe ritual for nobles appeared to be true—nobody sending their children here wanted the trial to be so difficult that said children never returned.

Just as they were about to reach the staircase leading to the roof, the party stopped in their tracks. A beast stood before them, but one different to what they had seen until now.

"Is that...a horned hare?" asked Nadia.

"A variant, it would seem," said Clemens.

Horned hares were known for their wheat-brown fur and their pure white horns, but the hare that appeared before them now was white as snow. Only its eyes were a noticeably different color, glimmering with a ruby-like red. It was perhaps one meter long—bigger than the usual hares they'd encountered. The hare stooped low as it glared at the party, baring its fangs and letting out a carnivorous growl.

"Variant, you said? Does that mean we should be worried?"

Nadia smiled reassuringly to calm the concern she heard in Annelie's question.

"They're quite temperamental, it would seem. But nothing to worry about—so long as we're careful, we'll be safe from danger."

The horned hare variant was a beast much faster than its size let on, and it dodged attacks deftly while striking out with its horn and fangs. Even A-rank adventurers might have trouble handling the hare if they weren't ready for its speed. Fortunately, Annelie's bodyguards consisted of a dual sword wielder who was both fast and accurate, a high-level mage with powerful spells at her very fingertips, and a magic swordsman who was impressively quick for one so powerfully built—as Nadia had said, there really was nothing to worry about.

"I'll handle it," said Clemens, unsheathing his dual swords. "Watch over the nobles for me."

“You got it,” replied Alec, gesturing for everyone to make some space for Clemens to work.

Clemens likely had his eyes on capturing the hare for both its meat and its pelt. He was quick and capable of precise attacks, and he would surely be able to kill the beast without spilling its innards and ruining a potential meal.

“Be glad, Sir Walt,” said Alec. “Once we dress the hare, we’ll be able to eat it tomorrow.”

Walt’s face lit up.

“Really?! What good news! I was of the belief that hare meat took days to properly age.”

“Magical beast meat is a little different from ordinary wild animals—the aging time is comparatively shorter. Some say this is because of the magical essence within each beast, but the true reasons remain unknown. Snow wolves are a notable exception—aging their meat takes more than a month.”

“Wow...”

Walt no longer viewed the hare as a magical beast. Now he saw it as a foodstuff.

“I have a feeling that Walt’s goal for this expedition is quite different from that of the rest of us...” muttered Annelie.

“Agreed,” said Dennis with a shrug, scribbling something into his notebook.

Shiori smiled at the interplay between the friends, and began thinking about tomorrow’s menu. Not only did she have what she’d brought with her, but now everyone could indulge in some hare cuisine too. A stew seemed like the best bet.

“Well then,” she said, “perhaps tomorrow we can enjoy horned hare stew, or we can broil it with tomatoes.”

“Wow, I can’t wait!” said Walt. “How lavish!”

“I quite like it grilled,” said Nadia.

“I know what you mean,” said Walt. “Really brings out its unique aroma.”

“Indeed, and it’s even better roasted with herbs.”

“Not this again, big sister...” muttered Shiori.

Shiori decided to let the two meat lovers talk to their heart’s content, and turned her gaze back to Clemens, who was facing off against the horned hare. In battle, everyone had their own role to play, and so there often wasn’t time to closely observe how your companions fought. That made this particular encounter quite valuable.

Clemens readied his swords and dropped into a low stance. He closed the distance to the hare in an instant, already knowing how it would attack. His sword whipped upwards through the air to slice the hare’s long horn off at its base—ramming attacks were the beast’s specialty, and there was a slim chance that the horn might pierce or gouge flesh. With that in mind, it was best to take the hare’s most effective weapon away from it as quickly as possible. This would make it easier to finish it off with its fur and meat in good condition.

Still flowing through with the slice of his blade, Clemens moved into the hare’s blind spot, then instantly put some distance between them. The excellent condition of his swords and his great accuracy allowed him to cut the horn completely free in just three blows, and the noble onlookers let out cheers.

“Amazing... Such beauty of movement...like a sword dance,” said Shiori.

His graceful movements made the act of fighting look like a dance, and combined with the beauty and good looks of the man himself, it was like watching the ferocious yet alluring work of a god of battle.

“Indeed,” said Alec, who spoke his next words with a hint of unease. “It’s not just his face, you know—many a woman has fallen in love with the way he wields his blades.”

“I thought that might be the case. But for one so attractive, I’ve never seen him take a lover. Is he particularly stoic?”

This time, it was not just unease Shiori saw in Alec—he cringed.

“He...well...it’s like he doesn’t even realize, sometimes.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Uh... Never mind.”

Shiori was curious, but Alec did not appear to want to explain himself. Instead, he looked over at Clemens.

“And now it ends,” he said.



With the hare's horn out of play, so was any danger to Clemens's person. He closed in on the hare—which looked lost for a moment at being deprived of its main weapon—and, with his next attack, deliberately missed. At the sight of Clemens suddenly open to a counterattack, the hare stood on its two hind legs and readied its own strike. But this was exactly what Clemens had wanted, because now the hare's heart—its weak point—was vulnerable.

Clemens grinned, and in the next instant was closing in on the beast. The sword in his right hand plunged into the hare's heart, and the monster spasmed, its front legs flinching as if in an attempt to fight back. Clemens saw this too, and thrust the sword in his left hand into the monster's heart also.

The death glare in the hare's eyes faded, and it fell back, dead. The nobles let out a cheer, then remembered they'd been warned to keep their voices down, and all covered their mouths. Clemens removed his blades from the beast, cleaned the blood from them, and sheathed them. He let out a short sigh as he brushed the hair from his eyes.

“Amazing... I wonder if I can capture such a battle in my sketches?”

Annelie had gone red from the excitement of it all, and Dennis tried to calm her down. Walt edged closer to the horned hare's corpse after making sure it was okay for him to do so.

“Wow... Amazing work,” he said. “But how do we carry it? It looks quite heavy.”

“It is,” said Clemens. “Ideally, while Annelie is on the roof taking a look at the view she came for, I'll get to dressing it.”

“Ah, I see... I'd help, but it would get quite cramped in here if we tried to carry it.”

The hare was certainly lighter than a snow bear, but that did not mean it was light. They could see the stairs from where they were, but given the lack of space in the corridors, it would prove difficult to carry the hare with two or three people. It seemed the only choice left was to gut and dress the hare right here. But just as they were thinking that, Rurii poked at Shiori's feet.

“What's up?”

The slime trembled and approached the hare.

“Are you saying you’ll carry it for us?”

The slime nodded and trembled once more. Then it slid beneath the hare and lifted up the corpse. It was careful not to drop it.

“Rurii, you’ll help us with this?” asked Walt, surprised, before adding happily, “You truly are something else!”

Rurii waved a feeler left and right as if to say, *“Leave it to me!”*

“Well then, let’s move on,” said Annelie, her eyes alight with expectation. “I can’t wait to get up to the roof.”

That was their goal: the top of the Tower of Silveria. They walked the staircase up from the fifth floor, with Clemens leading them.

2

Shiori melted the huge piles of snow on the tower roof with the warmth of her magic, then dried the wet stone tiling that remained to make it easier for everyone to walk around. It was only then that she invited the nobles onto the roof. At her word, they stepped out into the air, where thin traces of warmth from Shiori’s spells could still be felt. The sound of their boots upon the stone rang pleasantly into the sky. Annelie simply stood there for a time, until Dennis threw her a look that was worried and also somewhat suspicious.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

His head was tilted in curiosity, and his hair, red like the sky at sunset, fluttered in the wind. Those forget-me-not eyes... People who weren’t used to the pressure of those long, tapered eyes found them frightening, but for more than fifteen years, that gaze had watched over and protected Annelie with a gentle warmth.

She loved them—just as she loved the man they belonged to.

“It’s nothing,” she replied. “I suppose I’m just a little nervous.”

“This is what you’ve been waiting for—the sight you’ve wanted to see for

years.”

Dennis smiled. But this view was not the only reason she had come to the Tower of Silveria. She would not feel nearly this nervous if her only goal had been a scenic view. For Annelie, she had come as part of a ritual—it was time for her to make clear her feelings for Dennis, and make a firm decision for the future. She had waited five years, but by coming here to this tower, they could settle things, once and for all.

She did not know how things would end. In success? In failure? If she were being honest, she was in part grateful that Dennis had postponed it for so long, citing a need for safety—there was every chance the ritual might end in failure, and so long as it never began, things could go on as they always had, and he would remain at her side indefinitely.

But finally, here, now...the time had come.

A few weeks ago, Dennis had come to her excitedly, with good news.

“I’ve found it!” he’d declared. “A safe means of getting to the tower!”

Annelie had of course been happy to hear the news, but her feelings were also far more complicated. There was a part of her that wished things could go on as they had for just a little longer.

But they had made the journey, and they had made it in just two days—two days of countless precious experiences. It was through this journey that Annelie had been able to see for herself the harsh life of adventuring—the knowledge and preparation necessary to survive in such a world, and the skills and methods of experienced adventurers—and terrifying magical beasts. She had also seen more subtle, unforgettable wonders, like the deteriorating artwork of Lukyan Sarayev, and the carvings of the Bazarova dynasty.

But perhaps the biggest impression that had been left upon the margravine was meeting the Eastern woman, Shiori Izumi—it was she who had found a way to put cracks in the wall around Dennis’s heart, built strong from past trauma and nurtured into a hatred of immigrants. It would take time for that wall to be fully demolished, but Annelie was thankful that this journey had become a step towards healing.

Dennis made a decision to change on this journey, and I, too, must show the same resolve.

Dennis knew that the feelings between the two of them were mutual, and yet a sense of inferiority over his past—his bloodline—kept him from crossing the boundary between them. Annelie had decided that she would once again tell him her feelings, and in doing so, she would also confirm his position—would he stay by her side, or would he not?

With her mind made up, Annelie walked forwards. She crossed to the parapet at the edge of the tower, and as she did so, the scenery beyond it slowly revealed itself before her eyes.

Someone behind her let out an awed gasp. The world that stretched out before their eyes was purely, utterly, and completely white.

“Is this the scenery that you wanted to see?” asked Shiori.

“Indeed it is.”

The surrounding forest, and the town far off in the distance, even the sky itself—all of it was covered, as if painted, in snow. It was as if all sound and all heat had been leached from the image, leaving only pure white.

“A world unsullied—of purity and innocence,” Annelie said.

“Purity...and innocence.”

Dennis frowned at the words, bundled as they were in some sort of emotion.

“This is the scenery I have longed for you to see.”

“Me?” asked Dennis.

“Yes, you. But perhaps more accurately...I wanted us to see it together. This is a Lovner family ritual, and though it could be said to have been passed through generations, it has only existed for a few hundred years.”

Annelie glanced at Walt, who nodded, seeing that a deeper discussion was about to begin. Walt called to the adventurers, “Would you mind affording them a little time alone?”

Though a smidge worried, the adventurers gave their permission.

“We can’t let anything happen to you,” said Alec, “so though we’ll remain out of earshot, I hope you understand that we must also remain close enough to come to your aid if need be. If it’s safe to say we’ll be staying here this evening, we will get started setting up camp.”

“I understand. And yes, please get started with campsite preparations.”

Walt and the adventurers walked away, and once he was sure that they were all busy with their own individual tasks, Dennis turned to Annelie with a confused look upon his face.

“Lady Annelie,” he started.

“Annie is fine, here,” she replied. “I’d prefer that.”

“Is this something private, Annie?”

She noticed the deep furrow in his brow.

“You could say that it is, yes. You could also say that it isn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to talk about you and me. Our future. I’m already twenty-five, and I have to start thinking about my successors. A family. I have to make a decision regarding my future.”

“You want to have that talk *now*? In this place?”

There was a stern look in those forget-me-not eyes that she loved so dearly. They seemed to speak to her—*Did we really put you in such danger coming to a place like this just to have this conversation?* He had spent years gathering information, thinking that it was all for his beloved lord’s art, and they had finally arrived here only for him to find out that her true reason for coming was to talk with him. He was not against scolding her when such times were necessary, and he could not accept that they had come to such a place for something that, to him, felt so trivial.

“As I told you, Dennis, this is a Lovner family ritual. No—perhaps it is best called a trial... One that tests me, and tests my family. It is of great importance, and that is why we have come.”

“A Lovner family ritual? But I’ve never heard of any such thing...”

“Of course you haven’t,” Annelie giggled. “It is only called such for convenience, and you can count on one hand the number of times it has been undertaken in the last few hundred years. It wouldn’t be at all surprising if you’d never heard of it—after all, the last person to undertake it was my great-grandmother.”

Annelie’s great-grandmother had, like Annelie herself, inherited the position of lord of the Lovner family four generations ago. Across history, the eldest Lovner child had always inherited this position, regardless of gender.

“And what is this ritual?”

“The first to undertake the ritual was a margravine called Lisbet. It is said that she was a bold and audacious woman. She seemed to like this scenic view so much that she came every year.”

Annelie went on to explain that the woman had quite coincidentally come during the winter to discover this world of pure white. And it was upon seeing this sight that she had envisioned the family ritual—a ritual by which the margravine would share her true feelings, and convince her lover to be her partner in life. It was a ritual that could not be overcome if the margravine was not one of strong resolve.

And it was said that at the time of the first ritual, Lisbet had fallen in love with a wandering artist of unknown origins.

“Annie, you...”

Partner in life.

The words rocked Dennis to his core. He felt dizzy.

“There are some lords of the family who have no need for the ritual, like my father. In his case, his wife was of a similar standing, and so it wasn’t necessary. But in Lisbet’s case it was different. Her lover was of a lower social standing. And no matter how much they loved each other, it remained a wall that her lover could not bring himself to climb.”

Storydia stood apart from other nations in its lesser insistence on social standing, but even now it was still rooted in the ways of the nobility. A difference of a noble title or two typically didn’t pose much of a problem, but it

was rare for a family to allow one of high standing to marry one of the common people. This was especially true when the one who would join the family was a male of low social standing.

In this sense, the Lovner family was, among its noble peers, something of a rebel or renegade. Since the family's first generations, so long as the family traditions could be upheld, the lord's partner in marriage could be anyone they so desired, regardless of social standing or lineage.

Still, it was a distinguished family, and had been since the nation's founding. They were also an eminent name in the art world. As a result of having produced some ten famed artists over the years, the family was now tremendously wealthy. This was why many noble families set their sights on marrying into the family...just as many others, like Dennis, knowing the great reputation and history of the family, distanced themselves.

That Dennis continued to remain by Annelie's side was because the woman herself had so strongly desired it. And this was not simply because she loved him. On top of being an exceptional attendant and secretary, nobody else—aside from Walt—best understood the Lovner family and the lords who protected it generation after generation. Nor did he have any ambition outside of achieving the family's goals.

But the time had come for a decision to be made. Annelie was now twenty-five years of age, and it was her duty to raise a family that could carry on the name after her. If she did not make a decision now, this duty would become that much harder to accomplish.

At the same time, she could not simply keep Dennis bound and single. He was a year older than her, an age where—if he had not stopped himself for her sake—he might already have a beautiful wife and one or two children too.

This was why Annelie was ready for them to make a decision, and for that decision to be final, even if that meant Dennis did not accept her feelings. She turned to face him, looking up as he silently looked down upon her. Behind him was a world of pure, innocent white—a most beautiful contrast to the beautiful, sunset-red hair of the man she so loved.

She loved Dennis because he saw her for who she was, and because he gave her his honest, open heart. She had felt this for him when she was just a girl, and she had always felt this way.

It was he who had said, “You are most beautiful when you are unadorned, without airs, and when you are simply you.” She had felt sure that they felt the same way about each other, and so as they had grown up, she thought of telling him how she felt. But before she’d even had the chance...

“I am not a pure-blooded Storydian,” he had said. “Dirty blood runs through my past, and so I cannot be with the woman I love.”

On that day, he had, in his own way, denied her the chance to open up to him. She was already a countess then, yes, but she was terribly hurt, and had not known what to say.

The day lingered in her memories as one of heartbreak.

To capture a moment as it is, in its natural state.

With her art, Annelie was always in pursuit of capturing that sense of the natural. This was a principle she held as an artist, and anyone who tried to twist this part of her was no different than an enemy.

And so, when it came time to “select playmates for the future lord of the family,” she despised both the children that clung to her every word and those who would attempt to bend her to their own will in attempts to control her. When she turned seven, the “playmates” that were brought to her almost always fell into these two categories, and she detested the vast majority of them. It was nearly certain that their parents had had something to do with it too—they’d either told their children to adore the young Annelie as if she were a goddess, or otherwise treat her as if she were a puppet, and train her for their future marriage.

But Annelie had been educated in the ways of her family lordship since her youth, and, though young, she understood the meaning behind the selection of her new playmates. She knew that it was a way of testing those who would lead the family in the future. The selection process was both a chance to test the future lord’s ability to discern the people around her, and also to select her

aides.

Because she understood this so well, she responded to dishonest praise and compliments with feelings of disgust, and simply did not have fun with the “friends” who tried to keep her under their thumbs.

In this way, two years passed without a single child meeting the young girl’s expectations. And from the very beginning, Annelie’s father and grandfather had worried that finding playmates for the girl would prove a difficult task. For the last two generations, the eldest child in the Lovner line had been male, and then Annelie was born. Neighboring noble families were excited at the prospect—they hoped that a meek and gentle young woman might well fold to their wishes.

Though Annelie showed glimpses of her future strength, in the end she had a girl’s delicate body. Her body was not just different from a male’s, but there was a time during the month during which she could not be as active as her male counterparts. There was also the issue of whether she could fulfill her duty as the lord of the family while she was going through the process of creating heirs. Many noble families thus schemed to seize control of the Lovner line by marrying into it, the excuse being that they would be supplementing Annelie’s female weaknesses. It was for this reason that the vast majority of children introduced to Annelie as potential “playmates” were boys with hidden agendas.

But as Annelie’s father and grandfather had expected, the young girl despised those boys, who reeked of a desire to marry into her family.

Into the middle of these circumstances, then, came Dennis and Walt—boys from a branch family who were both a year older than the young Annelie.

I have no doubt that these two will be just like all the others...

Annelie had essentially given up on the boys before they’d even met, and yet they turned out to be exactly the playmates she was looking for. No sooner had they been introduced than the boys were already asking, “What should we play?” She couldn’t believe what they said next either.

“Is it really true you’ve got a huge garden with lots of fun stuff?”

“Our parents said we can do *anything* as long as it’s not dangerous.”

The young Annelie was shocked: they sounded like they’d actually come to *play*.

That day, they made the most of the renowned Lovner family gardens, playing tag and hide-and-go-seek. When they grew tired of all the running around, they drank sweet milk tea and ate the chef’s best sweets, and they talked of what they liked, the games they liked to play, and all manner of other things.

When the day came to an end, the three of them made a promise to bring their favorite picture books when they next met—then they said their goodbyes and parted ways. The difference of their family standing and their gender meant nothing to Annelie—she’d simply had a truly wonderful day. Even now she could still remember how satisfied she’d felt as she lay down to sleep that same night.

That was the day she had met Dennis and Walt.

As they got to know each other better over time, Annelie began to realize that there were no other people truly suitable as her aides. In general, Dennis and Walt abided by her wishes, but they weren’t afraid to tell her when they thought she’d made a bad judgment. They didn’t do any of this as if they were her seniors, but rather as her friends. When they had hopes and wishes of their own, they spoke of them to her honestly.

The two boys were her friends, and yet even from a young age they were able to discern the difference of status between them. At tea parties and public gatherings, the boys knew to treat her with the dignity that was expected of her position. They understood the workings of their world, and were flexible in a variety of circumstances. Though it was true that the two boys still had much to learn, they were more than suitable when one considered their ages.

So, Dennis and Walt were brought on as trainee attendants after they had known Annelie for about a year. However, though she had acquired the ideal people to work as her aides, their relationship had changed—from friends to that of master and servants. There was also little time for them to spend together in private. The loneliness and solitude of this distance between them sent an ache through Annelie’s heart, and it was Dennis who had seen it in her.

“I feel like you’re not being yourself,” he’d said.

He’d confronted her about it some two months into their adoption as trainee attendants. Having finished his work for the day and made his report, he’d said the words to her quietly, in private. She was happy to hear his usual voice after so long—he’d dropped the stiff politeness of his attendant’s position—but she was stubborn too. As his master she did not want to complain, nor did she want to air her true feelings. She told him, quite stubbornly, that she was fine, and she was doing no such thing.

“The best thing about you is that you don’t put on airs, even though you’re a noble,” Dennis had said in reply. “But now you’re putting on this act. What gives?”

Dennis was bluntly honest. He always had been, ever since they first met. He was who he was—he spoke what he thought, and he did not hold back. And she realized that in much the same way, he saw her for who she was—not as a noble’s daughter, but as a girl; as his friend, Annelie.

“I’m lonely,” she’d said.

“Why?”

“I keep thinking I have to be a proper master, but it’s like I’m pushing you and Walt away from being my friends. I can’t stand the thought of being alone like that.”

“Ah, so that’s it. That’s the same as us, then.”

“Really?”

“Really. We were so excited at being able to be together as friends every day, but then suddenly there was this distance between us. It made us lonely too. But we all feel the same. I’m glad I said something.”

When he’d said that, she’d burst into tears, at which point Dennis had, perhaps a little roughly, dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief. He’d taught her something important that day—she’d thought everything had changed, but in fact nothing had changed at all. Yes, they were her attendants, but even then, they were still her friends.

She had gone to bed that night feeling a sense of relief and a satisfaction that was not unlike the day she had first met Dennis and Walt—and as she fell into slumber, she savored the warm feelings that illuminated her heart.

When I look back, I think that was the day I fell in love with him.

“Oh, I remember that,” said Dennis, who smiled at the nostalgia of Annelie’s memories of the past.

Perhaps because of his position, over the years Dennis had come to wear a sharp expression, like a knight entrusted with her protection. And though she loved that side of him, she would always prefer him now, like this, when his face was filled with a smile.

Annelie knew that Shiori had likely sensed her feelings—her love for Dennis—in her sketchbook. There were more sketches of him than there were of anyone else. And she couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed at a woman—whom she had only just met—getting a glimpse into her heart.

But just as Shiori had sensed her love, Annelie had sensed something similar in the housekeeping mage—and some part of her wanted those feelings to be shared. She wanted to speak of so much with Shiori, who was polite and friendly to all she met, and who gently shared the depths of her heart with those she grew close to.

And yet, I feel a deep, terrifying darkness within her...though such a thing is perhaps not unreasonable, given the long journey she must have taken to get here.

Shiori was not a person born in Storydia, and so was not a pure-blooded Storydian. This was true of Dennis too. Though only slight, Imperial blood flowed through his veins—even though, as a fourth-generation immigrant, the influence was practically nonexistent. However, nobles placed much weight on bloodlines, and so there were many, many nobles who’d taken issue when Dennis was employed as Annelie’s aide.

Dennis was the child of a woman who had thrown away the Lovner name and become one of the common people so as to be wed to a man of an Imperial family line—and an ordinary citizen, no less. Many could not abide that the

child of such a marriage be allowed so close to a Lovner family lord, nor that the lord would put such trust in him. It was for this reason that some attempted to put Dennis at a distance. And there was no greater chance to do so than five years after Dennis had become Annelie's attendant, when his father and an immigrant woman had ended their lives in a double suicide.

In the end, they are Imperials. The boy shares his father's blood, and that family line should not be allowed to be spread any further.

It was a heartbreaking ordeal for Dennis, such that for a while, he had indeed put some distance between himself and the Lovner family. At the time, Annelie's father had passed away at a relatively young age, and Annelie herself was wrapped up and drowned in business and family matters relating to inheriting the family's lordship. The girl was but fourteen years of age, and she struggled to shoulder the responsibilities that came with becoming margravine, as well as managing an entire estate. Walt had been so worried about her mental state that he'd begged Dennis until he agreed to return.

However, though Dennis had lost none of the skills that made him perfect as her secretary, his heart was now wrapped in an intense hatred for immigrant people, and it showed in his darker demeanor. At the mere sight of an immigrant, the change upon his features—and Dennis had always been easy to read—was frightfully clear. It was especially noticeable whenever he met a woman similar to the woman who had stolen his father from his family—a woman with dark black hair.

Dennis did not even try to hide his feelings, and because the Lovner lands were quite full of different nationalities, Annelie found that she could not take him along for certain business meetings, territory inspections, and diplomatic visits. On more than a few occasions, this had brought Dennis to the point of wanting to quit his position entirely. But even then, Annelie could not bear to let him go.

She loved him. She loved that his feelings were raw and honest. She loved that he saw her for who she was. She loved him when he said, "I like the way your art captures things just the way they are."

But this was not the only reason that Annelie refused to let him go. His heart

was in such a fragile, dangerous state that she felt to let him go would be to release him to a place far, far away. A place she could no longer reach.

Ten years had passed since the incident with his father. Dennis had been less openly hateful of immigrants, and Annelie had been able to take him out on more official business. Still, people were quick to criticize him for what had happened a decade ago. They said he was unsuitable for a position at the side of a lord.

This had created a situation in which, though Dennis still stood by Annelie's side, he could not accept her feelings for him. His support for her was support for the lord of the Lovner family.

"But the time has come for us to make a final decision. For me, and for you."

They would be free of this curse of purity, these feelings that had built up around pure blood. They would be free, here, now, as they stood before a landscape that seemed to symbolize purity itself.

3

Walt had been watching Clemens, intrigued, as the man dressed the horned hare, but he took a moment to glance back at his friends, who were looking out at the white scenery around them.

"Purity and innocence..." he muttered. "I had a feeling this trip wasn't just about inspiration for art, but still... I wonder if she's really serious about putting an end to things?"

"An end, you say...?" asked Shiori.

What did he mean?

Walt's usual smile crumbled into despair.

"Dennis has Lovner blood in his veins, but it's mixed with an Imperial bloodline. His mother—my aunt—denounced her noble lineage to be with Dennis's father, and for those reasons there are many who do not approve of him being Lady Annelie's aide. And some have told her as such too..."

"Ah, I see."

There were many who hated the Dolgast Empire and saw it as a brutal, savage place. In their eyes, it was a backwards nation, having kept a system of slavery where the vast majority of other nations had already abolished it. In places like Trisval, which was once Imperial territory, this hatred was not so great—many of its inhabitants were of mixed blood or were otherwise asylum seekers. But in noble families, where bloodlines were still viewed with much importance, things were different.

“I see,” said Alec, his eyes still on guard as he spoke. “In short, people are saying he’s not an appropriate partner for her because he’s not a pure-blooded noble.”

He chuckled, but there was a certain amount of disgust in it.

Come to mention it, Zack brought that up once—that Alec was an illegitimate child made so uncomfortable he decided to flee.

At some point Zack had told her of the circumstances surrounding both him and Alec electing to leave their families. She did not know their lineages, but she knew from the way they held themselves and the way they’d been brought up that they had both been raised well. Wealthy families, perhaps nobles, but both seemed to have come from good homes. To be an illegitimate child in an unwelcoming environment was sure to have been an ordeal.

Though Tris had more freedom of choice when compared to neighboring countries, the tradition of family names and bloodlines was still one with particularly deep roots. Mixed blood. Impurities. There were many who were labeled as outcasts for these reasons—their background and their parentage. Foreigners and illegitimate children struggled even in modern Japan, but perhaps because of her own modern upbringing, the contrast in a still-developing world, such as this one, was all the more stark for Shiori.

She had felt the impact of it firsthand. Though it had almost vanished of late, when she’d first come to Tris, life had been far from easy—all because of her Eastern appearance, which was a rarity in the nation.

But I’m struggling with more than just not being Storydian... I’m not even from this world.

Shiori had been told on many occasions that she was aloof—that she was

distant. And as she glanced at Alec, she saw that there was something vague and distant in his usual strong gaze.

Alec, too, has had his fair share of struggles in his life so far.

When she thought of what Alec had murmured when he'd fallen ill with a fever, she realized it was perhaps beyond her ability to truly imagine, having been raised in such a sheltered environment.

Shiori reached out subtly and, without anyone noticing, brushed Alec's hand with her own. For a moment he reacted with surprise, but his face soon relaxed into an easy smile, as if telling her she needn't worry. His big, warm hand gave her a pat on the back and rubbed it gently.

"But when it comes to upholding Lovner family traditions, there's nobody better suited to Annelie than Dennis. The Lovner family has never let itself be bogged down by issues of bloodlines and family names."

Walt muttered these words, though perhaps not to Alec and Shiori—he was staring out at his friends, who grew a touch closer as they talked with one another.

"But you noticed the relationship between them already, didn't you?" he asked.

"Indeed we did," said Nadia, her lips curling into a smile. "I know he likes to take care of her, but you can tell it's more than just that. While we were out shopping, he was so very worried about which coat she would like best."

He had narrowed the selection down to just two coats, and had thought long and hard about which to buy. In the end, of course, he'd bought both, one with the family's travel expenses, and one out of his own pocket.

At first it seemed like he was just overly attentive to his master, but there was a certain smile on his face when he'd spoken the words, *"I wish to do everything in my power to give her what she wants,"* and then there was the way Annelie gazed longingly at the portraits she had drawn by her own hand.

It was clear to everyone that the two were in love.

"When I looked more closely at the margravine too," said Nadia, "it was as I

thought—she likes to have him in her sights.”

“Nadia...” said Shiori.

“That’s ‘big sister’ to you.”

As was perhaps to be expected of one such as Nadia, she had already noticed the relationship between her clients. Shiori, Alec, and Clemens all looked at one another and chuckled.

“The two of them are very much about being true to themselves, which can admittedly make them easy to read. There are some who don’t agree with their relationship, yes, but most adore the two of them and hope they can find a way to be true to each other.”

There was a gentle, kind light in Walt’s eyes as he spoke—one that came from a person who was friend to two others.

“And as for me...I hope so more than any of them.”

Annelie looked up at Dennis, the man clearly wracked with nerves, and her eyes locked on his own. His red hair looked warm against the white, snowy scenery, and there was kindness in his forget-me-not eyes. How long had she wanted for those two beautiful colors to be hers and hers alone?

“Dennis,” she said, “you are a most valuable attendant. And though I’m sure you have thoughts of your own on the matter, and ever has my own selfishness kept you from doing anything else...you have always done a tremendous job. But I intend for this to be an ending—I am not getting any younger, and you can’t remain in your position indefinitely.”

“Annie...” Dennis uttered. His eyes grew wide, trembling at the realization brought on by her words. It took all he had to force an awkward smile.

“So, at last, you will be releasing me from your employ, then,” he said. “Are you finally...ready for marriage arrangements?”

Dennis’s face was pale, and the edges of his lips quivered. Annelie smiled. He was, and always had been, terribly easy to read. At the mere sound of the word “ending,” he was visibly shaken.

“There will be no need for any arrangement. I’ve already decided who I want

to marry: it's you, Dennis Fryden."

Annelie closed the distance between them just slightly. Dennis's breath caught in his throat and surprise glimmered in his eyes as Annelie placed her left hand softly on his chest—it was as if she wanted to feel the warmth of his beating heart and the movements of his breath.

"I love you," she said. "I wanted to tell you back when we were both younger, but you wouldn't let me when I tried... I've loved you for fifteen years. I love you for telling me that you love my art. And I love you for the way you look at me—not as the daughter of the Lovner family, but as me. As Annelie."

Faced with his margravine's true feelings, unadorned and spoken aloud, Dennis went red, and though he at first made to speak, he eventually held his words back. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes.

"Annie," he said. "I am so happy you feel as you do, and yet, I...I cannot return your feelings in kind."

His voice was hoarse as he forced these words out. Annelie had expected he would say as much, but to have this sentiment spoken so clearly still pierced her to the heart. And yet she knew that it was *here* that the battle had to be fought. That was why she had come to this place—so they could proceed into the future.

"To say you cannot return them...is to say that you do not see me as a woman. I suppose it was merely vanity to think that perhaps you did."

Annelie looked once more into Dennis's forget-me-not eyes, but he could not hold her gaze.

"No, it's not like that at all," he said. "You are a wonderful, charming woman. It's just..."

Dennis trailed off into silence. He tried valiantly to speak the words that should have come next, but all he could muster were pained gasps.

"All those times you tried to leave...why did you let me bring you back?" Annelie asked. "I didn't insist on you because of your position as secretary, I did it because it was *you*. And I did it because I just... I always thought there was a chance, and I will not give up unless you tell me clearly, here and now, that

there isn't. If you feel nothing for me, then I want to hear you speak the words. Only then shall I let you go."

Dennis's lips shook with fear. His gaze fell and he let out a sigh, his hands balling into fists and then opening again, over and over, like an expression of his inner turmoil. All he had to do was utter the words—*I don't love you*—and that would have been enough, but he could not do it. He was too honest for that. He'd lived his life under the same principle as Annelie—that he would be true to himself—and this had always made him a most terrible liar.

And this was why Annelie had always known, since long ago, that he loved her too. She felt it in his eyes and his gaze. It was the warmth in them and the kindness of his smile when he'd spoken the words, "*You are most beautiful when you are unadorned, without airs, and when you are simply you,*" and then run a hand through her hair. It was the smoldering way his eyes looked at her even after he had refused her the chance to reveal her feelings. And it was in the gentle, soft feel of his gaze when she wore the clothes he'd bought for her—always mixed in with the items he bought her for work, and always matching her tastes and preferences.

How could she *not* have noticed the way he looked at her?

Back at the lodging in Silveria, when she had put on the stunning olive-colored coat with its elegantly soft sleeve design, the sheer passion in his eyes had embarrassed her. Was the man himself not aware of it? It was certainly far more passionate than anyone could simply put down to an attendant's loyalty to their master. How was she supposed to simply give up when such a gaze was fixed upon her?

"You need to tell me there's nothing there. Tell me the way you look at me is nothing more than a matter of loyalty and I—"

"It is *not*. Just. Loyalty!" Dennis cut the margravine off, speaking over her. "It wasn't loyalty that kept me by your side, even with all that slander! I love you. I have always loved you. You called me friend—*me*, a man of mixed Imperial blood and not even a member of the nobility. And when you became margravine, still you kept me by your side. You don't look at me with any bias—you see me, and have always seen me, for who I am. I have always loved you,

Annie, just as I know you love me too! And yet...!"

Annelie stood in surprise at the outpouring of Dennis's heart. He took a breath, clenched his fists, and went on.

"I just...I just couldn't say it. I didn't want everyone to think that I only had my eyes on the Lovner family name and its fortune. I didn't want to be called the son of an immigrant who only got close to your family for the money. And...most of all, when I thought of the damage to *your* name at marrying the son of an Imperial who'd abandoned his own wife and child...and when I thought of the harm that might have on a potential child of our own, I...I just couldn't bring myself to say it."

Dennis simply couldn't stand the thought of putting his own wife and child through the painful memories that he and his own mother had been forced to endure.

"But even then," he said, "I never wanted to lie to you, not when you kept me by your side. And I thought that if you never had a chance to share your feelings, I would never need to respond to them... It was cowardly, I know."

And that was why, he revealed, that on the evening that the sixteen-year-old Annelie had hoped to bare her heart to him, he had cut her off, and refused her the chance.

"I love you," he said with a pained grin, "and that is why your feelings bring me joy."

"Dennis..."

"But you know as well as I do that even with Lovner blood in me, I am still a commoner. There is no escaping my Imperial lineage either. On top of it all, within me flows the sullied blood of a man who could not remain faithful to a single woman. You are pure and honest, Annelie, and I am entirely unsuitable for you."

His feelings, finally out in the open. He remained terribly scarred by the actions of his father, who had run away together with another woman. And because of the heartlessness of those around him, he had closed his own heart off, and was now particularly sensitive to talk of lineages and bloodlines.

Annelie had seen it, had watched all of this happen, but at the time she had been young and immature, and could do nothing for him. But she was no longer that powerless young girl. She was not a fragile, delicate type who would easily crack under pressure.

“Pure... What are you talking about? The pure and honest girl of which you speak disappeared a long, long time ago.”

Dennis lifted his head with a start. Annelie smiled.

“One cannot live as a part of noble society by purity and honesty alone,” she said. “I was reluctant, but at times I did what I had to. You were there by my side—you saw this yourself.”

Dennis nodded.

“Just how many things exist in this world that can retain their purity?” Annelie asked him. “I don’t believe that such a thing can exist.”

True purity, true innocence, *did* indeed exist. But it was only ever for a fleeting instant. All things changed with time, fading with everything around them. A newly born infant was an example of such innocence, but it too would grow to lose this quality. Through scoldings, through education, it would learn, and eventually it would come to have its own thoughts about the world. The inner workings of that child would be influenced by the environment around it. Yes, it would lose the purity of the innocence that it once had, but this was simply the process of maturity—a necessity for learning to live and survive in the world.

This idea was just as true in the pure white landscape that stretched out before their eyes. The white they saw now was freshly fallen and entirely unsullied, but it would melt with the end of winter and grow earthier in color as it mixed with gravel and mud. Some might have called it dirty. And yet, it was part of nature’s process of welcoming in the next season. The snow that melted would dampen the soil, and green sprouts would grow there before blooming into vibrant flowers, coloring the landscape anew.

Everything that existed in the world could not go on in a state of innocence and purity forever. Not people, not animals, not plants, and not the scenery they viewed from the tower. All things changed. *People* changed with the

passing of time. It was their natural state of being, and it was why Annelie loved Dennis for being just the way he was.

“Dennis, do you know why the Lovner family places so little value on lineage when it comes to marriage?”

“Because it puts far more focus on the development and continuation of its artistic endeavors and territorial management.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right. But to achieve both of those tasks in a healthy manner requires a broad point of view and a flexible sense of creativity. If we constantly immersed ourselves in matters of lineage and rank and bloodlines, and only ever surrounded ourselves with people who thought similarly, we would eventually stagnate, no matter how well things had started. Such a family could no longer be called healthy. There is also the matter of changing with the times, a matter I think of as very important.”

And this was exactly why the Lovner family did not care for bloodlines. It was also why, over the hundreds of years of the family’s history, commoners and immigrants had at times married the lord of the family. Even the Lovner family’s direct descendants were no longer pure-blooded.

“The very idea of pure blood is meaningless, at least where the Lovner line is concerned,” Annelie said. “The first generation of Lovners weren’t born in this country to begin with. They were wanderers. Vagabonds.”

In the Lovner family history, the rightful heir inherited control of the family. The records that remained were old and did not note where its members had been born. All that was known was that in the beginning there had been a musician on a journey, who had crossed the seas and found himself in this country.

It was said that the first Lovners were not artists, but poets. They traveled from country to country freely, and they took in the sights of these places and their interactions with the people, and turned these feelings into songs. They were minstrels, in that sense.

“You’re saying that the very first Lovner was...an immigrant?” asked Dennis. “I’d heard they were a court poet...”

To hear the truth of the family's origins left Dennis completely and utterly in shock.

"And that is indeed what is left in our records," replied Annelie.

When the king had heard the songs of that first Lovner, he had appointed him court poet. That same poet had eventually acquired his own small but pleasant plot of land and put roots down—he loved his lands as he loved the people who lived upon them. And to make life more enjoyable for those who lived there with him, he was not against bringing in new methods and technologies from both within and outside of the nation.

In his later years, he lived his life writing poetry to his heart's content as he gazed out at his territory—a land which both upheld traditions while developing with the open-mindedness of adopting new methods. It was a joy for him to watch as the landscape changed with each season.

It could not have been easy for the man to have lived this life—he was an outsider, and the nation was in the early stages of its founding. It was governed by nobles who had emerged from the land's native people. But even then, he loved the country's beautiful territories, worked on them together with its people, and over many long years was accepted as just another part of it. In this way, the Lovners had prospered over many generations and was now known as one of the nation's oldest and most esteemed families.

"The first Lovner was an outsider. But he loved these lands as much as any of its citizens. You are no different, are you, Dennis?"

Even if he was an outsider. Even if he was impure—Dennis's heart and mind were dedicated to his country and the Lovner family.

"It is true," he said. "I was born in this country. Raised here. And I love it. The way I feel might not make sense, but no matter what anyone says, I am one of this nation's people."

This was why he was so hurt by the idea of having Imperial blood in his veins. It hurt so much that at times he felt he might break, and yet he did not leave Annelie's side. There was more to this than just his feelings for the margravine, and he began to explain the complicated knot of his emotions.

“I couldn’t let them just do as they pleased with the family and the woman I loved,” he said. “The Lovner lands are so blissfully free, and they are the lands I call home. I could not stand the idea of them being sullied by such bigoted aristocracy, greedy with their hunger for power.”

“Dennis...” Annelie said, her feelings spilling from her face in a smile. She had always known it—Dennis was the right man for her. “Your devotion is exactly what the Lovner family needs. It’s not just your love for me, but your love for the family and its territory...” She moved in closer and placed her head upon his chest. “I need you by my side. Dennis, you are the man I want to help me protect my family line.”

“Annie...”

His arms timidly reached around towards her back, but wandered upwards just before they were about to embrace her.

“But you must understand that to be with me means you cannot escape criticism,” he said. “You’ve already received enough as it is.”

Though many praised Annelie as a young artist, some still ridiculed her behind her back. They said while she was beautiful, she was past her prime, and still hung up on her first love—with a lower-class foreigner as a servant to boot. Annelie had to laugh—the criticism wasn’t altogether wrong.

“It hurts to be showered in verbal barbs for me too. I’m only human. But I will never regret making you my life partner. Do not say you will protect me from gossip, or that you will endure it on my behalf. We will face our problems together. That is what husbands and wives do. It may sound idealistic, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you, even if we have to fight to do it.”

There wasn’t a hint of a lie in her words, and Dennis was astounded by the strength of Annelie’s resolve. He looked towards the sky and closed his eyes. His face softened into a wry grin.

“I give up,” he said.

His arms, once filled with doubt, now wrapped themselves around the margravine and pulled her in close. Behind them he heard cheers—based on the voices, they had come from Walt and Nadia.

“You were prepared to come to a place as dangerous as this, just for me,” he said. “And then the lengths you went to in order to convince me—any man would be a fool to turn you down.”

“So you accept, then.”

“I do, and I do so gladly. I pledge here and now that I will spend the rest of my life with you.”

There was a strong resolve in Dennis’s words. They were filled with the realization of a love that had taken fifteen years to bloom. The red of Dennis’s hair and his forget-me-not eyes colored the canvas of Annelie’s heart. She stood on her tiptoes, looked him in the eyes, and kissed him. She felt the cool touch of his lips and the warmth of his breath. She indulged in the gentle melt of his lips as his hand went up to her neck and his tongue entered her mouth. She felt lost in the heat of their breath.

And just like that, they both seemed to remember that they were in front of people, and softly pulled apart, bashful looks on their faces. Their gazes entwined and then turned towards the winter landscape that spread out from the rooftop.

“I hope someday we can come back to see this again,” Dennis said, “when the snow has melted.”

One day, when the pure white snow had soaked into the earthy hues that heralded the coming of spring.

“As do I,” said Annelie, and then added with a cheeky grin, “However, do you not think it would be a pain, being escorted through muddy paths?”

“It may well be indeed.”

The two shared a smile and looked back out at the snow.

“My father...” uttered Dennis, still looking out at the scenery. “I think it’s about time I came to terms with it all.”

“With what he did?”

He was a man who had thrown away his family and chosen to run away with a foreign woman, only to choose the path of shared death. Annelie had met him a

few times, and he had struck her as a man of great conviction, but one who was also frank and honest. He had been sincere about both his work and his family, and she remembered him as a good man. It was for this very reason that the news of his double suicide had come as such a heavy shock.

Afterwards, Dennis had refused any attempt to talk of his father, so strong were his feelings of hatred. For a time he could barely even bring himself to be close to adventurers. And yet now, he intended to come to terms with it all.

“I may not understand it, but I want to at least know why he chose the path he did.”

Those most involved in the heart of the matter were dead, so there were far more questions than there were any answers. But all the same, there had to be something written down in the records of the Lovner Adventurers’ Guild, as the man had been a member.

“I think it’s a good idea.”

Annelie knew it was something Dennis had to do if he wanted to be able to look past the incident and into his own future. They gazed at one another again, and shared once more of a light kiss before turning away from the wintry landscape.

They found their friend running towards them, with the adventurers slowly following behind. All of them wore gentle, kind smiles, and Annelie, too, sent the same smile to the man who was now her lover.

A few years later...

The painter Annelie Lovner would announce a series of paintings, titled “The Purity of Ever-Changing Scenery.” The work displays a series of landscapes captured vividly from Silveria Tower across the seasons. It aims to showcase the idea that there is no such thing as true purity, and that the world is beautiful for exactly what it is—the delicate and precious change of one thing into another. Though the series was controversial for its perceived take on noble and pure-blooded mindsets, it was nonetheless critically acclaimed.

The series would go on to be a defining work of the artist, cementing her as a

representative artist of her nation in the years to come.



4

“Aw, shucks, guys... Could you make a pal any happier?!”

Overcome with emotion, his eyes filled with tears, Walt wrapped Annelie and Dennis in a big hug, the two of them smiling in their big friend’s embrace. Shiori shared smiles with her fellow adventurers at the sight of the childhood friends, all so cheerful.

“Well then, please allow me to offer my congratulations,” said Nadia.

“Thank you,” replied Annelie. “I’m just... I’m so glad we came. I’ve achieved what I came here to do, and I’ve gotten so much out of this trip. And I truly owe it all to everyone who came with me. Thank you, really.”

“I should thank you all too,” said Dennis. “I know how things started, but...I feel ready to face my problems now.”

While Annelie was bright and happy with an overflowing joy, Dennis looked more as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders—he, too, was in good spirits.

Shiori did not know what had happened between them in their past. But she knew enough to realize that it had not been smooth sailing to get to where they now were. She was glad to think that she’d been able to play a small part in helping them to take a step into the future together.

“I am simply glad we could be of service,” Shiori said. “I am so happy for the both of you.”

It seemed that they had chosen a path into the future together, and from the very bottom of her heart, she hoped that their life would be one of great happiness.

“Thank you,” said Annelie. “I’m sure there will be a lot of hurdles for us to jump on our return, but for now I just want to bask in this feeling and not think about the rest of it.”

“Well, in that case,” said Shiori with a grin, “I’ll have to come up with something celebratory for tonight’s dinner. Given where we are, however, I

hope you understand that I won't be able to go all out."

Annelie and Walt whooped with joy, and though Dennis scolded them for it, he too was at ease. The air was lively with cheer, and though the air outside of the barriers was cold enough to cut the skin, here everyone could relax in the gentle warmth of their delight at the young couple's romance.

In a corner of the rooftop warmed with her magic, Shiori reached into her rucksack and pulled out the foodstuff for cooking she'd brought with her.

"Now, what to do about dinner...?" she muttered.

They had a horned hare now, so they certainly weren't hurting for ingredients, which meant that she could afford to be a little more extravagant than usual.

"Okay! We'll use this, and this, and this, and...this."

Shiori placed all of the different foods out on the workbench. She had some semi-prepared vegetables, white sauce, liver paste, baguettes, and mussels in oil. There was also the recently dressed horned hare meat and bones.

"What's on the menu?" asked Alec.

"Pot-baked gratin with liver paste open sandwiches, and hare meatball soup."

Pot-baked gratin was a delicious meal with a hearty appearance, which made it perfect for celebrations.

"Quite the indulgence. Can't wait."

"It's going to be great!" said Shiori.

For a moment Alec broke into a smile, but then his face grew serious.

"About that other trio of adventurers," he said.

"Ah...yes. They're still here. But I suppose that can't be helped, being that night has fallen."

They had given the Imperial trio some food on the condition that they had to head back to town immediately, but ever since then the trio had remained in the same location.

“You don’t think they intend to spend the night here and then meet with us tomorrow?” asked Clemens.

“So long as they’re obedient, we *could* conceivably take them with us,” said Nadia.

But both adventurers wore grim looks—neither wanted to deal with the trio if they didn’t have to.

“Well, that depends on the client,” said Alec.

“I don’t want to spoil the mood, but do you think we should let them know?”

“I feel the same way, but it’s our duty to keep them informed.”

When she heard the situation, Annelie shrugged—there was little more they could do.

“So that’s what it’s come to...” she muttered. “I doubt they’ll have much chance of getting back with their lack of equipment and almost nonexistent food supplies. Abandoning them here would probably haunt me, so I don’t mind taking them back with us.”

Walt looked worried.

“But what if they’re just waiting for an opportunity to attack us?”

“They’ve already seen the difference in our abilities, so I’d like to think they wouldn’t be so stupid,” said Alec. “Still, if we were to bring them back with us, we’d have to be on high alert the whole time. We can’t say for certain that they wouldn’t act out in desperation.”

“You have my thanks.”

With their stance on how to handle the Imperial trio decided, everyone went back to their various tasks. Alec and the adventurers returned to guard duty, and Rurii stretched out over the stairway entrance, resting as it kept a watchful eye out. Annelie and her two aides sat at the table in the center of the camp, reminiscing on the past and talking about the future. Shiori went about her cooking, sometimes giggling at the excited conversation from the table.

“I suppose we’ll start with the soup,” she said to herself.

Shiori took the meat from the hare bones and put it in a bowl, then added some water to a pot along with the bones and set to heating it to flavor the soup. While that was simmering, she went about making meatballs—she took the hare meat from the bowl along with the bigger cuts, put it all in a different pot, and then, after putting a lid on tight, cast a wind spell.

“Food Processor!”

Sharp, cutting winds whirled within the pot. When Shiori took the lid off, she was left with all the meat minced up nicely.

“Magic. So delightfully convenient.”

“If only I could use magic...”

Shiori yelped in surprise at the sudden voices. Dennis was on one side of her with his notebook, Annelie was behind with her sketchbook, and Walt was looking on curiously. Shiori had been so focused on her work she’d never even noticed.

“That magic you used just now,” said Annelie. “Is it of your own creation?”

“Er...um...yes, actually.”

As they all talked, Shiori added salt and pepper to the meat along with sliced onion, and herbal flour to help remove the game smell from the meatballs.

“I wonder if other mages can learn to use your housekeeping spells?” asked Dennis.

“Perhaps with practice, it would be possible, yes...”

Shiori was trying not to give Dennis a straight answer. When she thought back to the sight of a few fellow adventurers attempting to learn her cooking and cleaning magic—“daily life magic” was perhaps the best cover-all term for it—she wasn’t sure how best to respond.

“Perhaps,” said Clemens, jumping into the conversation, “but until you mastered it, you’d have to be very careful you didn’t hurt or damage anything around you.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

The nobles stared blankly, while Clemens, for his part, wore something of a wry grin as he looked over at Nadia. It simply wasn't easy for those with an abundance of magical energy to cast spells that required delicate, subtle control. Attempts at clothes-washing would result in showers over the entire camp, while attempts to make baths resulted in creations more akin to muddy swamps.

This was true of Nadia too. It had happened back when Shiori first started working with her and Clemens. Nadia had taken a keen interest in Shiori's food processor spell and wanted to try it herself—and Shiori's big mistake had been thinking that Nadia could handle it with ease because she was a high-level mage.

The results, however, had been tragic.

"Nadia used so much magic that she diced up not just the contents of the pot, but the actual pot itself too."

"Even the pot?!"

What had been even more unfortunate, perhaps, was that because Shiori had been preparing a curry-esque dish at the time, the damage had been all the greater. Nadia had quickly cast a barrier spell and Rurii had stretched itself out to protect Shiori from bits of flying pot, but the camp was turned into a curry-covered mess. Shiori could still remember Nadia shrinking meekly into apologies, while Clemens had been so angry a vein popped up on the side of his head. It was the kind of mistake that, in a worst-case scenario, could have been life-threatening, and Nadia had been thoroughly scolded by not just her own party members, but Zack too.

All of that said, Nadia had bought Shiori replacements—a whole set of top-of-the-line, lightweight pots, in fact—and these were the very pots that Shiori still used to this day.

"We've been lucky to have Shiori's washing and bath magic to see us through this trip, but if it were someone else..."

Clemens's gaze grew distant as he looked back upon memories of the past.

"Oh my," said Annelie.

Dennis and Walt also let out strange moans as they imagined it.

“I suppose I’ll just have to put my idea of recruiting a few personal mages on hold for the time being,” said Dennis, who had apparently been entertaining the idea of training a few housekeeping mages for future expeditions with Annelie. “Ah, I know,” he went on, “we’ll just make Miss Shiori the Lovner family’s personal—”

Before Dennis could finish his sentence, Alec placed a hand on his shoulder.

“May I ask that you *kindly* refrain from poaching our members?” Alec asked.

There was a polite smile on his face, but his eyes seemed to say something very different. Still, everyone around couldn’t help but laugh now that the two men had fallen into the same shtick they always did.

“Come on, now,” said Annelie, who could see Dennis wasn’t finished but pulled him away nonetheless. “Shiori will never get any cooking done while we’re bothering her in the kitchen.”

“Can’t believe I still have to keep my eye on that guy...” muttered Alec.

“Alec...”

Shiori giggled at how protective Alec was, and then went about scooping the scum from the surface of the soup before putting the meatballs and vegetables in. Once she added salt and pepper to flavor, it was just a matter of simmering it all.

“Next up, the gratin.”

This meal, too, was quite simple, as Shiori could use the semi-prepared ingredients she’d already brought with her. First she melted some fragrant butter in a pot, then sliced up the oiled mussels and onion and threw it in to fry. Once it was all looking cooked in oil, she added mashed potato, salt and pepper, and let it cook a little longer. All that was left then was to add the white sauce and cheese—then she could put a lid on it, bring the heat down, and let it cook in the oven. That was all it took to prepare a pot-baked gratin with sweet onions and delicious mussels.

In terms of dinner preparations, all that remained was toasting the baguettes

and spreading the liver paste on them. A pleasant scent filled the air, and Walt, who had been chatting at the table, began to grow fidgety as the food was laid out before him. Shiori ladled the meatball soup into cups, and put the pot-baked gratin in the center of the table. When she lifted the lid, the cheese sizzled pleasantly.

“Just a little more,” she said, letting a hint of magical fire escape her fingertips to cook the surface of the gratin.

“What a feast,” said a joyous Annelie. “So this is outdoor cuisine, then. Looks ravishing!”

“This is indeed a very popular camping dish,” said Shiori.

“Do you mind if I draw it? It could make a wonderful addition to an adventuring novel.”

“Wow. Um, please, go right ahead.”

Annelie promised that when the novel was published, she would send Shiori a copy. It was certainly something to look forward to. Shiori went about filling plates with the liver paste open sandwiches, some bottled pickles, and the piping hot gratin.

“Rurii, will you be eating tonight?” Shiori asked.

Rurii pointed to a corner of the roof with a feeler. It seemed the slime was most interested in the leftover horned hare parts. Shiori gave the okay, and the slime wobbled off happily to indulge in its share of the spoils. Soon enough, everyone had taken a seat at the table.

“On tonight’s menu, we’ve got open sandwiches with liver paste, pot-baked mussel gratin, and horned hare meatball soup. Please dig in! Oh, and there’s enough for seconds too.”

“Wow...”

The nobles were awed at the feast—it was the kind of thing they never would have expected while outdoors on an expedition.

“Grub’s up!”

“It’s hot, but...so good!”

“I can feel it warming the core of my body.”

“The scent of the mussels and the cheese...exquisite!”

It relieved Shiori to see and hear everyone enjoying the food.

“You know, with a taste as rich and flavorful as this,” said Walt, “I would just about kill for a drink to go with it.”

“Ah...that would indeed be nice,” said Dennis.

Shiori had to admit—a little red wine would have gone perfect with it all.

“I happen to have brought some drinks with me,” said Clemens.

“Unfortunately there’s only enough for an aperitif in terms of size, but I’m happy to share it if you like.”

“Oh, really? Well, if it’s not too much trouble, we’d love some.”

Clemens’s suggestion had everyone in a more joyous mood, and he reached into his knapsack to bring forth a few small bottles. For some reason, the action caused Alec to stand from the bench in surprise.

“Hey!” he said. “Don’t you dare tell me you’re offering your ominous, cursed liquor to our clients...”

“Now this,” said Clemens, ignoring him, “is called ‘Rosa Alskare,’ which means ‘the crimson lovers.’ Much as the name suggests, it’s a powerful wine with a refreshing sweetness. This one is called ‘Djuprod Mane,’ which means ‘the deep red of the moon.’ It’s perhaps an acquired taste, but it’s a beautiful deep crimson in color with a full-bodied aroma. Both are based on stories of romance, reportedly. Perfect for the two of you.”

“What the...?” uttered Alec.

His face twitched as he reached over and tapped Clemens on the shoulder as the man continued discussing the wine selection.

“If you had these from the start, why did you offer me the other cursed stuff?”

“Hm? Oh...*that*. Well, I thought a little revenge was in order for the man who took from before my eyes that which I loved and adored in secret.”

“Oh, you. Did. Not...” muttered Alec.

Shiori looked over at the two men as they spat whispered barbs at one another, and tilted her head.

“Um, is something the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Alec, “just a little something between the two of us.”

The best she got from them was a blinding grin from Clemens, and Alec grinding his teeth. Nonetheless, everyone tiptoed around the issue as the bottles of wine were passed around, poured into the lids of people’s canteens for a toast.

“Here’s to the prosperity of the Lovner family,” said Clemens, “and Annelie and Dennis as they head off to a new life together.”

Everyone raised their drinks.

“Cheers!”

Annelie and Dennis smiled happily, and those around smiled brightly with them. Clemens sat in the corner as the celebrations went on, staring at Shiori, then shifting his gaze to Alec, who casually slid up to be by her side. A smile rose to Clemens’s lips.

Alec carried a great wound of sorts upon his heart, and yet, recently he showed a more relaxed expression, one of ease—proof, perhaps, that the man had found healing, Clemens thought. An image passed through his mind of the past—of a young Alec looking haggard and gaunt.

When Clemens was only a young rookie starting out, Zack had introduced him to a young man by the name of Alec. Zack said nothing of who he was nor where he’d come from. But Zack himself had once been an officer to the second prince, and in the young man named Alec—with his chestnut hair and his dark magenta eyes—Clemens had felt an inkling for who he really was.

Some months ago, the third prince—an illegitimate child of the king—had gone missing from the castle. The missing prince’s strong connection with the

crown prince was well known, but all the same, he had been made the figurehead in a battle over the throne. Rumor had it that after much worry, the third prince had elected to run away. Some whispered of suicide and assassination—rumors that prince Aleksey was no longer of this world.

When they had been brought together, Clemens had inferred Alec's identity, and remembered thinking he was simply glad that the third prince was not dead.

Zack hadn't given anything away, but he had to have known that Clemens knew. That he said nothing of it, and that he brought them together all the same, was proof that he trusted Clemens. Given his own merchant family background and his personality, Clemens was not one to go sharing the secrets of others. So he had said nothing then, just as he never intended to say anything now.

In this way, he and Alec had become partners of a sort—friends and rivals who had escaped the jaws of death countless times—and strong brothers-in-arms.

Ten years had passed, and then Clemens had met Shiori, and his feelings of protection had bloomed into love. However, by the time he realized that he held feelings for the woman, she was already in the arms of his best friend.

Clemens needed more time to organize his thoughts and his feelings, and to get over his heartbreak. It was a most bitter, most painful experience for a love to end before it could ever be confessed. And then there was the fact that the object of his affection had been taken by none other than his best friend of many long years. Clemens knew he should be happy for them both, and yet the pit of his heart itched with an unceasing ache. The feelings were complicated, and he still could not let them go.

But even then, he knew that when his feelings eventually dissipated, and when they sunk into the depths of his heart as mere memories, then he would be ready.

And I will celebrate your joy from the bottom of my heart, Alec.

And so for now, Clemens shared his treasured alcohol collection with the others, and they would talk deep into the night—as friends, and as companions.

Clemens drank down the remains of his cup. It was a complicated flavor, and one that was interwoven with both sweetness and bitterness.

5

The lively but small-scale party on the roof of the tower came to a close when the food ran out. All the same, Shiori had to giggle—it did not seem as if the three nobles would sleep very much, still reverberating with the joy and celebration of a love finally realized.

Even after they'd had their baths and drank cups of herbal tea, and even as bedtime neared, none of the nobles were yet ready for sleep. They even seemed a little worried about that fact. Shiori, watching them, had an idea.

"Shall I play some music to help you relax?" she asked.

"Relaxing music?"

"Yes. It's called healing music. It's something to listen to especially when you can't sleep."

And indeed, it was something that Shiori listened to sometimes for just that reason. It wasn't always effective, but all the same, she figured it couldn't hurt to try.

"I've never heard of it, but it sounds intriguing. How does it work, exactly? Are you going to sing for us, Shiori?" asked Annelie.

"Er, no, that's perhaps not a good idea..." said Shiori with a chuckle. "I'll play it with illusion magic. Do you mind if I sit at the entrance of your tent? You can all lay down inside and then I'll cast the spell."

This was the same illusion magic Shiori had used on her visit to the orphanage to play her movie. The three nobles excitedly took off their boots, changed into more comfortable clothes, and wrapped themselves in their blankets. Then, when the magical lantern was extinguished, Shiori closed her eyes and focused. She pictured the CD she liked to listen to, and the booklet with its design inspired by space—a sky the color of Alec's eyes, covered in shining stars. The music on the album had been inspired by space and the galaxy.

I really loved that CD...

Shiori had left everything she had ever known in her former world—her savings, her favorite clothes, her accessories, her books, her photo albums, her friends and family. Countless treasures accumulated over some twenty years, and now beyond her reach.

Can't let myself get distracted. Have to focus...

A single tear ran down Shiori's cheek, but she concentrated on her spell.

Seeing as I'm doing this much already, I may as well cast an image for them too...

Shiori let the magic in her body swirl, and funneled it into an image that played within the tent. She projected a starry sky upon the ceiling, transforming the tent into a planetarium. At the same time, a gentle synthesizer began to play.

"Whoa..."

"It's beautiful..."

But their awed voices soon fell into silence as the three nobles lost themselves in the sight of the miniature starry sky. They drifted upon the gentle swaying of the music and slowly fell into slumber. First Walt, then Dennis, and finally Annelie. When the music finally faded, all that remained was the peaceful breathing of the sleeping nobles.

It seemed that for all intents and purposes, the healing music had been a success. When Shiori was certain everyone was asleep, she let the illusion on the ceiling of the tent fade.

They were three close-knit friends. Annelie and Dennis would soon be wed and eventually start a family, and Walt was sure to watch over them. In this way, they would all start a new life filled with rare, priceless treasures and experiences.

I wonder if I can still have that?

Shiori would never be able to get back the things she had lost from her home world. But if it were at all possible, she hoped she might be able to fill this new

one with things that were precious and important. She longed to create fond memories.

She had crossed the chasm from one world into another, but she felt sure that such a thing would not happen again. And so she had to accept things the way they were. This was the world in which Shiori now lived, with a great many people that she loved. And she had made the decision to live this life, together with them—with Alec and the people she called her friends.

Shiori placed a hand softly to the bracelet on her left arm. Alec had given it to her, and it contained a beautiful gem the same color as his eyes. She gave the dark magenta gem a soft kiss, then wiped the tear from her cheek. She wished the three nobles—all sleeping with gentle smiles upon their faces—a quiet good night, and closed the flaps of their tent.

Outside, the scenery was wrapped in a blanket of darkness, and countless stars sparkled in the purple-blue of the sky above. Beneath it, Alec stood on guard, and he turned towards Shiori. The wind swept through his chestnut brown hair, revealing his beautiful dark magenta eyes beneath. They softened into a smile, and he reached a hand out towards her. When she took it, he pulled her into his embrace, where they stayed for a time, staring up at the starry sky.

It was a sky with different constellations to that of Japan. But to the north, she saw some she recognized. Cassiopeia, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor. And further down, Polaris. The guiding star was much, much higher in the sky than in Japan. It was this sky, with its stars the same as those back home, and only this sky, that gave Shiori a feeling of connection to the world from which she had come. And it was for this reason that Shiori had come to enjoy staring at the evening sky to the north. And here, now, she loved that she could watch it together with the man she loved.

“Shiori.”

The low, sweet voice spoke softly from above her. She looked up into a gaze that stared back down at her warmly. Alec put a hand to her cheek, and pulled her softly towards him.

Their clients and their companions were fast asleep, and there was nothing

more to look at but the stars. Their lips pressed warmly together in the silence, all the sounds around them lost in the falling snow. They shared each other's warmth, melting into one another as their tongues intertwined.

The hand that wrapped around Shiori's waist slackened, tracing the line of her body—sweetly, gently, and alluringly. It dropped from her back to her hips, and then just as she thought it would drop lower still, it traced back upwards, and Shiori felt her body tremble. A part of herself felt embarrassed at doing this where they were, but the feeling was buried and lost, and she was at the mercy of their passionate kisses. She fought back the groan that threatened to escape her lips, and fell into the fiery warmth of Alec's body.

I love you. I love you so much.

The words formed in her mind as he indulged in her, and they escaped as sighs, fading into the air. Alec took his mouth from hers and silently kissed the flesh of her collarbone, causing her to jump. He felt the slight resistance in her voice, and with a mischievous smile he breathed softly on her neck—just this alone sent heat flushing through Shiori's body.



“Shiori, one day, when I have settled things, will you...”

But the words that were supposed to follow never came, and instead Alec pressed his lips once more into Shiori’s throat. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he once more passionately left what she thought of as a mark of possession, and she looked up at the sky above—the stars glittering like gold dust in a blanket of dark magenta.

Alec, he’s like the night sky...

He pulled her into his powerful body, and he brought her healing—softly, warmly—like evening slumber. Shiori closed her eyes, giving herself to his arms as he left his mark upon her.

One day, I’ll tell him everything...

And the deep sky looked down upon them, as if it might absorb them completely, while they lost themselves in the sweet, tender embrace of lovers.

Interlude 1: A Chance for Cultural Exchange

Even with the extreme cold and the ongoing snow, Annelie had enjoyed a heartfelt banquet in the pleasant warmth of their campsite, and now soaked in a warm bath. She was at the very height of satisfaction.

“Such luxuries...” she murmured.

Warm food and bedding, a bath—she had always thought of these things as a given, but she now knew better, having ventured into the unforgiving wilderness with all of its dangers, and spent time with only the barest of necessities. Her everyday life was filled with what were actually great luxuries, and coming to realize this fact was one of the most valuable things she had learned upon this particular expedition.

“My whole life I’ve eaten well, dressed in clean clothes, and slept in comfortable, warm bedding. It has always felt completely natural, like a basic human standard.”

But even that—basic human standards—was a policy implemented by the king just two generations ago.

That all citizens may live in a humane fashion...

Still, the definition of “natural” and “humane” often got more and more muddled as one went higher up the noble hierarchy. There were too few opportunities to put things into perspective. Annelie considered herself lucky to be blessed with such an opportunity.

With each passing generation until the present king, the life of the citizens grew more plentiful and abundant. Before that, however, they had been suppressed under Imperial rule. And yet, there were still too many who scraped by day by day, so far from the luxuries that others took for granted. Unfortunately, eradicating poverty was likely an impossible task. But it was the king’s duty to do as best he could, and there was indeed still much that could be accomplished.

When it came to poverty, it was the weakest who suffered first—people of low social standing, whose positions in life were fragile. This was not just the elderly and the sick, however; it was also women and children—those who would raise the next generation, and those who would shoulder it—cut away as if they were nothing.

Annelie knew of the time of Imperial reign—of life after the kingdom had been restored to sovereignty—only through history books. With its lands ravaged, and the kingdom had gone through decades of great poverty just to make them livable once more. Annelie was now a lord who governed over a portion of that land, and so it was something she would not soon forget.

In much the same way, she would not soon forget the haggard, broken faces of the Imperial adventurers they had encountered—a trio that had come from a country now in its death throes.

“We really have to do our utmost...” she muttered.

By this, she meant together with Dennis, Walt, and the many people who supported them.

When Annelie finished in the bath, she got dressed, took a seat at the table

and let out a deep breath. Shiori quickly readied her a cup of herbal tea, and Annelie sipped at it while the housekeeping mage dried her hair.

“Thank you,” Annelie said.

Shiori replied with a bashful smile—one that made her appear so very innocent. With her smooth skin and her glossy hair, one could have been easily convinced that she was in her twenties, though they might not have been surprised to find she was actually in her thirties either—Shiori’s appearance was malleable in that way. Though she exuded a certain youth, the aura around her was not that of a naive young girl.

I’ve heard that Easterners tend to look young, but it really is difficult to pin down their age.

Perhaps it was for this reason that in older times, it was said that Easterners hid the secrets to rejuvenation and immortality. This led to no small amount of what were essentially kidnappings, in search of these supposed secrets. Though nobody was quite so stupid as to believe such stories anymore, many still approached Easterners with hidden motives. And it was true to say that there was a strange charm to Shiori, something fleeting and irresistible, that brought to mind those old rumors.

But Alec is different. It is not just her appearance that captivates him—he is drawn to her heart, and he loves her for who she is as a complete person.

The party had only been traveling together for a few days, and yet Annelie could tell that Shiori and Alec loved and valued one another. Neither one was more reliant than the other—they seemed to support each other in a state of equilibrium.

I hope that Dennis and I can achieve the same thing.

Annelie felt her gaze drifting over to Shiori as she thought of this, and her eyes stopped at the woman’s knapsack, half-open on the kitchen counter. Some of its contents were sitting out in the open—it seemed Shiori had been in the midst of organizing her baggage.

“Oh, pardon me,” said Shiori, “I don’t mean to be so messy.”

“No, please pay it no mind, such a trivial thing doesn’t bother me in the

slightest,” said Annelie, who then stopped Shiori from tidying the knapsack. “But what do you carry inside of it? It was so heavy when I tried to carry it myself.”

“Would you like to take a look?”

“Is that quite all right? As long as it’s no bother, I’d love to see inside.”

Shiori had likely made the offer because of the intrigued look on Annelie’s face—she knew that the Tris Adventurers’ Guild rated Shiori very highly, and she wondered what such an adventurer carried with her.

So, Shiori began to take out the contents of her knapsack, much to Annelie’s delight. In a matter of moments, the margravine was joined by an equally intrigued Dennis and Walt. Dennis, of course, whipped out his trusty notebook, and for a moment Annelie wasn’t sure if it was right for a man to carefully observe and record what a woman carried in her knapsack. She soon came to the conclusion, however, that Dennis wasn’t the type to have ulterior motives.

Perhaps it’s actually more helpful for him to take those notes on my behalf.

And with these thoughts in mind, Annelie looked back at Shiori’s knapsack, and at Shiori as she spread its contents on the table. At first, Walt was awed and delighted, but his face grew more serious as Shiori went on. Dennis, too, who was scribbling earnestly in his notebook, frowned at the sight.

“This...is so much more than I could have imagined,” uttered Annelie.

Walt and Dennis could only nod gravely in response.

The content of Shiori’s baggage, as a dedicated housekeeping mage, were recorded in Dennis’s notebook as follows:

Belt pouch (medium)

Emergency medical supplies: Salve ointment, antidotes, antiseptic, bandages, gauze, scissors, tweezers, forceps (made by Aulin Dispensary).

Belt pouch (large)

Low-grade magical recovery potions: ten.

Towel: cut and resewn for ease of use.

Rations: one day's worth (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Canteen: a lightweight metal canteen and spare water packs (both made by Enandel Trading Company).

Portable material encyclopedia: an illustrated guide to magical beast and plant life materials (a bestseller published by Sederholm Publishing).

Writing implements: pencil, notebook.

Knapsack

Blankets: two Tris hare fur blankets (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Waterproof sheet: snow bear fur sheet with erve four inner lining (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Change of clothes: one day's worth (also used to replace damaged/dirtied clothing).

Cold-weather gear: a poncho for snow/rain, a stole (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Boots: a spare pair in case of damage (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Magical lantern: portable lighting (made by Enandel Trading Company).

First aid box: painkillers, fever medication, digestive medicine, insect bite ointment, bug spray, eye drops, compresses (made by Aulin Dispensary).

Low-grade magical recovery potions: reserve stock.

Sanitary products: emergency feminine hygiene set (the underwear is new, and invoiced when used).

Bath items: tent for the bath, portable washbasin, soap, towel.

Face-washing items: assorted makeup, face-washing soap, comb, toothbrush, hand mirror.

Sewing equipment: needle, marking pin, thread, buttons, several pieces of fabric.

Laundry equipment: laundry nets, soap, fruit vinegar (for use as softener), clothes pegs, rope.

Gathering equipment: containers, bags, tweezers, scissors (made by Enandel Trading Company).

Cooking equipment: kitchen knife, cutting board, soup ladle, wooden spatula, long chopsticks (a utensil used in Eastern cuisine), pots, kitchen towels, foldable knife.

Dining equipment: plates, cups, cutlery (metal in summer, wooden in winter, both made from lightweight materials).

Preserved foodstuffs: canned foods, homemade bottled goods, freeze-dried foods, portable foods.

Seasonings: salt, sugar, pepper, spices, bottled butter, vegetable oil, soy sauce (an Eastern condiment).

“Wow... This... Well, this is...”

“It’s quite a formidable amount to carry around.”

Shiori giggled at the sight of the flabbergasted nobles.

“There’s much less to carry in the summer,” she said. “In the winter I have to pack a lot of cold-weather gear.”

Requests for adventurers were constant, no matter the season, and so adventurers headed out regardless of the weather. Specialty adventuring shops were working hard on developing new lightweight goods and equipment, but there was still much room for improvement.

“As of late, we’re seeing more lightweight storage containers made with magical beast materials,” said Shiori. “I’m trying some out on this trip, actually. If all goes well I think I’ll slowly replace my older equipment.”

Shiori passed Annelie two such containers, and the margravine was surprised by just how light it was. One was a lightweight metal protected by the application of beast materials, and another container was crafted from beast shells. It was easily as light as glass.

“That said, the equipment is in short supply and it’s also quite pricey, which makes things more difficult.”

Still, Shiori wanted to make warm, delicious meals for her traveling companions while keeping her own physical condition in mind, and so—where her budget allowed—she was constantly experimenting with portable ingredients and different menus while on expeditions.

It was through this very experimentation that she had devised the freeze-dried foods that Dennis found so fascinating. They were apparently prepared with a technology common in Shiori’s home country, but mass production was at present quite difficult. If she someday got serious about putting the foodstuff in the hands of a manufacturer, Annelie was ready and willing to help her with financial investment. However, she held off from saying anything straight away, knowing all too well that Shiori would be hesitant and likely shirk away from such offers. Still, the technology seemed beneficial for creating stockpiles of relief foodstuffs for times of emergency or disaster, so Annelie intended to someday offer monetary investment.

While Annelie was thinking about all of this, Dennis continued to scribble in his notebook. Walt, meanwhile, took a few items in hand and asked a few questions as they occurred to him.

“I must say,” said Walt, “this is all much heavier than I’d expect a woman to carry. Your companions sometimes help with your supplies, you said?”

“Yes,” said Shiori, nodding. “I am fortunate that my companions often carry heavier items such as tents, sheets, and barrier stakes.”

“Considering all the ingredients and cooking tools Shiori carries,” added Alec, “she carries more with her than most. But as her companions, it’s only natural that we carry what we can—she’s the one providing us with a nice campsite and great food.”

For Alec, there was no hierarchy between the vanguard and rear guard—you helped your companions so long as you were capable. According to him, this—consideration for your fellow party members—was the true secret to survival on expeditions. Being companions meant far more than simply fighting together.

“It’s common for those in the rear guard to be looked down on because they’re not on the front lines, but the only reason us vanguards can fight with our full power is because of the support that rearguard members like Shiori provide,” explained Alec.

Everyone had their own way of fighting—there were those who fought up close, and those who helped from a distance. But both were essential. There was no better or worse. Everyone stood on even ground.

“Nobles are the same,” said Annelie. “We are only able to keep our positions because of the citizens who live upon our territories and support us. And that is why it is our job to reward them for their services.”

And it was true to say that all people lived through mutual support. It was no different for royalty or nobles. Annelie looked at Dennis and Walt, and they nodded between themselves. It brought a smile to Alec’s and Shiori’s faces.

“The citizens of the Lovner lands must be a happy lot, indeed,” said Alec. “Blessed with a kindhearted lord.”

It was as great a compliment as Alec could be known to give.

“Thank you,” said Annelie. “But we still have a long way to go, and there is much we still want to accomplish. The Lovner territory is perhaps too skewed towards its cultural and tourist industries, and I worry about our self-sufficiency in terms of food. I hope to put more effort into our farming sector.”

“Perhaps biting off a little more than you can chew, Annie,” said Walt, chuckling as he took a look at a bottle of oiled mussels. “Our tourism industry is flourishing, if you ask me. However, I suppose it is indeed true that maintaining our farming population is becoming something of a problem. It’s all well and good for people to want to become performers, but many of the older farmers lament the fact that the young are abandoning the farms because they want to live in the city, or else study abroad.”

Walt hailed from a baron’s family which had been granted a small part of the Lovner territory. It was a peaceful land and, because the country itself was prospering, many farming families were quite stable economically. The young were meant to inherit the farms, but were instead abandoning them, charmed by the wonders of the cities.

“I believe farming to be a fine profession,” said Annelie, “but I suppose it does not seem very exciting when compared to those who make their living in the more artistic city center. I know farming isn’t glamorous, but I *do* wish there was a way to impress upon people the charm and value in working the lands.”

“Ah, so this problem exists even here too,” said Shiori, who had been listening intently.

Annelie sensed this was a chance to hear more of the lands of the east and, as she knew little about the location, decided to prod Shiori gently for her thoughts.

“Oh, so this problem is something that people deal with in your homelands also, is it?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s quite common for the young to be enamored with life in the cities, which is admittedly more convenient. But there are other reasons too—some people want more secure, higher-paying jobs, and some don’t like the idea of being tied down to life in a country town.”

However, there were cases of the opposite too—people who moved from the hustle and bustle of the cities to the quiet countryside in order to live the life of a farmer. Sometimes those people willingly inherited the farms of others, and some among them did so because they wanted a better environment in which to raise a family.

“It was for this reason that some organizations took the initiative and began to support these people in their moves to the countryside,” said Shiori.

“Support, you say?”

“Yes. Things like helping people find available houses or vacant farming lots, supporting their efforts to find work...that kind of thing. As you can imagine, it’s not easy to simply move your life from one place to another, so there are some local governments that organize short-term stays and hands-on farming experiences.”

In this way, there were some who found the farming lifestyle a good fit, and others who chose to return home to the customs and weather they were more used to.

“And to help promote farming, some towns turn sections of farmland into tourist attractions,” said Shiori.

“Such as visiting the fields?”

“Hm... That happens too, but it’s more along the lines of allowing people to pick and eat their own fruits, or allowing people to experience fresh produce in dining halls built on farm properties...”

“Oh, I see,” said Dennis, nodding and scribbling in his notebook. “Certainly much easier said than done, but also certainly worth trying.”

“Oh, I am just so glad we came here,” said Annelie, taking Shiori’s hand. “It’s so important to mingle with other cultures, and to see things from a different point of view. Thank you, Shiori. Your thoughts are valuable to us, and I’m sure they’ll provide a good reference—I’d love to try some of those ideas for our own lands.”

Shiori smiled bashfully.

It certainly seems as though she hails from quite the developed country...

Annelie found herself contemplating Shiori and the country she called home. It would require considerable resources for a country to take the initiative and implement strategies of support to bolster farming populations. The ability to implement such a strategy would also require ease of movement within the country from location to location. This was a far cry from what Annelie had been told and thus far knew about the eastern regions.

I wonder if there was a particular reason that she had to leave such a developed country to start anew here?

It seemed that Alec, too, felt similar—he did not let it show, obviously, but there was a certain curiosity to his gaze as he looked upon Shiori. She was a woman with a one-of-a-kind job that utilized a variety of unique skills, and this made her a woman of much mystery. Annelie could not help but feel frustration at the reality that, upon the end of this journey, she would be forced to part ways with this charming and bewitching woman.

There’s still so much I wish to talk to her about.

Annelie wanted to talk to Shiori about who she was, and the lands she had come from, and to share stories of their romances. This was what she thought as she watched the quiet and casual way in which Shiori and Alec grew closer to each other.

Interlude 2: When You Wish upon a Star

“You seem lost in the stars tonight.”

Alec made this comment as he wrapped Shiori in his arms. She never tired of staring up at the night sky. The comfortable warmth of Alec’s body at her back brought an easy smile to her face.

“I was just thinking about how the stars look different in my hometown.”

“Different? How so?”

Shiori pointed up at a glimmering star high above.

“The North Star, Polaris,” she said. “In my hometown, it’s much lower in the sky. Here, it sits much higher up.”

“Polaris? Ah, you mean the Star of the Sacred Tree.”

Alec had been confused at first, but when he followed her finger he knew they were talking about the same thing.

“So that’s what it’s called here,” Shiori said.

The Star of the Sacred Tree. Alec told her it was named after an ancient myth from the north—a great tree that sat at the center of the world.

“I see. So it’s the star furthest north, hence the name,” said Alec. “The names change depending on where you go, then.”

“Yes...”

The stars sat in a different place here to where they were back home. They were like a symbol for the immense distance between two worlds. Though perhaps it was not merely distance that separated them.

The locations of the stars were different in the two worlds, but the constellations were the same. This meant that though the worlds were separate, the stars that sparkled in their skies were the same. This, in following, indicated that this place existed on the same earth as her own home—it was just that the worlds were different. Shiori had come to understand this as her being in a parallel world.

This was a small comfort for Shiori—the idea that the sky offered a small connection to the world she once called home. It gave her a place to send prayers for everything and everyone that she'd left behind.

I'm fine, and I'm healthy, and I hope that all of you are too.

This was the prayer she whispered, so softly it could not be heard, as she stared up at the countless stars in the night sky, together with the man she held most dear.

Night had fallen in the world Shiori once called home—with its same starry sky—and flecks of snow could be glimpsed among the falling rain. Shiro Izumi stared blankly at the growing puddles of water around his feet, but raised his eyes when he heard the footsteps trudging through the rain towards him.

"Sorry, were you waiting long?"

The voice was kind and considerate. Shiro responded with an aloof smile.

"No, don't worry. I just got here."

"Uh, okay."

The man, Fumihiro, knew from Shiro's coat sleeves—which were soaked through to a different color—that Shiro was lying, but he didn't comment on it.

"Well then, let's get going," said Fumihiro. "You're drinking, yeah?"

"Yep."

The two men walked through the rain until they reached their destination, where they passed through the blue *noren* curtains and inside the restaurant. It was warm inside, and the aroma of grilled fish filled the air. The old man behind the counter nodded them a greeting and pointed them towards a booth with a

smile.

“It’s been a while since we last came here, huh?” muttered Shiro.

As he glanced at his friend, the hint of a pained expression flashed across Fumihiro’s face. He’d been friends with Shiro since university, and they’d been to this restaurant countless times. However, it had been four years since Shiro’s last visit to the warmth of the restaurant’s familiar atmosphere.

Four years...

Shiro had stopped drinking when his sister, who was seven years his junior, had gone missing. A bitter smile crossed his face—it had been so long, and yet at times it felt so very short.

He silently passed his wet coat to the female manager of the restaurant, then took a seat on the *zashiki*-style cushions at the booth they’d reserved. He wiped his hands with the warm hand towel he was given, and then their beers were brought to their table.

“To your mother,” said Fumihiro.

“To mom.”

They made a toast to Shiro’s mother—who had passed away a month ago—then drank from their jugs of beer.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” Fumihiro said.

“Yeah... I wish she could have seen Shiori one last time.”

Shiro’s mother’s condition had worsened as of a year ago, and for the last six months she’d been in and out of the hospital. Then, a month ago, it was decided that she would not go home. His mother had passed away quietly, as was her nature, but even then, none knew how much she’d longed to see her daughter one last time—her daughter Shiori, who had vanished so suddenly and unexpectedly.

It happened at the beginning of winter, four years ago. Shiro remembered it as a clear, pleasant day without a cloud in the sky. But all the same he felt something that morning, like an itching discomfort in his chest—and sometimes

he wondered if it was something he only remembered now because of what had happened. It was as though something was about to happen, or more accurately, as though something bad *had already* happened. But all the same, he got out of bed and had breakfast with his parents, his wife, and his child—and that was when it happened.

The phone rang, and his wife answered it. Then she suddenly grew pale. Worry gripped her voice as she talked with the person on the other end of the line, until finally she turned to the rest of the family hesitantly and shared what she had just been told—the phone call was from the police, and they had called to announce that Shiori, who lived away from home, had gone missing.

Shiro called his workplace to arrange a day off, then ran to the police station, where he was told of the unusual circumstances surrounding the disappearance of his younger sister.

In the late hours of the previous evening, an unexplainable power outage had occurred. It had only lasted for perhaps a minute, but due to the sudden power outage among electrical appliances and electrical meters, the power company received several phone calls and so had sent an employee to check it out immediately. What this employee found upon arrival was the scattered contents of a woman's bag, and a single shoe. This had all been reported to the police.

At around the same time, the police station had also received several reports of mysterious light emissions, and so had sent a nearby patrol car to the location. Based on the state of the location, the police had deemed it likely that it was an incident of some kind.

However, further investigation uncovered very little. All of the items on the street were Shiori's. She had not gone home that night, nor gone to work the following day. There were also no signs that she had visited any known associates. The police suspected a kidnapping. However, there were no traces of such an act having taken place. They found no signs of Shiori having been taken away in a vehicle, nor to a nearby building. It was also unlikely that she had disappeared of her own volition—she had left her phone, wallet, and bankbook on the street.

There was no evidence pointing towards Shiori having left the city for somewhere else either. No one had witnessed her disappearance, and it was impossible to discern anything from nearby surveillance cameras, the images of which had been distorted due to the power outage.

All that was known was that Shiori had been using her phone up to the moment of the power outage. And because the power company employee had arrived mere minutes after the power had returned, it seemed as if Shiori had, in the space of a few minutes, simply disappeared.

One year passed with no new leads regarding where Shiori might have gone and why. Desperate for any kind of further clue, Shiro turned to a missing person's television program some six months later. The police warned that doing so might increase the already-heavy mental strain on Shiro and his family, and to be careful before making a decision they might later regret.

Though it was true that some cases had indeed been solved by information gathered across the internet upon the public announcement of a case, there were just as many that remained unsolved. The detective assigned to Shiori's case was kind, and warned Shiro and his family that the case could also result in unwanted attention. Fumihiro—who worked as a policeman in their hometown—also warned Shiro against making any hasty decisions.

By this point, however, Shiro was clutching at straws, and decided to make the case public. He consulted the police, met with the television crew, and the case went out across the country.

The response to the strange incident—an office worker seemingly disappearing under suspicious circumstances—drew lots of attention. Shiro received an influx of information along with footage from surveillance cameras, dash cams, and people's own individual phones, but the majority of it wasn't particularly clear. However, among it all were a few videos capturing footage of what had occurred on the night of Shiori's disappearance.

The television station and police looked diligently into all the information, but what they found only made Shiro more sure than before—there was no logic to his sister's disappearance. He had already felt this instinctively—he had been sure that his sister, whom he loved and cared for deeply, was gone, and he

would likely never see her again.

On the night of her disappearance, all the electrical appliances in the area had behaved erratically, which was followed by a power outage. Photographs and videos taken at this time all recorded the same thing simultaneously—an instantaneous luminescence followed by a power outage. And all of it happening in just an instant—perhaps even less than a minute.

Shiori was believed to have been at the center of the phenomenon. In videos, a female figure could sometimes be seen on that day—at exactly 11:58:36—being swallowed by a bright and blinding light. And then, in the next instant, she was gone. Nothing remained of the woman save for a bag and a single shoe.

The detective on the case said nothing definitive, but Fumihiro, who had watched the program, gave Shiro the details. Sometimes, physical evidence was analyzed by the forensics department and the National Research Institute of Police Science, but no conclusion could be reached—in other words, the scene could not be explained except in terms that defied reality. It was said that Shiori's disappearance fell into this gray zone.

Shiori's disappearance trended online for a time. Footage from the program was posted to message boards and Twitter, and studied. Previously unreleased footage was shared by the television program and the police. All of the information was compiled by anonymous users on websites, but there was little in the way of dedicated research—most only followed the case out of curiosity.

It was like something out of a light novel—like a portal to another world, or the summoning of a holy woman.

Shiro heard that some even went to the scene of the disappearance for a time, waiting around as if expecting something to happen. But for those who were not directly involved in the incident, the disappearance was little more than entertainment. And as much as he did not want to admit it, Shiro knew that he, too, had once viewed disappearances in this light. The realization of that fact, and the disappearance of his beloved sister, completely and utterly overwhelmed him.

“But at least you were well enough to invite me out to dinner,” said Fumihiro,

after they had indulged in some small talk over drinks. He chewed on some karaage before going on. “So...I guess you’re feeling a bit better now?”

“A bit, yeah...” said Shiro, poking at his shogayaki—Shiori’s specialty—and smiling. “I saw her, you know. In a dream.”

“A dream?”

Until recently, Shiro’s dreams had been nothing but haunting. In them, Shiori struggled with painful emotions. She met with awful experiences. And she died. However, a little after their mother’s last memorial service, held forty-nine days after her passing, he had a dream that differed from all the others.

“I don’t know how to put it exactly,” said Shiro, “but she looked happy. She was smiling.”

“Huh?”

“I know you’ll probably think I’m messing with you when I talk about this. And I know you’ll tell me to knock it off with the light novel stuff...but in my dream, Shiori was living happily in another world with a boyfriend.”

“Oh...well, that’s...uh...” said Fumihiko with an awkward, somewhat pained, smile.

“But this guy in the dream,” said Shiro, “he was a really good guy. So good it almost made me mad. Good-looking, tall, strong, and wealthy. Heck, he was even the illegitimate son of royalty.”

Shiro’s joking tone caught Fumihiko by surprise, who spat out a mouthful of beer.

“That really *is* some light novel stuff,” he said. “But, that’s good, right? Maybe it was your mother wanting to show you that Shiori’s doing okay.”

“Yeah, maybe...” said Shiro with a laugh. “You might be right.”

And he hoped that it was so.

Nobody knew what happened to Shiori on that day, nor what had happened to her since. And though Shiro had never entirely given up, he had always had the sense that they would never meet again. But if it was indeed true that Shiori would never come home, Shiro at least hoped that, wherever his sister was, she

was happy. He hoped that she was safe, living somewhere nice with a person she cherished, and enjoying days of warmth and kindness.

That was the one thing, as her older brother, he wished for from the bottom of his heart.

The two friends paid for their meal and left the restaurant. Outside, the cold rain had stopped, and the stars could be seen peeking out from between the clouds.

“Wow... Polaris is so clear up there tonight...”

The night sky seemed as clear as if it were purified by the rain. Shiro stared at it, remembering the times that he and Shiori had gazed up in search of shooting stars.

There was no way Shiro could have possibly known that at that very moment, in a faraway place and a world separate from his own, his younger sister stared up at the same sky together with the man she loved. But all the same, Shiro stared up at the beautiful stars twinkling in the darkness, and he sent a prayer up towards them.

Interlude 3: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ November XX

Today marks the first day of Shiori and Alec working together as a pair. Shiori looked really happy. But Alec looked even happier. They were all smiles. Seriously, like all smiles. They wouldn't stop smiling. They were in such high spirits I was actually worried. But still, I'm glad to see them both looking so happy.

It's up to you and me to protect Shiori—right, Alec?

Clemens still looks a bit gloomy. Sometimes it's like, “Come on, Clemens! If it's females you're after, I can introduce you to a whole host of magical beasts!”

But, well...you prefer humans, don't you?

In other news, recently people at the Guild have been saying things behind Alec's back like "I hope you choke on your happiness," and "I hope you go blind." I wonder what that's all supposed to mean?

■ November XX

As of today, we're heading off to a place called Silveria. It's about a half a day by horse carriage. I've been in carriages a few times and boy, do they make travel easy or what? I remember hitching a ride with some of my slime kin in secret. One time we went so far we almost couldn't make it back home. We got in all sorts of trouble. But what a fond memory that is now. I wonder if all those slimes are doing well. I hear Pel is doing *amazing*.

When we got to Silveria we met with our clients, and one of them is just straight-up awful. Shiori was kind of hurt by his behavior, but she was fine around him otherwise. She's so thoughtful.

So the awful guy's name is Dennis, but he might not be *that* awful. Alec told me secretly that he's a guy with some *baggage*. Anyway, Dennis's master Annelie wants to visit Silveria Tower. Apparently it's dangerous in the winter and almost impossible to get to without the support of strong adventurers like Alec and Clemens. She actually requested Shiori because they'll be camping for a few nights and Shiori can make that nice and pleasant for them.

Dennis treats Annelie like she is precious. He has this face sometimes that looks just like Alec when he looks at Shiori. I think he wants to be Annelie's mate.

■ November XX

We're off to Silveria Tower! It's actually pretty close to town, and even in winter you can walk there in about a day. We're going to get as close as we can before it gets dark.

But let me tell you, snow jellyfish are a real pain. Even snow wolves and giant spiders would be shocked at the size of a pack of snow jellyfish. According to Clemens, there were enough of them to fill two dragons! I've never actually seen a dragon, but the pack was as big as two of them. Sounds pretty scary.

We took care of them jellyfish though. There was this really strong snow bear that attacked too, but Alec and Clemens handled it like it weren't no thing. They're so good at that. They're awesome.

While Shiori and the others were taking a break, I decided to feast on snow bear innards. But get this—there was already something doing just that when I got to it! It was a dull-green slime, and just as I was thinking, “Wow, he totally reminds me of grandpa from the sewers,” it actually turned out to be one of grandpa's slime kin! Grandpa is a total homebody, so this slime was wandering from place to place on his behalf, gathering information.

The wandering slime and I chowed down on the snow bear meat. Humans say it's tough and unwieldy, but it's a feast for us slimes. Mmm, so much meat packed in every chunk. The innards too—so rich and delicious.

I asked the green slime if it ate snow jellyfish, but it said the things are tasteless and it doesn't like the spicy sensation that comes from eating them. I totally agree! I ate a couple while we were fighting, and they really were tasteless with this spicy kick. Apparently that's because of the poison.

Once we finished eating the bear, the wandering slime took its leave. Apparently it's headed for the kingdom next, so I told it to give my regards to any peach-colored slimes it ran into. Then it was bye-bye! I hope he'll have more stories for me next time we meet! It's just a pity that it's a different type of slime to those in the Blue Forest, because we can't communicate via transmissions.

I asked the wandering slime to leave the snow bear pelt and then I gave it to Shiori and the others as a souvenir. I'd heard them say that it's valuable. They were super happy when I brought it over. That made me happy too.

■ December △△

Dennis made Shiori cry while she was cooking. It was different from bullying, but Alec and the others didn't know that at first. That's not surprising. Until now, Dennis has been insufferable.

Shiori said she was crying because she was happy.

Nobody actually knows how Shiori got here or where she came from. Shiori gets sad sometimes because she can't explain her situation to people. The place she comes from is so far away it's not even on a map, and she has trouble explaining it so that people believe that it exists. She told me one time that sometimes she finds herself doubting her home ever existed in this world.

With all that in mind, when Dennis essentially said that Shiori's memories were real things, the words made her so happy she burst into tears. I thought he was worthless, but Dennis actually did something that both Alec and Zack couldn't. He even apologized for his behavior up until then. So it turns out he's a good guy. That's a relief.

But Shiori is a really mysterious person. Everyone else thinks so too. Zack said she just appeared in the middle of the forest all of a sudden. He said it was like she just fell from the sky. Just like the angels people sometimes talk about.

■ December XX

We got to Silveria Tower! It's old and mostly run-down on the inside, but it's a beautiful tower and it's all sparkly white! The monsters inside are pretty strong, but nothing that Alec and the others can't handle. They're all legit tough. They handled all the magical beasts and I only had to help out a little.

But the people who got here before us were creeps. It was different from Dennis, because I sensed murder from them and it made me change color. But they were no match for us!

Actually, though, it turned out that there was only one really bad human, and the other two were different. They flattened themselves on the floor just like slimes and begged for a little food, then went off meekly once they'd gotten it. I guess they must have been hungry. They didn't have much money, and they didn't know how to prepare their own food.

But I wasn't about to forgive them! Not after they made Shiori remember some horrible memories! She even went all pale! Alec held her tight and comforted her and then Shiori felt a little better. That was good. It makes me happy that Alec treats her so special.

We reached the top of Silveria Tower. It was the very place that Annelie wanted to visit. She took Dennis off to have some kind of important discussion. Apparently it was a talk about becoming mates. There are lots of circumstances that make it difficult for them to just become mates. Humans have lots of those. Circumstances. It's always so complicated.

Walt explained it to me thusly: "Well, it's kind of like this: the top member of a pack doesn't become mates with the lowest member of the pack, right?"

That makes sense. That doesn't really happen. I guess in that sense, humans and beasts are alike.

Still, I hoped that because they loved each other, they would find some way to be together. So they talked and they talked and then finally decided to become mates. I was so glad! I hope they're both really happy!

Shiori cooked up a special celebratory feast just for the occasion. I ate the rest of the horned hare, which I'd helped to carry earlier in the day. I like snow bears but the innards and blood of horned hares is really delicious too. So rich and plump—it's fantastic. Would love to eat some more. I'll have to have Shiori take me back to the Tree of Familiars. Back in town, that's the one place you can eat horned hares.

After Annelie and her two aides went to sleep, Shiori cried a little. I wonder if she was thinking about home again. It's so far away she can't go back—I wonder what sort of place it is? I'd be lonely too if I could never see my slime kin again. But I hope she cheers up—Alec and me are going to be by your side forever, Shiori!

Alec wrapped Shiori tightly in his arms again. She always looks so happy when he does that, and it makes me really happy too. Even Alec looks happy. Those two are on guard duty together so I decided to go to bed a bit earlier.

Good night, guys! See you tomorrow!

But you know, sometimes I wonder about the way Alec shuffles stiffly in place when they're together. Looks uncomfortable. Is he itchy downstairs?

Side Story 1: The Herbalist Physician's Tender Wish

Nils Aulin was a herbalist with the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild who managed the eponymous Aulin Dispensary. The interior of his shop smelled faintly of dried earth, and the shelves were lined with all sorts of products—this included ordinary medicines for home use, adventuring potions, medicinal teas, bath salts, and moisturizing products, which were popular with housewives. His products were all reasonably priced, and the dispensary was popular among its regular clients.

Behind the counter, the shelves were filled with tightly packed bottles and cans of raw materials, and there was a well-ventilated room filled with herbs that had been put out to dry.

"I see... So you and Shiori are a pair now," said Nils. "That's just wonderful."

There was something of a relieved smile on the herbalist's face. Alec had just told him that he and Shiori were teaming up for work. The smile showed just how much Nils worried about the woman—both as her doctor, and as a fellow adventurer.

"At her heart she is strong and sturdy," continued Nils, "but a part of her is still...aloof. It's like she might vanish at any moment. I worried about her, but so long as you are here, keeping her grounded, I feel a little better."

"Keeping her grounded..."

Adventurers were often shrouded in mystery and kept their pasts to themselves, but none were quite as mysterious as Shiori. It could not have been easy for her, living unsupported in a country so far from her home. She had simply been trying to make ends meet, but had found herself part of a horrendous incident—one that ripped her sense of self-worth from the depths of her heart. In Nils's point of view, this had left her hanging in the balance, her existence fleeting—like that of a ghost.

"There are many watching over Shiori," Nils said, "but the only one who really

looks into the depths of her heart is you, Alec. And I think that with someone like you at her side, her wounds will heal with time...”

The words were a reflection of Nils’s character, and their deep meaning was not lost on Alec.

“I hope so,” said Alec, nodding.

He would stay with her, and help her take back what she had lost over the last four years. This was how he hoped to help her.

Nils nodded, his eyes wrinkling at their edges with his gentle smile. He could read Alec’s thoughts and feelings. He let out a short breath, and then a brighter smile filled his face.

“You mentioned you wanted some more medicine, yes? Wait here just a moment.”

Nils took the note that Alec had given him and turned to the shelves behind him. He took some items and put them on the counter.

“Okay, so...antidotes, disinfectant, one roll of bandages, and...ten high-grade magical recovery potions. That’s quite the amount. Going on an expedition?”

Alec looked at a can of moisturizing ointment—one of Nils’s new products—then put it back in its basket and nodded.

“Exploring Silveria Tower,” he said.

“Hm? You’re going there in winter?”

“Yep.”

Alec had expected the expression Nils would make at this pronouncement, and could only muster a pained grin. Silveria Tower was the kind of place nobody visited in the winter. It had been ransacked and explored so thoroughly that it no longer contained anything of worth. This was not to mention the dangerous magical beasts that wandered the forest paths in the winter season. There was so little there to make the place worth exploring, and so, unsurprisingly, most avoided it except to use it as a place of training.

“I see. So it’s an assignment, I assume?” asked Nils.

“That it is.”

Nils had picked up on the fact that Alec was not particularly excited about the job. Alec shrugged. Silveria Tower was a very difficult place to get to, and very few—if any—went there willingly. If a request came in during the winter, it would inevitably go to veterans and those of high rank. Work was work, however, and one couldn’t be picky. Still, Alec would have preferred to stay home if that had been an option.

Come to mention it, it was the same with the Fibria wildwood...

Alec’s trip to Fibria had been a suppression request in the humid, hazardous swamplands. Nobody wanted to take the request, and so the expedition had gone to Alec, who had recently returned from a long-term assignment. It had, however, turned out to be a most memorable request.

That request was the day I met Shiori, the woman who would become the love of my life.

Just thinking of her beaming face brought an easy smile to Alec’s own, and as he looked up at the medicinal items lining the shelves in front of him, he had an idea.

“By the way,” said Alec. “I’d like to purchase some low-grade magical energy recovery potions too. Ten... No, wait. Fifteen, please.”

Nils had been tallying up Alec’s purchases, but his hand paused for a moment.

“Hm? Low-grade potions?” he asked. “What will you do with all of them?”

Alec was an A-rank adventurer who combined magic with swordsmanship, and high-grade potions were just enough for him to fully recover his magical energy. Low-grade potions were essentially useless to him, even as spares. Alec took one of the low-grade potions from the counter and smiled as he looked out the window, through which the light of the sun filtered into the store.

“I’d like to have some on hand for Shiori,” he said. “She always pushes herself too hard, but I don’t think forcing her to stop is the right way to go about things. She has to be allowed to live as she likes. That’s why I’m around—when she’s tired, I’ll be there for her.”

Alec could tell her to stop all he wanted, but if the situation called for it, Shiori would use her magic anyway. She didn't have much in the way of magical energy reserves, but she used what she did have to its very limits. Alec knew his job was not to stop her—rather, his job was to see her for who she was, accept her, and support her. So saying, Alec put the low-grade potion back on the counter, then noticed Nils's wide-eyed stare.

"What's up?" Alec asked.

"Oh, nothing," said Nils, coming back to his senses. "I was just thinking how nice it is that she's so loved."

Alec could feel Nils talking around the point, and nodded.

"That's because I love her," he said. "She's my one and only."

As Alec stated his love without any hesitation, Nils raised both hands in a show of surrender.

"Well now, *someone's* in deep."

Nils had a feeling he'd be hearing that kind of thing for a little while, but it gave him an idea. He took out a leather medicine pouch. It came complete with an attachment allowing one to clip it to one's belt, and was partitioned so that one could keep small bottles inside without them getting all mixed up.

"What would you think of keeping Shiori's potions in this?" he asked. "It's a new product from a craftsman I work with. It's much more lightweight than anything I've stocked until now, and it's said to fit great on the belt without impeding movement. As you'd expect, it's already been processed to protect against the cold. I'm using one myself. If you're interested, I'll give you a special price—just give me your thoughts on it after you've had a chance to use it. I'd love to hear a vanguard's opinion." He had plans to buy more of them and sell them at the dispensary, assuming they felt good to use.

"Oh? Hm...it *is* light, isn't it? Stitched together nice and firm too."

The outer material of the pouch was soft and felt natural around the waist when clipped to Alec's belt. Its lighter weight was thanks to improvements made to the inner lining, as well as the removal of excess metal fittings and nonnecessities—it was a simple affair.

“Not bad at all,” said Alec. “Might as well get it while I’m here.”

“I’ll tally it up with everything else, then.”

“Thanks.”

Alec paid for his things and bid farewell to Nils. He looked down into the bag of supplies he’d bought, and as his thoughts drifted towards his first job together with Shiori, his new partner, his lips turned into a smile.

Nils waved and watched as Alec walked off into the distance.

“He certainly is loved,” he muttered.

Alec loved Shiori, yes, but she loved him back just as much.

I love her, Alec had said. And it was in his face when he’d said those words. Nils had never seen Alec wear that before—a gentle smile like the light of the spring sun. Had he always been the type of man to smile like that? The hard, stern gazes he’d once shown had disappeared of late, replaced by gentler expressions. Nils believed this to be the effect of Shiori’s love, and the fact that Alec was healing.

“I really am so, so glad...”

Nils knew that among adventurers with hidden pasts, Alec too carried something heavy with him. And if that weight was being lifted from his shoulders, then this made Nils happy—both as a doctor, and as Alec’s friend.

To love, and to be loved, and to support one another on a shared path... Nils hoped for warmth and kindness for his two friends.

This was the wish he felt in his heart as he returned to his work.

Side Story 2: Of a Margravine and Her Husband

The man stood staring silently at the painting on the wall of the decaying room. He heard rhythmic, metallic footsteps approaching.

“How is it?” he asked, turning towards the sound.

The footsteps belonged to a woman with golden hair like the sun, and sharp brown eyes that glowed with her strength of will. She let out a sigh and shrugged.

“The whole place is just like this room—in ruins. Everything’s been taken, from what was once in the treasure chests right down to the magical stones in the candleholders. Everything—gone. Not even a gang of thieves would go that far. And to think it used to be such a beautiful tower...it’s a tragedy, now.”

The tower had once been known as the “noble lady of white,” but it was little more than ruins now—parts of it destroyed and the rest of it desecrated.

“I see,” said the man. “I suppose there was no stopping it.”

No stopping it. As the man spoke these words, his blue eyes narrowed with sorrow. Last year, due to their territorial reclamation strategy, the kingdom had completely overwhelmed the region. The Empire was in decline and couldn’t even maintain its own forces. With morale among its army plummeting, it didn’t stand a chance against the kingdom’s knights, who could take their time and had reserves of military strength.

What was left of the Empire after the reclamation was stolen and ransacked in its totality by its own starving citizens. There was no stopping this either—most of those citizens had lost everything to the Empire, from their lands and their possessions to their rights and, in some cases, even their lives.

The man lowered his eyes, and stayed there for a short time in prayer. He prayed for those who had had everything taken from them by the Empire, and he prayed for the Empire itself, which would one day meet its own destruction.

It was the home that he’d abandoned.

The man had been born to a baron's family, one who owned a small territory located in a corner of the Empire. His family were art lovers, and though they were yet unknown, they enjoyed painting. The art that his family created was simple at heart—beautiful scenic views, the lives of regular people, and the joys of the everyday.

However, the new dynasty had begun in his grandfather's generation. And because his grandfather had ignored the orders of the new emperor, he had been sentenced to death. As a result, his family had been driven from their own lands.

The man's grandfather had strong principles. He refused to paint anything that he did not deem beautiful or that did not linger in his heart. The new emperor happened to take a liking to his grandfather's paintings, and ordered him to paint a portrait paying tribute to the Imperial family. However, the man's grandfather did not support the emperor, who was known as a tyrant, and upon refusing to paint this picture as he'd been ordered, he was killed on the spot.

The baron's family had managed to escape a similar fate, but their noble rank was revoked. They became nothing more than ordinary citizens, and were summarily driven from their own lands. They scraped by, living on their art, and fled the country when they saw the slow decay of the Empire. Ever since then, they had been a family of wandering painters, journeying across the lands in search of idealistic scenic views.

“A nation can change so easily in just twenty years...”

The man had changed his name to match the people of the kingdom. He'd hidden his identity. Now, he spent his days wandering. It was by no means a luxurious lifestyle, but he enjoyed that he could live as his grandfather once had—drawing what moved his heart. In the beginning the man had gone ignored, and many had annoyingly tried to teach him how to paint in a way that would earn him coin. But the man refused to stray from his principles, and drew only what he wanted. In so doing, he had carved for himself a life where he no longer worried about food, clothing, or shelter.

But sometimes, the man still found himself thinking back to when he was a

boy, living in his home country. The Empire had since fallen into disrepair, and their bias towards the military had resulted in exorbitant taxes which left the lands on the outskirts of their territory in horrible shape. It was all the Empire could do just to stay in control of the lands at its center. However, morale continued to fall, and the border checkpoints protected by national security were no different—refugees continued to flee the country.

But he'd heard the rumors long ago—his once beautiful home was now desolate and barren, and nothing like it once was.

“The defenses around these parts have grown nonexistent over those twenty years. That's how outsiders like ourselves can so easily gain access to land that once belonged to nobles like this.”

And you and I never would have met either.

The woman looked upon the man with passion in her eyes. She had come to Silveria Tower to test her strength and her abilities, while he had come on a journey—nostalgic about his past and hoping to paint something that reminded him of home.

Their meeting had been a coincidence. The bold swordswoman and the roaming artist. Though it seemed as though the two had nothing in common, they had hit it off immediately. She was a swordswoman, yes, but she hailed from a family of famous artists, and she had a great depth of knowledge when it came to art. She was honest, and if she liked something, it didn't matter that the artist was unknown—she loved the art for what it was. The man had liked that part of her, and so he'd hired her as his bodyguard. As they traveled across the kingdom, he found that he had come to love her, just as she had come to love him.

But when he finally thought to ask for her hand in marriage, the woman had been called back home. Her brother had died suddenly of a contagious illness, and it was now her duty to inherit the family lordship.

“Were it possible, I would love nothing more than to follow the path of the sword until its end, but with my brother gone, I am the only one left to protect our family,” she said. “This is the duty of those of the Lovner bloodline.”

The woman was a daughter of the distinguished Lovner family. And though

female, she would inherit the title of lord because her brother had no wife or children, leaving only his sister to continue the family name.

The woman had already inherited her title and become margravine, and as a pure-blooded Imperial, the man realized that marriage was impossible. He was a former noble of a now-decaying country, and he could not marry her, let alone join her family. He had told her as much and attempted to distance himself, but the woman forcefully stopped him—taking him on a journey to Silveria Tower, the place where they had first met. There, she had passionately talked him into reconsidering, and by the end of it, he'd felt so embarrassed by her fiery words of love that he'd wanted no more than to cover his ears and flee.

“Your life is beautiful, as is the way you have chosen to live it—you refuse to deny your own principles, and paint only that which you see and feel to be exquisite. You are observant and knowledgeable from having traveled the lands and absorbed their art. I am in love with you. Though I was blessed with the ability to manage territory, I have nothing in the way of artistic abilities. But for the Lovner family, both are essential. You have what I lack, and I want those things because you are the man I love. That you are an Imperial means nothing. I need you, and I beg you—won’t you stay by my side?”

No man could be told as much by the woman he loved and still deny her wishes—and so the man had accepted the woman’s proposal.

“You are, as always, nothing if not a bold and passionate princess, Liz,” he’d said, calling her by his nickname for her. “Wait. In this scenario, am I the princess?”

In response to the man’s joke, Liz—more commonly known as Lisbet Lovner—laughed.

“I suppose you are,” she said. “In which case I am the knight who will protect you. I will deal with any and all who are foolish enough to look upon the one I love with cruelty.”

Lisbet reached out a hand and beckoned for the man to approach. He put a hand upon her own and she pulled him close, kissing him. Then she spoke to him a promise.

“To you, I give my love and my life, my beloved princess.”

The man laughed.

“And I to you,” he replied, “my love and my life, my beloved protector.”

With the usual roles reversed, the two spoke their vows, and their giggling brought them closer together until their lips met in a kiss. Their embrace was one of great passion, and they stayed there for a time, wrapped in each other’s arms.

“Shall we get moving?” asked the man. “We should return to town before nightfall.”

Though it was relatively safe in the summer, the nights had their own unique monsters—not to mention the chance of bandits. Lisbet pulled herself away and nodded. With hands intertwined, the travelers went to put the tower behind them, but not before Lisbet looked back once more. Her gaze came to rest upon the beautiful painting that adorned the stone wall, so out of place among a room in such disrepair. It was the same painting the man had been looking at for a time—a landscape painting.

“Are you sure you wish to leave it?” she asked. “It was one of your grandfather’s, after all.”

It was one of the paintings the family had managed to take with them as they were driven from their home. A memento left behind by the man’s grandfather. The image was of a memory of youth—a memory that his grandfather had cherished more than any other.

“Yes,” said the man.

The man’s grandfather had come to Silveria with his father when he was young, on a journey of art. And it was here that he had met a young girl—a lower-class noble who was staying in the area for rest and recuperation.

For the young boy and girl, the barrier between the Empire and the kingdom did not exist—there were only the days they enjoyed together in each other’s company, and the tiny seed of love that bloomed between them. Still, the two were educated enough to know that theirs was a love that could never be, and the boy knew that one day he would inherit the lands of his family, just as the

girl knew she was already betrothed to another. Knowing the roles that they each had to play, they kept their feelings in their hearts until the day of their goodbye—a day after which they would never meet again.

The man's grandfather had said that the painting was of the day before that parting. He had said that someday, when he should pass, his soul would return to that place. And he said that when that happened, he and the girl would journey off to a world of new freedom, their hands clasped tight.

The young boy and the young girl had looked up at the sky high above Silveria's lands, and they had made that promise. And it was that moment in time that the man's grandfather looked to capture in his painting.

"That painting is a memory, and it belongs to my grandfather. He painted it for himself, so I cannot take it as a way in which to remember him. There is no better place for that painting to exist than right here, in Silveria."

It was a tower from which everything had been taken, and it was unlikely that anyone would be back anytime soon. This painting would stay right where it was, slowly fading over time, with nobody to look upon it. And as time passed, the painting would come to be a part of the place itself.

And that was as it should be.

"I see," said Lisbet, nodding.

The man squeezed her hand tightly, and the two walked off silently into the future.

After their visit to Silveria Tower, the man would be welcomed as the husband of Lisbet Lovner, lord of the Lovner family. He spent his days supporting the woman who was both his wife and lord of the territory, and the two lived a happy life together. Though there were indeed many who spoke derisively of this unknown outsider—this wandering artist whose origins were unknown—entering such an esteemed family, Lisbet was a woman of her word, and she dealt with every one of them.

The man went by the name Mikael Sahlen, but his real name was Mikhail Sarayev. He was the grandson of the artist Lukyan Sarayev, whose renown

would grow upon his passing.

This fact, however, was one that would never be handed down through the generations of the Lovner family.

Side Story 3: Promised Flowers

“It might have been a relatively short journey, but we certainly came away with some spoils—there’s the snow star grass for the request; then crystal lizard claws, fangs, and scales; marbled mushrooms; isu berries; and sjofn flower seeds.”

Alec spoke as he gazed at the crimson sjofn seeds in their glass bottle.

“We certainly did,” said Shiori, placing one of the berries in her mouth and enjoying the sensation of it bursting between her teeth.

Even Rurii, at their feet, trembled with joy as it happily ate the leftover snow star grass and isu berries.

With the requested items now gathered, the trio set up camp for the night before getting ready to return home the following day. They found a nice outcrop of rocks that blocked the snowy winds, enjoyed a bath and some food, and were now savoring a little liquor and snacks before bed. Alec had brought some snow grape wine in place of smelling salts, and had mixed it with water for their drinks. As for snacks, Shiori had prepared marbled mushrooms fried in butter soy sauce, along with isu berries and dry-roasted sjofn seeds.

The bushy mushrooms were tender like a high-quality steak, and their mouthfeel along with the butter soy sauce gave it the taste of a luxurious meat. The fresh berries had been lightly washed and were filled with a refreshing acidity that revealed itself when one bit into them. Shiori had prepared the dry-roasted seeds in a pot with some salt, which gave them a mouthfeel not unlike macadamia nuts. Pleasantly salty with a taste that faded into a sweet, flowery fragrance, they were very addictive.

“So tasty,” said Alec, who seemed to enjoy the mushrooms and seeds in particular.

It made Shiori smile to hear the sound of Alec chomping on the seeds and eating the mushrooms.

“Well, that’s what you get with high-quality ingredients.”

The taste of a marbled mushroom fully soaked in the butter soy sauce filled Shiori’s mouth, and she let out a relaxed sigh. Marbled mushrooms, sjofn seeds, and isu berries were all tasty and texturally pleasant, which made them popular ingredients among gourmets. However, as they could only be gathered deep in the snowy mountains and forests, they were not particularly common. This inevitably drove prices up, and because traders added a service charge, most restaurants preferred to deal directly with adventurers when purchasing such ingredients.

That Alec and Shiori could indulge in such high-quality ingredients was perhaps a perk of their job. Being that they had happened to come across a surplus of everything, they were able to enjoy the extra while it was all very fresh. It was a right of luxury afforded to adventurers while out camping.

“Be that as it may,” said Alec, “when there’s a talented cook around like yourself, we get wonderful meals even without the high-quality ingredients. Then there’s the baths and the beds, and the clean change of clothes... Traveling with a skilled housekeeping mage really makes me the luckiest man in the world.”

“Oh, stop it...”

It was the unreserved praise of a lover. Shiori’s face flushed red and she looked down, just as Alec placed another isu berry in her mouth. Shiori let it slip past her lips and crushed the light blue fruit between her teeth, her mouth filling with a sweet, fruity acidity. The juice of the berry threatened to slip from the corners of her lips, and she quickly tried to swallow it down. Alec watched her lovingly, then licked the juice on his thumb.

Wow...

The eroticism of the tip of Alec’s tongue so deftly licking at his thumb suddenly struck Shiori, and her face flushed further red as she gazed intently at him. He lazily ran a hand through the bangs of his chestnut brown hair and drank some more wine. He let out a low sigh.

Alec has a sex appeal that feels different from big sister and Clemens. Usually he’s very manly, but sometimes...he’s so...

Unfortunately, Shiori did not have the words to express the rest of her thought. Alec seemed to recognize her watching him at that moment, and lifted his head.

“Hm? Something wrong?” he asked.

“No, it’s nothing...”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell him that she was so taken by his relaxed, mellow gestures, so she drank a mouthful of wine to fill the space. Alec’s head tilted just slightly as he watched her, then he took a sjofn seed and placed it into her mouth.

“Eat up while we’ve got them,” he said. “They’re excellent.”

“Hm? Oh, sure.”

Shiori ate the seed that Alec fed her, and it cracked between her teeth, filling her mouth with that pleasant fragrance before fading into a wafting sweetness. The seeds crumbled under the teeth, but they didn’t feel dry—there was a light, pleasant oiliness to them that wasn’t too rich.

“They *are* good, aren’t they?” Shiori agreed. “But I think the scent of the flowers might be off-putting for some.”

“Fair point. It’s a unique scent, certainly, but I don’t mind it at all.”

So saying, Alec continued to eat them, enjoying the crunchy texture. Occasionally he’d feed them to Shiori too, which made her feel not entirely unlike a pet. After he’d fed her about four of the seeds, Alec grinned at her quite suddenly.

“These sjofn seeds aren’t just high-quality ingredients,” he said. “They’re also valued highly among performers. But sometimes they’re used for a rather *unique* purpose.”

There was something weighty to the way Alec spoke. Shiori gulped.

“Hm...?”

“When the seeds are compressed to produce an oil, that oil can be used as a love potion.”

“Erm, a love potion?”

Such potions were something of an urban myth—medicines and aphrodisiacs that made one fall in love or otherwise heightened their sexual desires. One sometimes saw them in works of fiction, but Shiori had always thought they were just that—fiction. But when she thought about it, she now lived in a world with spells and magical beasts. It wouldn’t have been all that surprising if such potions really existed.

Shiori felt panic rush through her at the realization that she had just ingested the raw materials for such a potion. Alec seemed to notice her jitters, and a deep smile grew upon his face—it was a smile that was both sensual and tempting.

“That’s right,” he whispered in her ear. “It excites the libido. Newly married couples sometimes use it on their first nights together, hungry to indulge in each other with a renewed passion. They rub it into their bodies after their baths, but it is just as effective when mixed with liquor or tea.”

The fingers Alex had been using to handle and eat the seeds ran alluringly along Shiori’s lips, and a shiver ran through her. Together, the two of them had now eaten their fair share of the seeds. Alec’s eyes felt almost terrifying in their passion, and the smile that rose to his thin lips seemed to show that the potion was taking effect. His fingers, too, felt burning hot—as did her own body.

Alec put a hand around the panicking Shiori’s waist and pulled her in close, touching his lips against her neck. Surely he didn’t intend to do *that* here, while Rurii was right there watching them?

“Erm, uh... Alec...”

She tried to resist, but she lacked the power to do so—she was at his mercy. His breath was warm against her neck, and she caught the sweet scent of sjofn seeds. As the excitement inside of her continued to grow, Shiori closed her eyes.

And then...

After a moment of silence, Alec burst into laughter.

Shiori opened her eyes, uncertain of what was going on, and was faced with a

mischievous grin.

“I’m so sorry. I only meant it as a little prank, but you just...you fell for it so much harder than I thought you would...”

“Huh?”

Shiori was left blinking in confusion as Alec revealed the truth.

“It *is* true that couples use the oil made from these seeds, but the effects are nothing like what you probably imagined—it’s just a pleasant aroma that helps lovers get in the mood, so to speak. I mean, *maybe* it creates an atmosphere of excitement, but there’s really nothing to worry about—eating the seeds has no such effects.”

“Erm...”

Shiori was left with mouth agape, embarrassment washing over her as she realized that she had been taken in by Alec’s prank and fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. She took the rest of the seeds and, with some vexation, stuffed them into Alec’s mouth. The man let out a strange squeal as he attempted to chew them all into something manageable. Eventually, he washed them down with a drink and took a relieved breath.

“I’m sorry. Really. There’s no need to sulk.”

“Says *you*,” muttered Shiori, still looking down as she sipped at her wine. “I really fell for that love potion thing, and it’s no fun if it only affects one person. And...well...”

If he had truly wanted her, she wasn’t fussed about the pace at which it happened—she would have given herself to him.

And I would have done so because it’s you.

But in her frustration and vexation, she couldn’t put those thoughts into actual words. Shiori looked down at the floor in silence, and Alec looked at her, his eyebrows drooping and a humbled look upon his face.

“I’m truly sorry,” he said, pulling her a little closer to him and running a hand through her hair. “You looked so adorable eating the seeds from my hand that I just got carried away.”

As he combed his fingers through her hair, Shiori felt the tension in her shoulders relax, and the feeling spread through her body. She looked up at Alec with something of a slight glare. The man let out a low groan. He turned to stare up at the sky, looking as if he were trying to contain himself. He took a few deep breaths, then pulled her into a strong hug.

“Hm? What is it?”

“That face you pulled just now,” said Alec, whispering into her ear, “it’s against the rules.”

According to Alec, when she had been blushing modestly, her eyes moistened by the effects of alcohol, it had been almost too suggestive for him to handle.

“And right after I apologized for my prank too,” he added. “When the woman you hold dear looks at you with a face like that...it’s almost enough to make you lose your self-control entirely.”

Alec then placed his lips on her own, kissing her, though there was something restrained in the action. They went on kissing, shifting their bodies as they did so, and just as their tongues met...

...they became aware of something poking at their legs. Coming back to their senses, Shiori and Alec looked down to see Rurii pointing a feeler at their plates—the slime was asking if it could finish off the leftovers.

“Oh, um, yeah...go for it,” said Alec with a nod.

The slime wobbled with joy, and immediately went about absorbing the berries and seeds into its body. It saved the marbled mushrooms for last, savoring them slowly before licking the butter soy sauce from the plate.

Watching the slime so neatly clean the food from the plates in such a satisfying fashion cooled the heads of the two adventurers, and Alec shifted away slightly. Shiori looked up at him, and there was something in the man’s embarrassed gaze that made her start giggling. Alec scratched the back of his head bashfully, then found that he, too, was laughing. Then Rurii, watching the two of them, joined in with its own happy trembling.

When they finally stopped laughing, Alec placed a fleeting kiss upon Shiori’s lips.

“The oil is something of a direct approach, but sjofn flowers are actually used for something quite romantic.”

“Oh?”

“When they are placed upon the bed of a newly wedded couple, it traditionally means lifelong happiness for them.”

The sjofn was handled and bartered as a rare flower, and was used as an ingredient in luxury perfumes and fragrances. The name “sjofn,” too, was that of the goddess of romance. The idea of having such a lavish flower scattered across a bed, a symbol for the pledge made between a couple and their lifelong happiness...

“If we can get a hold of the flowers...perhaps we can spread them ourselves...”

But Alec added no more explanation to this utterance, nor did he say anything of what he meant by them. So Shiori simply relaxed into the warmth of his arms, and indulged in the warm feelings that filled her very soul.

Afterword

Hello to all you first-timers, and welcome back to longtime readers. I'm You Fuguruma. Thanks to support from all of you, we were able to deliver a third volume of Housekeeping Mage. Thank you so much!

In this story, the Silveria arc, Shiori and Alec reflect on their pasts and begin to think seriously about their futures. It's a long arc, and unfortunately I couldn't fit it all in one volume. This third volume marks the halfway point. Though the arc hasn't come to its conclusion yet, I'm looking forward to sharing the rest of it with you soon. I hope for your continued support as I keep writing.

In other news, Monthly Comic Zero Sum has started publishing a Housekeeping Mage manga as a regular feature. Akihito-sensei is drawing it, and they've kept the feel of the light novel—it's a beautiful, lively look at Shiori's world and the people living in it. There's the ever-wavering but adorable and heartfelt Shiori, and Alec makes his first nude appearance (in the bath). The wobbly Rurii is also a must-see. If you have the chance, I hope you'll check it out.

Finally, I'd like to say thanks to a few people.

I'm grateful to my supervising editor for being so supportive and open to discussion, to Nama-sensei for the beautiful illustrations, to Ono-sensei for drawing Shiori's world, to everyone on the publishing side, to my family for their support, and to each and every one of you who read this book.

See you in the next volume!

Bonus Short Stories

The Little Things in Life

Shiori worked the needle carefully, stitching closed the open seam in the shirt. The scent of her beloved drifted from it, and with each stitch she prayed that he would not meet any injury. Her fingers moved deftly and, in time, the seam was stitched fully closed. Shiori tied off the threading, made sure it was hidden from sight, and cut the thread.

“Here you are, Alec. All done.”

Shiori passed Alec the folded shirt. He had been mending her pouch, but rested his hands for a moment and smiled.

“Thanks. I’m almost done here too.”

The lid of Shiori’s pouch had gotten frayed at the corner from constant use, and Alec was mending it himself. This was all part and parcel of coming back from an expedition. No matter how simple or easy the request, upon return it was important for adventurers to check their gear for wear and tear and repair it accordingly.

Shiori loved doing this with her lover and now adventuring partner. Just spending time together reviewing and mending their equipment made her happy.

It’s times like this that I most feel like I’m alive, together, with him.

Shiori of course loved the sweet and gentle times that they spent as lovers, and yet she treasured moments like this one—moments where she felt the reality of her life and existence, a thing that was so often vague and fleeting for her, a person from another world.

Shiori took the mended pouch and smiled as she rubbed it with her hand.

“Thank you, Alec.”

“Mhm. But if it gets any worse than it is now, you may want to have a proper craftsman look at it. That, or...perhaps buy a new one?”

Alec chuckled. He knew that the pouch was one mass-produced for rookie adventurers.

“Yes. But it was so comfortable to use that when I had to replace my first pouch, I just ended up buying the same type.”

Everything that Shiori owned had at one point been sold off by her own party. After that ordeal, and when she was finally ready to return to adventuring, she'd been in such a rush that she had gone to the same store she'd visited as a rookie and simply bought replacements for what she'd lost.

And perhaps Alec had sensed how she must have felt in the slight lull of their conversation. Shiori could not say for certain. Nonetheless, for a moment his eyebrows drooped, and then he invited her to go shopping for new equipment when they next had time.

“Or perhaps you could get your equipment tailor-made? Enander has a branch contact here. You pay for the quality, but it's made with lightweight, durable magical beast materials, so I'm sure they can make something just right for you.”

The words “lightweight” and “durable” made Shiori's heart dance, and she nodded.

“The potions and food always end up being the heaviest,” she said. “I really would like to ensure that at least my gear is light.”

“Makes sense. You just tell me when you feel like it, and we'll go together.”

“Okay.”

It was nothing more than everyday, forgettable conversation as they went about their work. But it was in these moments that Shiori felt most alive, living with the man that she loved. She sent him a gentle smile as she looked into his dark magenta eyes.

A Most Happy Slime

After a dinner of Shiori's delicious cuisine and then a refreshing bath together, all that remained was to end the day with some stretching before bed. Rurii had loved living in the Blue Forest, playing and hunting with its slime kin all day, but life was just as fun living with Shiori since becoming her friend. And recently, it had been even *more* fun.

Rurii watched as Shiori, dressed in her pajamas, prepared some light snacks to go with drinks. The slime wobbled with joy. Shiori never used to drink before bed—she always used to read books or spend time with Rurii. But her old routine was less common now—particularly when her new *friend* stayed the night.

“Wow, looks great,” said Alec, who had readied some wine and two glasses. Shiori smiled and nodded.

“I put it together from leftover ingredients,” she replied as Alec looked at the tray in her hand.

The plate was filled with thin cuts of smoked meat, pieces of cheese, and various pickles, all with toothpicks through them. The colorful array of bite-size morsels was called “pinchos,” apparently.

“All of this would taste great on crackers or with baguettes, but I thought it best we keep things light before bed.”

Shiori put some of the food on a separate plate for Rurii—minus the toothpicks—and the slime trembled with pleasure and began eating immediately. It savored the meat and cheese slowly, and at times drank of the delicious magical water Shiori had created for it as it watched the couple.

Shiori and Alec sipped at their glasses of wine and spoke of nothing in particular—just their everyday life. They sat close together on the sofa, sometimes inviting Rurii to join the conversation, and sometimes kissing and smiling. Both of them looked relaxed and at ease.

But until recently, these expressions had been quite rare for Shiori and Alec. Until meeting Alec, there had always been an air of loneliness to Shiori, and she'd always pushed herself too hard. Nonetheless, she'd hid these feelings behind a smile even when she was suffering. Since meeting Alec, however,

these instances had lessened, and she was smiling more and more often with a true honesty.

Alec was similar. When he'd first met Shiori, he'd often wore a stern, grave expression, but now he was more at ease. His smile seemed enchanted by Shiori whenever he looked at her.

Rurii liked to watch the two of them together. It was a new joy the slime had discovered.

They look so happy.

The slime once more wobbled with great joy at the sight of its two friends enjoying each other's company. The couple saw Rurii's gesture and smiled back.

In this way, the three of them enjoyed a relaxed evening before bed. After a time, Shiori began to nod off, and little by little, she fell asleep, her body falling into Alec's. Alec then put his glass on the table and held her in his arms. He ran a hand across her cheek, kissed her on the lips, then stood with her in his arms and carried her to bed.

The slight bump caused Shiori's eyes to flutter, and a lazy smile drifted to her face. She wrapped her arms around Alec's neck and spoke into his ear, then fell asleep right where she was—probably she was talking in her sleep.

All the same, Alec's eyes grew wide and his face went red. He looked embarrassed, and yet equal parts happy, and he gave Shiori a hug before putting her into bed and joining her.

"You love me, huh?"

Alec combed his fingers lovingly through Shiori's black hair, then kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and her lips. Finally, he chuckled to himself.

"Hopefully next time you can say those words when you're awake," he said, dropping one more kiss on her lips before reaching out and turning off the magical lantern.

"Are you going to sleep too, Rurii?" he asked.

The slime appreciated being asked, and it wobbled a response, to which Alec chuckled. He bid the slime goodnight, and the room filled with the rustling of

quilts before settling into silence.

“This part is always...kind of agonizing, but...well, I guess it’s not all bad.”

Alec’s words were spoken to nobody in particular, but they were raspy with oncoming sleep, and soon enough, the only sounds in the room were the couple’s slumbering breaths.

Rurii climbed onto the bed, careful not to wake Shiori and Alec. They were asleep in each other’s arms—Shiori with her cheek pressed against Alec’s chest, and Alec holding her in a hug. There was the hint of a smile on their faces, and both were entirely at ease.

This is just so nice.

Seeing its friends happy made Rurii happy. This, more than anything else, was what the slime loved. It wobbled and made to leave the bed, but then stopped and looked back at the sleeping couple. After a moment of thought, it crawled to their legs, and spread itself out into a puddle.

But it’s even nicer to sleep together.

Wobble, wobble.

So the slime spread out, covering the couple’s legs, and fell into an enjoyable slumber of its own.

I sure hope there’s even more fun things in our dreams!

And with those thoughts drifting through its mind, the slime departed for the world of sleep.



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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 3

by You Fuguruma

Translated by Hengtee Lim Edited by Momo

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