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Part 1: Open for Classes on Housekeeping Magic

Chapter 1: As the Snow Melts Into Spring

1

The Kingdom of Storydia was in a high-latitude region, known for its heavy snowfall and frightfully long nights over the winter months. The sun didn't rise until late in the morning, and it never stayed for long, always setting in the early hours of the afternoon.

It was now April, however, a time in which the lands were fully graced by the blessings of the sun. The temperature rose, there was warmth in the air, and the snow that had long covered the lands slowly melted away. It was the season for thawing ice and snow, and spring was afoot.

In the city of Tris, capital of the Torisval region, the melting snow revealed the long-hidden stone-paved roads, and wagons carrying cargo sprayed muddy slush over passersby, who responded with cries of surprise and displeasure. These wagons were followed by patrolling knights shouting angrily for their drivers to be more considerate.

Shiori chuckled as she watched this all play out from the window, then turned her gaze to the Tris Cathedral's steeple, far off in the distance. It was as if the world outside was beginning to unfurl, as scenery once hidden behind veils of falling winter snow was now clearly visible.

"It won't be long before the snow is gone entirely," Shiori remarked.

"Yep." Alec nodded, looking out the window with her. "And the ground on either side of the high road isn't just snow anymore."

Rurii—a slime, and Shiori's familiar—was stuck to the window frame, and it, too, trembled with joy. It wouldn't be long now before leaves would sprout on the trees, and flowers would bloom across the region. Spring inched closer with

each passing day, and with its coming the people of Torisval grew more and more excited—the long and gloomy winter was at its end, and taking its place was a season of gentle, warm sunlight. Shiori and Alec, too, had made their way out of the chilly darkness of winter and, hand in hand, were starting on a path towards warmth.

A few years ago, Shiori Izumi had been pulled into an unforeseen space-time anomaly, transporting her from a comfortable, ordinary life in Japan and delivering her into another world entirely. Though she had at least been fortunate enough to have been discovered and taken in by a kind group of people, her new life was nonetheless one colored by despair—she began it with nothing but the clothes on her back, and could not understand a word of the local language.

For Shiori, who everyone assumed had come from a far eastern continent, finding work was not easy. Nevertheless, she'd persevered, making use of her knowledge and skills from her home world to carve out a small life for herself. Yet even this was promptly taken from her, and in the process, she'd nearly died. This experience was so traumatic that she took her hopes and dreams and buried them in the furthest depths of her heart, locking them away behind a fleeting and polite smile.

Shiori's lover, Alec Dia, had gone through something similar. He'd lost his mother—his only parent at the time—just before turning nine, and the torment that followed had all but broken down the boy's kind and delicate psyche. His father, then the king of Storydia, had taken him in, and Alec had once more experienced the warmth of family, in no small part thanks to his half brother, Olivier. However, many nobles in the royal court were far from pleased at the idea of having to revere this boy of unknown origins—and one who had lived as a commoner, no less—as a member of the royal family.

To make matters worse, Alec and Olivier had been pulled into a battle of succession against their own wishes, and in the midst of it all, Alec's then-lover, Rebecca, had passed a personal judgment on him with words so sharp, they were like knives through his heart. Such was the cumulative damage from these experiences that even some decades later, even after having fled the royal

family in secret, Alec still carried these wounds.

And so it came to pass that these two lonely souls had met—Shiori, who struggled simply to live day to day, and Alec, who longed for peace of mind but was tempted to let himself slip into eternal slumber. They'd healed one another's wounds, they'd fallen in love, and they had come to live under the same roof. Now that they had shared with each other their greatest secrets—for Shiori, her origins in another world; and for Alec, his royal bloodline—there was nothing more that could come between them.

The home that they had both wanted, filled with kindness and warmth, was now something they shared. And though they were not yet married, Alec had promised to propose just as soon as he had settled the last of the problems that cast a shadow over his person.

"This is happiness," Shiori said.

"Sure is," replied Alec.

The two adventurers shared a smile, then a light kiss. Quiet times like this, in which they could share peaceful moments, were so very precious to them. For Shiori, even mere slices of everyday life were priceless treasures. She and Alec were born and raised in entirely separate worlds, and in terms of status, they had lived completely different lives. Under ordinary circumstances, their paths never would have crossed.

But the whims of fate had carried Shiori into this world, where she had taken up adventuring because she'd had no other choice. And it was here that she'd met the love of her life, a member of the royal family who was hiding his true identity. That they had met each other at all was a kind of miracle, and one that had been reached via a great number of crossroads in both of their lives.

"It's wonderful that we'll be able to supply you with an identity too," said Alec. "We owe Yae many thanks."

"She set her own conditions for the deal, but I'm incredibly grateful nonetheless."

Though their relationship had perhaps started off on the wrong foot, Shiori thought it a real blessing that she had formed a friendship with the director of

the Yobai Trading Company, a famed Eastern merchant company. Yae Yamabuchi, who led the company, traveled the continent not just for trade, but also on a mission to support and give succor to any Eastern immigrants she met on her journeys. It was this mission that had led her to Shiori. And though Shiori and Yae had met but once, Yae had already offered to provide Shiori with an identity: that of the missing daughter of an old family from Mizuho.

Yae had not offered to do this for free, and some of the negotiations were still ongoing, but everything Yae had asked for, Shiori could deliver. Shiori also owed thanks to her brother in this world, Zack Ciel, and his old friend Kristoffer Osbring, the Torisval Margrave, for negotiating on her behalf.

"You should be proud of yourself," said Alec. "Everything that's happened is a result of your own hard work."

"Thanks, Alec. But what makes me happiest is that you accept me."

They smiled warmly at one another, and shared a second kiss. Behind them, a book that had been left open fell shut, and the gust of air whisked some papers off the table. Alec knelt down to pick them up, and as he did so, he glanced at what was written on them.

"Oh, so it's finally on the horizon, huh?" he asked.

What Alec held in his hands were the papers that made up Shiori's plans for a lecture on housekeeping magic.

Housekeeping magic was a unique set of magical skills that Shiori had developed, based around household chores. One notable upside of this magic was that it did not require great amounts of magical power. By utilizing this unique skill set, Shiori played a support role in adventuring parties and, through her efforts, had earned herself a unique class title: "housekeeping mage."

When Shiori had first started out, many belittled her work, but through her efforts people had come to appreciate her contributions. As far as the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild was concerned, Shiori was now indispensable, and some of her colleagues had begun to profess a desire to learn Shiori's unique magic. With this wind at her back, Shiori had thus started planning her lecture on housekeeping magic.

"Yes," she said. "We've had a run of fine weather recently, so the timing feels right. I think I'll have Zack start letting the applicants know."

"Great."

Alec smiled as he read over the plans, and Rurii jumped down from the window frame to wobble with excitement.

Shiori had decided to hold her lecture in the spring, when the days were longer. The weather was unpredictable in the winter, and there was every chance a blizzard might blow through on the day of the event.

"I guess all that's left once the prep is done is to hope that we don't get any emergency requests. You never know what kind of work is coming."

In the early spring, many magical beasts awakened from their hibernation and immediately went on a search for food. As such, it was likely that the Guild would see an influx of suppression requests during this period. Alec hoped that the Guild would be able to handle them all without issue.

"There was so much more interest than I expected," Shiori said. "I just hope it all goes well."

Shiori had originally planned for a group of six or seven people, but as word of a potential lecture had spread, inquiries had come in from other guilds, the knight corps, and even the home of the margrave himself. As a result, Shiori was likely looking at a class that would number some thirty people in total.

Outside of the adventurers that were attending, there were also Lovner family servants, members of the margrave's personal guard, and knights who had been relegated to noncombat positions due to injury. Among the knights on the list was the former captain of the knights from Brovito Village, who had been injured badly during the snow wolf attack.

"Ah, I remember him," said Alec. "So he had to abandon working on the front lines after all."

Alec's brow furrowed with the pain of sympathy. He was a swordsman himself, and his deep feelings about the incident could be seen in the way he subconsciously rubbed his own sword arm.

The knight in question had injured his arm so badly that, even with healing magic, he would likely never wield a sword again. Though they had not seen him in action, both knew that he must have once been a fine swordsman—after all, he had made it to the rank of captain. Neither knew if the former captain's application had come at his own behest or the behest of those around him, but the fact that he would be attending at all made it clear that standing on the front lines was no longer an option for him.

"I really don't know how useful my magic will be for them all, but I do hope it helps," Shiori said.

Alec looked up from the list of applicants with a hint of pained helplessness in his eyes, but he smiled.

"We'll all be there to help you out, so try not to worry."

Rurii then added a thoughtful wobble of encouragement. "Me too!"

"Thank you, both of you. I'll do my best."

Applicants for Shiori's lecture weren't just attending to learn about housekeeping magic, however. Many of them were just as intrigued by—and full of expectations for—her use of combined magic. This was the act of casting multiple spells at the same time—something that a great many mages had tried and failed at, sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

A few high-level mages had in fact applied to attend Shiori's lecture, but these applicants were politely declined on this occasion—the lecture was, after all, focused on housekeeping magic. Shiori had promised these applicants that she would hold a different gathering at another time for a discussion on combined magics, and they were invited to observe the class on the condition that they also acted as a kind of support and security. High-level mages would be able to move quickly and decisively should a lecture attendee look like they were going to blow themselves up, after all. Alec and Nadia would be there for Shiori too, of course.

"But didn't you practice combined magic on your own?" asked Alec.

"My magical power is so dismal that there were never any explosions," Shiori replied. "Minor burns were the worst of it."

Shiori barely had enough magic to take down a mere spider. The worst she had to worry about wasn't an explosion, but her pot bubbling over while she cooked. That was the whole reason she'd had to work so hard to innovate and be creative with her magic in the first place.

"Minor, huh?" uttered Alec.

The injuries Shiori had suffered back then were all completely healed now, but Alec took her hands in his all the same, and looked them over carefully. Shiori gave his rough hands a pat and smiled up at him to allay his worries, but he couldn't stop a worried grimace from flashing across his face.

"I think I'm most surprised by how many mid-tier mages there are on the applicant list," Alec remarked. "I thought the crowd would mostly be low-level mages."

"Yes, I was a little surprised too," said Shiori. "But mid-tier mages have their own struggles."

Although she'd said this, to Shiori, who was as weak as a mage could be, what they went through still felt like something of a luxury. For mid-tier mages who relied on their magic in battle, their problem was that their progress might be halted at the middle ranks. Mid-level mages lacked the overwhelming power necessary to face powerful magical beasts, which meant they could only take requests up to a certain difficulty. This, in turn, severely limited what requests were available to them. They also had to be careful they weren't a burden on any parties they joined. For those who made adventuring their life's work, knowing that they couldn't rise any higher through the ranks was a very tough pill to swallow; so if their magical power was limited, all that remained was to be more innovative with the magic that was at their disposal.

"I'm lucky," said Alec. "I happen to be good with a sword, which opened up the path of being a magical swordsman for me. But if I'd had to rely on my magic alone, I think I never would have made it out of the mid-level ranks."

Alec could use high-level magic, but not to the extent that it could be his main source of offense. He was also bad when it came to ranged and area-of-effect magic. That was why he felt that were he a mage, he would also have been midtier.

"I think I would have stopped at B-rank too," he said.

"Oh, I see."

Things were different when, like Alec, you could fight by other means. But weapons weren't something you could simply pick up and wield either. Sometimes you were good with them, sometimes you weren't. When Shiori had undergone an examination to find out which weapons she was compatible with, she was told that the best she'd ever be able to muster, even with constant training, was simple self-defense swordsmanship. Naturally, she didn't stand a chance against a magical beast. At that point, Shiori had no choice but to come to terms with the fact that she could be little more than a low-level mage.

Fortunately for Shiori, however, she was good at housekeeping magic. Her ability to specialize in magic for chores had taken her all the way to B-rank, even with her lack of magical power. Shiori was a living example of overcoming one's limitations, and this had likely drawn the interest of many of the mid-level mages. If they could not climb the ranks by their strength as mages alone, then perhaps there was still a way for them to, like Shiori, play an excellent support role.

"But housekeeping and chores aren't for everyone," said Shiori, "so I want people to come away thinking that even if they don't become housekeeping mages, they can find their own kind of magic, unique to their abilities."

The number of registered adventurers was growing every year, and requests were getting more diverse as well. There was much that could not be handled with only the classes that currently existed. If it was true that Shiori's work as a housekeeping mage had allowed mid-level parties to complete requests that once required high-ranking parties, then it seemed likely that the future would bring with it more all-new specialized classes.

One interesting example of Shiori's influence could be seen on the herbalist Nils, who was already developing herbal cuisine specifically for expeditions. All he needed now, he'd said with a smile, was to learn the housekeeping magic to make it actually happen.

"Herbal cuisine, huh? I just hope it isn't too pungent," muttered Alec.

He cringed slightly as he spoke, recalling a nutritional mixture that Nils had

made him drink in the past. The taste had been so vile that he now politely refused it whenever Nils offered him some.

"Was it really...that bad?" asked Shiori.

"It was like withered branches and mud, boiled with cheap wine," said Alec, a distant look in his eyes.

"Eww," said Shiori, gagging slightly.

Nils was an A-rank herbalist—if he said that the concoction was a nutrition booster, there was no doubting its efficacy. However, that didn't mean Alec wanted to drink it again anytime soon.

"Perhaps it would be best for Nils to hold a tasting session before he starts serving his cuisine out in the field," said Shiori.

"Indeed. It doesn't matter how effective the food is if it takes a mental and spiritual toll on you."

When it came to food, nutritional value was of course important, but so was taste. And no truer was this the case than when a meal impacted a person's very morale. The two adventurers chuckled as they tidied Shiori's papers, then set out for the Adventurers' Guild together with Rurii. Shiori was now ready to set a concrete date for the lecture.

They avoided the snow on the roads and footpaths, all of which was colored sherbet by the warm rays of the sun. Wagons and carriages continued to spray up muddy water as they rode by, wringing screams and cries from the women walking nearby. This was a common sight for the season.

"When the snow is half melted like this, it's even more of a nuisance than in the middle of winter," remarked Shiori.

"Yep. And unpaved roads are really the worst, so we all try avoiding requests that take us through them. You're guaranteed a mud bath, otherwise."

Spring was indeed imminent, but at night, the temperature still dropped to subzero. The snow that melted during the day froze once again into something not unlike clumps of brown sugar. It was very difficult to walk through, and exhausting to boot.

"Lots of avalanches at this time of year too," said Alec. "We're always warning the rookies about it, particularly those who were brought up in cities."

"I can imagine."

The two adventurers chatted easily as they walked, and when they entered the Guild, they were greeted by an excited Bla, who was waving to them from the front counter. Bla was Zack's new slime familiar as of a few days ago, and it was already comfortable in its position as guild mascot.

However, the smile they shared at the sight of the slime quickly faded as they became aware of the strange atmosphere in the room. Whispering adventurers went quickly silent as they noticed Alec and Shiori's arrival, and there was surprise written across their faces. At the same time, one of the people at the front desk knocked on the door of the guild master's office before disappearing behind it. Unsure and anxious at the uncertainty of it all, Shiori found herself sidling closer towards Alec for protection.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I've no idea, but...it doesn't look good."

That made Shiori shrink with anxiety, and Alec pulled her closer. Just as a nearby adventurer was about to say something to them, the door to the guild master's office opened, and Zack emerged with a stern but slightly confused expression.

"Hey there," he said, letting out a sigh as he ruffled his head of red hair. "Great timing."

"What is it, brother?" asked Shiori as she watched him close the door.

"Someone came here to apologize to you," said Zack. "But look, you can turn them away if that's what you want, okay? They said as much themselves."

"Someone came here to apologize?"

Shiori was stumped. She racked her brain, but the only faces that came to mind were those of her old party members. Alec instinctively knew what was going through her head, and he held her tighter.

"Uh, wait," said Zack with a grimace. "I should've been clearer. My bad. It's

not who you're thinking of. Do you remember Vivi Larety? She was a rookie mage who quit last year in early autumn, after she caused some trouble."

"Vivi..." muttered Shiori. "Autumn... Oh."

Finally, a memory surfaced from a corner of Shiori's mind. She'd never even talked to Vivi until the incident, and Vivi had only known about Shiori's appearance and achievements through rumor. They had no connection to one another save that of being fellow adventurers. Nonetheless, Vivi had picked a fight with Shiori, claiming it ridiculous that a low-level mage had somehow made it to B-rank. At the end of it, Vivi and two of her friends had even pointed their weapons at Shiori.

The trio of rookie adventurers had been arrogant and driven by a twisted sense of justice. They had confronted Shiori, ignoring warnings and advice from their seniors and friends. In the end, the knight corps themselves had nearly gotten involved in the whole kerfuffle.

The trio of girls had, in their arrogance, scorned Shiori and underestimated her. For that, they'd paid the price. All of them had been punished for breaking Guild rules, but one among them had still refused to learn her lesson, and not long after returning to the fold, she'd taken a job well beyond her capabilities. Her arrogance had thus spelled the end of her life. Another one of the girls had been with her, and though she had in fact shown some regret about the incident with Shiori, she'd still accompanied her friend on this job, and eventually ended up leaving her friend to die. Such was this girl's regret in the aftermath of the incident that she had left Tris entirely.

The last of the trio, Vivi Larety, had fled back to her hometown, thus bringing the curtain down upon the whole incident.

"Shiori," said Zack kindly, stirring her from her thoughts.

Shiori blinked as she surfaced from her memories of the past, looking up at her brother and the worry that caused his sky blue eyes to waver ever so slightly. He knew that she was from another world, but he was kind and always considerate. He was her brother here in this world—a man she loved and could rely on.

But it was not just Zack. Alec had accepted Shiori in her entirety, and then

there was her ever-trustworthy lapis-colored slime, Rurii. Shiori smiled at all of them.

She was no longer alone.

"I'm a little scared, but I'll see her," she said.

Shiori had not forgotten the fear she'd felt when Vivi, who had the makings of a high-level mage, had pointed her wand at Shiori. But if enough time had passed to bring about a change in Vivi, then Shiori wanted to see it for herself. Zack nodded wryly, then opened the door to his office.

Inside, a girl with a head of blonde hair sat on the office sofa, staring at her feet. She looked up with a gasp as the door opened. Vivi's eyes met Shiori's own, and she nodded awkwardly, her eyes filled with a mixture of regret, uncertainty, and fear. They painted a complicated picture of swirling, mixed emotions.

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Shiori stood in the doorway for a moment, staring at Vivi. Vivi had come here to apologize, but with Shiori now here in front of her, she seemed at a loss for what to do. Her gaze wavered with uncertainty, and then she silently looked back down at the floor. But Shiori had noticed her glancing timidly at Zack and Alec, and so she asked the two politely to leave—she knew that the sight of them standing behind her would be overwhelming for the girl.

The two men weren't entirely comfortable leaving Shiori on her own, but eventually, they did as she asked. Shiori knew she'd made the right decision as soon as she saw Vivi let out a small sigh of relief. She took a seat opposite the girl, and the two sat in silence for a time before Vivi finally spoke.

"Um," she said hesitantly.

"Yes?"

The moment Shiori spoke, Vivi flinched and shrank into herself. Still, she forced herself to sit up and continue.

"I've thought a lot since, well, what happened..." she said.



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"Okay."

"And my older sister gave me a good talking-to..."

"Okay."

"I, um, I didn't know anything."

"Okay."

"And, erm, I realized that I never actually apologized to you."

"Okav."
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Shiori remembered Vivi being more forthright in her manner of speaking, but she was being very cautious with her choice of words now. Not just that, but she wasn't speaking clearly—she was waffling, almost—and Shiori felt that she was trying her utmost to be respectful, so in turn, Shiori did her best to listen patiently.

But even Vivi soon realized that she was avoiding the point, and after looking down at her feet again, she suddenly raised her head, looked Shiori in the eyes, and bowed deeply.

"I'm so sorry!" she said. "I said the most awful things to you—and what I did, it was just... I was the one who talked Sheila and Mia into doing it, but then I ran away without even a word, and...I'm so, so sorry."

Even here, Vivi couldn't quite bring herself to speak completely openly, but she strung the words together as best she could, her head hung low. Her former arrogance was like a distant dream, and it seemed that the last six months had brought about a positive change in the girl. Vivi continued to apologize as she opened up to Shiori, speaking of her past.

Vivi was born in a small village in the mountains near the border of the Enqvist region. It was a remote village in which Vivi stood out among other children of her age. For one thing, she had inherited her parents' good looks, but what drew even more attention was the fact that she had enormous magical potential.

On Vivi's mother's side, people were sometimes born with immense magical

power. Vivi's grandmother, her mother, and her older sister hadn't inherited this power, but Vivi had, and so her family treated her as very special for it. Believing that society was growing more open-minded about the role of women in society, and that their daughter's abilities meant she would have her pick of future careers, Vivi's parents had provided her with a more-than-adequate education. They'd cut into their savings to ensure she had a private instructor a few times a month, and ensured that both of their daughters could read, write, do mathematics, and understood the etiquette and manners of the city.

This had paid off when Vivi's sister fell in love with a merchant who regularly traded at the village, and thus married into an affluent merchant family. Vivi, too, grew into a young woman just as talented as her parents had hoped, and though she had an arrogant streak, they were happy to write this off as just a phase of youth.

Unfortunately for Vivi, as she grew into an adult and eventually prepared to leave to live in the outside world, nobody ever seriously talked to her about her attitude, or tried to help her to correct it. It was sometimes pointed out to her by family or those close to her, but because nobody ever pushed her on the issue, Vivi paid the comments no mind.

When Vivi's parents passed away, she'd left her village with dreams of making it big and becoming an adventurer in the capital of Tris. She made friends with the same rank as herself, and they'd passed a year without any issues to speak of. But eventually, her arrogance and prejudice had grown worse, and this had led to her run-in with Shiori. Subsequently, she'd faced a defeat unlike anything she had ever previously known.

The day that Vivi and her friends had picked a fight with Shiori, they'd stepped into a region of Shiori's heart that none should ever have borne witness to. On that day, they'd stared into the terrifying abyss of all the most painful emotions that Shiori carried with her—her heartbreaking longing for home, a fierce loneliness, a rage that threatened to crush her completely, a sorrow that was on the verge of tearing her apart, and a bottomless despair.

In Shiori's highly detailed illusion magic, Vivi had seen a woman of the deepest darkness, and the endless vortex of despair in which she resided. People were creatures that had a hard-enough time simply managing their own

hearts—they could only ever share a portion of themselves with others. Vivi was immature and young—barely even twenty at the time—and yet she had taken the full brunt of Shiori's pent-up despair head-on. She had touched, through Shiori's magic, the monstrous darkness in her person.

Vivi had felt like if she took one wrong step, she would be swallowed up completely by that darkness. If she had been any weaker—or if Shiori had wielded even just a little more magical power—then she might well have died from the terror of the moment. Even just the thought of it now left her shivering. She had been lucky, and her good fortune had saved her life.

However, ever since that day, she had been afraid of the dark. She now slept with the lights on. In the darkness, she saw Shiori's figure in the depths of despair, and she felt herself sliding towards it. The day after the incident, when she had been called to the Guild, the mere sight of Shiori had left her legs trembling. She'd shrunk away, fearing that the shadow stretching from Shiori's legs was a piece of the abyss she had once seen writhing towards her. When she saw Shiori hiding behind her awkward smile, knowing that she carried such deep grief within her, Vivi was terrified—she did not know just how deep the abyss went.

Vivi hated it. She was terrified. She wanted nothing more than to be home. As she wept with terror, the future was no longer as certain as it had once seemed. All she knew was that she had to get away from Shiori, and just like that, she had fled home to the mountains.

The people of Vivi's hometown had looked at her with some suspicion. This was a girl who had left boasting that she was going to become a first-rate adventurer, and suddenly, little more than a year later, she was back. Still, they'd accepted her return, assuming that Vivi simply hadn't been able to adapt to life in the city. Some, however, derided her, saying she was little more than "a big fish in a small pond."

They weren't wrong. Vivi had been forced to learn that some things could not be judged by mere rank and level. Vivi had lacked an understanding of the world, and hers had been a hard lesson. Vivi and Mia had underestimated Shiori, and their pride had been summarily pulverized. As for Sheila, who had refused to admit her folly, she'd taken on a reckless request, and her fate was

to be eaten by a magical beast.

For a time afterwards, Vivi had fallen into a depression. As she ate into the money she'd saved from her short adventuring career, she helped out with the local vigilance committee as well as hunters. The days were ordinary, plain, and boring. The so-called glory days, when her friends would look at her with envy, expecting her to make it big, were like a pipe dream.

Even right now, I should have been promoted already. I should be out there, as an adventurer.

Arrogant thoughts like these sometimes raised their head, but the moment Vivi imagined herself as a first-class adventurer, her pride was just as quickly crushed, as the muddy darkness of despair crept back into her memories.

Vivi lived this way into the new year, and in the middle of March, just as Vivi felt herself beginning to calm, her elder sister came to visit. Though once just a naive countrysider, Vivi's sister had since become a mother of three, and was now every bit the portrait of a merchant family's managerial staff. She'd been worried about Vivi, who hadn't visited even once, and who had sent only a letter before fleeing for home. So, just as soon as her youngest child was weaned, she'd come to visit.

Vivi had been promptly scolded for not even having come to visit her brother-in-law, but mere moments later, she'd found herself wrapped in her sister's familiar, warm embrace.

"What in the world did you do?" Vivi's sister asked. "I heard that there was trouble of some sort."

As a merchant, Vivi's sister counted adventurers among her new family's clientele, and so it was no surprise that word had reached her. Vivi knew that there was no use hiding things, and so she told her sister everything. From start to finish, her sister was by her side, listening quietly, but she let out a heavy sigh when Vivi's story came to its end.

"I always worried about that vanity of yours, but I never imagined it would lead to you doing something like *that*."

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"I'm sorry."
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"I don't think I'm the one you should be apologizing to."

"Oh, um, right."

It had been easy for Vivi to unload her story onto her sister, but it was only then that she realized she had never actually apologized to Shiori herself.

"Don't tell me..." uttered Vivi's sister, reading her younger sister's face like an open book.

Vivi's silence only served to confirm her sister's fears.

"So you picked a fight with someone out of sheer jealousy, the victim was kind enough to *not* get the knights involved, and then you fled for home without even saying sorry? Even as your sister, I can't make any excuses for this. How am I supposed to hold myself with pride in front of our adventurer clients now? You have no idea how strong the bonds are between fellow adventurers, do you?"

Vivi's lips pursed. She couldn't utter even a single word. It dawned on her then that her actions had a ripple effect that now threatened to harm her sister's work. She wasn't a first-class adventurer at all—she was little more than a child. But Vivi wasn't even a child anymore, which made things all the worse.

Though she gleaned from her sister's words that her family's business was doing fine, her sister nonetheless worked as a merchant, and Vivi's actions could very well muddy her entire family's reputation. If the knight corps really had been brought in, word could easily have spread that they were connected to criminals, costing them customers. The realization was enough to turn Vivi pale.

And when Vivi had confronted Shiori, she really had been out to hurt the woman. She simply couldn't deny it—she had snapped, and pointed a magically charged wand at Shiori. Sheila, too, had drawn her sword, and Mia had been ready to loose an arrow at a moment's notice. All of them carried powerful weapons that were capable of felling magical beasts, and they had all turned their weapons on an unarmed victim. Anyone watching would have sworn that the trio were out to kill Shiori. And perhaps, if Shiori had not resisted and fought

back, they might have done exactly that.

Vivi could not blame her actions on the folly of youth, and she could not claim that they had been provoked. It was well-known that Vivi and her friends had been trying to sniff out criticism to use against Shiori, and many had seen them following her around.

"Oh no..." uttered Vivi. "What have I done...?"

"More importantly, who are you thinking of when you say that? Don't tell me you're thinking of me and the family, and not the actual person you tried to attack."

"Frm..."

"And today's the first time I heard that the victim in all of this was an Easterner. I daresay you were *incredibly* lucky. If anything, you were saved by the circumstances."

Vivi looked up, confused by her sister's words.

"It happened before you left for Tris, so you might not know, but that Easterner really was almost killed in the past," said Vivi's sister gloomily. "Her party dragged her out on an expedition even though she was too sick to be out in the field, then they stripped her of all her gear and left her to die in the depths of a dungeon. This was after they had taken all her money and made sure she couldn't escape her fate. It was so big an incident that it was even in the newspapers. Prejudice against immigrants is one thing, but that was well and truly over the line."

"Oh my..."

Vivi gasped as her sister looked down at her, grief and remorse in her eyes. But those feelings were not for Vivi, but rather for the woman who was not there with them. The only Easterner in Tris, who had always stood out because of her appearance, but now drew even more attention because of the horrible incident she'd been at the center of.

"Now this is just my assumption," said Vivi's sister, "but I think that Eastern woman didn't want to raise any more of a commotion. She was already at the heart of a huge incident, and she probably knew that if the knights were

brought in to handle you and your friends, then it only would have gotten people talking about her all over again. Then there's the fact that she's an immigrant; a lot of the talk about her wouldn't have been kind, that much is for sure. Immigrants don't have it easy at the best of times, and that's why so many of them try to keep a low profile."

That was why the knights hadn't been brought in. And while Vivi's sister was only guessing, Vivi knew that the broad strokes of what she said were correct.

"What do I do?" asked Vivi.

Vivi was arrogant and reckless, but she was smart enough to be able to put things together. She had always been a quick thinker. Her fellow adventurers had told her about Shiori—they'd said she was conscientious, hardworking, smart, creative, and that she'd worked to the bone to get where she was. And yet now, when she looked back on things, Vivi realized that she had simply refused to believe anything she'd been told. While it was true that Shiori didn't wield powerful magic, she wasn't an idiot. Quite the opposite—she'd learned to use what she had quite masterfully.

Shiori had worked as hard as she could to achieve what she had, and on two occasions she had almost been killed. And both times, it had been for selfish reasons. These experiences must have been harrowing for Shiori, and that was why she had unleashed upon Vivi and her friends that abyss of rage and despair.

"I... I had no idea," uttered Vivi, "but I did something so awful..."

"There's never a good reason to take another person's life, Vivi," said her sister, her face cringing with sadness. "We all have people we don't like and don't get along with. I'm no different, and I imagine there was something about that Easterner that rubbed you the wrong way. But you know, the least we can do is just try to stay away from those types. Especially if it means nobody ends up hurt."

Vivi knew this to be true. She didn't like Shiori. She couldn't stand that the woman was a mage just like Vivi, but received praise despite her lack of magical power. Sheila had wanted only to drive Shiori away, thinking her a rival for her romantic interest, and Mia had simply gotten wrapped up in being a part of

something with her friends. All of them had assumed that, as an Easterner from an undeveloped region, Shiori was a nobody. They'd assumed that she'd charmed and slept her way through the ranking system, and so they had slandered her even though she'd done nothing wrong, and eventually leveled their weapons at her.

"You might have thought you were in the right, but all you were really doing was looking for a reason to vent your frustrations on someone you didn't like."

These words, coming from family, were raw in their honesty, and Vivi realized now that the people she'd thought were strict in the past had been holding back. But Vivi's sister had hit the nail right on the head—and it left Vivi in a stunned silence. As tears began to stream from her eyes, Vivi's sister spoke again.

"You're an adult now," she said soothingly, "and I'm sure you know what you have to do, right?"

"I do." Vivi nodded.

And so, she had come once more to the capital of Tris.

"We were thoughtless, and we put you through something awful, and we caused trouble for a lot of other people too. I'm so very sorry."

Vivi bowed deeply, and Shiori stared silently at her soft golden hair for a time. Vivi's words and her bearing were honest, and she truly regretted what she had done. She wasn't apologizing to Shiori because someone had ordered her to do it. Even though she knew how shameful it was to confront her actions and confess to them, she was doing it anyway. She was apologizing for all of it.

Shiori let out a breath before speaking.

"The day you confronted me," she said, "I was so scared."

At first, she thought the girls had only come to ridicule her. But then it became clear that they would not leave until they had done more. The girls' words had made it crystal clear to Shiori that they planned to fight her as a way of proving that she was useless, just so they could go back to the Guild and tell everybody. But it was also clear that they wanted to intimidate her, make her

cry, and cause her panic as a way of making themselves feel better.

When Shiori brought this up, Vivi lowered her gaze awkwardly. Her expression was a silent confession.

"For you and your friends, it might have been nothing. But it *is* true that my ability to use magic is very limited, and that my combat abilities are lacking. That's why it was so terrifying. All of you were seen as rising stars among the rookie adventurers, and you all pointed your weapons at me."

All Shiori had done was do her best to keep on living. She had made it out of one life-threatening incident, only to be faced with another. In the moment, she'd thought that perhaps she would be injured so badly, she might never recover. Perhaps she would be fatally wounded. These very real possibilities had filled her with fear. A fear caused by Vivi and her friends, and their brazen intimidation.

"When people decide that others are beneath them, it poisons their hearts," Shiori continued. "You hold yourself above whoever it is you don't like, and you start to think it's okay to be cruel, and that it's okay to do whatever you want to them."

The people that ended up in this kind of position were always those who were weak. They were so-called underachievers, or the less well-off. Sometimes they were forced to assume this position by those who were overwhelmingly stronger than them. And Shiori knew only too well what would happen once they found themselves there. These poor defenseless souls would be mercilessly bullied, and treated as less than human.

People who became bullies lost touch with the idea of respect for others. Something in them grew warped. This had happened to Shiori's own party members. They had all been good people to begin with, but as they were led down a dark path, they had come to despise Shiori and had treated her with great cruelty. When Shiori had looked into the eyes of Vivi and her friends when they'd confronted her, she'd seen something that reminded her of her old party —the belief that they could do whatever they wanted to Shiori and get away with it.

"I won't deny you your feelings of contempt. And I don't think a strong sense

of pride is a bad thing," said Shiori. "But please, don't ever think it's okay to create a target you can look down on and bully. You aren't just stomping all over another person's dignity when you do such a thing—your own heart will devolve into a hateful, abominable thing."

In the end, the act of persecuting others was just a way of airing your own frustrations.

"My sister, she said the same thing," said Vivi. "That's why getting to C-rank was easy, but after that...well..."

Vivi admitted then that her actions against Shiori had not just been a matter of vanity. She'd outperformed her fellow rookies to the point that when they were finally reaching D-rank, Vivi was already on the verge of rising to C-rank. However, things had not progressed so smoothly from there.

Vivi had been picky about jobs, so she hadn't gained a wide range of experience. Her attitude was also a point of contention, and she'd ignored advice from her friends and made no effort to reeducate herself in areas where she was lacking. As a result, good requests didn't often come her way.

In the midst of all of this, she became aware of Shiori, a low-level mage who did nothing more than chores and hailed from a lost civilization. It infuriated Vivi to learn that Shiori had made it to B-rank in just three years. Vivi and many of her friends at the time shared similar feelings, and their comments—things like "She might work hard, but her ranking doesn't make sense," and "Seriously, all she does is cook, wash clothes, and boil bath water"—made Vivi, Mia, and Sheila all the more sure that Shiori would make the perfect target for their frustrations.

"Judging me was not going to make your rank any higher," said Shiori. "Worse still, the rumors that I earned my rank through foul play were groundless.

There's no evidence of that."

"You're right. That's why, in the end...we only tarnished our own reputations."

When Vivi had entered the Adventurers' Guild, some six months after the incident, the eyes that met her person were cold and unforgiving. Even her former friends and acquaintances, who had egged her on with their bad-

mouthing, didn't want to approach her. At that moment, it had become crystal clear that she had crossed a line and, in doing so, ruined her own reputation.

"Making mistakes like that, it's something to do while you're young," said Shiori. "And I don't mean to be rude by that—it's just that, where I come from, you are still technically a minor. So please, make your mistakes now while you can still make up for them. Make your mistakes while people will still forgive you, and do your best to learn from them."

There was yet more Shiori could say, and so much more hidden in the depths of her heart, but she had been put in fatal danger twice in her life, and this was the most she could muster. Vivi nodded in return.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Shiori.

"First, I'll go back to my village," replied Vivi. "But coming here gave me a chance to think about a lot of things, and...I want to work as a mage, and this time, I want to do it right."

Vivi's own parents had worked hard and dipped into their private savings to ensure that Vivi received an education that would make it easier for her to live in the city. Vivi did not want their efforts to go to waste. At the same time, she wanted to do work that made the most of her skills.

She reached out a hand and Shiori timidly shook it.

"I see..." said Shiori, mustering a smile. "Things might be very difficult for a time, but if you really put your heart into your work, people will notice."

Shiori, too, had at one stage felt nothing but prejudice surrounding her. But she hoped that, just like her, Vivi would one day meet people who would look at her with kindness and generosity. She stood from her chair as Vivi wept, and silently left the room. Alec and Zack both looked relieved to see her, and Rurii gently rubbed her leg. Her fellow adventurers, too, who had been watching quietly from their places around the Guild, relaxed into rueful smiles as they realized that everything was, for the most part, okay.

Zack gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder, and then went silently back into the guild master's office. Shiori let out a sigh of relief, then, without a moment's hesitation, leapt towards Alec, who was waiting for her with open arms. There

she closed her eyes and let her body indulge in the kindness of his embrace.

Chapter 2: Beginner-Level Housekeeping Magic

1

The arrival of April brought more sun, and so the snow steadily melted away. There were snowy days here and there, but the warmth kept any of it from piling up. And fortunately for everyone involved in the housekeeping magic lecture, the skies were so vibrant on the day of the lecture itself that the heavy snow of the previous day felt like but a dream. The weather was a showcase of beautiful contrast; clear blue skies, and pristine white scenery.

"With weather this beautiful, I think you're all set," said Zack, whose final judgment was that the lecture would ultimately go ahead.

Some had traveled from quite far to attend Shiori's lecture, and they smiled with relief at the news. Not long afterwards, a line of carriages left the capital of Tris—the two in the lead belonged to the Adventurers' Guild, followed by carriages belonging to the Torisval Margrave's private forces and the Lovner family, with a northern knight corps carriage bringing up the rear. The large carriages were quite an intimidating sight, but the people of the city saw them off with hope in their eyes, believing it to be some kind of joint training exercise between the Adventurers' Guild and the knight corps.

Shiori, who was sitting in the lead carriage, let out a quiet sigh. Even though she'd seen the attendee list in advance, she was nonetheless nervous, and seeing all of them in person was enough to make her head spin. Even now, she felt some discomfort in the gazes that fell upon her—in the glances from adventurers from outside of the Tris Guild, to whom an Easterner was still an uncommon sight. It was a struggle for Shiori to remain composed under such pressure.

Perhaps having noticed this (or perhaps not, as it was often difficult to read what a slime was thinking), Rurii and Bla broke out into a wobbling dance, both strange and entrancing, which drew everyone's attention. Rurii was always by

Shiori's side, but Bla had been sent by Zack to go enjoy the outdoors, and Shiori was grateful to the slimes for relieving the pressure she felt.

"You okay?" whispered Alec, who had noticed Shiori already looking a little exhausted.

"I'm feeling a little anxious, admittedly," she replied, "but I'm trying to think of today as me just going through the motions, and practicing what I always do."

If her class noticed their teacher's lack of confidence, they'd lose faith in her abilities. A reserved and timid attitude would be seen as a weakness by some, so it was better to appear positive and assured, even if it meant bluffing.

"Wow," remarked Alec. "I always knew you were mentally tough, but you look ready for anything. You've really gotten so much tougher."

In Shiori's attempts to be strong, there was usually a certain fragility, as though her very person might shatter and crumble. But Alec noticed almost none of that in her now.

"If that's the case, then I owe it to you and all my friends. You've taught me that there are people around me I can trust and fall back on. And more than that, you accepted me, Alec—all of me. I'm not afraid anymore."

The Shiori Izumi of this world was surrounded by people who watched over her and protected her. Her brother here in this world, Zack, and her lover, Alec, had both accepted her past, and they, along with her blue slime Rurii, were always there for her. She was no longer alone. People accepted her as an inhabitant of this world just as they would any other resident, though it was not her original home. Shiori still had her fears and her doubts, of course, but her existence was no longer a fleeting, near-transparent thing; she had found the confidence to be her own person.

It was for this very reason that Shiori no longer paid any mind to those who looked down on her as an Eastern foreigner, or those who would be attending her lecture out of a certain spite, so as to evaluate and judge the "so-called abilities of the housekeeping mage." She could shrug all of this off as little more than par for the course.

When she said as much to Alec, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close.

Vivi sat in the same carriage as Shiori, and sighed as she glanced at the adventurers who had come for no reason other than to judge the housekeeping mage. She knew what they were thinking, and how they felt. To them, Shiori was nothing more than a low-level mage. It didn't matter that she was a bona fide B-rank adventurer; they looked forward to pushing her around and teaching *her* a thing or two, if her class wasn't up to their expectations.

And it was at least true to say that among the Guild's officially registered mages, Shiori's magical power was the lowest. So it was no wonder that some people were skeptical. That didn't mean that Vivi was about to speak up about it. Still, as she looked at the jeering faces of those particular adventurers, Vivi was shocked by how repulsed she felt.

"I bet I looked just like them, once," she muttered to herself.

"Indeed you did," said the beautiful and intimidating Nadia, who'd overheard her. "Around the time it happened, you looked no different. Such a pretty face, all twisted with hatred."

Vivi took another glance at the adventurers. The hideous thoughts behind their expressions were as clear as day. Vivi let out a sorrowful whimper. If this was how these adventurers interacted with others all the time, then their rank assessments would inevitably end up with comments along the lines of "issues with client relations." Vivi herself wouldn't even have dreamed of entrusting work of any kind to people with such disrespectful attitudes.

Indeed, such attitudes often marked the end of an adventurer's career. At Crank, adventurers were often required to negotiate directly with their clients, and at B-rank, it was more and more likely for requests to come from the wealthy and influential. Anyone who was likely to cause conflict with their behavior would simply not be trusted with such requests.

Which makes sense. You could end up bad-mouthing or bullying a member of the nobility, and then they might stop coming to your Guild altogether.

Some clients concealed their identities out of necessity. Vivi didn't even want

to imagine being rude to a client, only to later learn they were actually in a position of authority. She had also discovered that Shiori herself had friends among the elite—she'd even seen Shiori talking casually with one of the renowned Lovner family, a young man who was supervising a group of servants attending the lecture. Shiori was even on a first-name basis with the young man's lord, the countess herself. Perhaps Shiori, too, hailed from an established family.

Vivi was just a simple girl from the countryside, born and raised in the mountains. And now that she knew the extent of Shiori's connections, she understood that if things had gone differently, her head could literally have been on the chopping block. Just thinking about it made her shiver. More importantly, Vivi now knew that no matter who you encountered as an adventurer, you owed them good manners. She'd heard far too many horror stories of people who had failed in this regard.

Ugh—that reminds me of that job where we needed a herbal physician, but we kept avoiding them because we thought they'd only slow us down.

Vivi had, without so much as blinking, refused offers from fellow adventurers with gathering skills, and the geography wonks who knew locations inside and out. She'd brushed them aside, and even told them to their faces that they'd only get in the way. It was no wonder that those adventurers had never talked to Vivi or her friends again.

That was how Vivi and her friends were with everything, and because they'd rested on their laurels and relied purely on their natural talents, when they were promoted to C-rank, they found that far fewer jobs were available to them. Vivi and her friends had been so convinced that *they* were the only ones that mattered that they'd even been openly rude to their clients. Not long afterwards, they'd caused the incident with Shiori.

The adventurers Vivi watched now from the carriage were almost all below Crank. In them she saw her past, and it told her everything about them. She knew that their lack of promotions was more than just a matter of their abilities.

"There is much we can learn by taking a step back and looking at things

objectively," said Nadia. "How do you feel about things now?"

Nadia had always felt to Vivi like a strict and somewhat terrifying older sister, but she was also surprisingly thoughtful and caring as long as you were respectful. Still, Vivi didn't know how to respond to Nadia's advice and her question, so at first she simply dropped her gaze.

"I don't want to say too much, but I think they're pitiful," she replied. "They, too, are just looking for a reason to make themselves feel bigger than someone they hate."

It was such an empty endeavor. Looking to put someone else down to make yourself feel big did nothing to actually raise your own value.

"They too," said Nadia, picking up on Vivi's subtle moment of self-reflection. "I see. But things are different now, are they not?"

"I think so. To be honest, I'm still not comfortable around...her, but..."

Shiori had invited Vivi to attend her class, an act of generosity because Vivi no longer had any real friends among the adventurers. Vivi had labored over whether or not to attend, but in the end had decided that she wanted to better understand Shiori's character and magical abilities.

When Shiori had arrived on the scene, it was as a completely unknown woman of Eastern origin. She'd built what she had from the ground up. She was a capable mage, and had defeated three more powerful adventurers in an instant by conjuring a terrifying abyss of despair. Vivi couldn't help being intrigued and wanting to learn more about what magic Shiori used in actual battle. She also wanted to be free of the trauma she'd inflicted upon herself.

"I see," said Nadia, once Vivi had explained herself. "I do hope you find some of the answers you're looking for." She smiled at Vivi.

In the past, Vivi had completely ignored the advice of the older mage, and so for a moment she was shocked by Nadia's kind words of encouragement. She replied with a timid nod.

The train of carriages eventually passed through a village near the foot of a local mountain, and onwards towards their destination, a forested area. The

location was perfect for training; it offered open areas, and there wasn't much to worry about in terms of magical beasts.

"Ah! Rookies, take a good look!"

The mage-turned-martial artist Kai Shanvary—a man with quite the colorful past—pointed through the open flaps covering the back of the carriage at the lower mountainous terrain past the forest. His familiar Sigurd, a blizzard cat, copied its master by pointing in the same direction with its tail.

The mountainous area was clear of trees, but the snow there lay in an unnatural zigzag pattern that reminded Shiori of ridges or cracks. Alec went on to explain that that was exactly what they were.

"That's an indicator of a potential avalanche," he said. "You shouldn't go anywhere near that kind of terrain if you can avoid it."

Back when Shiori was still a rookie, she'd been warned about avalanches, but it was difficult to know what to look for when you weren't used to keeping an eye out for it. It felt like a reminder to her—there were always things you had to pay attention to.

"It's a good idea to avoid areas where snowballs have rolled down sloped surfaces too," said Kai, speaking to the rookie adventurers. "Places with sharp inclines and areas free of trees are especially prone to avalanches. They often look like better places to walk because they're so open, but they're anything but. Take the long way round, even if it'll cost you some time."

Behind them, Rurii and Sigurd looked to be giving a lecture of their own to the rookie familiar Bla, and the sight of it had the adventurers laughing among themselves.

The carriages then worked their way through the trees to a wide-open space that was to be their classroom. Shiori took a deep breath and readied herself, while Alec gave her an encouraging pat on the back.

2

Hasslo Forest was about one hour east of Tris by carriage, a forest of broadleaf trees located at the foot of a low mountain. Even in winter the trees

were a vibrant green, and the forest was dotted with streams, ponds, open grassland, and rocky outcrops. It was often used as a training ground for new adventurers. Today, however, this wide-open space in the middle of the forest was to be used for Shiori's lecture. To start things off, the mages brought along as security jumped from their carriage and began melting the snow covering the ground.

"Do you think this is large enough?" one asked.

"Well, I'd like to make some space for those just observing," said Nadia. "If everything is too close together, we may end up startling the horses."

"Hm, in that case, let's make it all a bit wider."

The mages were all teachers themselves, and in no time, they'd created a space for the class.

"All right, the rest is up to you, Shiori," said one.

"Okay."

There were a few things that had to be done before the class began to ensure there were no accidents. One such task was that of informing the nearby village beforehand, and one was inspecting the training grounds to ensure that no villagers accidentally got caught up in the practical training. Usually, this task was done by a group of experienced hunters or with the help of familiars, but today the job fell to Shiori. It also happened to double as a chance for her to display some of her skills.

"A radius of around two hundred meters should be wide enough, yes?" she asked.

"That sounds good," said a mage. "Start with our immediate surroundings."

"You only need to focus on that," added another. "We'll have the familiars cover the rest."

"Very well. I'll get started, then."

Everyone grew curious as to what exactly Shiori was about to "get started" on. The housekeeping mage closed her eyes, took a breath, then began spreading a thin net of magic out from within herself. She was casting a search

magic spell, one that picked up any living creature within a set area, or anything emitting a strong magical essence.

Search magic was originally used to search smaller spaces, such as rooms, for objects such as magical tools or magical stones. With practice, however, humans had come to sense such things without magic, and so the spell had fallen out of regular use. These days, mages briefly learned about it in beginner-level spell scrolls and the like.

This same magic—or more accurately, an improved version of it—was what Shiori now cast in front of everyone, her magical power spreading like a web over the immediate area, mapping the living creatures within its range. She had first started using the spell in earnest about six months ago, and back then, it would quickly exhaust her. Now that she had refined it and made it more efficient, however, it rarely sapped away all her magical energy, save for when she used it for long periods over wide areas. She was so used to it now that it was no different from breathing.

The people watching Shiori were left shocked—the small threads of Shiori's magical power were so thin that they never would have noticed them if they weren't looking out for something. Murmurs ran through the crowd.

"It's so thin..."

"But wide too. I can't sense where it ends."

Those who had not studied more than the basics of magic, such as Walt and the attending servants, weren't aware of what was going on. The adventurers and knights, however, knew exactly what was happening. Even the observers Shiori was most worried about—those who had come to judge her—gasped in surprise.

"There are no humans within a two-hundred-meter radius," reported Shiori, some thirty seconds after casting her search magic. "I can only sense smaller wildlife and a few small magical beasts."

As she stopped casting the spell, an astonished buzz ran through the crowd. They were impressed.

"All right, then I guess the rest we'll leave to Rurii and the others. Get to it,

guys."

At Alec's order, the familiars gave their silent replies and began to comb through the forest, searching beyond the area that Shiori had covered with her search magic. Just as Shiori was hoping that Rurii and Bla wouldn't take it upon themselves to capture anything strange, one of the students raised their voice and asked a question.

"Was that search magic you just cast? The spell for locating items?"

It was quite interesting to learn that the ones most interested in this particular spell were knights and soldiers.

"That's correct," replied Shiori, "though I use it mainly as a way to detect threats."

"And you can determine the difference between smaller wildlife and magical beasts?"

"Yes. There are slight differences between magical beasts and ordinary wildlife, and on most occasions I can pick up on those differences based on the size and density of a creature's magical energy."

"Is it similar to sensing presences? Like an expanded version of that?"

"But won't any potential threats notice your spell?" asked another student.

"When you imbue the spell with too much magical power, yes," replied Shiori. "But when it's no different from a thin thread of string, you'd be surprised at how hard it is to detect—it often feels no different to something like a fly buzzing past."

At this point, the students burst into a passionate discussion, even though the lecture hadn't even started yet.

"Ah—so the key is to keep the magic level low enough that it doesn't feel like a threat."

"And you know, you can sense it if you're looking for it, but if you weren't, you might not take any notice. It'd be the same as a piece of silk thread falling in the forest—you'd have no idea it had even happened."

"But hey, keeping your magic level suppressed over such a wide area? That's

no easy feat. Certainly not something you can master in a day or two."

Shiori began to feel a touch overwhelmed by all the excitement, but she did her best not to let it show.

"I'll show you how to practice the spell a little later, and I hope it'll prove useful," she said, before facing the whole group. "Very well—shall we get started, then?"

The eyes that gazed back at Shiori were brimming with curiosity and expectation. And thanks to her impromptu display of her skills, half of the gazes that had once been harder and colder had noticeably softened. Naturally, some remained skeptical, but Shiori didn't need to worry that someone might interfere while she was teaching. She had Alec standing just behind her, Nils and Ellen attending as students, and Nadia on standby in case of any unexpected explosions. All of them were friends, and they all looked at her with warmth and trust in their eyes. Then there was Walt, standing by the carriages and offering a quiet, encouraging wave.

The support buoyed Shiori, who did her best to raise her voice and speak confidently. At the same time, she reminded herself not to think too much about the margrave's wife, who had shrewdly hidden herself among his private forces.

"Firstly, thank you all for making time in your schedules to attend today's class," Shiori said. "As I'm sure you're already aware, today we'll be covering the subject of magic as it pertains to the campsite—things such as cooking, washing, and bathing. That said, the magic you will learn today can also be used for attack and support, depending on the way in which it is used. Though my own magical power is very low, these spells are more than powerful enough to fell certain magical beasts."

At this, the expressions of some in the crowd changed—mainly those who longed to remain on the front lines of battle rather than play a support role as a housekeeping mage. These people had come more for their interest in combined magics, and it excited them to hear that there was yet more practical magic they might learn.

"All of the magic that I will teach today you will recognize as offensive magic. I

have merely repurposed it and refined it for housekeeping tasks, while ensuring it can be cast with low magical power. Those who are more powerful than myself will be able to use these spells offensively. But even just used as they are, the spells are very convenient for everyday life, and I hope you'll be able to see them as ways to improve your own magical abilities. Now, with this introduction out of the way, let's get into the lecture proper."

Shiori bowed politely to light applause and a few voices calling out thanks. Among the students, however, were those like Vivi—mouths agape as if overwhelmed by what they'd just heard.

"Oh?" Shiori murmured, her head tilting inquisitively.

"They're just shocked by your intro," whispered Alec. "You've made it crystal clear that you know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I see, so *that's* what surprised them. Some of these people don't think very highly of me, do they?"

"There hasn't been much of anything in the way of cultural exchange with the East, so some people still have the impression that it's an undiscovered frontier."

Alec didn't have to say anything more. Shiori knew that many held the incorrect preconception that Easterners hailed from primitive communities, and were thus uneducated.

"Even though I'm well aware such views exist, I still can't help feeling troubled by them..." she uttered.

It was complicated for Shiori, who was, at least in terms of her identity in this world, an Easterner herself. But she had also seen Eastern products firsthand through Yae and the Yobai Trading Company, and none of it was inferior in quality to what existed in Storydia.

"A lot of people who left the Eastern states did so because they were poor or less well-off," she continued, "so to some extent this prejudice can't be avoided, but...I don't see much difference between them and Storydia. Where they might be inferior in some areas, they are superior in others."

"You can think that way because you've experienced both cultures and have a

more objective viewpoint. Unfortunately, it's not easy to follow that same line of thought when you've never experienced life elsewhere," said Alec with a wry grin, motioning for her to start the class.

At present, Shiori's "cover," so to speak, was that she was the daughter of a well-established Eastern family, but had been separated from them during the turmoil that arose when Mizuho had opened its borders. Though Shiori was just an ordinary citizen in her true home of Japan, among Storydians her speech and bearing were anything but ordinary, and so it was more convenient to give her a backstory that best explained this. Now that the Shiori she'd once been in Japan had been accepted by those closest to her, she could live here without feeling walled in. From now on, she would live as a person who hailed from the Eastern states.

And I hope I can perhaps provide a bridge towards a deeper understanding of that culture.

With that thought in mind, Shiori turned her attention back to her class.

"Today we'll be looking at five spells: We'll use water magic to cast a laundry spell; wind and ice magic to cast a food processor spell; fire, earth, and wind magic to make a bath; fire and wind magic combined to cast a drying spell; and the search magic that you saw before we began. Given that this is a class about housekeeping, we'll put our focus on magic as it pertains to completing tasks within that sphere. I ask that you keep this in mind if you have come here with an eye for expanding your offensive magic repertoire."

Shiori worded this as a request, but her words acted also as a preventative measure—she didn't want anyone getting ahead of themselves. Fortunately, by the nods she saw in the crowd, everyone looked ready to listen attentively. This came as a relief.

"Well then, let's begin!" said Shiori, kicking things off.

3

The first spell Shiori planned to cover was her laundry magic. It was by far the simplest of the five she was going to teach. It did, of course, pose unique

challenges of its own—first, the caster had to create and maintain a mass of water, then create a current in it—but it was the best spell with which to gauge the skill level of her students.

"We'll do our laundry in three steps: wash, rinse, and spin-dry. That means washing the laundry with soapy water, rinsing it with plain water, and finally spinning it to drain the excess water. When it comes to chores, laundry is by far the most labor-intensive in terms of time and effort. That's why it isn't done often on expeditions unless it's unavoidable. However, it's an indispensable part of ensuring our bodies remain clean. It's not uncommon for adventurers and knights to spend several days in the same dirty clothing, but such conditions can lead to irritated skin and bacterial infections."

When it came to what you wore at home, it was fine to do the laundry once a week. However, going multiple nights covered in mud and the fluids or entrails of magical beasts? That was a special kind of stress, even for those who were used to it.

"Over long periods of time, such conditions can also lead to a drop in morale. So it's always best to do your laundry at the campsite if possible. There's no need to go looking for water if you've access to magic, and you can do it all in less than half the time it would take to do it by hand. For a party of four or five people, the whole process, from washing to drying, takes about one hour. Clothing or equipment that is especially dirty may need a proper handwashing, but things like sweat and grime usually come out just fine with some laundry magic. Erm, if I might ask, who among you has experience washing your own clothes?"

Most of the adventurers and knights raised their hands, but the wealthier among them had never had to handle the task themselves—they could leave the work to washhouses upon their return from requests, or otherwise have servants do it for them.

"Okay—and may I ask who here has used a hand-cranked washing machine?"

The vast majority of students had not, though some had seen them before. As the name suggested, these barrel-shaped washing machines utilized a hand crank. One put soap and water inside along with their washing, then turned the

handle to spin their laundry. Though washing machines were becoming commonplace among the middle classes, handwashing was still standard among the working classes.

"We had one at our village, which everyone used," said one student.

"I've always used washhouses," said another. "They'll rent you a washing machine and a place to hang your laundry. Yeah, it costs a bit of coin, but the Tris washhouses offer a warm dryer which makes them especially convenient."

The Lovner family and the margrave made use of magically engineered washing machines which allowed for automated water filling and heating, but these took up a lot of space and were also very pricey. At present, they were very much a luxury item of the upper classes. Shiori had yet to even see one in person.

"I see... Thank you all so much. So we've got a range of experience among us, then. Laundry magic serves as a way to recreate these washing processes. With water magic we wash and rinse, and with wind magic we dry. For starters, allow me to demonstrate with two towels."

Shiori then formed a water mass in front of everyone, which wobbled formlessly as it hung suspended in the air.

"When using river or well water, you have to boil it first to purify it, but magical water contains no unnecessary elements and so it foams very easily. In that sense, doing laundry with magic and magical tools is especially convenient."

The natural water that came from wells and rivers included lots of minerals, and wasn't always conducive to being used with soap. Magical water, on the other hand, was soft water without any mineral elements. There wasn't much need to worry about soap scum, but in the past Shiori had used river water in order to ease the magical strain on herself, and she'd wanted to cry when she was left with water that wouldn't foam properly and clothes covered in soap scum. She sometimes still missed life in Japan, where they were blessed with soft water and detergent.

"You want enough water that you can submerge all of your washing. Once you have enough water, you can put your soap in and let it foam," said Shiori,

adding some powdered soap to her water. "Try a variety of soaps and choose the one that's easiest for you to use. Personally I recommend old-fashioned soap trees and bubble nut grass—they're not the most powerful soaps, but both are simple and easy to use."

While almost everyone listened intently, the students who had come for combined magics looked anything but interested. Feeling suddenly a little cheeky, Shiori added, "It's worth mentioning that soapy water also suffocates insects, and can be used for such purposes when necessary. In the past I've used this very magic to vanquish a pack of giant spiders."

Immediately, the bored mages seemed to wake up, and Shiori giggled.

"However, because soapy water works on *all* insects, it's not a good idea to use it over a wide area because of the effect it can have on the environment. You'll want to be especially careful in areas where beekeeping is prevalent."

"Oh—so in that sense it's no different from ordinary magic," said a student.

"The same as not using fire magic on sloping snow-covered surfaces or dry grassy fields, and not using lightning anywhere near water...that kind of thing."

These snippets of conversation, along with various questions and answers, helped to ease the nerves of all the students. It was a way for them to get comfortable.

"Exactly," replied Shiori. "You always have to remain mindful whenever you use magic. When I faced those giant spiders, I didn't have the luxury of time to think things through, but I do always try to stay conscious of my surroundings."

Magic was convenient, but just like any other tool, using it the wrong way could potentially lead to big accidents. Just as it was important to know what was around you when you swung a weapon around, so, too, was it important to be alert and mindful of where and how you used your magic.

"Now that the water is sufficiently soapy, let's add our towels and run a water current through it."

The two towels began to spin in the body of water, and smiles spread across the faces of the watching students as they were drawn in, enjoying the spectacle of it.

"You don't have to do this in a set direction, and going back and forth in opposite directions can help you to get a better wash," said Shiori. "In this way, it's no different from handwashing."

Shiori created a number of complicated current flows, and the students watched as the towels were pulled around within them.

"Now that we've cleaned our towels, let's take them out and get rid of this water. You can let it soak into the ground or, if you're worried about the environment, you can also choose to simply evaporate it."

Evaporating two towels' worth of water was a simple task—the mass of liquid bubbled and expanded before dispersing into the air.

"Next, we're going to create another water mass and run another current through it, this time to rinse the remaining soapy water from our towels. For ordinary soap I recommend two rinses, but when washing with soap trees and bubble nut grass, once is enough. If you're worried your washing will be stiff and coarse after rinsing, add a little vinegar."

"What...?" came a confused voice from among the students.

Some of them didn't understand what they'd just heard, while others with a little more chemical knowledge, such as Nils and Ellen, understood immediately.

"Ah, it counteracts the excess soap," said Nils.

The Lovner family's laundry maid was also familiar with the use of vinegar, and admitted with a slight cringe that she struggled at the family villa, where they lacked the luxury of a magically engineered waterworks system.

"Well water isn't good for washing, and the clothes came out awful," she said. "That was when the caretaker's wife told me about washing with rainwater and fruit vinegar. The whole experience helped me to realize how much I still had to learn."

The spread of improved soaps and waterworks systems had vastly improved the state of laundry through the entirety of Storydia. As a result, however, people were losing laundry-related knowledge and skills. As this infrastructure continued to improve, what was once indispensable daily-life knowledge would

fade away. The world was in a transitionary period between ages, and technological gains would go hand in hand with certain losses. Shiori closed her eyes for a brief instant, as if in a moment of mourning.

"Once our rinse is done," she said, going on, "we'll remove our laundry and get rid of our water. The next step is the spin-dry, and this requires a little dexterity. Basically, we'll use high-speed wind magic to remove the water from our laundry, but because we have to be careful that we don't spray water all across the campsite, we'll have to cast that wind magic within a barrier. There are two barriers we can use: one that uses ice magic, and one that uses wind magic. Ice is the easier of the two, and I'll demonstrate that now."

It would have actually been easier just to wring the laundry out when there were just two towels, but for larger loads, that was very time-consuming—hence the convenience of housekeeping magic. Shiori cast a small circular wall of ice, then a whirlwind inside of that, in which she placed the two towels. The students peeked over at the towels with surprise as the centrifugal force spun them dry.

"Wow, they're spraying a lot of water," one remarked.

"Yes, and that's why you need a barrier: to protect anyone nearby," said Shiori. "In seasons like this one, you can craft a barrier from the fallen snow. Okay, now I'll demonstrate with a wind barrier, which is my preferred choice."

Shiori cast a whirlwind, and in the middle of that she cast another, which spun dry the towels. The students watched on in silence for a moment, then couldn't help but express their surprise.

"Wait, is she using two magics at the same time?"

"Yeah, but they're both wind spells, right?"

"Yes, but look—they're spinning in different directions."

"That's correct," said Shiori, "I'm casting two wind spells at the same time."

Shiori went on to explain that this was a beginner-level technique for simultaneous casting.

"They're both the same type of magic, so the magical power consumption is

the same. Wind magic, comparatively speaking, doesn't require much magical power, and it's quite easy to sense its flow. It's perfect for learning the basics of combined magic. On top of all that, unlike fire and ice, it's relatively safe."

Combined magic—the act of casting multiple magics at the same time—required the spellcaster to maintain a balance of magical power in both hands. Failing to maintain this balance meant the weaker magic would be extinguished. However, this balance was by no means an easy thing to master. Magical power flowed more smoothly through one's dominant hand, and because casters had affinities to certain types of magic, those types were naturally easier for them to cast and control. All of this was to say that it took great concentration to maintain the equilibrium required for combined magic.

Shiori believed that developing a sensitivity to the subtle flow of your own magical power was the quickest way to learn simultaneous casting and combined magic. Upon hearing this, the students nodded in agreement.

"I've always thought of simultaneous casting and combined magic as being two *separate* magic types," uttered one.

"Practicing with a single magic type, though. Wow, what a total blind spot."

"And wind magic is neither hot nor cold," added Alec. "Which means that the temperature of your spells won't get in your way. I guess that makes it perfect for developing a sense of balance."

Wind magic was less popular than other magic types due to the fact that it didn't do any direct damage. This meant it was often used for support, either to confuse enemies or create defensive barriers. This long-unchanged and biased viewpoint was perhaps one of the reasons that simultaneous casting and combined magic had yet to be completely understood.

"Well then, we've finished our spin-dry," said Shiori, casually casting a mix of fire and wind magic to dry the two towels in an instant. "And that means we've finished our laundry. Unless anyone has any questions, let's get straight into practice."

The students stood frozen in awe for a moment, but Shiori's easy grin spurred them into action. Her housekeeping magic was, at a glance, a simple and unimpressive thing, but there were important lessons hidden within it. The vast

majority of her students all boasted longer careers than her own, and she had no doubt her magic would help them find ways to improve theirs.

In this way, the housekeeping magic class got off to an easygoing start.

4

For the practice sessions, students were allowed to bring tools depending on their skill levels and ultimate goals. For Nils and the Lovner family servants, who weren't expecting to use these skills at the campsite, practice started with them filling buckets and barrels with water. But even then, they struggled when it came to getting the quantity right, resulting in overflows.

Even some of the experienced mages had trouble when it came to controlling the currents within their laundry water, and screams rang through the air as surrounding students were sprayed with water. But then there were also those who made it all the way to the spin-dry without issue, and as practice continued, the difference in abilities began to make itself clear.

"This is actually pretty hard for me..." uttered one.

"My arms won't stop trembling!" said another.

The students who had the most difficulty with control were, surprisingly, those with long career records, and those with high magical power levels. Vivi—who was a rookie adventurer but an experienced member of her local vigilance committee—also struggled to control her water mass, and it wriggled and swelled wildly.

"Some of you have very high magical power levels," said Shiori, "which will make controlling small water currents difficult. I suggest forgetting about the laundry side of things for the time being and trying out the magic at a size that is easy for you to control. From there, you can start getting smaller as you get more confident."

This simple and direct advice led a few students to quickly find success. Throwing away fixed ideas was an important part of training—especially when it came to learning something new. Still, Shiori's advice did not help everyone, and some were still frustrated by their inability to master what they'd seen.

"When you rely only on the skills and talents you were born with, this is what can happen," Alec said to Shiori, lowering his voice out of consideration for the students' feelings.

Many mages who specialized in offensive magic weren't as skilled when it came to control. After all, offensive magic required the spellcaster only to cast their magic and release it at a target—no real control was necessary. However, because these same mages had developed extraordinary power without much in the way of training, they'd never realized that this was also a weakness.

These powerful mages were flush with magical energy, but the spells they cast were rather simple. When it came to fire, it was only fireballs and explosions, and when it came to water, it was rivers and bubbles. Their power came purely from a reliance on their inherent abilities. This meant it was difficult for them to adapt their powers to different situations, and their limits became apparent surprisingly quickly.

"The inability to control the flow of water marks a lack of concentration and imagination," remarked Nadia with a wry grin, casting water currents through an enormous water spiral. "Perhaps those students should focus more on building those skills first."

"Hm...I wonder," said Shiori. "Focus is one thing, but imagination can be swayed by things like where you studied and even how you were raised. That's why I believe it's so important to read widely, and to see and experience new things. It's very difficult to imagine that which we don't know."

Perhaps, Shiori was implying, these spellcasters had difficulty when it came to picturing water spiraling. After all, if you'd lived your life in a village until adulthood, your knowledge of the world was limited to what you saw within that village, which could easily make picturing things like laundry magic difficult. It was also said that in desert regions and lands with everlasting summers, it wasn't common to see mages who wielded water and ice magic. It was believed that this was due how little they interacted with those particular elements.

Magic, then, was the act of accessing magical essence through magical power, and making real that which you envisioned. Magical essence was made up of elements that responded to a living creature's mental faculties—the stronger a

mental image in the caster's mind, the more accurate and distinct the spell they cast. Put another way, magic could not be used without imagination. When it was, the spells were terribly weak.

One answer to this was the act of chanting to strengthen a spell's image. However, in practice this was by no means a sure thing. Spell chants were designed so that the words within them brought to mind an image, but they required the caster to have a deep understanding of language. The ancient chants of the past were no longer even decipherable.

For this very reason, one magical scholar had argued that the mastery of magic required first a strengthening of the vocabulary. That same scholar—who wrote a record of his own journeys—had told their disciples that they needed to travel far, see much, and expand their minds.

"When I was still young, the neighboring adults would take me into town and show me the outside world. When my father took me in, he gave me a truly wonderful education," said Alec. "In that sense, my life before adventuring gave me a foundation for it. I'm nothing if not fortunate."

"When I was young, I was lucky too. I had a good teacher, for one thing, and when I left my home at thirteen, I was able to travel widely and see much," said Nadia.

Shiori had not experienced as much as either Alec or Nadia, but she had come from a world with an abundance of knowledge and information, and so she had naturally grown up in a way that had inspired her imagination and fed her wisdom. But not all of the mages at her lecture were as fortunate, and many of them could not simply pack up their things to traipse around the world and expand their horizons.

In order for people to learn and study and to improve such skills as their imagination and vocabulary, Shiori felt the best option was reading.

"Perhaps I'll donate an illustrated encyclopedia to the Guild," she muttered.

She also considered using her illusion magic to show her fellow adventurers a variety of natural phenomena. People would always have their individual strengths and weaknesses, and all the experience and knowledge in the world wasn't a guarantee that they could put it to use. Nonetheless, giving

adventurers the option to study and learn was still a good one.

Being able to read and research what you wanted, when you wanted. What a luxury that was...

This thought rang especially true to Shiori as she watched Nadia and some of the others giving advice to struggling students.

"Wouldn't it be nice if there was a place where we could more easily read and study?" she mused.

Public libraries existed in the royal capital and in each domain capital across Storydia, which any member of the general public could conceivably make use of freely, but it wasn't exactly a welcoming atmosphere, what with their usual crowd being a rather scholarly lot. Most private libraries required a membership, and many were located in manor salons and other private locations where like-minded individuals gathered, making them unsuitable for the ordinary populace. That left only rental bookstores or, for those with deeper pockets, secondhand bookshops.

However, for a populace that required only minimal writing, reading, and mathematical skills, the idea of buying a selection of books to study was one that had yet to really take root. Written works were still very much considered luxury goods. And while the Adventurers' Guild had a selection of books, it was made up of whatever adventurers had decided they didn't need anymore. It was a far cry from anything resembling a library.

"What's on your mind?" asked Alec, noticing the thoughtfulness etched into Shiori's features.

"Oh, well, I was just thinking about how knowledge acquisition is just as important as practice in the field. I can't help thinking that the Guild could really benefit from having a dedicated library of its own."

Such a library wouldn't just be made up of practical guides. It would also include illustrated encyclopedias, dictionaries, travelogues, essays, and novels, as there was much to learn from all of them. And truth be told, it was all of these things that had given rise to the skills and experiences Shiori had developed as a housekeeping mage.

"A place to gather knowledge..." muttered Alec. "Yes, I think a library would be a good idea. And why don't we put your textbook there, while we're at it? Something on housekeeping magic is fine, but a campsite cookbook would be great too."

"Alec..."

Shiori did, of course, want to write such textbooks, but Alec was already getting way ahead of himself.

"The Guild can handle all the preparations when it comes to publishing, and if you need illustrations, I'm sure the Lovner family would be open to discussing it. They may even have connections they can introduce us to."

"Oh, and given that Walt's already here, the timing is perfect. I'll ask him afterwards."

It was also true that Shiori often passed her recipes to interested adventurers at the Guild. Having them all in one place would no doubt be much more convenient for everyone.

Shiori didn't have a single piece of tangible evidence that proved the existence of Japan. Rather, what she had brought with her to this world was all the wisdom that it had given her. That wisdom was the foundation upon which she'd built her magic and her campsite cuisine, and it had charmed a great many people. And now she was thinking about putting it all in a book, which would, by its very existence, prove that she had lived here in this other world. Nothing would make Shiori happier than seeing that proof come in handy for others.

"A place for people to learn what they are lacking," muttered Alec, while Shiori thought through her vague future plans. "I really thought that Storydia had come a long way in terms of general education, but now I realize how much further we still have to go. There are so many people who simply lack a little extra information; the little push they need to take them to the next level. It's such a shame to think of people who live their lives without realizing their true potential just because they never learned to see it."

"Not realizing your potential is something that happens even in advanced nations," added Shiori. "When people are spoiled for choice, many are left

worrying over which path forward is the best fit."

"Such a problem is quite the luxury," said Alec.

"Yes, but I think even just a place for people to casually study and learn is a great idea, especially in adventuring. Compared to other jobs, it's a truly chaotic mix of ages and backgrounds, and there are huge differences in what skills and knowledge people have when they first start. That leaves people unable to accept requests they should be capable of, and sometimes unable to select the right requests. They might actually possess all the necessary abilities, but they're unable to gain experience and, as a result, they fail to get promoted."

Shiori had registered as an adventurer at the age of twenty-eight, which was relatively late. In the beginning, her foreign appearance and difficulties with the language had put her at a disadvantage, but in four years she'd been able to make up the difference, catching up to fellow adventurers her own age—and earning her promotions—thanks to having the knowledge that she did.

"I think many adventurers don't even know how to learn. So for adventurers, a dedicated space that helps point them in the right direction would be great."

There was, of course, a system in place to teach new adventurers the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics, but even then this was for at most three months—because of a long-held belief that adventurers proved their worth out in the field, not inside with a book.

"But if there was a place where adventurers could spend a little more time on their own education, I think we'd see a lot more of them really discover their potential. And perhaps I'm being a little too optimistic, but I think that same study could result in far fewer casualties."

"So you'd create a framework in which one can gather all the skills, knowledge, and tips and tricks that adventurers need in their work..."

"Right. And if you employ retired adventurers to work as teachers in such a place, then you're also helping adventurers find and secure work when adventuring is no longer an option for them."

Naturally, there would still be adventurers who would struggle to improve, and those who would be satisfied simply having studied the bare minimum. But

having seen the training schools that the knight corps went through in order to reach an expected education level, Shiori knew that there was great meaning in such facilities. Of course, in the case of adventurers—who put a high premium on the freedom that the job allowed them—attendance would be a matter of choice.

A place where you're free to learn as you like, and choose for yourself how you learn...

Shiori glanced up at her lover, who was watching all the students throw themselves into practice. Deep thoughts were etched into his features. Shiori and Alec had both struggled in Storydia due to their respective positions, and Alec had in the past talked of how he wished there was a place to support people who were at such disadvantages. That so many people of different backgrounds and careers could be brought together for this class was because they were all either looking to polish their own skills, or searching for a new way forward into the future. And it struck Shiori that for such a place like this to work, a framework like the one she'd described was a necessity—and not just something temporary, but something more permanent.

At that moment, a cheer erupted around the students. The one student who'd been struggling with the task had finally cast a stable water column, thanks to the support of all their new "peers."

"A training school..."

It was perhaps far too much for Shiori as she was at present to handle, but that wasn't to say that the plan would come to nothing. It was still little more than a vague outline of a greater idea, but Shiori knew she'd continue to think about it.

5

"Okay then, let's finish by practicing the spin-dry," announced Shiori. "As for your barrier, ice or wind is fine—pick the one you prefer."

Most of the attendees chose to use ice, but a number who were up for the challenge decided to attempt simultaneously casting two wind spells. They

would only be using a single element, but it still proved difficult to control two whirlwinds spinning in opposite directions. Unperturbed, however, the students continued to give it their best.

"Oh, and for those of you on the more powerful side, please be careful," said Shiori. "If your two opposing wind spells get too close together, you run the risk of ripping your laundry."

"Oh?"

The students tilted their heads in curiosity, so Shiori cast two small whirlwinds, each spinning in a different direction, then took a small piece of cloth and threw it into the vortex. The cloth spun around and around until it was caught in the space between the two whirlwinds, at which point a loud tearing sound pierced the air. When Shiori stopped casting her spell, all that remained were shreds of cloth dancing across the snow.

"This is as dangerous as it gets with my limited abilities, but for more powerful magical wielders, the dual whirlwind can be used offensively."

"That's probably true," muttered a mage, staring at the shreds of cloth on the ground. "But, um...tearing a magical beast to shreds with whirlwinds is...well, it's pretty gruesome, don't you think?"

"Ugh, now that you mention it..." said another adventurer.

A single wind spell could not cut things on its own, not without some kind of outside assistance. Still, the thought of using wind magic to shred a living creature sent a shiver down the spines of many of the students watching.

"However, once you get used to wind magic, it's far less taxing on your magical energy than using fire magic, and it could be useful against flying magical beasts that travel in large packs, like snow jellyfish."

"I see. Admittedly, I'm somewhere at the lower end of mid-rank as far as mages go, so any options that allow me to control my magical energy output are very appealing."

However gruesome a method of attacking might be, one did not always have the luxury of choice when lives hung in the balance. For a moment, Shiori thought back to when she'd doused two rare magical beasts in chili oil, but quickly shook the memory off, shoving it into a corner of her mind. As she did so, the students began a lively discussion of magic, inspired by the two opposing whirlwinds.

"Hey, if you were to take this double whirlwind idea and apply it to two spinning pillars of fire, you think it would be enough to take down a larger magical beast?"

"Knock it off, would you? Just picturing that is going to give me nightmares."

"Oh, but wait—it would probably be a lot better than having the whirlwinds spitting out raw, bloody meat," added someone who was listening in. "You'd just have charcoal or, at worst, barbecue."

"Yeah, no, I don't think that makes it any better..."

Shiori quietly removed herself from the excited chatter and turned her attention to the students who were attempting their spin-drying with ice barriers. The majority of them weren't having too hard a time, though a few were struggling when it came to using their magic to form shapes—and not just rookies or low-level mages either. One of the higher-ranking mages—Joel, an acquaintance of Shiori's—was also struggling.

The few lower-ranking mages who had at first been entertained by the struggling Joel now found his plight hard to watch, and were starting to look a little worried—it seemed they weren't sure whether they should offer advice or not.

"Damn it! What the hell?!" he cried. "It's just a damned barrier!"

It was exactly as Shiori had thought—magical crafting was the issue. Joel's barrier was bent out of shape, and the open section in the center was far too narrow. Things weren't going as he wanted, and the frustration was all too clear in his voice.

"That damned rookie can do it! So why the heck can't I?!"

The "rookie" Joel was talking about was likely Nils, who was practicing next to Joel and had completed his spin-dry without any issues to speak of. All Nils could do was muster an awkward and troubled smile in response—he likely had the knack for such magic, as his barrier was very well done for someone with his

level of experience.

"Gah! To hell with it!"

And with that, Joel blew his ice barrier away with a fireball and squatted down grumpily. Everyone around kept their distance, unsure how exactly to placate or advise the frustrated mage. Shiori, too, was worried, but she tried to put it at the back of her mind—as the head instructor, it was *her* responsibility to address the issue.

"Understanding what we are incapable of is, in itself, a great reward," she said.

Joel looked up at her. He was a few years younger than Shiori, though as a mage he outranked her, and his face was a mix of resentment and suspicion.

"When you understand your own weaknesses, you can then address them.

One option is to choose to overcome them, though it's also perfectly fine to abandon that path and focus on polishing the areas in which you are stronger."

Everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses. And though sometimes it was necessary to work so as to master your weak points, Shiori knew all too well that sometimes you could struggle with everything you had and still ultimately get nowhere. What mattered most, however, was whether or not you were willing to recognize your own faults, because you could not proceed beyond them if you didn't.

"This class is a great opportunity," Shiori continued. "You can just try everything and get a feel for things. By the end of the day, you'll have a sense for what you have mastered and what you need to work on."

"But it's just so pitiful," muttered Joel, his gaze dropping to his feet.

"Everyone else has a handle on it. The only one failing is me. How can you know how this feels? You're already so masterful."

He was pushing back, rejecting her advice. Shiori knew exactly how he felt. However, she did not want this to devolve into a pity contest, and so she gritted her teeth for a moment as she thought carefully about what to say next.

"I was no different from you. Look, erm, tell me this: How many basic fireballs can you cast in total?"

Joel looked taken aback by Shiori's sudden question, but he thought about it, then answered, "I've never counted, but I guess around three or four hundred?"

"Jeez, that's way more than me," muttered Alec.

Joel looked surprised by that, but he almost fell over when Shiori's next words reached his ears.

"For me, it's only thirty," she said.

The students nearby gasped.

"Thirty...? I'd heard rumors that you were wea...er, I mean, that you had it hard, but..."

Joel grimaced. He'd caught himself before he said "weak," and had selected different words out of kindness. He was at least capable of that much empathy, and Shiori knew that his frustration was merely making him sulk. Still, the facts left him speechless—Shiori had even *less* magical power than he'd heard.

"On my first day of training, I cast ten fireballs, then fainted on the spot," Shiori said. "I was bedridden for the next three days. I've never been able to improve much, and even now, thirty is the most I can muster."

This was why Shiori was considered the weakest among even low-ranking mages.

"When I registered as a mage, lots of people asked why I was bothering," Shiori said. "They said my magical power was laughable. People still say that, in fact, though admittedly it's better now than it once was."

Shiori noticed Vivi lowering her gaze with a look of embarrassment. But it wasn't just her—a few other adventurers also looked a little uncomfortable as they listened to Shiori speak. They'd probably said or heard similar things.

"But I couldn't wield any weapons," Shiori said, "and there wasn't any work available for Easterners outside of adventuring. The only thing I had to rely on was what little magical power I had. So I decided to see how far it would take me. I'd be lying if I told you that I don't get irritated, annoyed, and vexed by my own weaknesses. I still do. But I've at least made it to the point where I'm

accepted as a backline support specialist. Thirty fireballs may be my limit, but that doesn't stop me from getting private requests. And you're no different—I'm certain you can carve a path of your own too."

Joel meditated on Shiori's words, then let out a sigh and shook his head.

"I've got so much more magical power," he said with a grimace, raising his hands as though in surrender, "yet all I'm doing is sitting here grumbling and complaining. I'm sorry. Hearing about what you've gone through, it's almost unbearable. You're incredibly skilled, but with your magical power level...it's been really hard, hasn't it?"

"It has, but it's also thanks to my weaker magic levels that I've been able to refine what I have and make the most of what I've got."

"Heh, it's just like they say," muttered Joel. "You really do have a motherly side."

"Sorry?" asked Shiori, blinking in confusion, though Joel did not say anything more.

What Shiori did not know was that a group of younger adventurers looked up to Shiori and had taken to thinking of her as a surrogate mother. The vast majority of these young rookies had been separated from their real mothers at some point in their youth, and in the devoted and caring Shiori, they felt the touch of home.

"Up until now, I've never thought of refining my magic," Joel admitted. "Always figured I'd just fire it off, and if it wasn't enough, then I'd drink a recovery potion and have at it again."

When one had a good flow of magical energy, they could increase their attack power by boosting their spells. This meant one could be powerful without ever needing to develop mastery over the magic they wielded. In Joel's case, however, this had become a weakness.

"If I fought like that, I'd collapse just three or four fireballs in," said Shiori. "That's why, well...just watch this."

Shiori crafted a pillar of ice, then focused on the tips of her fingers, releasing just a tiny flash of magic from them. It was an arrow of fire, or perhaps

something more akin to a laser, shooting out in a thin, straight line. It buzzed as it whipped through the air, slicing the pillar clean in half—the top part of it began slowly sliding towards the ground.

"Whoa..."

"Eek!"

Voices of awe and shrieks of surprise filled the air as Shiori grinned.

"With my magical power levels, a few fireballs won't do very much damage," she explained. "But if I concentrate the energy of a few fireballs into a single point, I can raise the destructive force of my magic. This allows me to strike a lethal blow, even with my limited power. Erm, having said that, I still run out of magical energy very quickly, so I don't use such attacks very often."

One of the knights watching Shiori remarked, "Ah, so it's not unlike a waterjet cutter."

The knight's father was a stonemason, and explained to the others that Shiori's magic was not unlike a magical tool he'd seen at his father's workplace.

"Yes, it's the same idea. Instead of dispersing the force across an entire surface, you increase its power by focusing on a single point."

"And have you used this against a magical beast?" asked Joel.

"I've only used it a little on lower-ranking magical beasts," said Shiori, shaking her head. "Due to my lack of power, I only have use for it occasionally when slicing pumpkin, or winter cabbage, or other vegetables that are especially tough."

"Vegetables?! Really?!" cried Joel, bursting into laughter. "I mean, knowing you have a weak point is actually kind of a relief. But that idea of focusing on a single point—that works for me. It's difficult for me to create shapes with magic from my own imagination."

There was a hint of defeat in Joel's words, but his mood had nonetheless been brightened.

"But that's not going to stop me from giving this a little more effort," he continued. "It might just be a matter of me *thinking* I'm no good at it. Thanks,

teach."

"You're most welcome," said Shiori, taking a moment to imbibe a recovery potion.

"Wow, she wasn't kidding..." Joel uttered as he went back to his practice.

The watching crowd of students let out their own sighs of relief as they, too, returned to practice.

"Looks like you lifted his spirits," said Alec, once the air had settled. "Good on you."

"Yes," said Shiori, smiling, "but for a moment there I wasn't sure how things would go."

Facing one's own weaknesses was a struggle against one's self-respect. In a sense, you had to separate who you really were from how you saw yourself, and that was no easy feat.

"There's still a part of me that dreams of being something more," Shiori admitted. "Sometimes I still wish I had more magical power, and I wish I could fight the way that mages are supposed to. But I know that by directing that energy elsewhere, I'll end up in a better place. I hope that Joel learns that too."

They glanced at Joel. From his gaze, they could tell that he no longer felt rushed, and that he was simply focused on the task at hand.

"I hear you," said Alec. "There's no need to be perfect at everything, and sometimes finding a compromise is the step you need to improve."

There was something nostalgic in Alec's gaze as he watched the students practicing, as though he could see a past version of himself in them.

"Um..."

The hesitant voice roused the two adventurers from their thoughts. It was a member of the margrave's personal guard—a young girl, in a plain, unadorned trainee uniform.

"Is it possible to create a barrier with earth magic?" she asked. "I'm good at that, and it would be a cinch if there were rocks and stones nearby."

"Well, the problem with earth magic," replied Shiori, "is that if you lose control of the spin-dry, you can dirty your laundry all over again. That's why I tend not to recommend it."

"Oh, I see," said the girl, clearly picturing it. "If all the washing hits a muddy or earthy surface, you might have to start over."

"Right. No matter how solid a barrier you make, it's difficult to prevent that from happening. That, and...well, when you're using rocks, you have to ensure their surface is smooth, or you can tear your laundry to shreds."

"Oh..." muttered the girl, thinking for a moment before a playful grin spread across her face. "I'm guessing that's something you learned firsthand, yes?"

"Oops," muttered Shiori, guilty as charged.

And it was true—in the past, she'd made a barrier from a rocky outcrop, and ripped up the towels she was washing.

"Indeed I did," Shiori said. "I tore up my laundry, and dirtied it too. In the end, and after trying everything, I found ice and wind to be the best options."

"Yeah, okay. That makes sense. Failure is just a part of learning something new, huh?"

The girl nodded at Shiori's logic, then ran off back to where she was practicing.

"However wonderful a technique is, it's always built on the back of another person's struggles," said Ellen, who made a block of ice, then melted the inner section with a deftly cast fireball spell.

The interior of Ellen's barrier was very smooth, and her barrier itself was excellent.

"I tried thinking like you," she continued with a giggle and an enchanting grin. "As long as the end result is the same, you can get there however you want, right? And it's always best to look for ways that make things easier for you."

A few other students who had been struggling with Shiori's initial method, Joel among them, found success when they copied Ellen's two-step, two-spell style. When Joel finally did it as well, his friends gave him hearty pats on the

back and congratulated him. Joel himself wasn't completely satisfied, however, and threw himself back into trying to master Shiori's method.

"So adaptable," said Nils, drinking a recovery potion. "I'll have to make sure I don't fall behind."

"Oh? You know it's not a race, right?" said Ellen with a wry chuckle.

"But it's been so long since I felt the fires of competition," said Nils. "Sometimes you need that."

Nils had already built himself a career as a herbalist, to the point that he'd been A-rank for a few years now. He'd lived a very calm and stable life for quite some time, and he'd given up on rivalries and the like once he'd passed the age of thirty. Feeling the rush of competition was something of a thrill for him.

"But I must say, the sense of exhaustion is very different when using elemental magic," commented Ellen. "I feel like my magical power is depleted in an instant."

"There's definitely an aspect of compatibility to it. But I think for you, it's also a matter of simply not being accustomed to it," said Nils.

As a physicker, Ellen rarely used elemental magic—at most she used water magic to make purified water, and light magic to see more clearly as she worked.

"Fire magic is especially greedy. It'll sap all of your magical energy if you're not used to it."

"Well, that's because it's literally a power source, so it requires a lot of energy."

"Some kind of staff that shoots fire would be handy. Something like a magical tool."

"Well, there are a whole host of staves decorated with magic stones..."

"They're all pretty much accessories, and little more than walking sticks at the moment. When it comes to focusing, rings and bracelets won't weigh you down as if they're luggage."

Elemental magic stones rarely had much effect in and of themselves. They

gave a small boost to a person's natural magical recovery rate, but otherwise provided little more than a small amount of warmth or a slight chill. There were some magical tools that utilized such magic stones as their source of power, but they were extremely complicated and thus not particularly portable. This was no different with weapons, which at present only came in the form of large-scale military-grade options.

"Speaking of which," said Ellen, "didn't a weapons manufacturer in the royal capital put out a staff that could shoot fireballs? It would have been a few years ago now, but what happened to that? I don't think I ever saw someone wielding one."

"Oh, that," said Kai, the martial artist. "The thing was stupidly heavy, and apparently people said it was better off being used as a battering ram. I went and took a look at it myself, and let me tell you—it looked like it was made for orcs and trolls. That said, I heard that there was some demand among martial artists that specialize in such weapons."

"O-Oh..." muttered Ellen. "I guess I can see why it wasn't widely adopted."

"Why wouldn't anyone notice that while they were testing it...?" Nils wondered.

Nobody knew if the makers had seriously thought it would sell, or if they'd released it as a publicity stunt, but nonetheless they had to give the manufacturer credit for even trying to develop such a weapon, even though it was widely regarded as more appropriate for literal monsters.

"Would a weapon like that come in handy for mages who are experienced in close combat?" mused Kai.

"Mages built like you aren't all that common..." said Alec.

He gave Kai a knowing glance, gesturing at the former mage's powerful physique, to which Kai grinned.

"This has given me a great idea," said Kai. "I mean, if there are magical swordsmen out there, I figure it's okay for there to be mages that specialize in physical combat."

"Wait—did this all come from that staff we were talking about?" asked Ellen.

"Well, when I changed classes, there was no martial artist mage option, so I just went with the clear and simple martial artist. But I've still got the heart and soul of a mage, you know? And now, when I think about Shiori, I wonder if it's a good idea to just come up with my own class."

"So not just a mage, but a...martial spellcaster?" asked Shiori.

"Whoa, now that's got a nice ring to it. I like it! That's what I'm going to register myself as!"

Kai seemed to really like the name—which had popped up as a class in a game that Shiori's brother played in her home world—and he quickly scribbled it into his notebook. At the same time, Shiori was genuinely curious to see if Kai would really change his class a second time.

"I gotta say, though—having a place like this to practice is really refreshing," Kai said. "It's a great way to make all-new discoveries. Plus, gathering people of the same class together helps you spot your own strengths and weaknesses."

"Yes, it seems like a good reason for people to get together and mingle, and seeing that makes me glad I organized this lecture," said Shiori.

There were of course those who were openly competitive and those who, even now, remained distant, but for the most part the atmosphere was great—students were keen to ask questions and help one another. There was also much to learn from their fellow students, being that the class went beyond just the Adventurers' Guild and also included people from other vocations. This allowed for unexpected inspiration in exchanges of opinion.

"With more of these classes, you might find that factions or rivalries develop, but all the same, it's a very interesting idea," said Alec. "I'm very keen to hold a meetup for magical swordsmen."

Based on his tone of voice, he really was serious about the idea. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing to protect your own original techniques by keeping them secret—as many still did—but for work that was largely done in groups, it was important for everyone to improve, as this raised everyone's chances of returning home alive. Special techniques and spells, and the skills necessary to make them work, were in and of themselves methods of survival.

"It's the same with everything, right? None of it matters if you don't make it home," said Alec.

"Right. Just another reminder that I want to teach everyone here as much as I can," added Shiori.

For her, this class was a chance to give back to the people who had shown her kindness. The class had only just begun, and there was still much to teach—Shiori intended to put her whole heart into it.

After letting the students practice for a time, Shiori clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"Well, now that you've all had a chance to try it out for yourself," she said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "does anybody have any questions? If not, we'll summarize what we've covered."

Some of the students looked deep in thought, but seemed fine for the time being. Other students looked like they had questions, but didn't want to bring them up in front of a large group. The worry on these students' faces, however, eased into relief when Shiori mentioned that she would make time for questions after the class, and that she would also accept written questions.

There had been a few bumps to smooth out, but all in all, Shiori had handled the first part of the class quite well. She let out a little sigh just as Alec passed her a recovery potion and a nutritional drink.

"Great work," he said, his kind smile beaming down at her.

Chapter 3: Intermediate Housekeeping Magic and an Emergency Request

1

Shiori gave all the students a ten-minute break so they could rest after the first session, but many of them were excitedly still practicing.

"Calm down, you lot," warned Nadia, "or you'll never make it to the end of the lecture."

Learning new magic required an excess of magical energy, and also demanded more focus from the caster than usual. The process was often exhausting. Shiori wanted the students to make sure they had enough energy for the rest of the day, but Alec told her that there really wasn't much more they could do.

"I remember being just like that," he said with a wry grin. "And I'm guessing you pushed yourself pretty hard back when you first started."

"Erm, I will neither confirm nor deny the statement," she replied, shrinking into herself.

"I thought so," said Alec, laughing.

Back then, Shiori had been desperate. For her, it really *had* been a matter of life and death. And for the zealous students here, the class was a chance for them to break through roadblocks and find new ways forward. Some weren't strong enough to join adventuring parties. Then there were those who had dropped out of parties or been asked to leave them. There were also people who, whether due to injury or a lack of magical power, were now considering their other options. Shiori understood how they all felt—none of them wanted to stop.

Shiori glanced over at Joel, who had let his temper get the better of him during practice. He'd been among the students practicing during the break, but Kai had convinced him to rest. Joel had reluctantly agreed, but the break did not

stop him from scribbling in his notebook so as not to forget his discoveries and the advice he'd been given.

Shiori saw her own past in Joel's every action—she, too, had endured a time in the depths of despair, thinking she was useless. Back then, she'd been desperate to learn everything she could, and absorb whatever knowledge she found, hopeful that in time it might prove useful. It had been a real struggle, but in time she had discovered her own unique approach to her work, and was now in a position where she could teach it to others.

Joel was likely in the very midst of that same struggle, and Shiori wanted to believe that the day would come where he would break through—that one day, all his hard work would pay off.

Just then, one of Joel's friends called out to him, and the two adventurers shared a few words. Joel's face lit up as another thought hit him, and he quickly scribbled it into his notebook.

When you work hard, there will always be people there to help you. So if you don't give up, then I'm sure things will work out...

The hint of a smile drew itself across Shiori's lips as she checked her pocket watch.

"Okay, looks like break time is over," she announced.

All the students wandered back from where they'd been resting or practicing, and gathered before her.

"Next, I'm going to talk about my food processor magic—a wind magic spell. This is a very practical piece of magic that you can think of as an upgrade to the spin-dry we just practiced. With that said, for those of you who'd like to continue working on the basic skills, there's a space prepared for that. You're welcome to join this lesson at any time, just as you're welcome to leave and practice the basics as you see fit."

A few students raised their hands to indicate that they still hadn't quite mastered what had been taught earlier, and one of Shiori's companions led them away to watch over their practice someplace where they wouldn't get in the way of the rest of the class.

"Well, let's get started," said Shiori, once that had been taken care of. "The food processor spell mimics kitchen tools that slice and blend ingredients, so what we'll be doing is crushing and whisking. Usually you'd do this with a mortar and pestle or a meat grinder, but we're going to do it with wind magic, and a little ice magic as necessary. However, our spell is essentially a substitute for a specific tool, so there are limits to what ingredients we can do this with. Please keep that in mind as we proceed."

Wind dispersed easily, and that made it difficult to maintain a consistent amount of pressure on a target. When Shiori said there were limits, she was not referring to the amount of magical power required, but rather the limits of wind magic itself.

"When I demonstrated the spin-dry magic, we saw that two opposing wind spells could rip and tear our laundry. The food processor spell works the same way. First, I'll demonstrate the initial crushing and whisking."

Shiori took some steamed potatoes she had prepared earlier and put them in a container, then made sure the lid was on firmly. Next, she placed her hands over the container, focused, and cast her wind magic inside of it. Two small whirlwinds began to swirl, and the potatoes caught in them were broken into pieces. Chunks of potato collided with the glass container's walls, then were caught up again in the wind and broken up even further until all that remained was a paste.

"Wow! That's amazing!" cried a student.

The mashed potatoes were, admittedly, a far cry from the likes of that prepared with care by an experienced chef, but it was more than good enough for a home-cooked meal.

"I noticed that the potatoes you used weren't raw but steamed. Does the spell only work on soft ingredients?" asked Nils, looking carefully at the mashed potatoes.

"That's correct. The food processor spell isn't very effective on raw root vegetables and leafy vegetables that are flat and high in fiber. You need to heat these ingredients and cut them up in advance. It's a part of the spell that I think can still be improved."

"Oh, okay. When it comes to preparing medicines, the tools we use often have lots of small and delicate parts. Cleaning and drying them can take a lot of time. I was just thinking of how much easier it would be if I didn't have to take them with me on my outings."

Tools that crushed and compressed were common in both cooking and in preparing medicine, but their durable metal parts made them heavy and not especially practical for taking out into the field. Portable versions were available, but they were made more for wandering merchants than adventurers. For Nils, whose job sometimes required him to visit dangerous locations, even the portable versions were bulky to carry, and so he was always carefully considering just what he should take with him. It was an ongoing concern.

"I'd love it if I could do some of the preparation work while I'm out in the field," Nils said. "Some ingredients simply don't last very long once they've been picked, and others spoil when you freeze them."

"Hm, in that case, it might be best to bring a mortar and pestle with a lid. The uneven surface makes the spell more effective. Relying solely on magic will require more magical power, and if you add too much power, the container itself might explode."

"Oh..." muttered Nils, reading between the lines.

Nadia, meanwhile, averted her gaze, while the adventurers who knew of the "exploding curry pot" incident shared a wry chuckle. In the past, Nadia had been charmed by Shiori's food processor spell and wanted to try it herself. Neither she nor Shiori had thought particularly deeply about what might happen, and so Nadia had tried it out on the curry that Shiori was in the middle of preparing. Nadia's powerful wind magic had then destroyed the pot entirely.

It wasn't at all rare for magical experiments to go wrong, causing explosions or accidents, but the true tragedy of Nadia's failure was that she'd tried it on a pot of curry. Though the mage herself and Shiori had protected themselves with quick barrier spells, the campsite had instantly been showered with curry. It was such a disaster that it was still talked about to this day.

Fortunately for everyone involved, the curry pot hadn't been completely

airtight. A pot that was more resistant to pressure would have caused an explosion which would have destroyed their barriers. Everyone laughed about it now because nobody had been injured, but under different circumstances, things could have been very different. The usually coolheaded Clemens had flown into a rage, and Nadia had practically begged for forgiveness.

But thanks to that accident, I learned to be careful when using such magic in airtight spaces.

Shiori had always understood the logic of it, but there were some things that didn't really sink in until you saw them firsthand. As everyone who knew about the curry pot incident cringed, a student hesitantly raised their hand.

"Um, I don't quite understand why the container will explode if you increase the magical power," they said.

"Ah, I see," said Shiori, before pausing to think for a moment. "When the wind magic you cast exceeds the capacity of your container, the container itself becomes unable to withstand the pressure. Think of a can expanding because its contents have gone rotten, or the lid on a bottle popping off when the contents within ferment, causing excess pressure—it's a similar idea. It isn't usually a problem when you simply let magical essence or power flow into a container."

Magical essence and magical power were, on a basic level, highly permeable—letting them flow into an airtight container was not usually an issue, as any surplus would naturally filter out. The same could not be said for spells, however—when the magic from a spell exceeded a container's capacity, it caused damage. When you thought about the durability of a container, changing temperatures within one too quickly was also dangerous. This was one reason that magical tools were both heavy and robust, and difficult to make lighter and smaller. When it came to developing smaller magical tools, the only notable success to date was magic lanterns.

"I see... That makes sense," said the student.

"But depending on how you use that magic, it could become an attack spell," added one. "Like making tree nuts explode."

"Well, maybe if you had them on hand...but trying to focus your magic on one

just hanging from a tree wouldn't be easy."

"Well, what about using it on the inside of a magical beast, then...ugh, wait. Forget I said anything."

"Eww, did you really just say that...? Surely that's a last resort..."

Though the students all cringed at having crossed a line in their brainstorming that none wanted to cross, they all still happily discussed their ideas.

"To master this food processor spell," said Shiori, "you have to be able to control it within a confined space, so it's a good way to train your accuracy. For those of you with strong magical power, I think it's a good idea to start your practice with something that isn't particularly dangerous. Something that won't cause much damage if it explodes or goes flying. Personally, I recommend water grapes."

A ripple of chuckles ran through the students at Shiori's suggestion. Water grapes were a vine fruit from northwest Alphandis that were harvested all year round, and were slightly bigger than apples. A cluster of water grapes—which was so big it had to be held in two hands—cost about as much as a potato, and they were so common that most people of ordinary upbringing were now completely sick of them, having been made to eat so many in the past.

It was a strange fruit that, once people had sucked out the gelatinous fruit inside of it, was little more than a semitransparent bubble-like skin. This skin was what Shiori was recommending they use for practice—it was cheap, you got something to eat, and as a result, you had something to practice with.

"Wow, seriously?!" uttered a student.

"I've eaten enough water grapes for an entire lifetime..." added another.

The chuckles and grimaces among the students showed just how many had been fed water grapes as children.

"Still, this magic really gives you more options when it comes to cooking at campsites. Can you make minced meat with it? After listening to your explanation so far, I can't help thinking that it might be difficult."

The question came from a C-rank magical swordsman who had recently

become obsessed with cooking, one from a different Adventurers' Guild branch. He lacked the strength and magical power to be a frontliner, and so as of late hadn't been invited to join any parties. Now he was putting his efforts into improving his cooking repertoire, as it was an area in which he already had some confidence. However, he was now struggling because there was a limit to what he could take with him out into the field.

"I mean, adventuring is already exhausting," said the magical swordsman. "But having to hammer meat and crush vegetables too? It's pretty tiring..."

"Yes, I know how that feels," said Shiori.

The swordsman went on to explain that skewered meat or fish with some canned soup, or a stew made from bottled ingredients was the best he could do at present. As a subpar frontliner, he moved around a lot when it came to battle, and having to work yet again at the campsite put a lot of strain on him physically.

"I'm planning to hold another class covering various recipes and ways to make cooking easier—but yes, when you're cutting up something hard or springy into smaller bits, you won't have much success with just wind magic. You have to innovate a little."

Shiori explained that the most wind magic could do was break or tear something. Finely mincing something was hard even for mages of the highest level—which was to say, it was impossible.

"Huh?"

About half of the students suddenly looked puzzled, perhaps because of the gaps in their scientific knowledge. Based on what she was seeing, Shiori guessed that most of the students attending her class today only had a basic education.

"But wait," said one. "Strong mages do use wind magic to cut things, right?"

"That's what it looks like, but what actually does the cutting is the small rocks and leaves caught up in the spell. They move at such speed that when they impact the target, they cut it. However, we're largely talking about grazing damage—wind magic alone cannot chop or amputate."

Alec and Nadia nodded in agreement with Shiori's explanation.

"Oh...I had no idea," said one student.

"I always thought it was just a matter of being more accurate and in control of the magic..." said another.

There's such a huge difference in the levels of education here. We really should put some serious thought into making dedicated libraries. I'll ask Zack soon.

Mages brought natural phenomena to life through magic, which meant that a certain degree of scientific knowledge was a necessity. It was a real shame to think that some could not tap into their potential due only to this lack of knowledge.

In that sense, Ranvald really was a superb teacher...

When Shiori was just a rookie, Nadia had been her teacher, but Ranvald Lumbeck—then the guild master—had occasionally given her lessons when the mood struck. He had also colluded with the party she eventually joined, and stolen much of the request payments she had been owed. When she thought about it now, she could see that it was a part of his scheme. However, his lectures on the unlimited potential of magic were, it had to be said, truly meaningful.

"I see—so you really are quite well-educated," he'd said. "In which case, it is likely possible you can still find a good use for your powers, even though they may well be limited. Do your best."

And then Ranvald had taught Shiori illusion magic. As far as Shiori knew, he had been skilled enough to have taught at a renowned school in the royal capital, but had become an adventurer at a smaller city when his family had disowned him. What happened to him after he'd been fired from the Guild, she did not know. All she had heard was that a selection of his textbooks had been pulled from publication, and that his freedom had come at a very heavy cost. Still, some still lamented that one so talented had thrown it all away for a life of crime.

Shiori felt herself sinking into the misery of the past when a voice pulled her back to the class.

"Hm. I heard that you tore open the canvas on a carriage with wind magic.

Was there some kind of trick to that?"

The question came from the former captain of the garrison knights at Brovito Village, Leo Nordman. The man had been badly injured during a snow wolf attack on the village and, as he could no longer wield a sword, was now working as part of the garrison's support unit. It was tragic, of that there was no doubt, but the man himself had been adamant about taking on a different position, claiming that even without a sword, there was much he could still do as a knight. Though his magical abilities were limited, he wanted to learn some housekeeping magic so as to make better use of his hobby of cooking to improve the meals for his fellow knights.

But to see the man so frail broke Shiori's heart, and she tried her best not to think of the past as she answered him.

"Yes," she said. "There was ice on the wind when I cast that spell. Like this."

A cold wind whistled through the air around the training grounds, and sent sharp shards of ice slicing through the leaves of nearby trees. Though it would usually have been enough to simply cast ice magic to cut open a carriage canopy, in the case of the drugged snow wolves, the carriage was filled with sleeping gas. Shiori had thus relied on a combination of wind and ice to ensure that the gas was dispersed properly.

"There it is, the combined magic everyone talks about... I see," said Leo. "So that's why I'd heard that people don't know whether to call you low-ranking or high."

"Because my power levels are so low, there are times when it's more efficient for me to use magic in combination," replied Shiori.

"So you use combined magic especially *because* of your lack of power. Developing that ability with everyone looking down on you couldn't have been easy..."

The former captain was aware of the hardships Shiori had faced, but there was a hint of worry and defeat in his words—a reflection of the uncertainty he felt about his own future. The sword was no longer an option, and though he likely wielded greater magical power than Shiori, he still had to consider the path that lay before him. Bias and discrimination due to rank and gender was

far more prevalent among knights than adventurers. Leo had been a knight for almost thirty years, and though his gaze was resolute, he could not completely hide his anxieties.

In Shiori's case, she really had been looked down upon. Many had laughed derisively at the very idea of a low-level mage toying with combined magic and simultaneous spellcasting. If she couldn't even wield common spells to any real effect, there was no way she could control something so difficult, they'd said. And given her power level, nobody expected much even if she did somehow achieve some form of mastery.

Shiori, however, now believed that the very reason the field of combined magic had not developed much was because of the established belief that it should only be attempted by the most skilled of mages. And while she agreed that learning it was not a simple thing, even low-level mages could cast combined magic. Their spells might not be especially powerful, but that did not make them useless by any means.

"Well, it's true that I've gone through my own share of hardships," said Shiori, "but we each find our own unique ways to utilize our skills in battle."

Magic was, ultimately, just a tool for a job. In light of that, the accepted ways of thinking about it—common sense, as it was so called—were unimportant.

"I have heard people say that one of the reasons Storydia stands out among neighboring nations is that it was quickest to adapt magical technology for use in everyday life, back when it was mainly used for military purposes," said Shiori. "Many criticized the decision at the time, thinking it a waste to share such tools with the common people, but because there were those that ignored this criticism and forged ahead with their research and development, Storydians now have a very high standard of living. Common sense is of course important when it comes to things like safety, but when it's a matter of emotion, and what's considered common sense doesn't actually make sense, it only gets in the way. There is so much we can learn from what we only *think* is impossible."

It was a bold statement for Shiori, and Alec and Nadia couldn't hide their surprise. Fortunately, her message had reached Leo and the other students. Leo himself mused on her words for a moment, then chuckled and shook his head.

"To be completely honest with you, I still can't quite come to terms with where I'm at. All the skills and experience I've accumulated up to now can't help me, and I'm left looking for something completely new. I have to commit to that and, well, I still don't quite have it in me."

"I know how you feel," said Shiori. "But considering your wealth of experience, I'm sure you'll find things that will prove useful in whatever you do next."

Five years ago, Shiori herself had just been another office worker. Now she was an adventurer, and it was thanks to her previous experience and knowledge that she'd been able to continue on her new path. That which at a glance seemed entirely unrelated could still provide ideas and inspiration. Leo had led squads of knights, and that experience was sure to be invaluable.



"I suppose so," said Leo, letting out a sigh before breaking into a grin. "I think at the end of the day, I really just wanted someone to encourage me, and tell me I still have it in me, or otherwise to tell me straight that it was time to call it a day. Lucky for me, I've got good people around me. You've made me reconsider things."

In some ways, Leo and Shiori were similar—both had been ripped from lives they knew by forces outside of their control. And Leo was not alone—there were others with him who could no longer wield the weapons that they had so loved.

"Knights, adventurers—let's just give it our best as comrades," said a middleaged spearmaster, patting Leo on the shoulder. He, too, could no longer wield his weapon as he once did—the majority of the fingers on his left hand were gone—but he still longed to continue working, no matter what it took.

There was a certain sober loneliness in the air, but it was eased by the realization that nobody here was alone, and slowly everyone began to feel hopeful and as though they were in good company.

"Well then," said Shiori, "let's move on, shall we? There's still much for us to cover."

She did not know for certain that her class would give these people the guidance they desired while each stood at their own crossroads, but she hoped it would at least help them find some direction. Shiori, too, was still looking for where she wanted to go. Through her students here, she could look back on her own life, and make new discoveries through the act of teaching. Perhaps it would help to expand her world and make it just a little wider.

I want to treasure each and every opportunity that comes my way...

That was what Shiori thought as she looked up at Alec, who had given her the opportunity to truly accept who she once was—the Shiori that had once been, before she'd arrived in this world.

Vivi's shoulders slumped. Before her was a dubious-looking bubbly pool of mud. Creating a bath the way Shiori had explained was one thing, but making a bath tub was entirely another. The walls Vivi had made weren't strong enough, for starters, and the water must have been way too hot, because everything went to sludge, turning the whole attempt into a muddy, swamp-like bog. The sight of it was enough to make all the mages nearby take a few steps back, but the results Vivi had achieved were not particularly uncommon; the whole practice area had rather swiftly become a collection of bottomless, sludge-filled pools.

A number of specific steps went into creating Shiori's magic baths. First, the earth was disinfected with heat. Then the bathtub walls were hardened, after which water was added and heated. This sounded simple enough, but was in fact quite a serious challenge. Bathtub walls that seemed hard enough at first still melted when water was added.

"This is less a bath and more a trap spell," muttered one adventurer, glancing from their own muddy mess to the beautiful pool that Shiori had made as an example.

"You got that right... Still, though..."

Certainly, a deep, muddy bog would hamper or even hurt potential enemies, but in truth, everybody wanted nothing more than to master the fundamentals of what Shiori was teaching. Most of these mages already *had* attack spells at their disposal; what they didn't have was a way of taking a bath at their expedition campsites. The very idea of relaxing in a bath after a hard day's adventuring was a draw of its own. Naturally, then, it wasn't extra offensive spells these mages were after, but mastering the basics of bath magic. And no truer was this than for those who had experienced Shiori's baths firsthand.

"I get depressed just thinking about eating and sleeping all covered in dirt and grime and monster gizzards," said one adventurer. "But let me tell you, when Shiori handed me a towel and said 'Go right ahead and soak in the bath while I prepare dinner,' it was the first time I ever truly believed that heaven existed."

"Oh, knock it off..."

"Well, either way, I at least want to master bath magic, whatever it takes."

"I feel you. I really do."

When it came to dirty clothes, you could get by bringing a fresh set with you. But the same wasn't true of the human body. In terms of refreshing the body, the best you could usually hope for was to suffer through getting blasted with a stream of water magic.

Vivi turned away from the conversation the more senior mages were having and turned her muddy bog back into a state that resembled the ground it had once been. It wasn't perfect, however, and the place looked not unlike earth that had been hammered by a long rainfall.

Shiori Izumi, on the other hand, was able to almost perfectly return her baths back to ordinary ground. She could not bring back whatever weeds or grass she had pulled out in constructing the bath, but the land could be walked upon without any issues.

Shiori was especially skilled when it came to detailed, intricate work. On top of that, she cast combined magic with ease. If you ignored her lack of magical power, she wielded her spells with a finesse even greater than that of high-level mages. Vivi couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by a sense of defeat; Shiori was a low-level mage, but in terms of control, she was leagues ahead.

And as Vivi wallowed in her failure, the nearby conversation went on...

"If we can master these skills with our magical powers, it's really going to be something," said one person.

"Yeah. You can't help but think about it, huh?"

"And that earth magic earlier—put that to practical use, and you can make impaling barriers out of the ground itself. Until now, I've only ever used that magic to temporarily blind monsters or otherwise create pitfalls."

"But I mean, if we're tripped up when it comes to just creating a bath, we've got a long road ahead of us."

"Yes, indeed. Hah—if only there was a rocky outcrop around; that would make this so much easier."

"Speaking of, I had no idea that earth and stones and all of that stuff originally

came from sand. That was news to me."

"And if you think about it, we're using our earth magic to control its form. But yeah, I've just never really thought about it."

"Still, the idea of making up for a lack of magical power with knowledge and imagination? I guarantee I've missed a lot of opportunities because of that. I've got so much more experience with magic than Shiori, but that idea just never dawned on me."

Potential, no matter how great, couldn't be exercised without knowledge. It was knowledge of a subject matter that allowed for the caster's imagination to run free. Outside of those with exceptionally high levels of magical power, mages inevitably plateaued when they came to rely only on their powers.

When an individual wanted to increase their knowledge, the fastest path to such a thing was books. However, it had only been a few decades since the regular populace had come to enjoy reading. And while basic reading, writing, and math skills had spread, there were not many among the working class who thought of buying books in order to study on their own.

"Ah—so you didn't know how rocks were formed, huh? I did notice you were using rather simple spells given your magical power levels, and now I see why..."

This last comment came from Daniel Cronheim, one of the top five high-level mages in the Tris Adventurers' Guild. He had come as an observer, and nodded to himself as all the pieces fell into place.

"But that can't just be common knowledge, right? Well, I mean, outside of nobles with fantastic home tutors or those who studied at the royal academy."

"Nobles get educated at such an early age. What a huge advantage."

"And it's true to say that many famous mages are all nobles or otherwise rich. The last guild master was a noble, right? He published a bunch of books, and made quite the name for himself."

"That's true..."

"But Shiori's on a different level. You wouldn't call her a specialist, but she

knows so much about so many different things. The scope of her scientific knowledge is so broad. She says she came from an ordinary household, but where'd she learn all that stuff? You can tell she's used to reading books too."

"I was lucky enough to have a pretty well-known tutor growing up, but I was never taught how rocks were formed. And when it came to science, it was just about astronomy and the weather, and not in any great detail either. Maybe if I'd gone to the academy, I would have learned a broader set of subjects."

"My stepbrother attended the academy, and apparently he learned a lot. But at the top-class academies, the sciences are broken up into specific fields...things like geology, meteorology, and even oceanography."

"I know I might not look it, but I attended a girls' academy. They're all about etiquette and domestic training. So languages and literature, music, history...and venturing a little into the realm of the economy and societal studies. Certainly no geology or meteorology, though."

"So Shiori attended a girls' academy that taught the sciences as well?"

"I've never heard of such an academy. Maybe things are different in the East?"

"Who knows? But she sure knows a lot on a wide range of topics. Still, she's a bit lacking in terms of general knowledge of Storydia."

"She's talked about going to school before. But you know, I think a lot of it just has to do with how hard she works. When she was just an assistant at the Guild, whenever she had a free minute she was studying, even on her breaks. She was always at one or the other, never anything else. Working or studying. By now, she might know more about the kingdom than we do."

"Hmm... Studying, huh...? Studying... Look, I'll be honest. I don't even know how to study."

"Me either. I mean, if it was just looking at photographs and illustrations, I feel like I could do it."

"Maybe we could ask Shiori if she has any book recommendations?"

"Good call. I'll ask my brother to send me a book or two as well. Maybe then

we can all get together and do a study session...or even just a reading session, to start with."

"Hey, now there's an idea. I'm not confident it'll get us straight up to Shiori's level, though."

"Don't say that. You're going to kill the mood..."

"So get this—I..."

When the conversation on rumors and tips had run its course, the members of the group once again took to making baths. That was when Joel, who'd been silently working on bath magic alone, muttered his thoughts aloud.

"If you ask me, I think we're lucky that Shiori is just a low-level mage..."

He did not speak the words with any contempt whatsoever. Still, what he said brought those around Joel to a halt, and they waited for him to explain exactly what he meant.

"If she were a high-level mage casting the same kinds of spells, I...I think I'd go insane with jealousy."

Joel didn't like thinking about it, but in truth, he really was jealous. He explained it to everyone simply: Shiori had developed an incredible mastery of magic in less than *five years* of work. Shiori's appearance made her stand out, and while Joel had not always taken her seriously, he knew that she had poured her heart and soul into improving. Her results had come by way of her efforts. Joel knew this, and yet if Shiori had simply risen to the ranks of a high-level mage, he would have had a hard time accepting it.

"If Shiori had more magical power, then she'd probably end up as an archmage. But, because of her low magical power..."

Joel's words petered out into silence, but everyone knew what was going unsaid. Some looked upon him with disgust, while others lowered their gazes. They couldn't readily and openly agree with him, but they nonetheless knew how he felt. Whatever the circumstances, however, Shiori's magical power was clearly in the realm of the low-level mage. There was a feeling similar to relief in the fact that she would never make it any further than that, and it was perhaps even something of a consolation. Joel was far from alone in feeling this way. It

was shameful, to be sure, but it was an emotion that could not be easily scrubbed away.

"I get it," said Vivi. "I didn't want to admit it. Didn't want to acknowledge her work. That's why I pushed her. That's why my friends and I surrounded her—to make her prove it. It's why we...tried to attack her."

Her words hinted at the incident Vivi had been a part of, and those who didn't know the circumstances gasped. Those who did, however, waited silently, interest piqued, for Vivi to continue; they knew that Vivi was in the process of changing for the better.

"She was just a low-level mage, but the way she was treated by the experienced adventurers? We couldn't stand all the attention she got. We were convinced there was more to it. Something shady going on behind the scenes."

In the fundamental textbooks for magic, it was written that imagination and concentration were indispensable for the casting of magic. Vivi, however, had never believed either to be of any real importance. After all, for her, a mere chant and the wave of her hand was all it ever took.

However, that was only because Vivi's magical power was so much higher than average. Everything she cast thus relied on the powers she was born with. In terms of attack magic alone, she already rivaled high-level mages. And as such, she had looked upon mages who needed imagination and concentration as worthless.

Shiori was among those whom Vivi had thought of as insignificant, and yet Vivi had lost to her. All because of Vivi's lack of imagination. She'd been egotistical, and she had seen the world only through the lens of her own beliefs, and it had led her to incite a foolish incident.

"I mean, it's in the past now, but is it true? Did she really beat all *three* of you?"

The quiet question came from Kai, who was acting as a supervisor at the lecture.

"Yes..." admitted Vivi.

"A high-powered mage, a magical swordsman, and an archer...and you lost?"

"Yes. It was her illusion magic. The whole thing was over in an instant."

This was the first time anyone had heard what had happened—and how Shiori had survived—from someone who was present at the scene. Shock rippled through the group. Illusion magic was often said to have little to no practical use; and yet Shiori had used it in such a way as to defeat three adventurers, all of whom were far stronger than her.

"I had no idea that illusion magic could be used like that. I'd never even dreamed of it. But I'm lucky she's only a low-level mage. Were she anything more, I'd be dead."

Vivi's heart would surely have imploded, unable to bear that impenetrable darkness, full of a world's worth of despair and sorrow. Shiori had emerged victorious that day by way of her imagination. An imagination that had almost killed Vivi.

"That's why I'm really glad...that she's only a low-level mage," said Vivi.

The group dropped into silence. This was how Vivi really felt. It hadn't taken much of Shiori's magic, but the illusion had still struck such terror into her that she'd feared for her own life.

"Yeah, you really were lucky," said Kai. "But the fact that you can realize that shows you've grown. And you too, Joel. Not everyone can admit their envy.

Treasure that honesty, both of you."

Vivi and Joel nodded as Kai smiled at them.

At that same time, Shiori was a little ways from the group, watching her attendees and completely unaware that she was being talked about.

"Yes, just like that," she said. "Yes—very good. But perhaps make the surface a little harder."

Shiori was checking a student's bathtub. The surface of it was smooth and looked quite tough, but upon actually touching it, Shiori was uncertain whether it was quite right. The attendee, a girl who had recently become a mid-level mage, nodded obediently.

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"Uh...there," she said, giving it a try. "Like that?"

"Yes, just like that," said Shiori. "Please try adding the water now."

"Okay."
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Perhaps the student already had mastery over the element, as she filled the tub with the perfect amount of water. Unfortunately, it was boiling and far too hot, and the student let out a gasp.

"It's okay," said Shiori. "The bathtub itself has held firm, so now it's just a matter of bringing the water down to the right temperature. You can simply add more water to it, or you can use ice magic to cool the bath. Try doing whatever is easiest for you."

"Okay," said the girl, thinking for a moment. "Here we go..."

She then chanted an ice spell. The girl had a good grasp on water and its higher-level element, ice; this was clear in her ability to bring the water's temperature down to an appropriate level.

"Great! I knew you could do it. You've pretty much got bath magic down pat, now."

"I did it!" said the girl happily, but then she let out a wry chuckle. "Until now, I thought I was good at fire magic, but today I realized for the first time that I'm actually better with water and ice."

"Fire magic is more powerful, and in a snowy country like this one, where many magical beasts are weak to heat, it's very easy to fall into thinking that way," said Shiori.

"That's a good point. I'm going to spend more time working with and exploring water and ice magic. I'll work on my fire magic at the same time."

"Great. Best of luck."

"Thanks!"

Shiori smiled gently at the sight of the girl, so eager to review what she had learned, and then cast her gaze around the area. Some were still struggling to construct their bathtubs, while others—who were growing more used to the laundry and food processor spells—were experimenting so as to develop their

own methods. It was fascinating to watch each caster approach bath magic in their own way, and it was a display of creativity too; some made their bathtubs from thick ice, while others used earth magic to gather pebbles and stones to use as a kind of tiling.

"An ice bath," remarked Shiori. "It's very pretty."

The caster, a fellow adventurer, shot her a satisfied grin.

"Right? Ages ago I saw a glass bath in a noble's manor, so I used that idea as a base."

"A glass bath?! How extravagant..."

"Yep. They paid about as much for the bath as they did for the mansion they put it in. But because mine's made of ice, the water cools too quickly. What makes it difficult is that I have to keep a constant stream of magic going to keep the bath at the right temperature."

"I'm simply envious that you have enough magical energy to do so," commented Shiori.

The adventurer laughed.

"The thing is, I can't use my magic at a distance, which means I can't be too far from the bath. I have to be right next to it watching over things until everyone's done."

"Oh, I see. I wonder how the rest of the party would feel about that..." Shiori muttered.

Alec rolled his eyes playfully.

"So there's room for improvement, then," he said, chuckling.

Elsewhere, the knight corps' Leo Nordman and the margravine Monica Osbring—who was passing largely unnoticed thanks to being disguised as a soldier—were comparing their own baths to Shiori's example. They were also swapping opinions—of which there were many, given the work shared between their organizations.

"Ideally, you'd have a waterproof sheet to use for the flooring and walls. That way all you need to do is put a hole in the ground."

"That would make for more baggage, but it's not a bad idea. And if you're using a carriage, that's certainly the more realistic option."

"Yeah. If it's a sheet that doesn't need support rods, you can fit it in a knapsack."

"But I don't think those sheets are made to *hold* water, are they? How long would one last?"

"Guess we'll have to check when we head back."

The group couldn't help noticing the familiars returning as they spoke, and in particular, the two slimes, Rurii and Bla.

"How about...using a slime for the floor of the bath?"

"Well, they definitely wouldn't let any water out."

"But would we be using the slimes as flooring, or...drowning them...?"

"Ah—right, of course... There's the matter of how the slimes themselves feel about it."

The slimes seemed to realize they were the topic of conversation, and they wobbled with curiosity as they slid over to the group. Bla bounced up and down, clutching a large insect wing and shell in its feelers. Based on the unusual colors, the materials had come from a variant, which were often found out in the snow.

"I wouldn't go showing any of that to Zack," whispered Shiori.

Bla jumped on the spot: "Got it!"

In any case, it seemed that Bla was going to donate the insect material to the orphanage. The kids there would love it, and as an added bonus, it would all be much to Zack's relief.

"Those with a better understanding of magic are getting better at how they wield it. There's less wasted energy in their work," said Alec, who, at Bla's behest, had put the slime's "loot" in his knapsack.

"Yes," said Shiori, nodding. "Watching them makes me realize that I'll have to up my game."

"I can't help but be impressed. You just never stop looking to improve, do you?" said Alec, who chuckled as he put a hand to his sword. "That said, it's made me think I should work on some new techniques myself. Even though Zack had support from his party, he still took down a dragon with a single greatsword. That's the kind of power I have to aim for, especially when I consider our future together."

Alec put an arm around Shiori's shoulder and pulled her in close. He smiled down at her, and she felt the warmth in his gaze. She looked away from Rurii, who had happily joined a group of attendees, and smiled back up at her lover.

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Though Shiori had agonized over how things would go to start with, the lecture's attendees were so enthusiastic about her lessons that the first session had gone longer than planned. Shiori had allotted three hours to the session, but they had gone well over that and were now finally settling down for a lunch break.

As a housekeeping mage, Shiori had wanted to prepare a warm lunch for everyone, but the meal was instead prepared by the Lovner family chefs, who had come as the noble family's attendants. Though the chefs were trainees, what they provided was nonetheless cuisine worthy of a distinguished family. When the food was served, many whooped with joy; this was the kind of fare that many commoners would be lucky to even taste.

The potage, which was made from root vegetables prepared painstakingly the night before, was crafted especially so that those who were tired (and those who were not particularly hungry) could still consume something nutritious. The sandwiches, too, filled with sautéed mushrooms and meat grilled with spices and soy sauce butter, were perfect for the hardworking—and sometimes still growing—attendees.

The scent of the food whetted everyone's appetite, and the taste didn't disappoint. The food was pleasantly filling and perfectly satisfying, even in small portions. It was a menu concocted to accommodate Lady Lovner's needs during her outdoor activities by none other than her fiancé, Dennis Fryden. He'd used

Shiori's campsite cuisine as a reference.

"I see," said Alec, grinning after he took a bite of a sandwich. "I don't know what the Lovners usually eat, but this flavor has Shiori written all over it."

"This is *so* good," remarked a nearby adventurer. "Eating the same food as a famous noble? Ugh, this is *bliss*."

"My family is never going to hear the end of this," added another.

Behind the energetic chatter and banter of people enjoying their food was Nils, who was lying down and sipping gingerly at a bowl of potage. Due to his efforts, he had avoided running out of magical power entirely, but he was thoroughly exhausted.

"You look tired," said Shiori.

"Yes, this is all...quite tough, actually. I mean, I knew it was coming, but I didn't think it would be quite so...heavy. I've never experienced fatigue quite like this. It's like all the life has drained out of my body."

Even though he was something of a beginner, Nils had taken to the new spells quite quickly, and in the joy of experimenting with them, he seemed to have overexerted himself. He'd since used up all the recovery potions he'd brought with him, and his fellow adventurers, pitying their friend, were now placing potions at his pillow not unlike offerings of a sort.

"And to top it all off," muttered Nils, "I've drunk too many recovery potions. They've done a number on my stomach."

Nils's familiar, an alraune by the name of Eir, was valiantly attending to its moaning master. Valiant, of course, was what Eir would have called its own efforts, but to anyone else the languid alraune looked merely annoyed by its predicament as it tore a few leaves from the top of its head, then squeezed a few drops of liquid from them into Nils's mouth.

In small amounts, the sap of the leaves worked as a stimulant, and it helped bring Nils back to life. Still, lying on his side surrounded by empty bottles, Nils looked rather not unlike a drunk suffering a very serious hangover. Those around him couldn't help but chuckle; he looked like anything but the herbal physician he actually was.

Magical recovery potions were made by melting down the high-intensity magical essence extracted from a variety of different materials and melting them into a special liquid. The liquid had an adsorbent effect when it came to magical essence, but this came with a downside: a rather...unique flavor profile. A sweetener had been added to help it go down smoothly, but it tended to sit heavily in the stomach. Nils had ingested quite a lot in a short period of time, and was no doubt feeling especially bloated.

In games, you just drink as many as it takes and that's that, but in the real world, your stomach gets filled up.

If recovery items in the real world were just like they were in video games—meat and breads—then you'd be looking at a whole lot more luggage and a heap of calories to go with them. Shiori looked down at Rurii by her feet, and pondered the idea that perhaps only slimes would be truly happy if meat had healing properties.

"Well, at least I know roughly how many recovery potions I should be carrying with me," mused Nils, frowning. "But even once you get used to things, what makes you tired is always going to exhaust you, isn't it? Magical power is one thing, but you also have to consider the physical toll if you want to be of any use at the campsite."

Shiori nodded.

"Yes, you're right. We're always walking just as much as the other members in our party, and even in battle we still have a role to play as rearguard support, which means we're moving around. Anybody who is thinking about adding housekeeping mage work to their duties really has to consider their magical and physical health. That's especially true of vanguard party members, who are so active. Taking on too much might simply leave a person mentally and physically broken."

"Ah..." A few vanguards nodded.

"Someone else said that earlier. Makes sense."

An adventurer who was active on the front lines and then worked at the campsite was really only giving themselves more work with which to tire themselves out. And it didn't really matter how well-rested your party was if

you were left an exhausted mess as a result.

"That's why it's so important to think in terms of matching what you're capable of to how you work," said Shiori.

"Good point," said Alec, finishing up his lunch. "So you have to know what you can and can't do as a housekeeping mage. The class is one of your own making, and it's unique to you. As long as you're what people think of when the class is brought up, you're the standard for expectations, at least as far as the Tris branch is concerned. And you have to admit, it sure would be disappointing to set up camp only to find that there's no bath and the food is only average."

"Yes...that's true," said Ellen, nodding. "It's a brand-new class, so perhaps the first step is accurately defining exactly what a housekeeping mage is."

"Yeah, but...we can't set the standard at Shiori's level. That's bound to cause problems."

"And if I might ask...exactly what duties do you handle, Miss Shiori?" asked Leo Nordman.

Shiori thought it over for a time.

"Well...if we're only talking about what I handle at the campsite, then cooking, cleaning, the bath, and bed-making. Depending on the location and the season, I might also adjust the temperature within a magical barrier with air-conditioning magic."

"Bed-making? You don't just mean putting up tents?"

"By bed-making, I mean adjusting the moisture in the ground or snow to create something not unlike a basic mattress. Such beds help to relieve stress on the body."

"Making beds out of the ground...?" uttered Leo. "Ah, that was in the report. After the wolf attack, you made beds for patients."

"That's right. They're especially effective upon waking, and adventurers are fond of them when on expeditions, particularly when they've been injured or are especially tired."

When the snow wolves had attacked Brovito Village, there simply hadn't been

enough beds for all the wounded, and the garrison knights had lacked the supplies to accommodate everyone. Shiori had thus made basic beds for the patients, which had offered some relief until the emergency services had arrived.

"I see. So you ease the exhaustion of your party members, help them mentally recover, and in doing so, keep them as close to being in peak fighting shape as possible. That's the fundamental role of the housekeeping mage, huh? Kind of like a supply base, in some ways."

As an office worker in her former world, Shiori had little knowledge in the way of military vocabulary, but she at least understood the gist of what Leo was getting at.

"I have to admit, military terms are a little foreign to me," she said, "but I think of my work as giving my fellow adventurers the support that will allow them to fight at their best."

Leo looked at Shiori and her quiet smile, and his gaze grew distant as he nodded to himself, thinking. In the distance, on the other side of the forest, a few thin trails of smoke rose up into the sky, likely from a nearby village. The sight of them underneath a crystal clear sky was the very image of peace.

"The rear guard don't stand at the front lines," he said finally. "Their work isn't as noticeable. It's certainly not as flashy. But the troops have to be supported. It's indispensable. Unfortunately, we've known peace here for so long that only a few have any experience when it comes to fighting on a large scale. I've been at it for thirty years, and even then, when I was young—we're talking twenty years back now—it was little more than small skirmishes on the border. These days the work is mostly taking out magical beasts or handling bandits. There's not much need for a support unit, and maybe that's why the young soldiers coming up look down on the support troops."

Leo had been forced into the rear guard on account of his injury, and it had made him realize the state the military was in. He felt it was something of a crisis.

"Sure, it's safe within our borders," he continued, "but across the sea, and just a few borders away from ours, you've got civil war and territorial disputes.

The dissolution of the Empire also means that instability in the region will continue for a time, and nobody can say for certain that we won't get pulled into things. There's no harm in being prepared for the worst."

After having experienced this much of Shiori's lecture, Leo thought it might be a good idea to train up some housekeeping mages while there was still time to do so, and put them to work in his units.

"Not that I have that kind of authority anymore," he said. "So the best I can do for the time being is to be the proof I need to make it happen."

Leo was a knight with a huge amount of experience under his belt, and it seemed clear that younger, rookie knights didn't quite understand his new train of thought. But even then, a few showed interest in developing support tactics.

"If that's something you're keen to learn," said Alec, noticing the interest, "then you'd best talk to Zack. He's a good teacher."

"Huh?" uttered Shiori. "Zack knows a lot when it comes to the military?"

"He comes from a distinguished military family," said Alec, leaning down to whisper in her ear. "He would have had some lessons in the art of war. He wouldn't have had much chance to put them to use, but still..."

"Oh, I see," murmured Shiori.

Zack had once been the heir to his family line, and served as aide to the royal prince. And were that prince still alive, Zack would likely be serving as the head of the nation's military defense.

But something happened that changed his life... As to what, I've no idea...

Had the two princes never passed away, Zack would likely still be serving the nation at the castle, and Alec never would have been brought to the castle by his father, the king at the time. Instead, Alec would have lived out his life as a commoner, and might never even have become an adventurer. In that alternate reality, Zack never would have found Shiori when she'd fallen into this world. She wouldn't have met Alec, and she might not even have met Rurii. Her life might well have been over before any of these things could have occurred.

Everyone who had gathered for Shiori's lecture had, like her, come here by

way of a countless number of crossroads in their lives. And here, at this moment, all of their paths intertwined. When Shiori considered the fact that it was her own work that had brought everyone to this place, she felt that the weaving of the fates was a truly inexplicable thing.

And perhaps today, right here, somebody's life might change in some unimaginable way...

Shiori hoped, earnestly and honestly, that whatever change came for that person, it was for the better. She hoped that the fates would bring them blessings as they had for her, on the fateful days she'd met them all: the man who would become her brother, the slime who would become her best friend, and the man who was her one true love.

Shiori indulged a little in the balanced sweet and salty flavors of the soup as she drank the last of her bowl, then let out a contented sigh.

"What a wonderful meal," she said.

Walt, who was overseeing the food, quickly noticed Shiori's empty bowl and grinned.

"It's good, right?" he said.

Seeing Walt reminded Shiori of something, so as she used her water magic to help wash up after lunch, she turned to him with a question.

"By the way, Walt," she started, "how does one go about hiring an illustrator? Is it something that even a foreigner like me can do?"

"If it's an illustrator you're after, we've got connections. I'd be happy to mediate. Why? Are you thinking about putting a book out?"

"Yes. I thought it might be nice to publish something on campsite cooking or housekeeping magic. Not that I have anything definitive just yet."

"Not sure about the magic book, but we've certainly got connections for cookbooks, so just say the word. I'd be happy to help you."

"Wow, thank you. Then I'll send word when the idea takes shape. And how much would I pay you for an introduction fee? Of course, I'd be more than happy to give you a few books as a token of my appreciation."

"Oh, well, you can bet that'll please me and the old man—er, I mean the head chef," said Walt. "That kind of fee usually depends on what the illustrations are and how many you'll need, but if you want to say thanks"—and here Walt paused to grin for effect—"you could send me a collection of your portable foods at friends' rates. They are *the* perfect midnight snack."

"If that's what you'd like, sure," said Shiori. "Oh, but I know Dennis doesn't want you eating anything too fatty, so are you certain?"

When Shiori had last met with Dennis, Walt's cousin, he'd come with a request on Walt's part for more portable food. He'd been very clear, however, that he wanted something hearty but not too fatty. Clearly, he was worried about Walt's health.

Walt groaned.

"What is he—my mother? But look, I'll admit, I have put on a little weight recently..."

Walt was tasked with cleaning up after the crimes of his own grandfather and preparing for his lord's wedding. As such, he more often found himself stuck behind a desk than being outdoors and on the move. All the desk work meant that he rarely had much of a chance to exercise.

"As much as I'd like to tell you just to work out," said Alec, "when you're so busy that you literally can't make the time, even just going outside feels like far too much effort."

Alec could sympathize, having lived part of his youth in the royal castle.

"Yeah, and it's not like I can just go running around inside the manor, though I have tried walking up and down the stairs more often. I just get so tired so quickly that it never lasts long."

"If going outside is too much trouble, how about a step workout with a stool or something?" offered Shiori. "It'll be much easier than using the stairs, and easier to make a habit."

"A step workout? What's that?" asked Walt.

"Exactly what it sounds like. You take a stool or a box or a stepping stone, and

you work out by stepping up and down on it. It's usually very simple to do in any room, and surprisingly good exercise."

This was part of the diet plan that Shiori's sister-in-law had arrived at when she'd realized she was eating too much; she had her hands so full with taking care of her kids that she couldn't easily get outside to work out. Shiori had been skeptical when she'd first heard about it, but had been surprised by the results when she'd actually given it a shot. More than anything else, she loved being able to casually work out while she watched television.

"If you use a stool or a step that's lower than the height of your stairs, it won't tire you out as much. You can start by just doing ten minutes a day, then increase the amount of time you spend on it as you get more used to the exercise."

Shiori gave a brief demonstration as she explained the workout routine, and Walt was intrigued.

"I just love that you can do it in your room," he said. "I wonder if I could do it while I'm looking over documents...? Hm? What's going on?"

Walt's thoughts turned to a question as the people around him began to stir nervously. He looked over to where some were pointing and saw what looked like white smoke rising up from the middle of the nearest mountain. It was clearly an avalanche—on the very mountain they'd seen and talked about on their way to the lecture grounds.

"Oh..." uttered Shiori.

"Looks like an avalanche," said Alec. "I really hope nobody was caught up in it."

At the base of the mountain were a number of small villages.

"I'm guessing they already know how dangerous it is..." he continued.

It was just a part of life for the people in this area, especially those who lived near mountains. Avalanches weren't a rare occurrence, and so as the clouds of snow dissipated, most people picked up their conversations where they'd left them.

However, as margravine of the region, Monica needed to know what had happened, and so she issued an order and her soldiers sent a messenger bird—a magical beast they could trust to move at high speed.

Shiori reached into her robes and pulled forth her pocket watch. It was just about time to bring their lunch break to an end. There were still two spells left to be taught, so she took a few breaths to calm her nerves, and after glancing one last time at the mountain in the distance, she let everyone know that lunch was over.

4

"For the afternoon portion of the lecture, we're going to look at how to use fire and wind magic to cast a drying spell, and I'll also explain how to disperse your magical power in such a way as to cast a search magic spell. Both can be rather difficult if you don't have a firm grasp of the fundamentals, but I've included them in today's agenda due to the overwhelming number of requests I've received. That said..."

And here Shiori paused to smile before continuing.

"I cast combined magic in my own way, and it's possible there may be quirks to how I'm doing it that are unique to my person. So I would like you all to keep in mind that these spells are best thought of simply as a reference point for your own learning. First, I'll give a demonstration—nice and slow, so you can see and understand the process for yourself."

Three years had passed since Shiori had started using magic, and there were still many who were skeptical—not just of her combined magic, but whether or not she could even use magic at all. However, by this point most were convinced by what they'd seen in the earlier portion of the lecture, and now everyone watched her earnestly. Not a single disparaging gaze could be seen.

Shiori took a deep breath, then focused on the palms of her hands.

"In the right, fire magic. In the left, wind magic," she said.

The flame on the right and the air currents from the left melted and mixed together. As they became one, a warm breeze drifted among the attendees,

bringing to mind the winds of spring. A few awed gasps floated into the air, along with an appreciative whistle. Shiori giggled.

"This is drying magic," she said. "I use it mostly for drying clothes or wet hair."

The light breeze seemed to grow in scope, and soon encompassed all of the attendees.

"It can also be used as a heater when expanded to cover a wider area," Shiori continued. "If you raise the level of fire used, the heat will be enough to affect magical beasts weak to heat and warm climates. In fact, the warmth you are feeling right this instant is enough to completely dry out a snow jellyfish. Though I haven't tested it on all magical beasts, there's a strong likelihood that this spell will be effective when used on monsters that are active in the winter."

Shiori made sure not to bring up the yeti she had encountered in the past, but she used her illusion magic to cast a picture of the battle against the snow jellyfish in Silveria. The response was immediate. The gathered adventurers were left in awe. Meanwhile, Alec and Rurii watched on, supremely satisfied. Questions soon followed, and fast.

"Amazing," said one adventurer.

"Is there a trick to learning it?" asked another.

"If I practice enough, I wonder if I can do that..."

"Is there an effective way to practice such spells?"

"Er, uh..." uttered a flustered Shiori, taken aback by what felt like a flood of interest. "I'll cover each point one at a time. Firstly, let's discard the popular notion that combined magic is something special. I think the fact that I can wield it makes that clear. The first step is simply to give it a try."

Many had failed in their attempts to cast combined magic. Those that had succeeded, at least as far as the historical records were concerned, had all been high-level mages of some renown. Naturally, this had resulted in the belief that only true masters of the magical arts could use combined magic—a belief that obstructed the act of imagination necessary to even attempt it in the first place. And so this was the first point Shiori wanted to make.

"The reason that combined magic is so difficult," said Shiori, "is that we have to balance two magics simultaneously. To succeed, we must eliminate whatever disrupts this balance. I believe this to be of particular importance. The most reliable way to practice, at least for me, is to exert an equal level of magical power from both hands at the same time. However, there are two important points to note."

Number one: Ascertain your dominant hand when it comes to the exertion of magical power. Number two: Know what magics you are most compatible with, and work out a hierarchy for ease of casting them.

"Your dominant hand for magic is usually your dominant hand for everything else. Similarly, the magic you are most compatible with is that which you can cast most powerfully. So, when practicing, cast your most compatible magic in your nondominant hand, and the opposite in your dominant hand. This will make it easier to work towards achieving a balance."

Shiori was most comfortable with wind magic, and fire, in contrast, was what she felt least compatible with. Her dominant hand was her right. So she cast the fire in her right hand and the wind in her left. This helped her to make up for the differences in her ability with the different elements.

"I never thought of that," muttered Alec, breaking the silence that had settled over the group. "I just figured it was a matter of emitting the same amount of magic with both hands."

"But even then, it's still not easy," said Nadia, her brow furrowed.

"Correct," said Shiori with a nod. "It's very likely that the more magical power you have, the harder it will be for you to use combined magic. When you have a high magical power level, your output levels are also naturally very high. Making minute adjustments can be a challenge. On the other hand, when you don't have so much power, your flow of magic is gentler by default, which means making those same small adjustments is much easier. This has led me to believe that low-level mages are perhaps better suited to casting combined magic."

"I never thought of that either," said Kai.

He let out a deep sigh. Kai had once been a high-level mage himself. Daniel, another high-level mage who had come to observe the lecture, nodded.

"Her hypothesis certainly holds water," he muttered. "Whether it's true or not will be proven further down the line, as more mages experiment with it. Though I must admit: It is interesting, if perhaps slightly vexing, to think that the reason we've had so few successful combined magic casters until now has been because those who are most suitable for it were never seen as such in the first place."

"But now that there's a thread to pull on and unravel," said Alec, "there's lots of value in experimenting with the idea."

A quick glance around the group showed a passionate fire in the eyes of the attendees. They were raring to go. Upon seeing the impatient eagerness on her students' faces, Shiori wrapped up her explanation.

"There are three things to consider in order to successfully cast combined magic. Firstly, know how much magic you are exerting in each hand. You can check this simply by casting magic through both hands simultaneously.

Secondly, understand which magic you work best with. Let's check this first with fire and wind magic. Please cast a low-level spell in both hands simultaneously. Don't concentrate too hard; let it come naturally. The spell that lasts longer is the one you're more compatible with. Thirdly, do your best to cast both magics at equal power. If you usually work with a staff or wand, you may find there's a big difference between what you can do with each hand. But practice and don't give up; instead of casting two different elements, try casting the same in both hands. When you can concentrate and balance the one element and control it effectively, you will have become a better and more powerful mage even if true combined magic is still beyond you. That's a positive outcome."

Staff, wand, concentrate.

Vivi couldn't help the shiver that ran through her shoulders at these words. It took her back to her days as a rookie, and the instruction she'd received from her teacher.

"Vivi, you have extraordinary magical power, but you lack concentration. It takes time for you to cast your spells, and even after you've gone to the effort of summoning such power, much of it scatters haphazardly. This means you

cannot utilize the full extent of what you are capable of. Perhaps you should try this staff? It will help with concentration."

And true enough, the staff really did help the ditzy, often-distracted Vivi. She had never really understood the idea of gathering magical power in the fingertips, but the staff was a single object, and thus it was easier to focus on. The power of her spells increased immediately, and she wasted less magical power when casting.

Vivi no longer owned that staff—having since bought another—and the teacher who had given her that advice had gotten married not long afterwards, which had seen them retire and leave Tris.

Actually, I think I bought that next staff after they quit...

Simple designs had never really appealed to Vivi, but she had kept her teacher's staff for its utility. She also couldn't bring herself to buy a new one when she had received it in goodwill. That had been the extent of Vivi's consideration towards others. However, around that time, Vivi had easily made it to C-rank. Though she'd gotten there through the use of her teacher's trusty staff, she did not hold on to it much longer.

"They're only a teacher as far as *this* place is concerned," Sheila had said, "and I mean, seriously, you're *both* mid-level mages, right? Why do you have to care so much about the advice of someone who isn't even better than you?"

Sheila's words had sealed the deal, and Vivi had ditched the staff. Sheila Ander was the daughter of a small domain lord who was a lord and knight, and her brother was well-known as a member of the northern knight corps. Sheila was extremely proud of her heritage, and Vivi, similarly, was extremely proud to be associated with a daughter of the nobility. It felt like she had found herself a friend of some renown.

But I was really just another country bumpkin who didn't know any better.

This was a fact that was as true of Vivi as it was of Sheila. And it was no wonder that their ignorance had seen them head down the path they had. The haughty Vivi had held her nose high, been summarily and thoroughly shamed for it, then fled home...only to return some six months later. Her former friends were now cold to her, and Vivi had spent most of her time in the Guild entirely

alone.

Still, Vivi was not entirely ignored. When she spoke to others, they did not callously snub her, and instead answered any questions she had. When it was necessary, people did speak to her. But none went out of their way to spend time with her. It was exactly what Vivi's sister had told her after she'd come clean about the incident.

"We all have people we don't like and don't get along with, but the least we can do is just try to stay away from those types."

That was exactly how people were treating her now. Vivi knew that her own actions had brought about her isolation at the Guild, and in coming to accept that, she began to observe her surroundings more closely. She watched the expressions on other adventurers' faces, and the snippets of conversation that drifted by. What she then came to realize was that, in the past, she had existed in the tiniest of worlds.

The nobility are all over the place...

They were around, and they were there, but they didn't always make a big show of it. It did not take long for Vivi to realize that among her companions were high-ranking nobles who far outranked the likes of Sheila. These nobles lived the same lives as commoners, ate from the same pots as their party members when on expeditions, and held themselves not unlike anybody else. Many had also done far more in their careers as adventurers than Vivi and her friends.

And yet she and Sheila had strutted among them, a rising star with the daughter of a lord and knight, as though the whole world was their oyster. How foolish would they have looked to their companions back then?

I could literally die of embarrassment...

This was why Vivi wanted to dig a hole in which to bury the girl she had once been.

"...once you can control the flow of magic in your body, and can raise your concentration to its upper levels, you can even do the following."

Shiori's words brought Vivi out of her wallowing. As she watched, Vivi's eyes

went wide. Shiori simply stood in place, and without so much as a gesture, she cast combined magic.

"It's terribly tiring, however, and not particularly energy efficient, so I don't do this often."

With everyone looking on in shock, Shiori ceased casting her spell and offered a shy smile. Mages generally raised their hands when casting spells because it was a necessary movement for concentrating magical power. Along those lines, the staff acted as an extension of the limbs—but Shiori hadn't used anything. Combined magic required the highest levels of concentration and technique, yet without so much as a wave of the hands, Shiori had cast a spell in the air before her through sheer focus alone.

"She's incredible..." someone muttered.

Vivi's eyes dropped down to the short staff in her hands. She loved it, and she had bought it with money she had earned.

Concentration, huh?

She attached the staff to her belt, then put out her hands, casting fire in one and wind in the other. The fire in her right hand flickered intensely, whereas the wind made an odd whistling sound before quickly dispersing. The spells went about as well as she'd expected; Vivi was good with fire magic, but she rarely used wind magic. She then swapped the spells around, casting wind in her right and fire in her left. This time, the wind whipped around in an intense whirlwind, and quickly extinguished the flame in her left.

"Huh...?" she uttered.

Fire should have been what Vivi was best at. Even if there was a difference in what she could cast with each hand, these results seemed impossible. Her wind magic couldn't possibly have put out her fire magic. Vivi felt a vague impatience creeping up within her as she cast fire magic, this time in both hands. The results shocked her. While the flame in her right hand was powerful and steady, the one in her left wavered like that of a candle.

"It...it can't be..." she murmured.

While those around her began to experiment with casting combined magic,

Vivi alone stood in dumbfounded shock; she had just realized exactly how little magical power she could cast from her left hand. And no matter how many times she tried, the results were always the same. Vivi's left hand was weaker than even a low-level mage's. Had it always been like this? Had her two hands always been so vastly different in terms of power? But no, Vivi was sure that in the past things had been different.

But what she had been capable of in the past, she was capable of no longer.

Vivi stood still like a statue. Somewhere in the depths of her heart, she had clung to the idea that she was still superior to Shiori, but reality was now shattering that lie before her very eyes. And as she looked around for help, as though seeking someone who could tell her how to restore the magical power she seemed to have lost, her gaze met with none other than Shiori's.

"Is something wrong?"

Shiori had been walking among the attendees when she noticed the anxious look on Vivi's face. This had brought her over with an offer of assistance.

"I...um..." muttered Vivi.

"Yes?"

"My left hand... The magical power I generate with it has gotten so weak... I don't know what to do..."

The way she described it indicated that this hadn't always been so. Vivi demonstrated a few times, and Shiori saw the irritation and stress in the lines of the girl's face.

"Ah," said Alec, who had been silently watching until now. "I don't suppose you usually use a staff with your right hand, do you?"

Vivi nodded.

"Whenever you use a staff, you can't really help casting more often from your dominant hand. Perhaps since you began using a staff, you've come to cast predominantly with your right hand. I think that's what we're looking at."

Vivi had neglected the use of her left hand, and so the flow of magic to it had

grown weaker as a result.

So this is what happens...

Shiori had heard about this, but couldn't help feeling surprised upon seeing a real example of the phenomenon.

"I'm right-handed," said Alec, "but that's also my sword hand. That means I tend to cast far more often with my left, so in my case I'm more used to casting with that than my actual dominant hand, and the flow of magic from it is smoother. That said"—and Alec paused to frown for a moment—"this is a rather extreme example. Do you always cast with your right hand, using your staff, even for simple spells?"

Vivi thought about this for a time.

"I'm not sure... But...probably...maybe, yes."

When Vivi was a rookie, her teacher had told her something similar, warning her about her habit of defending attacks on her left side with her right hand. This was wasted movement, as she should have been defending her left side with her *left* hand. This, the teacher explained, could leave openings for her enemies in battle to exploit.

However, Vivi could not break the habit of relying on her right hand, and so she'd gone on that way for more than a year. And her overreliance had never proven inconvenient when she'd had two strong companions fighting by her side.

"Hmm," murmured Shiori thoughtfully. "Given that you intend to return to adventuring, I recommend putting work into balancing the flow of your magic. Otherwise, you'll run into difficulties down the line."

Shiori knew that Vivi was in an awkward spot among her peers, and while she did not say as much out loud, she knew it was likely that Vivi would be doing some solo questing. If that was indeed the case, it was best for Vivi to address any weaknesses she had as soon as she could.

"If concentration is the problem, perhaps switch from using a staff to rings or bracelets. By wearing one on each hand, you'll naturally focus your attention on both hands. And if the rings or bracelets have magical stones embedded in them, they'll draw your focus, making it easier to concentrate your magical power."

A glance at Vivi's equipment showed that she was rather particular about what she wore and used, with an eye for what was fashionable. Shiori felt that items with cute designs would be more likely to keep her motivated.

"Rings or bracelets..." uttered Vivi.

"Don't forget that it's winter," added Alec. "Bracelets that you can wear over gloves and equipment might be your best bet."

Vivi thought about the advice for a time, and eventually nodded. Her gaze eventually fell upon Shiori's left hand.

"Is that what that's for?" she asked.

"Huh?"

Vivi was looking at Shiori's bracelet.

"Oh, th-this?" stammered Shiori. "It's more like a lucky charm."

"A lucky charm...?"

Vivi's head tilted quizzically at Shiori's bumbling answer, but when she saw Alec and his proud grin, the puzzle pieces came together.

"Oh," she said, slightly exasperated. "I see. A lucky charm... Right..."

Vivi looked a little like she was suffering from a slight bout of heartburn. Those watching around her stifled their chuckles.



In this way, while the attendees faced roadblocks and challenges, the lecture continued smoothly.

However...

Among the sounds of chatter and magic being cast, Shiori caught the slight echo of a bell in the distance. At first she thought it was just her imagination, but then she noticed others looking similarly puzzled by the sound. Those who heard it stopped to listen more carefully.

The sound of it drifted on the wind. It was the ongoing ringing of an alarm. The first person to react was Monica Osbring, the margravine.

"It's an emergency signal," she uttered.

Was it a fire? A disaster? A bandit attack? The alarm continued to ring, but it was impossible to tell exactly what kind of message was being conveyed. What they did know, however, was that the sound was coming from where the avalanche had occurred.

Monica issued an order to a knight standing by her side, who gave a short nod before leaping onto his horse to investigate.

"I hope it's nothing serious," muttered Alec.

His words sounded almost like a prayer, but his expression made it clear that he had a bad feeling about the situation. Shiori, too, felt instinctively that they were dealing with something serious.

No more than five minutes had passed when the knight returned with a man they'd never seen before, also on horseback. The messenger bird the margravine had sent out also returned not long afterwards.

"Help!" cried the man. "There are people trapped in the snow!"

He leapt from his horse and shouted as if there wasn't a moment to lose. He had left home and raced here with no hat, no gloves, and no winter coat. His hands were red from the cold, as were his ears, which poked out from his messy head of hair.

The man knew that the adventurers were out here training, and so he had come as fast as he possibly could to ask them for help. On his way he'd met the

margravine's knight.

"Snow has fallen over a vast area, and many were caught up in an avalanche. We can't find them all on our own. Please! Help! I beg of you!"

Monica listened to the man's plea as she took the thin piece of paper attached to the messenger bird and scanned its contents. She looked at Shiori and Alec and nodded.

"Let's go," she said, before addressing everyone gathered. "This is an emergency request by way of the family of the margrave. I ask for your help in searching for and providing aid to anyone caught up in the avalanche."

Alec looked around at the adventurers gathered before him, all of whom nodded to show they were in.

"Consider your request accepted," he said. "Shiori?"

"I'm on it."

As the organizer of the housekeeping magic lecture, it was Shiori's responsibility to take the lead, and she announced an early end to the session.

"We're looking at an emergency," she said, "so we'll bring the lecture to a close. We're part of a search and rescue team now, and I will teach you search magic upon arrival at the scene."

"If you're D-rank or below, or a rookie with less than one year of experience, you're on first aid duty," announced Alec. "Nils, I'm sorry, but can I ask you to supervise this group?"

"Understood. Leave it to me," replied Nils, resolute.

Having spent the afternoon session observing while he rested, Nils was still pale, but nonetheless prepared to work as necessary.

"All right! Let's move out!"

"Got it!"

"Right behind you!"

The group began to move out. The margrave's guards and the knight corps, who were used to dealing with emergencies, led the way. Walt, too, ordered his

people to join in.

"We'll support the first aid efforts in any way we can—just tell us what to do," he said.

As servants for a family as distinguished as the Lovners, Walt and his staff had all undergone first aid training. Given their caliber, the help would be much appreciated.

The rookies were all nervous and uncertain, having never had to deal with an emergency before, but Nils and Ellen kept their spirits up as they directed them into a carriage. Meanwhile, Shiori and another group of adventurers tidied up their equipment and boarded the other carriage.

"Rurii, Bla, we'll be counting on you too as well," Shiori said.

The carriage rumbled along while the two slimes wobbled their replies: "You can count on us!"

The group headed to Eklof, a small village nestled into the base of a mountain.

Part 2: Guiding Star

Chapter 1: An Imperial Chimera

1

Eklof was one of many villages that dotted the lower foothills on the outskirts of Tris. Made up of about a hundred houses, it was built on the gentle sloping area at the foot of a mountain. It was a peaceful farming village, largely due to the grassy fields that covered the lands in the summer.

Now, however, Eklof was a village filled with voices, either screaming in sorrow or howling with rage. The men had gotten hold of every farming tool they could find and were using whatever they could to try to dig up the houses that had been buried and destroyed. The children could not comprehend that they were in the midst of an emergency, and so the women forced them into the houses that were still safe. They watched through the windows with anxious, fearful gazes as the rest of the village went to work. Every now and again cries went up, piercing the air, likely from those whose homes had been destroyed.

When the Adventurers' Guild carriage arrived, with the Lovner family carriage right behind it, Leo Nordman noticed them immediately and waved them over. He had arrived earlier with the other knights. Before any of the adventurers could reach him, however, they found themselves surrounded by pleading villagers.

"Please! My husband still hasn't come home!"

"Nor my child! He went out before all of this happened and he still hasn't returned!"

"Our kids are still so young! If my husband doesn't come back, I don't know what I'll do..."

The villagers were desperate. The adventurers knew that family members were still missing, but through the cacophony of voices, it was hard to grasp much more than that. Shiori shared worried glances with her fellow adventurers.

"Please, everyone, you must calm down," said Leo, cutting through the crowd to calm the situation. "I'll explain what happened here. Four people have been rescued so far, but three are still trapped underneath their wrecked homes. There are also six villagers who left earlier this morning on a hunt. None have returned."

"Were they caught in the avalanche?" asked Alec.

"We don't know," replied Leo, his brow furrowing. "All we know is that they went through the valley to the mountain in pursuit of a magical beast, and they've yet to come back."

"Ugh. Are you serious?" muttered one adventurer.

"Why would they do such a thing? They had to know how dangerous it was."

The adventurers stood in disbelief. Their reaction was only natural; they'd seen the zigzagging cracks running across the snow on the mountains. The danger of a potential avalanche was clear. And there was no way that the people of Eklof had missed such a thing; this was their home, after all.

"The cowshed on the outskirts of the village was attacked by a snorrum last night," said a villager.

She was an elderly woman, and her arm was wrapped around the shoulders of a young mother cradling her child. With some hesitance, she explained the situation.

Snorrums were snakelike magical beasts with pale blue fur that made their homes in mountainous areas. They were carnivorous predators, but moved so slowly that even an ordinary hunter could usually handle one alone. They were also not powerful enough to destroy a solidly built cowshed, let alone make it through the barriers that would have been protecting it. This was why the villagers hadn't felt a need to take action when they'd noticed what looked like snorrum tracks in the snow a few days ago.

However, this morning the villagers had found the door to the cowshed completely destroyed. Several of the dairy cows had been eaten—and very messily, to boot—which had left the surviving cows too terrified to give any milk.

"The hunters thought it might be a variant, and that it might end up attacking the village, so they left in search of it."

Once a snorrum attacked a location, the beast had a tendency to claim the place as its turf. It had left cows alive in the cowshed too, which essentially guaranteed its return. Given that it had broken through a barrier *and* destroyed a cowshed, there was a good chance the snorrum was a variant, and a dangerous one at that. That was exactly why the village's best hunters had formed a party and entered the mountain. Snorrums were nocturnal, so the plan had been to find and destroy the beast's nest while it slept.

"Avalanches aren't rare in these parts, and the hunters all know what locations to avoid and where to take shelter in times of emergency. They would have avoided the slopes, but...they should have returned already. We fear they might be in trouble."

When one knew the terrain, they could enter the mountain even with the threat of an avalanche looming, as long as they steered clear of dangerous areas. The hunters had done exactly that on a number of occasions, and every time they had returned home safely. The avalanche that had just occurred, however, was of a scale the village had never seen. It had hit the ridges and forest areas which had always been considered safe places to take refuge, and it had even reached as far as the houses on the outskirts of the village. There was every chance that the hunters had been taken by surprise and overwhelmed by it.

Their comfort with the environment had perhaps made them careless. Alec ran over the details in his head.

"Okay—we'll split up for our search," he said, speaking to all the gathered adventurers. "All of you who are D-rank or below, and anyone with less than a year of experience in the field, you're on first aid support duty. The margrave's troops and Leo will give you your orders. Nils, I need you to assign our people as

necessary. If you're C-rank or above, you'll be assigned to one of two search parties. I'll lead team one. Nadia, will you take team two?"

"But of course," said Nadia with a resolute nod.

"We'll help out with the first aid," said Walt. "We can also prepare rations if necessary."

He then gathered the villagers and his people, and headed to the first aid area.

"We should move out too," said Alec. "We'll want to take a look at the state of that cowshed first. We'll start our search from there."

"Alec," said Shiori. "I'm going to help the villagers looking for the people still stuck in their houses. Even if it just means locating exactly where they are, I want to do my part to help."

Shiori's search magic would be invaluable for finding the trapped villagers. Alec knew this, and nodded.

"Okay. Make that your priority, and meet with us when you're done."

"Got it. See you soon."

Alec placed a hand on Shiori's shoulder and shot her a brief, reassuring smile before he set about separating the adventurers into their teams. Alec often took positions of leadership in such times, and it seemed, at least by the fact that nobody ever objected, that his peers accepted him in such a role. There were other veterans among the adventurers, but everyone put their trust and their faith in Alec's command. He was well suited to leading people.

"Everyone working in first aid, let's move out."

Leo gave his order, and Shiori followed him to the part of the village that had suffered the worst damage. It was enough to take Shiori's breath away for a moment. The snow had forced its way into people's homes, crushing rooftops and bending walls out of shape. Broken timber was strewn throughout the snow. When Shiori thought of the people who were trapped in the wreckage, her blood ran cold.

Nils and Ellen quickly scanned the area to get a sense of the conditions, then

began issuing instructions.

"Ellen, can you handle any emergency first aid here on-site?" asked Nils.

"Yes, leave it to me," replied Ellen.

"Herbalists and physickers, you'll be handling the injured and wounded," said Nils to the rest of the group. "Rookies, you're with me. Everyone else, you'll get your orders from Leo or the margrave's unit."

"We're going to need lots of purified water, and lots of warm water too," added Ellen. "I know it's going to be tough on some of you because of all the magic you practiced earlier, but if you've got the magic to help, I'd appreciate it."

The adventurers all quickly scattered to do as they were told.

"Miss Shiori," said Leo.

"I'm on it." Shiori nodded.

Hunting dogs were roaming the houses, but they weren't as effective as dogs that had been specifically trained for search and rescue, and the changes in the environment had made them restless. The search for the missing people was not going well.

"I'll begin my search," said Shiori.

"We're counting on you."

When orders were issued for those at work to pause operations so they didn't get in the way of Shiori's search magic, the villagers weren't happy. Shiori knew how they felt. She knew they wanted nothing more than to get the trapped to safety as soon as possible. They didn't want to stop working even for a single instant.

"Don't worry—she'll make things faster than we'd ever manage on our own," said the margravine.

Three houses had been completely destroyed. One had been completely searched, and its inhabitants rescued. That left two for Shiori to search.

Please be safe. Please...

With a deep breath, Shiori cast her spell, spreading a magical net across the area. In a stroke of good luck, she hit on two trapped people almost immediately. One was a gentle presence, and within it was a smaller, weaker one.

"I've got two of them!" Shiori reported. "Two meters to the right of that exposed pillar! They're together!"

"What?! She found them already?!"

The villagers buzzed with surprise and curiosity, but the knights moved straightaway. They cleared away the debris and spied, in the tiniest of gaps between a cupboard and a section of wall, a glimpse of blonde hair. A woman looked up at them, covered in dust and blood, and pale as a sheet. Relief flushed her face when she realized that help had arrived, and the tiniest of smiles flickered at the edges of her lips. She held in her arms a small child. The debris had acted as a barrier of sorts, blocking the snow and stopping the two from being buried entirely.

"We've got them!" shouted a knight. "They're alive!"

"Bring blankets!" shouted another.

More debris was cleared away, and the mother and child were brought out of the wreckage. The villagers whooped with joy. A man ran to them with everything he had—this seemed to be the woman's husband.

"No major crushing injuries or bruising," said Ellen, looking them over. "Take them to receive first aid, please."

The man gave Ellen a pat on the shoulder and offered his tearful thanks. He then left with his wife and child, both covered in blankets.

"Your accuracy is incredible," uttered Leo. "That spell is one I absolutely must learn."

"I'm simply glad I could help," replied Shiori with a shy smile.

A moment later, however, her features sharpened and she looked at the ready; there was still one person missing. Another adventurer was nearby, trying to copy Shiori's spell to help speed up the search. The attempt was messy

and inaccurate, but regardless, the priority now was on saving the last remaining life. Unfortunately, the adventurer detected nothing, and the longer the search proved fruitless, the more panic began to settle in the lines of their face. Shiori did a search of the location herself, just to be sure, but the results were no different. Just as a bad feeling was beginning to creep up in her mind, the margravine spoke up.

"They might not have been inside when it happened. It's possible they were pushed out of their own house, or were outside when the avalanche hit."

The margravine had been a knight herself before she wed, and had experience with search and rescue operations after disasters. In the past, there had even been occasions where people who were assumed missing hadn't even been at their homes, and had later turned up safe and sound.

According to the villagers, however, the house's inhabitant was a widower, and none had been able to ascertain his whereabouts since the avalanche. Nobody knew where he was.

"I'll widen my search, then," said Shiori.

"Thanks."

The area surrounding the house was filled with big piles of snow. It had been about an hour since the avalanche hit. If the man was indeed trapped beneath the snow, he might have already perished.

But still. Even then, we have to try...

Shiori searched carefully through the snow. She touched on magical tools such as lanterns and kettles, but no life-forms. But when Shiori extended her net to cover the back garden, she caught the hint of a presence. It was weak, but it was not a magical stone nor a magical beast. It was the magical energy signature unique to a human being.

"Ah!" Shiori exclaimed.

"You found him?!"

"He's between that tree and the debris!"

Knights went running to the location in an instant. Rurii, who had arrived

before them, pointed out the place with a feeler. It was in terrible shape, but it was a storage shed. Sandwiched between it and one of the garden's trees was an old man lying prone. His eyes were closed, and he looked unconscious, but when the villagers called to him, he was able to respond with slight gestures.

"Hang on!"

"So this is where you were!"

"Dig him out!"

Ellen looked over the man and something caught her attention.

"Give me a hand," she said to Shiori. "Can you warm his body through the crack he's stuck in? Just up to a resting body temperature. Any higher and we'll be placing too much strain on him, so please be careful."

"Got it."

The two women stayed safely out of the way of the knights and villagers digging out the surrounding wreckage while they saw to the man's treatment. Shiori sent a warm breeze to him while Ellen made use of her physicking. At the same time, she fed the man a medicine that was clearly not publicly available. According to Ellen, it was restricted for use except with qualified doctors. The medicine pulsed with a strange light, even under the light of the sun, and this was due to the medicinal herb from which it was made.

"When you're kept under a crushing level of pressure for a long period of time, poisons can build up inside the body," explained Ellen. "I noticed the symptoms, which is why I administered the medicine, but...there may yet be aftereffects. We'll have to put him on a drip."

"Is it...crush syndrome?" asked Shiori.

Ellen looked surprised, but her hands never stopped moving as she replied.

"So that's what you call it in the East, is it? Here we call it pressure poisoning. We treat it with medicines and drips, but the methods for treating it were only established over the last few years."

"Wow...amazing..." uttered Shiori.

Medical technology and treatment methods were not nearly as advanced in

this world compared to Shiori's original home, but in other ways, Shiori saw that this world was far ahead in its own right. This was made possible thanks to the existence of healing magic, herbs with powerful medicinal properties, and the magical beast materials which contained many helpful ingredients.

Ellen went on to explain that crush syndrome and tetanus had specific treatments, and adventurers with medical licenses carried the medicines used to treat such conditions in the case of emergencies.

"You might know this already," she said, "but the leading expert on tetanus is in fact an Eastern physician."

As Ellen and Shiori continued to treat the man, he slowly began to wake up. At the same time, the last of the debris was cleared. He was quickly moved to a stretcher and carried away. His rescue meant that everyone in the village was safe. While none had died in the avalanche, however, many were in critical condition and possibly suffering aftereffects from the shock. All of this left Leo clearly weighed down by old memories, and one could see a sort of gloom hanging over him as he issued orders to those removing the debris.

"All right, that's one job done. Let's get to the next, Rurii," said Shiori.

Alec and the others had gone on to the cowshed to investigate and learn more about the magical beast that had attacked the village. They would likely pick up the hunters' trail there too, so Shiori had to head over to join them. She took a deep breath, and with her slime by her side, she ran off to find the others.

2

"What the heck are you doing checking out the cowshed? Can't you just head out and save the hunters already?"

The younger villagers couldn't hide their dismay when the adventurers insisted on investigating the damaged cowshed. While Alec understood their feelings, he also knew that in times like these, there was a procedure to be followed.

"Please understand," he implored. "We're doing this to ensure that we start

things off on the right foot, and that nobody gets hurt."

If the eyewitness reports they'd received were wrong, and the magical beast they encountered was more dangerous than expected, it could put the whole party at risk. Alec had experience with such situations firsthand, and had once found himself forced to decide whether to fight or flee thanks to mistaken eyewitness accounts.

This situation was made all the more dangerous by the fact that some thought the magical beast was a variant. It was therefore imperative that they investigate the scene for clues, then proceed with their search based on what they found. So, with the villagers somewhat placated—but still discontent—Alec and the adventurers headed to the cowshed.

The moment they saw it, everyone knew that Alec had made the right call. The sight of the cowshed left them speechless. The door and a portion of the wall had been completely destroyed, and blood was all over the snow nearby. A few sickened moans rose into the air as some even noticed chunks of meat scattered across the ground, no doubt from the slaughtered livestock.

"This is even worse than I'd imagined..." muttered Alec.

"Indeed," said Nadia, cringing as she covered her mouth with a hand.

This ordinary, everyday cowshed had been turned into a gruesome murder site, and even Alec, who was quite used to the sight of magical beast corpses, felt sick to his stomach. Meanwhile, those who weren't used to such sights—and there were a few—went white as sheets. Alec knew then that it would not be a good idea to take those particular adventurers up into the mountains on the search; they might not be able to handle themselves if the party happened across any "fun" surprises.

Lost in thought for a moment, Alec let his gaze wander, and it was then that Vivi entered his field of view. At first he thought nothing of it, but as his gaze returned to the cowshed, it hit him.

"Wait," he said. "Vivi. You're D-rank."

Alec had ordered everyone of D-rank or below to remain at the village. But she'd joined the search as if it were only natural, and Alec had completely

forgotten her actual rank. At first Vivi looked puzzled, but then it dawned on her, and she grew suddenly hesitant and awkward.

"Oh, I... Sorry. I just... I forgot," she said.

Vivi had been C-rank in the past, but had since been demoted. This was her first time out as an adventurer in some six months, and her current rank had slipped her mind.

"Don't worry about it," replied Alec with a slight cringe. "It's my fault for not noticing. I know you're actually as capable as any C-ranker, but if you want to go back to the village, I don't mind. What's your choice?"

Vivi looked troubled for a moment.

"No, I'll stay," she said finally. "I've been working with the vigilance committee since I was a child. Life in the mountains made me used to gruesome sights like this one. It wasn't at all uncommon for magical beasts to go attacking our livestock."

It was quite common in smaller villages for residents to enter their local vigilance committee at a young age. As Vivi had said, she had experience hunting in the mountains, and had been on search and rescue missions more than a few times. And as far as Alec was concerned, for searches on a scale as large as the one before them, the more help the better. All the more so if said help was experienced.

"I see," he said. "We're happy to have you on board, but don't overdo it."

"Understood."

Alec assigned Vivi to Nadia's team. Nadia was good at watching over those under her, and Vivi was sure to listen to her instruction.

"Hey! Alec!"

Kai shouted to Alec from the cowshed, which he had already started investigating. He had a puzzled look on his face.

"Would you take a look at this? What do you make of it?"

Kai gestured with his jaw at a lower section of the wall. Alec peered in closer and found a long crack running to the door. The damage went deep. The crack

had been caused by something hard and sharp chiseling through the wall; it was splintered and uneven. Whatever had caused the damage had done it with a stubborn insistence. The "weapon" in question was likely around thirty centimeters long; perhaps the fangs of a monster with a large mouth.

But there was one problem.

"It's too big," said Alec.

"That's what I thought too," said Kai.

Bla, too, wobbled at the sight of the odd damage to the wall.

"This doesn't strike me as the work of a snorrum variant," said Kai.

"Indeed..." muttered Alec.

The bite marks around the walls did resemble those of a snorrum. However, even if the magical beast was a variant, something still didn't feel right.

"Are we really looking at a snorrum, then?" mused Kai. "Is there anything else that might do something like this, but be mistaken for a snorrum?"

"I don't know," said Alec. "Nadia, what do you think?"

Nadia had traveled the neighboring states on foot, and Alec wondered if her experience might offer some help. Unfortunately, she shook her head; she hadn't seen anything like it.

"I see," muttered Alec.

He asked the others for their thoughts, but nobody knew of any likely culprits. Alec then took a look around, but to no avail; the villagers had trodden over any potential tracks outside, and the interior of the cowshed had mostly been cleaned up. He found no helpful hints.

"Are you sure it was a snorrum?" Alec asked the gathered villagers. "Did anybody actually see the beast?"

As it turned out, nobody had; they'd found tracks in the snow and simply assumed it was a snorrum.

"The tracks are probably still there outside of the barrier. This way," said one of the villagers.

Thankfully, the magical beast's tracks had not been affected by the avalanche, and though one of the barrier stakes had been chewed up, the rest of the place was largely as it had been left. While the sun had melted the tracks in the open snow, farther into the trees the adventurers found a track just barely visible among the hunters' footprints.

"Well, it certainly resembles a snorrum's tracks...but this..."

The strange, wavy tracks were much like that of a snorrum's, and the pale blue fur scattered around supported that conclusion. But everyone gathered felt that something was off about what they were looking at. Though the tracks were largely lost among the hunters' footprints, they still appeared very big. Certainly too big to simply write them off as a snorrum variant's.

An ominous silence fell, and as Alec looked around the environment, a hole in the snow caught his eye, near where the tracks ended. It was about thirty centimeters in diameter, and some distance away from the beast tracks. It appeared to be completely unrelated. Anybody who didn't know any better would likely simply have assumed that an animal had dug it. But Alec was hit by a strong sense of déjà vu, and he walked over to the hole cautiously.

Around the hole was pale blue fur, and mixed among it, glittering scales like shards of thin glass. This was worrying—the snorrum was not known for traveling under the snow, nor did it have scales.

I've seen this somewhere before.

Alec knew it hadn't been too long ago. He knew it was something he'd seen in the last few years.

Where was it...?

His memories of the recent past were built upon his experiences in the Dolgast Empire. He had spent most of his time in the Imperial capital, and so he had not often been outdoors among the piled snow.

Bite marks on the walls. Chunks of meat and a bloody mess. A big wavy track leading up into the mountain. Now a hole in the snow and scales.

The memories came together, and the image they coalesced into took Alec by surprise. It was a beast that resembled a snorrum, but it had a head not unlike

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that of a dragon...
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"A jormungand...?!" Alec gasped.

His voice rippled through the group.

"A jormun-what?"

"What is that?"

It wasn't a name that anyone living in Storydia was very familiar with, so most responded with confusion. But those who *did* know the name were left shocked to their cores. The jormungand, after all, was a terrifying remnant of the Dolgast Empire.

The jormungand was an amalgamate magical beast, born by combining snorrum variants—crossbred and carefully selected to ensure an exceptional specimen—with serpents of a related species. The result was a magical beast built for military use, one that was as violent and cold-resistant as a snorrum, but as cunning and mobile as a serpent.

However, perhaps because creating the beast required tinkering with creation itself, it could not survive in climates any higher than ten degrees. As a result, many jormungands perished before they were even let loose upon the battlefield. This was why many did not know the creature even existed, and even in the neighboring states, very few recognized the creature's name.

That said, some jormungands *had* survived. They had settled in the area where the Empire's southern border met the Torisval region, and attacked human settlements at about the rate of once a year. The jormungand was a terrifying creature capable of eating its way through a small village in a single evening, and so they were a constant source of stress and worry in the regions where they nested. Alec himself had hunted one during his time in the Empire, when he had accepted the request of a regional lord.

The person who had requested this of Alec was Elector Ulanov, who had governed the Empire's south, and incited the revolt within the Empire upon reaching a backdoor deal with Storydia. He had also supplied Alec with an identity—that of the son of a distant regional lord—while Alec had been undercover in Imperial territory. So when he'd begged Alec to take on the

extermination request, Alec had had no choice but to accept. While he did not want to stand out, he also understood that an important base was located very close to the village that the jormungand had attacked.

On very rare occasions, these amalgamate magical beasts would cross the Imperial border via the mountain ranges. Alec had never heard of it happening in Torisval, but eyewitness reports had come out of Estervall over the last few decades, as that nation also shared its border with the Empire's south. Alec was only aware of them having been hunted on two occasions, however.

Still, even though the guilds shared knowledge between themselves, information on the jormungand specifically was scarce, and so the name was only known by a select few.

"A jormungand... So perhaps *that's* what caused the avalanche in the first place," said Kai.

"Possibly," said Alec.

The serpentine part of the jormungand was dominant, and so it had a tendency to travel under the snow. By traveling that way under the piled snow, the beast unknowingly invited disaster. It was so common in the Empire that many suspected the work of a jormungand whenever an unusually large avalanche struck.

"But are you certain?" asked Nadia.

"I saw a track like this back when I was working elsewhere," Alec said, revealing the tiniest sliver of his past. "Other than that, this is just based on what I've read and studied."

"I see. In any case, all the evidence points in that direction. I say we move under the assumption that something extremely dangerous is out there."

Alec had never opened up to Nadia regarding his past and the "long-term work" that had once been requested of him. However, Nadia had once been engaged to Alec's deceased half brother, and was an associate to that same brother's former aide, Zack. That relationship had given her an inkling as to Alex's circumstances, and so while she was curious about his use of the word "elsewhere," she nonetheless trusted him implicitly. She had been there for him

countless times in the past, and the kindness of his "sister-in-law" was something he was forever grateful for.

"The situation has changed," Alec announced. "We're now running a jormungand suppression mission while we search for the missing hunters. It's dangerous for all of us to venture out there, so there will be a change of plans."

None of the gathered adventurers objected to this suggestion.

"I'd say B-rank and above for heading into the mountain proper," said Nadia.

"Right," agreed Alec. "For starters, we'll conduct a search at the base of the avalanche. We'll do this with familiars and, while I know this is sudden, search magic. If we don't find any survivors around here, we'll separate into a search team and a standby team. The standby team will handle things in case another avalanche occurs. If it really is a jormungand up there, then there's a good chance we may be looking at another snowslide and another attack. We have to let the knights and the margrave's people know."

One of the knights that had accompanied the adventurers specifically as a messenger said they would leave as soon as preparations were complete.

"Hey, I hate to interrupt," said Joel, raising his hand, "but you should leave the search magic to us C-rankers. Considering what you might be up against, you should conserve your magical power, especially Shiori. We'll give it everything we've got, I promise."

Joel explained that for Storydians, little was known of the jormungand. It was a magical beast that weaved its way through the snow, and it was unlikely that the C-rank adventurers would be very helpful in a battle against one. However, that was not to say that they couldn't still be useful when it came to searching for survivors. If they couldn't at least do this much, what point had there even been in attending Shiori's lecture in the first place?

"He's right," added Vivi. "All we can do here is utilize the search magic we're taught, and prepare for another avalanche."

Though she was a touch hesitant, Vivi agreed with him. She had experience in search and rescue, and knew how to prepare for the event that another disaster should befall them. While she was still young, and had very much been

a big fish in a small pond, Vivi was experienced for her age and knew how to handle herself. It had perhaps been one of the reasons for her former arrogance. Still, Alec was impressed—her willingness to take a step back here showed how much she had grown in the past six months.

"Got it," he replied. "Then we'll leave the search to all of you. As for who will lead you..."

"I'll do it," said an adventurer from a different branch. "I think we're better off working with the people we know here than going toe to toe with a beast we know nothing about."

"There's that too." Alec nodded. "Then leave the mountain to us."

"We're counting on you."

The assignments were decided in mere moments. The search and suppression team would be led by Tris's best: Alec, Shiori, Nadia, and Kai. Rurii had experience carrying the injured, and Bla was sure to come in handy too. Kai's familiar, Sigurd, would put its exceptional sense of smell and hearing to good use.

Fortunately, it was not long before Shiori arrived on the scene. She had only been gone thirty minutes, but informed them all that everyone at the village had been saved. Her skills were impressive, but there was no time to celebrate them.

"Shiori, plans have changed," said Alec. "We're not just searching for the hunters anymore; we have a magical beast to hunt too."

Shiori's face paled slightly when she heard about the Empire's amalgamate magical beast, but otherwise her expression remained steadfast.

"Got it," she said. "In which case, I'll be on search and scouting duties. I might tire out over too wide a search area, so will you back me up?"

It was rare for Shiori to ask for such help, and for a moment Alec was shocked. At the same time, he was happy to see she could ask for such things now when she needed the support.

"Of course," he said with a smile. "All right, then can I ask you to jump straight

into teaching everyone search magic? Joel and the others are going to be searching at the base of the avalanche, in the runout zone."

Joel, Vivi, and the other adventurers with them all looked determined. Shiori would only have time to explain once. With every moment that passed, the chance of finding survivors fell lower still. But even then, they would not give up. And with that light of glimmering hope empowering all of them, their search began.

3

The runout zone of the avalanche covered roughly a hundred meters across, and three meters in depth. There were no convenient distress beacons here, and none of the knight corps' trained rescue dogs either; this meant everything had to be done with what was at hand. Usually, this meant thrusting poles into the snow at set intervals in search of anybody potentially buried beneath the snow. It was work that required patience, and the wider a search area, the longer such a search took.

However, a few mages with the ability to cast search magic could shorten search times considerably, assuming of course that those trapped were still alive, or at least in the possession of something emitting magical power. It had also come to the adventurers' attention that one among the missing was adept at magic, and had a familiar. This raised the chances of their survival, and, believing this to be the case, the gathered adventurers waited for Shiori to begin her impromptu lecture. Time was of the essence, however, and she would only be able to explain things once. Everyone's focus was thus sharpened to a knife's edge.

"The wider you cast your search magic net, the less accurate it becomes," Shiori said. "This is especially true given the fact that you are all beginners when it comes to this spell. With that in mind, let's keep our individual search areas narrow. That means about five meters ahead, and ten meters to the sides. You'll work in pairs, casting one after the other."

While one person cast the search magic spell, their partner would stand five meters ahead, taking a short break whilst acting as a distance marker for the

caster. To bolster the number of members in the search party, help was called in from adventurers with the margrave's party, and D-rank mages with especially high magical power levels who were assisting with first aid. Extra help had also been requested from the villagers, who would help to dig out any survivors in the event they were discovered.

"To cast the spell, you are basically exerting magical power over a designated space. That's really all there is to it. It's important to maintain your magical power when you do so, however. You can't sense anything if you can't maintain the spell consistently. Think of the magical power you disperse as an extension of your body, and maintain a steady flow of it as you spread it across the search area. I will demonstrate now."

Shiori took a deep breath, and began exerting magic from her right hand. She did not cast her usual net, however, and instead cast it as a single block so it would be easier to see and detect. Her spell was like an enlarged copy of her right hand, slowly moving along the ground.

"In my case, I am only capable of sliding my spell across the ground. Those with more magical power, however, will be able to envision a three-dimensional 'box' into which they can cast their search magic. Like this."

Shiori narrowed her search area and filled an invisible box with magical power. Unfortunately, she did not detect anything in the area she searched while delivering her explanation.

"When your search magic detects something, it will feel not unlike touching something with your own body. Much like the way we sense presences, the spell does not pick up on most ordinary plants, but will always respond in some way, however weak, to humans, animals, and magical beasts. So please rest assured that even if you are completely new to this spell, you will know when you have found something. Please conduct your searches patiently and thoroughly."

Vivi felt suddenly awkward at the mention of sensing presences. When she had been a member of the local vigilance committee, they had always worked in teams, and so she had always left this task to others. She had never learned it herself. She could not keep this from tugging at her thoughts, but she knew that

if a mage cast the spell correctly, they would always know when they found something. Magic was an extension of the body, and it would touch what it found like a hand.

Vivi nodded, reassuring herself, then she took a breath and nodded again in understanding of what Shiori had just explained.

"That's it as far as explanations go," announced Shiori. "Are there any questions?"

She looked around the group, but nobody seemed lost or confused. After all, search magic was a beginner-level spell, designed to search the interior of a room. However, it had fallen out of favor when people realized that being able to sense presences was usually enough. Many of the people gathered before Shiori had cast search magic at least once before. As long as they were aware of their magical power output, they would be fine.

"All that's left now is to put this to work. Let's get to it, people," said Joel.

He was not the leader of their group, and so some responded to his comment with wry chuckles, but Shiori at least knew that she could leave this work safely in their hands.

"All right, then, we'll head out too," said Alec.

He gave Shiori a confident pat on the shoulder, and she nodded in response. At their feet, Rurii and Bla wobbled resolutely.

The adventurers in the runout zone search party didn't waste time seeing Shiori's party off as the party disappeared up the mountain, and instead quickly went to their designated search locations. They were nervous, but ready. None of them needed to say much to know that they had trustworthy companions by their sides, and a shared goal. This ability to share a task between them was a mark of partners and friends, and a fundamental skill of working in a party. And although Vivi felt some guilt over the fact it was a disaster area, she couldn't help feeling buoyant at being included among this group of fellow adventurers.

It feels like a long time since I've had this...

This was how it had felt when Vivi had first formed a party with Sheila and

Mia. Unlike the vigilance committee, where the older members always gave the orders, in her party of three, Vivi and her friends had shared their opinions and assisted one another in completing their goals. Vivi had never known such happiness.

But when, exactly, had the glimmering brilliance of those days begun to dull? When had Vivi convinced herself that she was the center of the universe, and that everyone outside of her own party was a fool? And even within their own party, there was a hierarchy. In many ways it was the lord knight's daughter and her gang of tagalong friends. It struck Vivi now as anything but equal, and she wasn't even sure if Sheila had ever thought of them as friends.

But in reality, all these people here are my companions...

And it was because they were companions that they could put aside their differences in times of emergency and help one another.

"I am raring to go," said Joel, who was to be Vivi's partner. "I have plenty of spare recovery potions, so let's give this everything we've got!"

Vivi couldn't help but smile.

"Okay!" she replied.

With a shared nod, Joel walked to a spot roughly five meters ahead of Vivi. The leader of their search party, a magical swordsman, raised his hand, letting everyone know they could begin.

Vivi knelt down and let her magic disperse from her right hand as search magic. She did this slowly and steadily, making sure that the flow of magic never faltered or broke. Using Joel and the mage next to her for reference, she cast a board of magical energy.

Even doing just these steps drained her mentally. Her powerful magical reserves were a disadvantage for her now, and she felt her magical power pushing outwards, as if to seep from her body. But she did not let this bother her; all that mattered was detecting the presence of a living body.

When Vivi's search field reached Joel, she felt a sensation not unlike touching human skin.

"So this is what a living being feels like..." she uttered.

The thought almost caused her search field to break, and Vivi hurriedly focused once more on the task at hand. But her focus served to trigger her magic, which flooded out in larger quantities than necessary and left her feeling depleted. Maintaining the spell took great stamina, and Vivi was glad she had opted to cast the spell from a knee; had she cast it standing, she realized she might well have collapsed.

Still, Vivi gritted her teeth, and with the hint of a moan escaping her lips, she sent her search field down through the ground. She did not know what three meters felt like, but Joel was watching, and he let her know when she had gone deep enough. Vivi then released the spell with a sigh, and put a hand to the ground to support herself.

"It's...not easy...!" muttered the mage sitting in the snow next to Vivi. "If you're not careful, you could knock yourself out easily. Feels like you could let out all your magic, just like that."

Search magic was not like a spell that you fired in an instant and then forgot about. None had expected it to require so much work to maintain and control.

The magical swordsman gestured to the group, letting them know that the first search had come up empty.

"Sure would be easy if we could search directly for the survivors the way we see the flow of magical energy," said Joel.

The exact reason was unclear, but unless magic was being expelled from the body, a life-form's magical power could not be seen directly; only its presence could be felt. That, too, disappeared the moment a body stopped functioning. Some scholars posited that magical power was itself the power of life, but magical power and lifespan were not proportionate. The field was one of many mysteries. Magical energy was something that only those who carried a certain level of magical power could see. So while it was something that existed beyond a shadow of a doubt, it was nonetheless a vague and puzzling phenomenon.

Magical power, through the medium of magical essence, allowed for the realization of the phenomenon known as spellcasting. To Vivi, magical power and spellcasting had always been nothing more than convenient tools to use

whenever she liked. She had never considered exactly what they were, and even now, she didn't really know.

I want to learn so much, and so much more thoroughly. I don't know anything!

Vivi also wanted to be able to cast new magic in just the way that Shiori did. But she would not get to that point by simply relying on what she was born with. Her experiences had taught her how immature she was, and she thought about this as she swapped places with Joel.

On one occasion they caught the flash of a presence, but when they hastily dug for it, they discovered only a horned hare. It was a huge letdown, but neither gave up, and they continued their search. After a few swaps, Vivi was beginning to feel the weight of exhaustion on her shoulders, but then her magic reacted to something.

"Huh?" she uttered.

It was a presence. A life-form. The mage to her side, whose own search magic overlapped her own, caught it too.

"I've got something!" they shouted.

"It's bigger than the last thing we found!" said Vivi.

"It might be a person!"

The two mages focused on the presence, and this only made them more sure. They realized it wasn't just one life-form, it was two.

"Are there two people...?" uttered the mage.

"I don't know," said Vivi, shaking her head. "But the two presences, they feel a bit different."

She could not put it exactly into words, but there was something different about the two life-forms she felt.

"It might be the person with the familiar," said the other mage. "People and magical beasts emit a different kind of energy."

"Well, we know for sure they're alive, so let's dig for them already."

The villagers rushed over to help dig through the snow, and let out cries of joy

when they unearthed a human figure. It was a young man and his familiar—a two-headed dog called an orthrus. They were lying one on top of the other.

"And they weren't crushed under the snow either," said somebody.

The two were in a tiny trench-like space. Either the man or the familiar had been able to cast a magical barrier.

"Lift them up!" cried a villager. "And hurry! They're weak!"

The weaker of the two was the orthrus, which had been lying over the man, probably in an attempt to protect its master. In contrast to its fearsome appearance, the orthrus was gentle and intelligent, and was a prized hunting partner and guard dog in farming regions. Some of Vivi's neighbors back home even kept them as pets.

And perhaps thanks to his partner, the young man was able to open his eyes and let out a weak moan. He was trying to say something.

"Shh, don't talk," said Joel. "You'll only wear yourself out."

But the man shook his head, ignoring the mage. He struggled to lift an arm and, with it, got a hold of Joel's sleeve. He was determined to pass along a message, no matter what it took. Smelling salts helped him recover somewhat, and though he struggled, he managed to speak.

"It was a weird snake, with the head of a dragon," he said. "It...it wasn't a snorrum. There were two..."

His raspy voice seemed to echo loudly through the silence. Just as Alec had suspected, the magical beast that had caused all of this was a jormungand. However, back at the cowshed, they had only found the tracks of one of the creatures. Did that mean another was hiding somewhere in the mountain? Tension and fear ran through the gathered adventurers and villagers.

"But the old man...he said the body was a snorrum...he said it was probably just a variant..."

The young man couldn't go on. Tears fell from his eyes. A heavy, pained silence fell over the group as they realized what it was the young man had lost. The old man, it seemed, was gone.

"He told me...to tell the village...but then the avalanche hit..."

The boy was the lightest and the quickest of the group, and he'd been sent to get backup. On the way he'd hopped aboard his familiar's back, and that journey was one of the reasons the orthrus was so weak now. However, just as they were about to make it back home, the avalanche hit, and they had not been able to escape its reach.

"It's okay," said Joel. "We've sent a search party up into the mountain. They're the Tris Adventurers' Guild's best."

This seemed to relieve the young man, and reassurance flooded his face.

"Thank goodness," he said.

"Do you know where the magical beast was?" asked Joel.

The man was having trouble speaking, but he nodded.

"In Rosashena Valley, under the eastern ridge..."

That was behind the ridge where the avalanche had started. The hunters' encounter with the strange magical beasts matched that of the avalanche. Given that the last place the hunters had been seen was so close to where the avalanche had started, it was now even more likely that they'd been caught up in it.

"We have to let Alec's team know. I'll send my familiar."

Upon saying so, a mage who hailed from the Chevelly branch of the Adventurers' Guild, located in eastern Torisval, scribbled a note on a piece of paper, detailing where the hunters had been headed, and the number of magical beasts. He attached this to a small bird. He whispered it a message, to which it twittered, then flapped its pale red wings and took flight.

In an instant, the bird had vanished into the distance. The young man and his orthrus were also carried back to the village. The search party picked up where it had left off, and Vivi took a moment to look up at the mountain. With the snow melting, it was a beautiful portrait of the coming spring, yet somewhere up there lurked terrifying magical beasts. The thought was enough to send a shiver down Vivi's spine.

For the residents of Eklof, avalanches and magical beasts were part and parcel of everyday life. This event, too, should have been just like all the others. But everyday life could quickly be turned upside down when things like laziness, negligence, pride, and a lack of knowledge all came to bear. The sight of the disaster before her impressed this lesson on her.

When all this is over, I'll pay my respects.

However things had ended up, Sheila had nonetheless been one of Vivi's companions. They had spent time together, and made mistakes together, and as a former friend, Vivi wanted to take flowers to the girl's grave at least once. If possible, she wanted to go to where Sheila's body was at rest, which meant apologizing to the instructor who had buried her. But Vivi felt no hesitation now over doing such a thing.

Once she paid her respects, Vivi intended to study. She would read books, listen to the stories of those around her, and increase her knowledge. She would polish her skills.

And much later, when Vivi became an instructor at the Tris Institute of Magic, she would tell her students that the first step to growth was admitting to your own failures and recognizing your own weaknesses.

4

The mountain was frighteningly quiet. Perhaps it was the avalanche, or the Imperial chimera, but either way the silence unsettled Shiori as she stared up at the mountain. Without even thinking, she put a hand to her bracelet. The magical stone within it shared the color of Alec's eyes, and the feel of it helped to ease her nerves.

Their goal now was to head to where they thought the jormungand might be: the area near the avalanche's starting point. It was common for jormungands to enter the snow near such locations, as it was often where they nested.

"One thing the jormungand inherited from the snorrum is its nocturnal nature," said Alec. "So barring any unforeseen circumstances, they'll almost always be in their nests during the day. They make their homes among the

darkness of the trees or in caves near their holes in the snow. If the hunters encountered the jormungand, there's a good chance it was somewhere near its nest."

Alec paused for a moment, his eyebrows drooping.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any leads on where those hunters last were," he added.

"They could have been caught up in the avalanche, but they might also have encountered the magical beast," said Shiori.

Nobody had seen where the hunters had gone, but parts of their route had been hit by the avalanche. This much was certain. Still, the adventurers could not give up on the possibility that perhaps the hunters were still in the midst of their hunt. That said, without any intel to work with, searching the entire seven hundred or so meters of the avalanche's flow simply wasn't realistic. And yet, they could not lose sight of what mattered most: that the hunters might still be alive.

"All we can do is search for them as we climb higher up the mountain," said Alec.

All were in agreement.

"We have to be careful of a follow-up avalanche, and we don't have that much time before sundown," Alec continued. "We're going to put our focus on searching for survivors and hunting that jormungand."

In other words, outside of special circumstances, they would not look for the deceased or transport them back to the village. That work could be left to the knights who were already on their way.

It had been two hours since the avalanche had hit, and the chances of survival were plummeting. However, the world in which Shiori now lived was one of magic, magical tools, and trustworthy familiars. Compared to the world she had once called home, the chances of survival were still reasonably high. That was why Shiori simply prayed that there were none dead, and that none had been caught in the avalanche.

"We don't know what might happen on our way up," said Alec. "Our first

priority is making sure that all of us return safely. In times of emergency we may have to split up, so we'll divide our group into pairs. We've got an odd number of people, so anyone left over can join the pair without any familiars."

Making these decisions early was a necessity for preventing any further problems. The pairs quickly assembled, each of them with a balance between vanguard and rear support. Shiori and Alec made one pair, with a wobbly Rurii and Bla as support.

"I'll take the lead, but I'll need a second-in-command..." started Alec.

"I'll do it," said Kai, raising a hand.

With the second-in-command quickly decided, the party settled on their climbing order: Alec and Shiori in the front, with their fellow adventurers Yksel, Madeleine, and Daniel behind them, and Kai and Nadia taking the rear. The familiars were spread around them as general protection.

"Shiori will take lead search duties," said Alec. "You okay with that?" "Yep."

"Can anyone else cast search magic? Accuracy isn't an issue; we just need to get a general idea of where the hunters are."

Madeleine and Daniel raised their hands. Both were good when it came to more intricate spells.

"Great, then we'll be counting on you two as well. That means you can recover your magical power in shifts. If you start to feel sick or unwell, don't hesitate to speak up. We've got quite the climb ahead of us, and Shiori, don't forget you just came from demonstrating at the lecture."

"Got it."

"I'll be on lookout duty," said Kai. "I've got great eyesight and I'm good at climbing trees. That's where I'll do my work."

Like the archer Linus, Kai was raised in the mountains, and he had better eyesight than most. According to the man himself, he could see clearly over a hundred-meter stretch.

"Great, thanks," replied Alec. "As for the rest of you, keep your eyes peeled

for anything the hunters might have dropped, and stay on guard. Rurii, Bla, Sigurd, I want you to let us know the moment you notice anything out of the ordinary too. Depending on how things go, we might also need you to help stretcher any survivors. That okay with you?"

The two slimes wobbled in the affirmative, and the blizzard cat's whiskers flickered.

"If we meet the jormungand out there, we will engage it. Fire and lightning magic are effective, but we have to consider potential avalanches. I know it won't be easy, but do your best to be careful."

"You got it."

"All right, let's head up there."

With their emergency signal flare and their rescue goods packed, the adventurers set off.

The route up to the lower eastern ridges, where the hunters' footprints headed, was a climb to an altitude of about two hundred meters. In terms of total walking distance, it was about 1,500 meters. In the summer, the path would take about an hour to walk, but it took much longer in the snow.

To make matters worse, the entrance to the hiking trail was blocked by fallen trees, forcing the adventurers to take a long detour. This meant taking more breaks, and although they were all used to such hikes, it nonetheless left them a little worn out.

There were no signs of the hunters along the way. Even Kai didn't notice anything in the immediate vicinity. The slimes, who were sensitive to carrion and dead flesh, found only a few small beast corpses.

"But we've got their footprints, so we at least know that this was the route they walked..." said Alec.

The footprints were a little lower down from the winding path that cut across the mountainside. They were only a few meters from the path of the avalanche. They weren't following the ridges so much as walking along the valley, and Alec let out something of a tired sigh.

"Perhaps they just didn't think an avalanche would get this far," he muttered. "And I know how they feel, but still..."

The gentle slopes of the valley were far easier to traverse than the harsher path along the ridge. However, there was little cover or means for escape in the case of an emergency. Avalanches often meant an onslaught of thousands of tons of snow, moving at such speed that not even a horse could outrun it.

"So I heard this from one of the villagers earlier," said Kai, speaking to nobody in particular. "But it's not uncommon for people to encounter avalanches here. It's happened a few times before. They were smaller, though, and nobody got hurt in any of them. People had probably come to believe that avalanches in these parts only went as high as your knees."

"So it was their familiarity with the environment that caused their negligence? That's rough."

However, judging by the hunters' footprints, they could tell that someone had headed farther into the valley to check for signs of an avalanche. Those footprints later returned to the path to join their fellow hunters.

"Doesn't look like they're around here," said Shiori.

"Nope," said Alec.

There was no confusion evident in the progression of the footprints either, indicating they had not encountered the jormungand anywhere nearby.

The adventurers took a short break for a drink, then continued on their way. After a little walking, they came to a section dammed off by big rocks and trees. Those caught in avalanches often found themselves under thick snow in such places, and so the adventurers decided to check it out.

Rurii and Bla were quick to dive into the snow. Sigurd, who until then had been walking, floated up and flew through the air. This was an ability that it had learned from Kai, as blizzard cats were actually incapable of flight. They had winglike organs, but they were in actuality too weak to allow for flight.

"So among the Eastern martial arts is a technique in which you send magical power through the soles of your feet to increase the power of your jumps," Kai explained. "I thought I was practicing on my own, but Sigurd was watching; we

both picked it up. It's not something they can do over long periods, but it's handy for short spells."

He went on: "Eastern martial arts aren't all just about hand-to-hand combat. Even at the beginner levels, it's all founded on ki, which is what they call magical power over there. It's only by harnessing that ki that you can come to wield various techniques. I have to tell you, I was shocked when I first found out about that. I always thought that magic was magic, but the idea that you could combine it with martial arts to form new techniques? That really sent my head spinning. I got to thinking that it's a real waste to limit your own potential by placing it within the confines of a simple term like 'magic.'"

Kai had once been a mage himself, but had found himself uncomfortable always playing the role of backline support, and so had begun studying martial arts on his own time. That had eventually led him down the path of reading about Eastern martial arts, with which he'd become obsessed. And thus was born the martial artist capable of wielding spells.

"I watched today's lecture really closely," Kai continued, "and I think there are similarities between your magic and the Eastern concept of ki. How about we implement some Eastern breathing exercises into your housekeeping magic practice?"

"That sounds intriguing," said Shiori. "Perhaps you'd discover fellow mage fighters that way."

"I would love that. I have been aching for a sparring partner," Kai said with a chuckle. He took a look around, sighed, then went on. "But even I'd have to practice a whole lot to spread ki over this wide an area."

Kai's gaze was on Madeleine and Daniel, both of whom were sitting down and utterly exhausted after casting searches over their designated areas.

"This still beats running around poking sticks into the ground," said Madeleine.

"She's right," added Daniel. "Especially when we don't have any information on where the hunters ended up."

The two shared a pained smile as they looked out over the snow-covered

mountain. The mages had found nothing in their search, and so the adventurers had no choice but to hike on.

Even with search magic at their disposal, walking a wintry mountain and periodically stopping to look for survivors was backbreaking work. The adventurers also had to deal with footprints that at times disappeared in the melting snow, which often meant losing the path the hunters had taken. Though they had the benefit of familiars and Kai, who boasted seemingly superhuman vision, the constant stopping and starting required great patience.

As the party neared their third short break, their faces painted a portrait of their exhaustion. It was only another thirty or forty minutes to their destination, but even Alec couldn't hide how tired he felt. The slimes, too, looked lethargic as they sluggishly consumed the treats Shiori gave them.

When a search through the snow around them came up blank, Shiori was hit by another wave of exhaustion and despair. She slumped to the ground, where Alec put a hand across her shoulders to support her. She let him accept her weight, and for a moment she was so tired that she felt she might even doze off.

"You okay?" Alec asked. "It's tiring work, I know."

"Yeah, it really is. The search area is so vast."

"You're not alone. I'm feeling it too."

His voice lacked its usual vigor. The search area they had to cover was truly immense. Shiori felt her spirit on the verge of breaking at the thought that there was still one more section left to scan.

"We still haven't found anything..." she muttered.

"No...not yet," said Alec.

More than two hours had passed, which lowered the chances of survival to thirty percent, even accounting for whatever magical abilities or magical tools the hunters might have. And while it was true that the survivors might be trapped somewhere beneath the snow, whether they were still breathing or not was another matter. Dark thoughts like these swirled in the depths of

Shiori's heart, sapping her will to go on.

"If only there were a more effective way of looking for them..." she muttered.

Shiori felt frustrated; she knew that exhaustion brought with it a drop in the accuracy of the search magic spell. This winter search was a very different affair to the one she'd experienced in the western forests of Tris. That had been across a mostly flat area, but there were limits to what one could find across the surface here; now she had to sift through meters of snow too.

"If only there was a way to do it that was more instantaneous, more three-dimensional..."

"Don't rush things, Shiori," said Alec. "Even now we're going faster than we usually would. You, the others; you're already doing more than enough."

Alec wasn't merely trying to encourage her; Shiori knew that he really meant every word. And yet she also knew that lives hung in the balance, and there was nothing anyone could say that would stop that fact gnawing at her. She gritted her teeth and glanced around. Her eyes happened to land on a tree covered in withered ivy. Without its usual leaves, the bare tree and its branches struck Shiori as not unlike the blood vessels that filled the human body, like thin, complicated patterns traced upon an empty canvas. She thought of blood vessels, and how they covered tens of thousands of kilometers so as to deliver oxygen and nutrition to every corner of the human body.

"Aha," Shiori uttered to herself. "Perhaps if I were to cast it just like that..."

She took a deep breath, then spread her focus across the search area before her. The strings of magical energy that left her fingertips traced over the snow like an uneven spiderweb, but from that webbing came thin, intricate threads that stretched down under the surface. It was a search magic spell that mimicked the blood vessels in the human body.

Alec's eyes went wide as he watched. He opened his mouth to say something, uttering a single "You're..." before catching himself and dropping once more into silence. He did not want to disturb his lover's concentration. Twenty, perhaps thirty seconds passed, until one of the slender threads of Shiori's spell, spread across a vast distance, felt something. It was terribly weak, but it was warm, and it was human...

"I've found something!" Shiori exclaimed.

"Where? At what depth?" said Alec, springing into action.

"There," she said, pointing. "Not even a meter down. I think there might be two of them."

It was a clump of trees that had been torn out of the ground by the force of the avalanche. Underneath it Shiori had felt a human presence. Once they removed the thick layer of snow covering the area, they found a rock under a broken tree, and past it an opening. In it they spied what looked to be a quiver, a scabbard, and a snow-covered cloak.

"We've got something!"

Clearing the snow was easy work for such skilled mages, and it was not long before they were able to free the two men who had been trapped beneath. Sighs of relief filled the air. The men had used their equipment to secure a little space among the fallen trees and the rock, then kept their body temperature at a barely survivable level through the use of hot stones and thermal magical beast materials. It seemed that good fortune had found them falling behind the rock. After that, it was their quick instincts with their equipment that saved their lives.

The older of the two men was pale, his breathing shallow. He looked injured.

"I think his left arm and ankle are broken. They were probably hit by a tree or something," said Alec.

"Fortunately he wasn't hit in the head or torso, which I suppose is something of a silver lining," said Nadia.

The younger of the two men appeared unhurt, and while his breathing was steady, the cold had left him terribly weak. Rurii and Bla slithered underneath the two men and carried them to a safer spot. The group saw to the broken bones of the older man and warmed both as best they could, then secured them to a simple stretcher.

"When they fell behind the rock, they would have used their equipment to keep the snow off," said Alec. "The speed at which they reacted shows you how well they know the mountains."

At the Tris Adventurers' Guild, too, adventurers were taught emergency measures in the event of an avalanche, to the point that it felt like it was hammered into them. In such instances, you had to do whatever you could not to get buried—you used your arms and legs to stay as close to the surface as possible, you covered your face to ensure space in which to breathe, and you grabbed onto rocks and trees.

All of this was fine and logical in theory, but Shiori wasn't sure she could remain so calm if she found herself faced with the reality of a quickly approaching avalanche. It was true, however, that even the hunters themselves would have had to reflect on their actions, being that they had chosen to walk so near to the expected path of the avalanche. Nonetheless, they deserved praise for how quickly and calmly they had responded in the heat of the moment.

"The others might not be far away," said Alec.

"Shall I search the area a little more?" asked Shiori.

"Perhaps..."

Alec dropped into thought, his gaze wandering farther up the mountain. But then something else caught his attention, and he spun around. Now he was watching a bird approach from a distance, but it was no ordinary bird; it was a magical beast.

When everybody else noticed the bird, they all put their hands to their weapons and readied themselves. However, the bird showed no signs of being a threat, and it merely circled their wary heads a few times before coming to land on Alec's shoulder with an adorable tweet.

"It's a familiar with a message," said Alec, who took the note from the bird's leg and quickly scanned its contents. "I see. It's from the group at the base of the mountain. They've rescued a hunter and his familiar. He regained consciousness quickly and was able to tell us exactly where the hunters were headed."

The party let out a small whoop of joy. The note was like an injection of hope for all of them. But the smiles left them when Alec informed them of the bad news: At least one of the hunters had fought with *two* unknown snakelike

magical beasts and been seriously wounded. It was unlikely he could walk.

So the hunters *had* encountered the magical beast after all. And it was not alone.

"The hunters had been headed for Rosashena Valley, right under the eastern ridge. Based on the starting point of the avalanche, the valley should be right behind it."

Rosashena was a valley located on the other side of the mountain ridge. Unlike the valley they were in now, which offered a good line of sight, Rosashena was made dim and gloomy thanks to all the trees. Outside of the season in which the pale red light of the Rosashena flower was in bloom, few ever went, though it was nonetheless considered an important hunting spot.

"So it's right behind the ridge where the avalanche started..." said Alec. "That's about twenty or thirty minutes from here."

"On the other side?" said Kai. "No way I can see that from here."

"All of the hunters might have fled to this side of the valley," said Nadia. "We've already found three people here."

There were three who were still in need of rescue. If they had run with the others, they would be nearby, but even with several of the mages casting search magic, nobody had been found.

"What now? Shall we search a little more before moving on?"

"If it wasn't two jormungands we were worried about, we could split into two groups," mused Nadia.

"But those things demolished that livestock pen..."

They were in quite a predicament. It wasn't a good idea to split their numbers when there was a chance they would have to fight a jormungand. And if the other hunters were still alive, the adventurers might also find themselves having to protect them *while* they fought. With this in mind, all agreed that they should stick together.

"The three who were rescued were all found on the western ridge," said Alec. "How about we limit our search area to the west as we climb higher?"

The party labored over the idea for a time.

"I think it's the right call," said Nadia. "We don't have much time before sundown."

Everyone agreed. The two men that had been rescued were left in Rurii's care. The slime was mobile and quick; it could get the two men to the village safely and return quickly. The bird that had brought them the message earlier would act as both Rurii's guide and their messenger. Nadia then released a signal flare that would let the knights at Eklof Village know that some of the rescued were coming.

"Be careful, Rurii," said Shiori. "And you too, little birdie. Pass this note to the others; it will let them know where we discovered the two men we helped."

Rurii wobbled in the affirmative as it carried both the stretcher and the two men strapped to it. The bird, too, chirped its understanding.

"Bla, take a good look at what you're seeing," said Alec. "As Zack's familiar, you may well find yourself doing similar work later down the line."

Bla, who had been watching on curiously, waved a blue feeler: "Got it!"

The bird took off with Rurii close behind. For a moment, the party sank into silence. Then they set their thoughts on the task ahead, and began to walk.

5

Did the others get away safely? Did they escape the reach of the avalanche?

Through the haze of what vision he had left, Nikolaus Linne gripped his partner Adrian's ice-cold hand. His thoughts wandered. Nikolaus and Adrian had spent many long years as widowers and were nearing their seventies. But unlike them, the younger hunters had families waiting for their return. One even had a child no older than five. Nikolaus would not be able to forgive himself if he failed to see them home safely.

I've gotten old and senile. Oh, how I wish I was still young...

Nikolaus and Adrian had been hunters for well over fifty years. The two had been the pride of their village, and Nikolaus would have been lying if he said he

hadn't felt some pride in that fact. And while he could blame his age to some extent, the truth of the matter was that he'd made a mistake.

"We done mucked up..." Adrian had muttered. "And this time, we done paid for it..."

He'd told Nikolaus that he'd be leaving a touch early to be with his wife, and then he'd stopped talking completely. He'd passed on with a smile, but if they'd not made their mistake, Nikolaus knew that Adrian—who was a few years younger—would have still had a few more years in him.

The catastrophe had all been due to a lapse in judgment. There had been signs that something wasn't right. They'd felt it when they'd seen the state of the livestock pen, and if they hadn't ignored that gnawing feeling, none of them would have been put in such danger. That was exactly why Nikolaus and Adrian had offered themselves to the monsters as bait—to allow their fellow hunters a chance to escape.

They had been lucky that the monsters were nocturnal. Or perhaps the beasts had already eaten their fill not so long ago. Perhaps that was why they'd been satisfied just taking Adrian's arm and Nikolaus's leg. The monsters had taken their "snacks" to the trees, through which lay their nest.

Nikolaus did not expect the monsters to return before sundown, but even then, fleeing was no longer an option. He'd lost a leg and a lot of blood along with it, and standing up was completely out of the question. He could no longer feel most of his body, and his eyesight was rapidly fading. The end was just a matter of time.

And yet, Nikolaus did not rue his last actions. The other hunters were young enough to be his sons or even grandsons, so if he had any regrets at all, they lay in the fact that he would not be able to see and ensure that they were all safe and sound. That, and he wished he'd been able to see his granddaughter grow up to be somebody's bride.

What a joy it would've been to hold a great-grandchild in these arms... Alas, it is what it is...

Nikolaus let a wry grin spread across his lips. In the end, he had failed as a leader, and he had not been able to right the ship by his own hand. He had to

take his punishment like a man, and pray that the younger hunters had all made it back to the village at the foot of the mountain.

But would the goddess listen to this old hunter's last, dying wish?

Amidst his slipping, hazy consciousness, Nikolaus heard a voice from somewhere in the distance. He assumed it was his imagination at first, but then he realized he was not dreaming. People were nearby. He did not recognize the man's voice, but he knew it was looking for him, and with all the strength he could muster, he sat up.

"He's over here! He's alive!" came a shout.

The voice was female. Nikolaus heard footsteps treading through the snow. Lots of them.

"Stay with us, old man! We're here to help!"

An arm wrapped itself around Nikolaus's back, a strong grip that supported his weight. The man saw that Nikolaus was not long for this world and he grimaced, but Nikolaus never even noticed as his consciousness began to slip away from him. Before he fell into his eternal sleep, however, he mustered up the strength to speak.

"Did the others..." he uttered, straining for each and every word, "make it...back...safe...?"

"They did. They're okay. You can rest easy."

"So they...did..." Nikolaus murmured. "I'm so...so glad..."

As his life began to fade, Nikolaus saw his wife reaching a hand out to him, and he smiled.

"Then thankfully...my wife won't have...an earful waiting for me...when I see her in the other world..."

Alec laid the old man gently down upon the snow. Shiori stepped a little closer to him. The two men had lost limbs to the jormungands, and their blood was strewn across the otherwise pristine white snow. But even then, the old man looked strangely at peace, and this seemed to lessen the impact of the otherwise horrific sight.

"He was at peace with his fate..." Alec muttered.

"Yes," Shiori replied.

That much was clear in the words he'd spoken and the look on his face when he'd departed. The old hunters had sacrificed themselves so that their friends might escape. Both of them had to have known that they would not return home alive.



It seemed clear that, having made their error, the two old hunters had looked to take responsibility for it, even at the cost of their own lives. The adventurers wanted nothing more than to take them back to a warm home, but their job was not yet done; if they did not fell the jormungands here, the monsters would surely return to the village come nightfall.

"As worried as I am about the remaining hunter," said Alec, "this comes first."

The monsters had taken their "snacks" away, and blood could be seen around an opening in a slanted section of snow. None could see where that opening led, but all knew that the jormungands were close.

The mountain was earily silent. Not even the chirp of a bird broke the stillness. Such was the powerful aura that emanated from the magical beasts. Alec felt his caution raise a notch.

"Can you give us a reading as to where they are?" he asked.

"Wait a sec," replied Shiori.

She cast her search magic spell, and let its tendrils stretch out across the area.

"I'm not sensing any living creatures," she uttered.

"Were they all eaten?"

"Perhaps..."

Shiori spread her magic out in widening concentric circles, and when she had reached just past the thirty-meter mark, she felt something. It crawled across the ground as it moved, with a snakelike shuffle—but arrhythmically, as though it were avoiding any trees and rocks in its path. More importantly, it was slowly drawing closer.

"It's at one o'clock, and close," Shiori reported. "It's got a read on us, and it's coming this way."

"How many?" asked Alec.

"One. But it's so much bigger than I expected... Ah! I've got another one!"

As Shiori's spell spread past the incoming jormungand, she caught the presence of something else beyond it. The sheer size of it took her breath away.

"It's not moving," she reported, "but...it's far too big to be just a snake. What in the world...?"

"How big is it?"

"It's bigger than a snow bear. I've never seen a wyvern, but I think it's about that size..."

Alec's eyes went wide with shock.

"As big as a wyvern?!" he exclaimed. "And you're sure?"

He'd asked these questions, but even before doing so, he'd been able to sense the unusual presence approaching their location. It was why he already had his sword unsheathed and at the ready. Nadia and Yksel, too, were on guard, and prepared to launch spells at a moment's notice. Madeleine and Daniel had already cast barrier spells.

"Please don't tell me we're looking at a legendary ice dragon..." Alec muttered.

The moment he'd uttered the words, the creature sped up. Bla's color shifted in an instant, the slime turning bloodred in warning. At the same time, Sigurd's beautiful fur stood on end.

"We handle the incoming threat immediately!" Alec shouted. "The jormungand farther back we'll take after!"

The snow trembled, wavered, and split as a white shape emerged from it. Before the shape could even think of taking offensive action, however, Nadia and Yksel had already cast their spells.

"Ice Spear, Is Spyd!" shouted Nadia.

"Ice Cage, Is Bur!" shouted Yksel.

A piercing metallic shriek ran through the air. From the other side of its cage, the magical beast had reared its head and let loose a short cry.

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"Ugh...!"
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"What the -?!"

It was a giant snake some twenty meters in length, its body covered in a

beautiful silvery blue fur, which might even have been as adorable as a stuffed animal's, were it only the fur you were looking at. But in contrast to the fur, at the end of the furry snake was the scaly head of a dragon. It was like something out of old legends, glimmering a silvery white as the rays of the sun struck its face.

But what horrified them beyond a shadow of a doubt was how the creature, by its very form, defied the will of the gods themselves. It was an artificially made beast, entirely unnatural, and it lacked such balance in its being that those who gazed upon it were struck by an unspeakable sense of incongruence and horror. The long, narrow pupils of the creature—a surefire sign that it was, indeed, nocturnal—glared down as it observed the puny humans standing in the snow.

"That's...a jormungand?" uttered Shiori.

"No doubt about it," replied Alec. "But this one is even bigger than the stories I've heard."

Even though he had faced a jormungand once himself, this was much bigger than any snorrum he had ever seen, and he let out a low moan of displeasure.

"Is it a variant?" Shiori asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps this one was raised 'well,' or perhaps it's simply well suited to the environment here."

The jormungand was originally made to survive the harsh weather of the Empire. The weather in Storydia was far milder, and thus considered unsuitable for such monsters. Those that were seen in the neighboring Estervall region were considerably smaller than this. Alec explained that the jormungand was most often short and stocky, and did not grow to such lengths as what they were seeing now.

"And you're saying we might have one more to deal with...?"

The other jormungand, the one still out of sight but on Shiori's search magic radar, was even bigger. If it were some other enormous magical beast, that was one thing, but the very thought of it being a bigger version of what they were already about to face was terrifying. And when Shiori imagined that such

hideous beasts were hiding here on a mountain, creeping down to feast on the livestock at nearby human settlements, it sent a shiver through her bones.

"I'll keep my search magic active," said Shiori. "If the other beast makes a move, I'll let you know."

Alec nodded.

"Good call," he said, then: "Bla, you're to protect her. I need two others to stick with Shiori."

Madeleine and Daniel, both defense and support experts, answered the call. Bla wobbled in the affirmative and bounced to Shiori's feet, where it took up a defensive posture.

"Leave the defense to us, my young Shiori," said Daniel. "You just focus on keeping your search going."

Daniel was well over fifty and had a number of grandchildren; he was at the age now where he looked at all women as though they were his daughters. That was why he'd called her "my young Shiori," and it was why Shiori and Madeleine replied with wry grins. Daniel couldn't fight the way he once had as a young man, but with his magic powering his defensive and support abilities, he was nonetheless top class.

"This'll make for a good chance to study your work," said Shiori, her words a message of appreciation to which Daniel winked.

It was then that a harsh sound echoed through the air as if something were being crunched into bits. It was the jormungand, chomping its way out of the icy cage it had found itself in with its incredibly powerful jaws. Once it was free, it unleashed a deafening roar that brought to mind metal scraping upon metal.

Shiori, her two guards, and Bla all leapt backwards, while Alec and the others, who had fanned out into a semicircle, readied themselves for anything. They were willingly giving up the first move to their foe, in order to better observe this unknown magical beast.

Another ear-piercing roar split the air. At the same time, the air itself wavered. It was a phenomenon that indicated the use of magic, something that all mages were accustomed to. Without a hint of panic, the defenders readied

their spells and neutralized the shards of ice that came flying from the jormungand's mouth.

As steam hissed and a mist wafted into the air around the beast's head, it struck. Alec quickly evaded the jormungand's quick but awkward attack while bringing his own sword into play. The heavy clang of metal echoed, and Alec grimaced at the shock of the impact.

"That is not the sound you expect from a living creature!" he muttered.

"Even Alec can't make a dent in it..."

Alec's strikes were as heavy as they were sharp, and powerful enough to slice most magical beasts entirely in half. But against the jormungand, his sword had practically bounced off its scales. Just what was it made of?

The jormungand had missed its first strike, but let the momentum carry its head around to target the swordsman again. It bared its fangs, but as it did, Kai slammed into its side with a powerful, magically enhanced kick. The beast let out a cry as it writhed in the snow. The swordsman and the martial artist, who had then leapt to a safe distance, shared a bitter grin.

"Talk about tough skin!" said Kai. "If I'm not careful, I'll break my own bones on that thing!"

"Well, clearly it's not just a biological weapon in name only," muttered Alec. "It's got high magic resistance too."

Both Alec and Kai had enhanced their strikes with their magic, to almost no effect. That told them just how strong the beast was.

"But physical attacks to the head seem to work," Alec continued.

"Still, given how swiftly it moves, concentrating our attacks on the head is easier said than done."

"How about dedicated magic attacks?" asked Nadia.

She and Yksel launched fireballs. The jormungand shrank away for a moment, but only a moment; it let out a sharp roar, at which the spells dissipated.

"I hate that thing," said Nadia, clicking her tongue.

"And the damn beast's using air-conditioning magic too."

The monster didn't just have a high resistance level; it was also, to everyone's surprise, emitting cold air from its very body and maintaining a perfect climate around itself.

"Ah, so it's got brains too," muttered Alec. "One tough customer."

But he never once took his eyes from his enemy. He was always scanning for potential weak points.

"If single attacks are ineffective, what about something more prolonged?" suggested Shiori. "Something like boiling or roasting, I mean."

"What a choice of words..." muttered Madeleine.

She couldn't help but cringe at Shiori's housekeeping-centric vocabulary. Bla, by their feet, wobbled with a silent giggle.

"We can try. If its air-conditioning magic works on a timer, it just might work."

"In which case, Yksel, lend me a hand," said Nadia.

So saying, she cast a gigantic pillar of water—another cage in which to trap the jormungand. The beast stirred for a moment, sizing up the attack, but Nadia gave it no room to escape. That was when Yksel cast a fire spell. As the water was hit by the new spell it began to bubble, and before long, it was boiling.

But there was a reason that both Nadia and Yksel had each cast their weaker magics. Nadia was so skilled when it came to fire magic that she was sometimes considered its incarnation, and had she taken care of the fire side of things, her powerful spell might have evaporated Yksel's water pillar entirely.

"Ah, it's working..." uttered Shiori.

The jormungand thrashed wildly as it frantically tried to escape, but there was nowhere to run. The cage of boiling water had been cast by two of the best mages the Tris branch had to offer, and they would not yield. The scorching cage, which could change its shape freely, worked to push the beast back into the fierce heat. The jormungand continued to flail, no longer able to discern up from down or left from right, until slowly its energy began to dissipate.

The monster's hide felt near indestructible, and boasted extremely high

magical resistance, but it could do nothing to stop the heat that was being forced inside it, cooking its fragile innards.

"It's big as far as snakes are concerned, but it's on the slender side when it comes to magical beasts."

In other words, heat passed through it relatively easily, and so eventually the boiled jormungand ceased to move entirely. The two mages let the boiling cage disperse into steam, then tossed the discolored beast into the melted snow. It had lost patches of fur along its body and scales from its head. It was a wretched sight.

"Well, that worked much better than trying to roast it alive," remarked Nadia.

"Went down easier than I thought too..."

The jormungand was a biological weapon, yes, but it had ended up powerless under the assault of a group of well-trained mages.

However, as it turned out...

"It was *too* easy," muttered Alec. "So easy that I have a really bad feeling about the next one, like it's just going to be something beyond terrifying."

...the first jormungand was merely the opening act.

Everyone in the group shared a similar apprehension. Their senses, honed by years of experience, were telling them that a new threat would soon emerge. And sure enough, the creature at the edge of Shiori's search magic net began to slowly approach. It was a heavy, gigantic presence, emitting an aura that was far more overpowering than the jormungand now lying dead before them.

"It's coming," said Shiori, "and even just its presence is terrifying..."

From the depths of the forest they heard the snow being crushed under each of the magical beast's slithering movements, a sound like steam shooting rhythmically from a kettle. Shiori gulped. The creature moved slowly. It took its time, as though its very goal was to inspire fear in them. Among the more intelligent magical beasts, such tactics were indeed preferred. When it finally emerged from the clump of trees, Shiori opened her mouth to scream, and yet not a sound emerged.

"You must be kidding..." uttered Alec.

Even he was disgusted by the deformed creature approaching them. He forced a grin to his face, but sweat beaded on his forehead.

"You really *are* beyond terrifying," he said.

The silvery blue body of the monster was easily as thick as a wyvern's, but it split partway through to reveal two dragon-like heads, their fangs bared. It let out wheezing breaths as it moved, the misshapen legs that protruded from its body swinging as it went.

It was a monstrous two-headed beast; a jormungand variant.

6

The creature was easily taller than six meters in height. As it slithered from the trees, it craned its two long necks, both of them swaying as if they belonged to two entirely separate magical beasts. Their two forked tongues darted incessantly.

Alec looked up at the two heads, his eyes wide with shock and his face twisted with disgust. And yet, somewhere in his features was a shade of pity.

"A variant..." he whispered, "or perhaps...just a mutation..."

When one looked carefully, they could make out what appeared to be the jormungand's eyes, but they were completely sealed up. Whatever eyes it once had had long since deteriorated. The four legs that protruded from its body—if you could even really call them that—were misshapen, little more than long sticklike protuberances that barely moved. These, too, it seemed, had deteriorated and were no longer functional. But when one followed the wavering tail at the rear of the gigantic creature, they spotted a tiny head at its end, like that of a dragon.

This jormungand, the adventurers realized, was no two-headed beast at all.

It was a three-headed monster.

Such a creature could no longer be called snakelike. It was a different kind of creature altogether, something entirely unique.

"Maybe it's a mix of different magical beasts," said Alec. "I've never seen anything like this."

The monster's gigantic body made it clear that traversing beneath the snow was impossible. That was why it had emerged from above it. And though it clearly did not understand any of the words that Alec spoke, it nonetheless caught the scent of the terrified awe drifting from the adventurers, and its mouths twisted into what looked like derisive grins. The creature's slow, laboring movements now looked like a defiant challenge.

The jormungand's mouths were a blackish red, and Shiori squinted for a better look before reeling as the truth dawned upon her. It was the bloody gore of pieces of flesh. Chunks of meat dangled from between its teeth, and among that mess of its feed, yet to be properly eaten, Shiori spied human fingers.

This, she realized, was the creature that had devoured the old hunters' limbs. A sick feeling rose up in her throat, and she struggled to take a deep breath. The jormungand pushed the trees aside, dragging itself out into the open. The awkward, wavering movements of its two heads stopped and, at the same time, its thick log-like tail rose into the air.

It's readying something.

Alec sensed it too.

"We don't know what we're dealing with!" he shouted. "Don't let your guard down! We don't know how it's going to attack!"

The air wavered, and Shiori felt a strange sensation creep over her skin. A moment later, the beast let out a strange cry. It sounded like a woman in the throes of death, her voice layered over itself multiple times to the point that the high-pitched scream pierced the ears.

Shiori and Madeleine groaned as their eardrums trembled and a chill froze their bodies. Shiori felt an unusual pressure forcing itself upon her, and Bla, at her feet, rolled behind her. Just as both were about to fall backwards, Daniel was there to catch them.

"It's an attack on the mind," he explained. "You must stand strong. The two of you can withstand it, of that I'm sure."

Daniel, too, looked pale, but he remained surefooted. He had evaded the jormungand's attack.

"Once you get used to it, you'll sense the timing of such screams," he said.

Alec and those taking on the jormungand directly were unaffected by the scream, having evaded it just like Daniel had. This impressed upon Shiori the difference that experience made, even among adventurers of similar rank.

"It's sensory, so the only thing you can do is get used to it, but you should be fine," Daniel said. "But remember this: Any creature that opens their attacks with such a scream always does so to ascertain their foes' weakest links. Look."

The magical beast was facing off against Kai and Alec, but one head was pointed in Shiori and Madeleine's direction. Its eyes might have deteriorated, but it still had unique snakelike senses allowing it to grasp who the weakest among them were. The head opened its mouth, and Nadia immediately realized that it was priming a long-distance attack. She cast a fire spell in an instant, but it was extinguished as freezing-cold winds blasted from the beast's mouth. The shards of ice in the monster's attack cut through the branches of the nearby trees, which were then carried on the wind and became weapons in and of themselves. It was an attack on a scale that Shiori could not possibly have defended with her magical power.

"Leave this to me," uttered Daniel.

He cast a two-layer barrier spell and blocked the fierce blizzard with ease. The thick wind barriers were cast in opposite directions, diverting the magical beast's attack to the left and right.

"Amazing..." whispered Shiori.

"Much easier to deflect such attacks than to meet them head-on," said Daniel, a proud smile on his face. "It often takes less magical energy and helps to minimize damage. Your lecture was a great reference, actually. It struck me in the moment that I might be able to dual-cast with the same magic type, and it went even better than I'd hoped!"

He added that there was still much room for research and experimentation, but nonetheless wore a most satisfied smile. Still, regardless of the fact that the

magic was of the same type, casting two spells with such differing movements was an act that required great skill. That Daniel could do such a thing so easily with just the slightest of hints showed how talented a mage he really was.

In any case, thanks to his quick response, the jormungand had failed in its attempt to dispatch the people it thought to be the group's weakest, and it now turned its fangs on Alec and the frontliners. But a mere moment later, it suddenly stopped moving. Its two heads were raised, their blind eyes falling upon the body of the first jormungand—the corpse of its partner.

The jormungand dragged its body closer to its fallen comrade. It no longer cared for Alec and the others, who had all taken up defensive postures at the beast's odd behavior. As the beast came to a halt, Shiori couldn't help but feel as though the magical beast were offering its lost friend a moment of silent prayer.

That thought was shattered, however, when the jormungand lowered its heads, bared its fangs, and clamped its teeth into the corpse before it. The near-impenetrable hide offered no resistance as the jormungand ripped free chunks of flesh and began to devour them.

"Ugh...!"

The horrible cacophony of flesh ripping and bones breaking rent the air. Shiori shrank into herself, and without even realizing it, she clung to Madeleine, who did likewise. Perhaps it was because it was a corpse, or perhaps its blood had coagulated from the heat of Nadia and Yksel's combined spells, but there was little in the way of blood or bodily fluids. This did little to make the sight of the jormungand feasting on one of its own any less horrific, and even Alec had to fight against the urge to gag.

"It's eating its own kind... It didn't even hesitate..." he uttered.

To maintain the state of its gigantic body, there was no doubt the jormungand needed much in the way of food. None could even guess how much it needed to consume to survive, but the greed with which it impulsively devoured its own kind sent a shiver down all of their spines. For a time the adventurers stood frozen; they had lost even the will to speak. It was Alec who first regained his senses.

The magical beast—which none were even sure could still be called a "jormungand"—noticed the movement of those looking to interrupt its meal and stopped eating, turning its head to meet its foes as it continued to chew the chunks of flesh still in its gullet. The edges of its mouth twisted.

"When I am done here, you are next," it seemed to say in the silence, and Shiori trembled at the thought.

"We cannot allow this beast to escape," said Alec. "It knows the taste of human flesh, and we do not know what havoc it might cause if we let it go. We must see it slain, whatever it takes!"

Alec moved as he spoke, and Kai was just a step behind him. With his sword awash in flames, he swung his blade at the jormungand's neck, just as Kai launched a heavy kick at the jormungand's other head, with Sigurd beside him slashing with its claws. The tail of the beast—its third head—exploded as it was hit by Nadia's lightning, then hammered by a shower of Yksel's ice spears.

It was an attack on all fronts by Tris's finest, and against any other magical beast, such an assault would have been the very definition of overkill. But even though they had given their attack everything they had, it appeared to have little impact.

The third jormungand head let out a freezing breath, evaporating the fireballs that flew its way while the main body twisted, its heads turning to snarl at Alec. Alec, however, was not about to stand still and let the monster have its way; he used the monster's head as a stepping stone to leap quickly out of the magical beast's reach.

At the same time, Kai, who had successfully launched a kick at the jormungand's face, threw a lightning-infused punch at the head that had its attention on Alec. His familiar Sigurd flew into the air and, with claws like moon crystals, slashed at the jormungand's nose.

The beast let out a short cry, and Nadia and Yksel immediately hit it with a superheated water cage. They had hoped this would be the finishing blow, but none could have expected what happened next. The pillar of water froze almost instantaneously from the inside out. Within seconds it was a pillar of ice, but then it began to shatter, and finally it exploded.

"Looks like magical attacks aren't going to be very effective unless we get creative," said Nadia. "This monster is *very* powerful."

Nadia and Yksel were among the five strongest spellcasters in Tris, but this jormungand had shrugged off their combined attack as if it were nothing. Clearly, it was not to be taken lightly.

"I bet that if the legendary dragon of the Dima Frozen Lake really existed, it would look something like this," Nadia mused.

"Give me a break..." muttered Alec, who then grinned and added, "Then again, this jormungand isn't quite powerful enough to warrant the title of 'legendary,' is it?"

"Indeed," added Kai. "Our physical attacks are having an effect."

The two men had felt their strikes making an impact. None of their attacks had been thrown randomly or without thought. With each blow, they changed where they aimed and how exactly they struck, all in search of the jormungand's weak points.

"The eyes and the nose are where the flesh is softest," said Kai. "I haven't left any marks, but we've definitely done some damage."

Alec grinned. He glanced down at the silvery blue fur and the scales stuck to the blade of his sword.

"The skin is tough against vertical strikes, but weaker against horizontal strikes," he said. "I thought it was strange that it was strong enough to deflect my blows, and yet it moves with such flexibility. And as I expected, there's a layer of scales underneath its fur. If you can hit it between those scales, you can hurt it."

Easier said than done—but these adventurers were professionals who could create such openings for themselves.

"Still, in terms of physical and magical strength, it's a true monster," Alec added. "We want to be efficient with our offense."

"But the way it whips around like that..." muttered Kai. "I sure wish there was a way to stop it from moving."

Though it was a stretch to call the magical beast agile, the jormungand could still easily inflict a critical blow with its freely moving heads and its flexibility. Cutting the creature's legs to slow it down or keep it moving was a pointless endeavor, but perhaps with magic they could make something work. And yet, the usual methods were having no effect.

The jormungand watched as the humans kept their distance and chattered away. Perhaps it saw the tide turning in its favor, or perhaps it thought victory was in its grasp, for its three heads let loose a battle cry that let them know it would not wait for them to take the initiative.

The magically powered roar became a snowstorm, while the third head unleashed bolts of lightning in order to bury the adventurers alive. Entering this hellish zone would surely render one useless, and the jormungand began to widen the range of its attacks as it ambled forward. It would stay right where it was most effective, trapping its prey and hunting them slowly.

But the monster's "prey" were not about to sit back and die either. Madeleine and Daniel protected everyone by casting a watery film and a reinforced barrier respectively, while Nadia created a pitfall to keep the jormungand at bay. The monster fell into it with a thud. The earth shook, and the zone around the beast that had been filled with its magical attacks returned to normal. Yksel quickly cast ice over the pitfall.

"I can't believe how safe I feel..." Shiori uttered.

She had no part to play in the battle, and was mostly watching like an apprentice learning a trade. Bla wobbled in agreement. Sigurd, meanwhile, had already started grooming itself, as if to say, "Bro, it's totally over." Perhaps magical beasts had an instinctual understanding of such things.

"If we leave it like this, it's going to get out again, and quickly. What's the plan?" asked Kai.

The pitfall was a stopgap solution. And if they cast any basic magic attacks, the jormungand would respond with its immense magical powers before it ever met its end. The ice that covered the pitfall, too, was quickly melting away, turning the hole into a muddy pond for the beast to swim in. The eyeless heads of the jormungand swayed as they looked up, seemingly sneering at their prey.

As Shiori watched the monster, which threatened to break free at any moment, she found herself reminded of something she had seen earlier that day—she thought of Vivi trying to cast bath magic, and how the girl's attempt had turned into a boiling, muddy bog.

"How about...a muddy bog?" she asked.

Everyone turned to her.

"A boiling pit of thick, sticky mud..." she added.

Yksel and Kai cringed at the thought, but Alec and Nadia nodded.

"It just might work," said Alec.

"A bottomless pit of boiling, thick, sticky mud," said Nadia.

"Aha. Because there's no easy way out of a bog," added Alec.

They were referring to the phenomenon known as thixotropy, which could be seen in things like quicksand, where the more you struggled, the more you sank. Shiori was suggesting a recreation of this phenomenon by way of magic.

"Let's give it a shot," said Alec. "But I don't like the idea of just letting it sink. I want something more definitive. So we stop it moving, and then we lop off the heads."

"That's our job, I guess," said Kai.

"Leave the bog to me and Yksel," said Nadia.

"In which case, I'll create a firm place for you to stand so you don't accidentally fall in," said Daniel. "Young ones, Madeleine and Shiori, I'll need your assistance. You too, my dear Bla."

Alec, Kai, Nadia, Yksel, and Daniel—they were Tris's best, and it took them no time at all to settle on the course of action they would take, and their roles in it. Bla, meanwhile, stretched out wide to protect Shiori and Madeleine.

"Well then, time to finish this," said Alec.

The jormungand poked two of its heads up and out of the pitfall, but Alec and Kai quickly forced it to take cover. Water burst up into the sky as the beast looked to rear its head once more, but at the same time Yksel cast a swirl of

earth magic within the pool of water.

The icky brown liquid bubbled, and the jormungand began to sink. It noticed that something strange was going on, and it let out a high-pitched scream as the muddy liquid quickly continued to heat up. The monster's three heads whipped around wildly, cold air rasping from its throats as it struggled. The temperature dropped for an instant, but it didn't last long, and the muddy bog continued to bubble, swallowing up the jormungand with each passing moment.

The monster was in a flustered panic, and it was no longer concerned with any of the humans that surrounded it. It let out a sickening scream, thrashing desperately to escape the muddy bog.

"All right," said Alec. "Let's end this."

At Alec's words, Daniel crafted a path forward by covering the bog with earth reinforced by ice magic. He'd even made vents here and there to ensure the heat had a place to go; this would ensure the steam wouldn't blow things up from within. The three heads of the jormungand were all aboveground, its body still trapped in the bog. It hissed as it struggled and flailed.

"Be careful not to fall into the vents, gents," said Daniel.

"Got it," said Alec.

"Let's do this, Alec!" said Kai.

The two men stepped out towards the jormungand. Kai launched a powerful strike right into the weakened jormungand's eyes, and his relentless combination attack left the beast no chance to counterattack or even evade. By his side, Sigurd gouged the monster's nose.

In time, the head they were attacking let out a strange boar-like snort. Its now crushed and deformed skull wavered slightly, and a single bloody bubble floated from the split that had once been its mouth before the head slumped to the ground, dead.

At that very moment, Alec was decimating the other head with a series of heavy sword blows. He sliced upwards, from the neck to the head, then dragged his blade against the grain of the jormungand's scales. He repeated this

action a number of times, and the scales, which had turned up due to the heat of the bog, were shaved clean off, revealing the softer flesh beneath. With its armor essentially gone, the jormungand was now defenseless before Alec's sword, and so he raised his fiery, flaming blade above his head and brought it down with everything he had. The sound of steel cutting through flesh and bone echoed into the air as the monster's head was sheared from its body and went flying into the snow, where it rolled until colliding with a nearby tree.

"Just one to go!" shouted Alec.

He spun around, but the head on the tail appeared to already be on its last legs. Even then, it looked ready to fight to its last breath. It raised its head high, but doing so took all the energy it had left, and with a final, last scream, the jormungand head sank slowly to the ground. The thin, high-pitched voice echoed with a hint of sorrow, as though it were lamenting its fate; it was a creature born of gruesome, hideous biological experiments, doomed to end its life as a monster.

The magical beast's cry eventually petered out into silence, and though the jormungand was still trapped in the mud with its heads poking free, it was not long before its vital systems came to a complete, and final, stop. It no longer responded to Shiori's search magic, which meant that the ominous, tragic deformity of a magical beast was truly dead.

"It's over..." muttered Alec.

There was something listless in his features as he muttered these words.

"The Empire is gone," he continued, "and yet...their sins still continue to haunt us like a curse."

Exactly what was on his mind at the time was unclear, but in his veins was the blood of the royal family, who had led Storydia for years in the long and arduous fight against the Empire. There was no doubt he had some heavy thoughts about it all.

Shiori walked to him silently, and put a hand gently upon his own. He twitched, then gripped her hand tight. Watching over the two of them was the sky, which slowly turned red as the sun began to set in the distance.

By the time they finished cleaning up the battlefield—to ensure the preservation of the two jormungand corpses—and covering the two dead hunters with sheets, the sun was setting. The darkening forests looked like something out of a piece of shadow art, casting sharp black shapes across the mountain's snowy surface.



At the foot of the mountain one could see the lights of the village as well as smoke from houses as people prepared meals for the evening. It was a peaceful sight, and from a distance it looked as if the disaster had never happened at all. As night quickly approached, the mountain was wrapped in silence. The tranquility of it made the rest of the day, and its tragedy, feel oddly distant.

"I almost want to just spend the night out here," said Kai.

"I think we're all thoroughly exhausted," said Yksel. "I myself am about ready to just fall asleep right here without giving it a second thought."

Neither man could hide how tired they felt, and who could blame them? There was, of course, the fact that they had needed to discover how to kill two unknown magical beasts on the fly, but even before that, they'd shouldered far more stress than they would've had to for an ordinary suppression request due to their search and rescue work, which added another layer of mental strain. This was made all the heavier by the fact that two of the men they'd tried to rescue had died.

"I think it's likely we'll be spending the night in Eklof," said Alec.

"Which I prefer to pushing on and trying to get home," said Nadia. "Everyone working back at the village is probably just as tired as we are."

"And many of us have been using our magic since the morning. What I would give for a sled to ride down right about now..." muttered Yksel.

Alec chuckled, then noticed something in the distance.

"Huh?" he uttered, and then, when he realized what was coming: "Great, looks like the trip back will be a whole lot easier."

He pointed to the distant light of the approaching magical lantern. Little by little it grew, revealing a sled. The sled was pulled along by magical dogs which were half flying over the snow. At the reins was Leo Nordman.

"It's one of the knight corps rescue sleds," said Alec, as he returned Leo's wave.

Everyone heaved great sighs of relief as Leo followed the edge of the valley, his stern features softening as he took in the sight of them. Rurii, who had

hitched a ride with the knight, bounced from the sled.

"Thank goodness," Leo said. "You're all safe?"

"We are, thanks," said Alec. "You came all this way for us?"

"I did. Had to do a little pushing and shoving to get access to the sled, but I had a feeling you might be at your limits."

The sleds had been brought by the reinforcements as a means for transporting debris, but fortunately the knights had managed to clear the roads by evening. Leo had done some negotiating, and when a sled had freed up, he'd taken it to come look for Alec and Shiori's search party.

"We're grateful," said Alec. "We're exhausted, and we were just discussing how to proceed. And, uh...we wanted to get these two back home as soon as possible too."

Leo followed Alec's gaze, and his eyes took in all that they landed upon at a glance. He knelt down by the covered bodies and offered a silent prayer for the two old men in their eternal rest.

"Was it the magical beasts?" he asked.

"Yeah. These two drew the monsters' attention so the others could make their escape. Regardless of how they ended up, they deserve respect for the guts they showed, offering themselves up to those kinds of monsters."

Something in the way Alec spoke these last words grabbed Leo's attention.

"What kind of monsters?" he asked.

Alec pointed silently to one of the jormungand corpses. Leo gasped.

"What in the world is that?!"

The dim light of their magical lanterns revealed its shape, and even now that it was a corpse, an oppressive pressure emanated from the body of the snakelike monster with its three heads.

"Wasn't it supposed to be a jormungand?" Leo asked. "This isn't the story I was told..."

"It might be a unique type...or it might be a variant...or it might be a different

mix of magical beasts. Honestly, we can't say for certain. It's just too vastly different from the norm."

Leo let out a worried murmur and fell into silence.

"We're going to inform the Guild in the not-too-distant future, anyway, so it doesn't matter if I tell you now," he said, "but we've been getting more eyewitness reports of strange monsters on the borders between Storydia and the Empire. We've heard that some are biological experiments that were released during the uprising, and others broke free while the Empire was trying to destroy the evidence of their existence. The truth is still unclear, but apparently no two monsters are alike."

A few nervous gulps could be heard among the group. The very idea that the strange monsters that had crossed the border were all vastly different from one another sent a tingle of fear and disgust down their spines. The corpses that lay before them, too, were completely different, even though both had characteristics of jormungands. Shiori found herself gripping Alec's arm, and he put a hand to her back to help ease her troubled mind.

Rurii and Bla both examined the corpses with great curiosity before shivering with something like disgust and rushing back to the adventurers.

"The reports have come in, but in terms of actual numbers there aren't that many," continued Leo. "No more than you could count on a single hand. That said, we can't overlook the fact that such deformities have been spotted four times in this area since the new year. Especially given that they're so close to the capital."

"In that case, wouldn't it be prudent to quickly mobilize some hunting parties?" asked Nadia.

"That's what the higher-ups intend to do," replied Leo. "They've already strengthened patrols set on hunting the remnants of the Imperial military in the borderlands. I think it might be a good idea to ban traversing deep into the mountains for a little while. We'll also want to keep these monsters a secret for the time being, so if anybody asks you about them, be vague on the details, please."

"Sure, that's fine, but...what if some of the hunters here saw these creatures?

How can you cover it up then?"

"We've already talked with the men we've saved, and fortunately they didn't glimpse much more than a head. The snow hid the rest, it would seem. I can't help but wonder if that report of two monsters was on account of this two-headed...er, three-headed monstrosity peeking up at whoever saw it."

In other words, until everything had settled down, the adventurers would tell people they had just faced two otherwise ordinary jormungands.

"We'll have these corpses retrieved in the next few days. I think we'll need a bigger sled...and we'll have to make sure we do it out of sight of prying eyes too."

Leo knew that some of the villagers would be suspicious of them transporting two monster corpses, but he also knew they didn't have much choice.

"In any case," Leo said, getting back to other matters, "the monsters that attacked the village are dead, and including the two deceased, all the missing hunters have been found. Once we get back to the village, it'll be mission accomplished. You can leave the rest to the knights."

"All of them?" asked Alec. "You mean to say you found the last hunter?"

"He made it down on his own. Seems he took a different route from the others, and so he came down a different path than the one you all went up. He was feeble and exhausted, but no injuries, thankfully. A good night's sleep ought to do him right."

The adventurers they'd found on the way were also in stable condition. Just this knowledge alone was enough to lighten the mood of the adventurers' party, and they shared smiles.

"The devotion of these two men, giving themselves up to protect their friends, it wasn't for naught," said Leo. "If we'd had to wait for the rescue dogs, we might have lost all of them, but your search magic proved its usefulness today, and nobody could have guessed this was how it would happen. I've heard that the mages who used it down closer to the village have gotten the hang of it too."

Leo smiled at Shiori as Alec wrapped his arm around her waist. The two slimes

by her feet bounced around happily.

"Now, let's head on home," said Leo. "The villagers will be waiting on their two friends, and I bet you could all do with a rest."

Sacrifices had been made, but the dead men, who had wanted only for their friends to return home safe, had seen their wish granted. Now it was time to deliver the two men back to their hunting companions, and back home.

The adventurers covered the jormungand corpses with snow, then carefully loaded the two old hunters on the sled before taking seats wherever there was space. It was only then that the dogs began to slowly pull the sled.

And all the while, the tragic mountain looked down on them silently.

Chapter 2: Guiding Star

1

Though finding the jormungands had taken the group a long and arduous climb, returning to the village only took a few minutes with the magical dogs pulling them along. When they arrived, the villagers were waiting solemnly for them, and with sniffled sobs echoing through the air, they carefully carried the two old hunters from the sled.

"You old geezers..." said a sobbing hunter affectionately.

It was the man who'd been rescued mere hours ago. He'd been thoroughly taken care of, but still required the support of his family as he walked to the older hunters and knelt before their bodies.

"Right up until the end, all they wanted was for you all to return home safely," said Alec.

The man bit his lip and nodded.

"When I told him you were safe," continued Alec, "he said he was glad. Said he could happily go to the afterlife without his wife giving him a painful earful."

Laughter broke through the tears of the gathered crowd.

"That's just like him," said someone.

"He was always wrapped around her little finger."

"He was like a puppy dog when it came to her."

"I never knew if he was complaining or bragging, but he was always talking about her."

The villagers retraced old memories, smiling as their tears fell upon the snow. It was all too clear that the two hunters had been much loved within their community. Their deaths had been brought about by their own pride, their own arrogance, but until the end they'd been like everyone's grandfathers.

"Well, let's hold a Guiding of the Souls this evening. We can't do anything grand, but we'll drink, we'll eat, and we'll see those two off by sharing all our memories of them."

A Guiding of the Souls was not unlike a wake, but it was not a sorrowful event. Each attending family brought food and drink, and everyone gathered around the coffin or coffins of the deceased, where they shared fond memories, sang loudly, and danced happily. By not mourning what was lost and instead celebrating a new beginning in the afterlife, evil spirits could be warded away from stealing the souls of the dead.

"We'd love for you to be there," said a villager.

"They loved drinking and having a good time," added another, "so the more the merrier, I think."

The villagers were pushy in their eagerness to have the adventurers attend, and the adventurers, in turn, succumbed to the pressure.

A simple altar was built in the village square, and bonfires to ward off evil spirits crackled around it. Flowers had been placed around the grounds. The two coffins on the altar were decorated in vibrant, colorful embroidery, and the villagers began setting out food and drink at the tables prepared around them. The Lovner chefs, who had provided emergency rations for the village, also prepared dishes for the two heroes who had died to save the young hunters.

A quickly assembled band of villagers played tunes on their nyckelharpas and flutes while others performed the village's traditional dances. Shiori watched on and smiled as the two slimes bounced and wobbled along to the music. She let out a deep sigh, so impressed was she by it all.

"It's amazing..." she uttered.

"First time, I assume?" asked Alec.

"Yes. I had heard about such celebrations, but this is my first time actually seeing one."

"I see. I've only been to a handful myself."

"Really?"

"It's something of an old tradition, so you rarely get them outside of smaller villages like this one."

Back before people had more stable living environments, the smell of the dead would sometimes incite attacks by roaming magical beasts. This was all the more likely for hamlets and other smaller communities. Thus, people had come to light bonfires and make great rackets so as to keep the beasts away. The Guiding of the Souls, then, was not just a ritual, but a very real way of thwarting potential danger. As barrier-stake technology developed and graveyards came to be more neatly maintained, the tradition had begun to fade.

Alec paused in his explanation to sip at a glass of wine. The bonfire was reflected in his eyes, bringing out an unusual color in them.

"These days, people leave things in the hands of skilled undertakers," he said. "Most towns, when they reach a certain size, will have a dedicated funeral home or something like it. For my mother, too, the doctor who attended her handled things. She was seen off by only those closest to her in the neighborhood."

Alec's mother had left the world young, while still in her thirties, and had been first buried in a graveyard on the outskirts of Tris. Many years later, and by order of Alec's half brother the king, her body had been moved to the graveyard dedicated to those who had served the royal family.

"Will you come with me, someday? To visit her?" he asked.

At some point, he would go to the royal capital, and though the exact date was still unknown, he wanted that to be when he could introduce Shiori to the place where his parents were now at rest. Shiori, of course, accepted his offer with a nod, and Alec smiled happily.

The villagers nearby suddenly erupted into cheers. Someone had told a story that the others had very much enjoyed, and everyone from the adventurers to the knights, and even the margravine, were clutching their stomachs as they bellowed with laughter.

"To those wonderful old geezers!" came the toast.

New bottles of wine were quickly brought over and opened. Two hours had passed since the celebrations had begun, and sunset was nowhere to be found within the darkness of night. And yet, the party showed no signs of stopping. Still, some adventurers decided to turn in; while the celebrations were fun, they were utterly exhausted. Fortunately, the knights had been kind enough to put up a tent for them all.

"These old bones, they ain't what they used to be," said the wily Daniel with a chuckle.

But for all the adventurers that chose to turn in, many others felt too amped up to even think about sleep, and it was these revelers who would take night watch duties, drinking and chatting throughout the evening. Shiori and Alec were among this group, and while Rurii and Bla slept like puddles beside them, the two quietly enjoyed their glasses of wine.

"You two did great work today," came a voice from behind them.

Walt arrived with a plate of food, and beside him was Monica Osbring, the margravine.

"The margravine said she wanted to speak with you two," said Walt.

Monica, who had been on-site directing the search and rescue operation, flashed them a beautiful smile.

"Unfortunately, we won't be staying the evening," she said. "We'll report to His Excellency and return again tomorrow."

The two adventurers quickly stood to their feet, flustered by the appearance of the margravine, but she urged them both to sit, knowing how difficult their hike had been. The woman stood straight, and her figure was nothing if not dashing; one could easily imagine what she'd been like as an active knight.

"It was thanks to your efforts that our search and rescue went as well as it did," she continued. "It is terribly unfortunate that some could not return alive. Nonetheless, I am beyond grateful to you for seeing to the safe return of all the others that found themselves trapped by the avalanche."

"We were simply glad to be of service," said Shiori.

The margravine had offered her thanks with the air of a knight, but just as quickly, her features softened into a warm smile.

"I was truly impressed by what you were able to do without the help of trained dogs," she said. "That search magic of yours proved very effective, even for those who were merely emulating what they saw. I intend to recommend that His Excellency quickly institute the use of it among the forces within his control."

Monica spoke passionately of having Shiori visit so as to hold another lecture for the margrave's forces in the future. Her words were no mere show of social etiquette or a trifling compliment; her eyes showed how very serious she was about the idea.

"If you think it will be helpful, then I would be glad to," replied Shiori.

"I'm sure it will. And while I can't mention this in great detail with so many people around, it came to my attention that you heard about the magical beasts around the border areas. This was not an isolated incident, and we may need to call upon your help in dealing with other similar threats."

"Understood."

After speaking with Shiori, the margravine smiled at Walt and Alec, both of whom knew who she was, then bowed gracefully and left. Walt watched her go, then slumped into one of the empty chairs nearby and let out a sigh. Walt was always ready with a smile, and yet even *he* was feeling the effects of the long day.

"You've had a rough day too, haven't you, Walt?" said Shiori.

She poured some spice-flavored wine into a wooden cup, which Walt took with a shrug and a smile.

"I've watched over disaster zones before," he said, "but this was the first time one struck while I was in the area. Life is all about new experiences, I suppose."

"I see... That's a very 'Walt' way of looking at things," commented Alec.

Walt was twenty-six, and quite young for someone in the position of

statesman. Still, he'd been in the service of a famed countess's family for more than fifteen years. Despite his age, he was the right-hand man of the young Countess Lovner; he was an experienced hand, and good at what he did.

However, due to an incident directly involving Walt's grandfather, a former baron, harsh criticisms had been leveled against Walt. That he had maintained a warm and flexible approach to life was worthy of respect. Shiori thought back to when she'd been twenty-six. She liked to think that she had come a long way, but she also felt that her life had been largely one of ease and comfort. Indeed, just a year after that, she had been suddenly hurled into another world entirely, and back then, she likely wouldn't have believed how much that world would toughen her up.

"I have to say," said Walt, "since I last saw you, I feel like you've changed, Shiori. You always struck me as sure-footed, but in these last few months it's like you've gotten even more grounded. There used to be something fleeting about you, but that's gone now. And you look brighter too, Alec."



Though he couldn't quite put them into words, Walt's feelings about things were on point.

"A lot happened after that expedition," said Shiori. "We met people, we talked, and...we found a place for ourselves, so to speak."

"Yes," added Alec. "I think we both faced our pasts, and it opened up in both of us a way towards the future."

"Oh...?" uttered Walt, who read the underlying meaning in both Alec's words and the way Alec's arm smoothly pulled Shiori closer. Walt grinned and continued, "Well, that's just wonderful. Now all that's left to wonder is which of the two couples is going to be quicker to tie the knot."

He spoke in a way that felt more like a parent than a friend, and Shiori and Alec had to laugh.

"Really, though, congratulations," Walt said. "You have to let me know when you plan your big day so we can help you celebrate it."

"I don't know if this is the place to be talking about this stuff," said Alec.

"Thanks, Walt," said Shiori. "That makes me happy."

Shiori sipped her wine. Here she was, sitting with a lover and a friend, both of whom she'd met and befriended here in this other world. She looked around at the celebrations. She gazed upon the laughter and smiles of people joyous to see well-loved souls set off on a safe trip to the next world, and the bonfires flickering as if in response to the revelry. Flames danced in the air, disappearing into the cold of the spring night. Beyond them, the stars glimmered, each of them a soul waiting for its next life to begin.

"Those two old geezers are going to have a great trip together."

"That they are."

The chatter of people reliving old memories mingled with the prayers in each raised drink, and Shiori raised her head, suddenly hearing a voice that was so very familiar to her. It was a low, calm, and peaceful voice, and one filled with warmth.

All I want is for you to be happy.

Perhaps it was just a person at the party, thinking of the old men who had left to be with their wives. And yet, Shiori felt as if she heard the words in her mother tongue—in Japanese—as spoken by the person that had brought her into being. It was all too much for her, and she buried her head into Alec's chest.

"Shiori, what's wrong? Shiori?"

Shiori heard the surprise in Alec's voice as the words dropped down upon her head, but she clung to him, refusing to show her face. She didn't want so many people to see her here, crying like this.

"I felt like I heard my mother talking to me," she uttered.

"Ah..." replied Alec, nodding.

"They say that such things sometimes occur at the Guiding of the Souls," said Walt. "When a spirit comes to welcome the souls of the deceased, they bring the helpers a message from their loved ones."

It was a chance to hear the voice of someone you would never meet again, he explained.

"People that receive such a message are said to be guaranteed future happiness, and when someone hears such a voice, those souls will be blessed in their next life. It's a gift from the spirits that connect our world to the next."

"Oh, I see..." said Shiori. "Then I guess that makes me...happy."

It was all she could muster, and Shiori's shoulders shook as she cried into Alec's chest, his arms wrapped tight around her. Walt watched the two of them with a warm smile on his face, then lifted his cup to the evening sky. It was a peaceful night that passed before them; one of prayers and well-wishes.

2

It was nearing midnight at the margrave's residence. The Torisval Margrave, Kristoffer Osbring, was reading carefully through a report delivered by the Royal Institute of Bioengineering. The title read, "On the Unidentified Magical Beast in Silveria, Torisval." The report detailed an encounter with an unidentified

magical beast—a yeti—on the outskirts of Silveria in December.

Kristoffer had looked over the report once already, but he flipped through it again. It started with the names of the people who'd conducted the autopsy and those who had discovered the beast. Then came the date and location of the encounter, and a detailed autopsy report.

After examining the magical beast discovered in December of last year, in the Silverian Forest of Torisval, our inspection revealed the following:

Height: Approx. 3.2 meters

Weight: Approx. 752 shilograms

Remarks: Our initial inspection leads us to the conclusion that the unidentified magical beast has a bone structure not unlike a troll's or an ogre's. However, it differs from known magical beasts with regards to body composition, the number of fingers and toes on its hands and feet, and the mouth area through which it breathes and expels ice. For this reason, we cannot rule out the possibility that this is an unknown magical beast. Further inspections will be necessary in order to arrive at a definitive conclusion.

Remains discovered in the Violette region of Torisval in mid-November have been matched to the same creature. The body composition and the shape of its feet are a direct match. From this, we have been able to determine that this magical beast appears in the area from the end of October through to the end of November.

Tracks and fur discovered in Fibria and in the Thornroos region of Estervall over the last twenty years are also extremely similar to those found in the inspected magical beast. We surmise the beast may reside in these areas, or is otherwise a member of the same genus.

Notes: Reports from eyewitnesses mention that the beast is capable of an expression resembling a smile. Our inquiry revealed that all eyewitnesses in the adventuring party were of trustworthy character and of high rank. The party's three clients (Countess Lovner and two aides) also gave the same testimony. We thus believe the eyewitness accounts to be reliable. This in turn means it is possible that the magical beast has emotional faculties similar to humans, and

"What do you make of it, Your Excellency?"

Upon hearing the question from his aide, Kristoffer furrowed his brow.

"If the report is true, then we'll have to draft up a plan immediately," he said. "To think a mythical beast truly exists..."

There was little room for suspicion now that the beast's body had been delivered to the Royal Institute of Bioengineering. Copies of the report in Kristoffer's hand had also been sent to the Estervall Margrave, the royal knight corps headquarters, and even the king.

The term "mythical beast" was used to identify any creature that existed by way of eyewitness accounts and rumor, but whose existence had yet to be actually proven. There were many such terrifying legends that all but proved the yeti's existence: thick wooden doors shattered in a single strike, powerful farming horses lifted up and snapped in half, and a snow bear pierced by what looked to be a hand. Until now, all such stories had been attributed to impaired visibility or outright lies due to the fact that a body or corpse had never been identified. But perhaps it was simply that the vast majority of those who encountered the yeti did not escape alive.

It was a fact that in recent years, a number of people had gone missing in the areas where the yeti had been sighted. In a portion of those cases, evidence was found for large magical beast attacks in the missing people's last known locations. Snow bears were known to reside in such areas in large numbers, and so the attacks had been attributed to them, but perhaps that had not been the case...

"If the beast is truly intelligent," mused Kristoffer, "then perhaps it is capable of hiding a corpse."

He did not think the beast responsible for all who had gone missing, but he had to at least entertain the possibility.

"Where's the information on where they've been spotted?" asked Kristoffer.

"Right here."

Kristoffer's aide was able and extremely well prepared, and quickly rolled a map across the table. Some twenty locations had been marked with seals, colored to indicate which mythical beast had been spotted.

"This contains all known sightings of mythical beasts so far recorded," explained the aide. "Those concerning the yeti are marked in blue."

"I see..."

Of the blue seals on the map, more than ninety percent were in the areas indicated in the report: Silveria, Violette, and Fibria. All could be found in the Silveria Forest, the forest in the Taube Hills, and the primeval forest areas of Fibria.

"Based on this, it seems plausible that a number of these magical beasts we call yetis live among the Taube Hills," said Kristoffer.

"It would appear so," replied the aide. "The remains of the beast that were discovered were also found in the same area."

"As much as I'd love to call for a large-scale investigation...it's those damned Imperials. Just how much longer do they intend to keep giving us trouble?"

Kristoffer spat the words as his gaze fell upon the map on the wall. The map was marked with five X's along the national border, and four were accompanied by sketches of magical beasts. All of the monsters could have been called deformities, because all of them had escaped from Imperial biological research facilities.

Fortunately, there had been little in the way of human losses, though the fifth incident—the report of which had arrived mere hours ago—had come with the loss of two lives.

"To combat these threats, we need our best squadrons. But with our forces spread across the border and everything so unstable since the uprising, I... Well, to be honest, I don't want to continue throwing valuable human resources at such problems."

However, it was still unclear exactly how many "test subjects" had escaped from the research facility in question. According to confidential discussions they'd had with Elector Ulanov, the Imperial assisting their efforts, the vast

majority of these beasts would have died before crossing the border due to the fact that the climate was inhospitable. However, it was nonetheless likely that at least one or two of the bigger experiments were lurking somewhere in the mountains of Storydian territory. The two jormungands that had been discovered just recently were the most likely culprits, but only a large-scale hunt would let them know for certain whether that was the case.

"Oh, and how did the lecture go?" asked Kristoffer. "Can we make use of Miss Shiori's magic?"

The question was directed to his wife, Monica, who was quietly waiting off to the side. She had returned from Eklof Village and was even now still dressed in uniform.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I think we should act fast and ensure that we institute the use of her search magic as soon as possible. The mages at her lecture were able to make use of it after just a single demonstration. That said, applying it in active battle situations is sure to take some time."

King Olivier's birthday party was to be held in early June. The margrave hoped to have some good news to help assuage some of the gloom surrounding the nation's current struggles, but now they had unidentified beasts to deal with; they would have to move with great care and caution.

"We must inform His Majesty and Sir Edvard of the mountain hunts. We'll contact Miss Shiori soon about her search magic; we'll want her to teach our people in person."

Long-range search magic, which could also be called enemy scouting magic, had originated in its present form through Shiori Izumi. Her capabilities were considered the highest standard of what was possible, and Kristoffer wanted her help to ensure those standards were kept. First, however, he would need to discuss the idea with Aleksey and Bleyzac.

"I see that look in your eyes," said Monica. "You were just wondering if you would have been better off keeping Shiori in your own care all this time."

She turned her gaze on her husband, rousing him from his silent thoughts.

"Could you not read people's minds like that?" he asked.

"You speak as if I'm some kind of telepathic magical beast."

Monica had been born to a knight among the nobility and an immigrant maid. Once a quiet wallflower at evening balls, she had since grown quite able and powerful.

"It is true that I couldn't help thinking it; that if I had taken her under my wing instead of Bleyzac doing so, I'd have made her quite the exceptional soldier," Kristoffer admitted.

"And perhaps also that she might have wed our youngest son, still single and without even a fiancée, yes? While they may at least *look* right for one another, you can't deny the age gap."

Kristoffer cringed.

That's why I told you not to read people's minds, he thought.

"But the truth is," he said, speaking from the heart, "Alec met her because she was left in Bleyzac's care, and through that experience, he could recover from his ordeals. Had I taken her in, perhaps her potential never would have been realized in the first place. And when I think that perhaps, in another future, the smiles those two share might never have existed, well...I do not think I made the wrong decision."

It was true to say that if Shiori had remained in Kristoffer's care, she never would have known the poisonous clutches of Ranvald. And yet, he made no comment on the matter; there was little point in discussing what might have been. What Kristoffer could do now was ensure that such an incident never occurred again, and take joy in the encounter that saw the prince-in-hiding meet the woman once confidentially referred to as the celestial maiden. That, and pray that the future spread out before them was bright.

"So, shall we make the information regarding the amalgamate magical beasts and the mythical beast public?" asked Kristoffer's aide. "The Estervall domain has made the decision to share intel with a limited number of Adventurers' Guild members in order to avoid further potential harm to its people."

The words brought Kristoffer back to the world around him, and he let his eyes fall once more upon the map on his desk. A yeti that had been active

somewhere in the realm of Violette and Silveria had been slain, but eyewitness reports over the last five years were focused most in Fibria. Perhaps their information was wrong, but perhaps not...

"We'll end up doing the same," replied Kristoffer. "Share the information with all of the domain's adventurers who are of B-rank or above. Contact each branch. This will take more than just a few late nights, but we must stay strong for a little longer."

"Understood," said the aide, who left with a salute.

Kristoffer sighed and slumped back into his chair. He flipped through the paper in his hands, then looked once more at the map on the table, at the areas in which people had witnessed mythical beasts.

"The Fenrir of Norrsken Mountain and the Ice Dragon of the Dima Frozen Lake..." he muttered.

As far as the related institutions were concerned, the yeti now existed. So was it possible that the other sightings were not just people's imaginations getting the better of them, but the actual legendary mythical beasts?

"They couldn't possibly..." he whispered.

On the page before him, the yeti looked up at Kristoffer with a twisted grin.

3

The weather the next day was most fine. Birds soared through a baby blue sky while gentle rays of sunlight shone over the Hasslo Forest. It was a refreshing spring morning, and a perfect day for seeing off the two beloved hunters. Walt, however, decided to leave straight after breakfast, as the incident had put his group behind schedule.

"I'll be in touch soon about an illustrator for your project," he said as he was leaving, giving both Shiori and Alec a firm, warm handshake. It was something of a hasty parting that felt like it had come upon them all too quickly, but that feeling was soothed by the hope that they would soon meet again.

"We should make a move too," said Alec. "We've informed the Guild, but

they'll be worried about us back home."

Shiori thought of Zack, and cringed slightly in response. He was always strict when it came to work, but at his core he was a kind man with a big heart. Shiori knew all too well that whenever an adventurer didn't make it back as per their schedule, Zack's calm and composed features hid behind them worry and anguish. And whenever a request went badly, Zack always looked thoroughly at all the details to ascertain whether the fault lay with the Guild, or perhaps with him, as a teacher and mentor. It was impossible to know the extent to which he suffered when an adventurer's life was lost.

Unlike organizations in which order was strictly enforced through a structured hierarchy, as in the knight corps, it was very difficult to keep track of everything adventurers did; after all, they worked freely and were responsible for themselves. All the same, Zack did his best to watch over all the adventurers employed at his Guild. As guild master, he considered all of the adventurers members of an extended family.

It was only recently, however, that Shiori learned how this aspect of his personality had been shaped by his experiences as a young boy raised in an orphanage.

"Being that you're here, I wish you could see the two men off with us, but we've already kept you long enough," said one of the villagers regretfully.

"We've far too many people here to stay any longer," said Alec with a wry grin.

Because the adventurers would not be attending the funeral either, they gave their condolences to the bereaved families directly. Deep bows were shared, and the adventurers waved goodbye to the villagers and parted with Leo's troops, who would remain behind to help support and guard the village. Then it was back to Tris.

As the carriage rumbled home, its occupants struggled with a mix of emotions, their faces portraits of how they felt. One could only guess at the thoughts flitting through their hearts. It was clear, however, that for many of them, their feelings went beyond just mourning for the men lost.

"Man, I just can't wait to start practicing..."

Joel was so excited that he couldn't seem to keep still. A few nearby adventurers nodded in agreement. Vivi, meanwhile, had mended bridges with some of her fellow adventurers over the course of the last day, and absentmindedly rubbed her left hand, silent and lost in thought.

On paper, Shiori was little more than a low-level mage, but the spells and casting concepts that she had demonstrated had been a beacon of hope for her lecture's attendees. They had been made aware of new potential. They knew now that magical power was but a small part of mastering magic as a whole. The lecture and its subsequent practice sessions had lit in them the spark of exploration and the desire for knowledge.

It heralded the arrival of a boom in magic the likes of which had not been seen since the establishment of the Tris Adventurers' Guild.

Tris was in the midst of spring. Snow melted into rivers, and marshlands reverted back to lakes. While Olof and the seasonal crew began their preparations to head home, the Tris Adventurers' Guild was abuzz with excitement.

The meeting rooms were filled with adventurers who had gathered to discuss magic. Some swapped opinions regarding the uses and practical applications of current spells, some discussed interpretations of magical tomes, and others spoke of combining spells with weapons.

In the forests and plains on the outskirts of Tris, people could be found practicing fundamental spellcasting or developing unique spells. These mages had learned through Shiori's lecture that recognizing each other's weaknesses and offering ideas for improvement led to more effective magic, and so it became more common to see groups practicing together instead of individuals practicing on their own. This dedicated application to training and experimentation saw adventurers improve quickly, and this in turn had a synergistic effect on the community as a whole.

"As I become more accurate and exacting with my spellcasting, I'm less wasteful with my magical power. My individual casting has improved in terms of power, and I can also cast more spells. Simultaneous casting and combined

magic is still a challenge for me, but by focusing on a single aspect of my magic, I feel like I've gotten to a good place."

Joel was somewhat bashful as he described his improvements to Shiori, but hearing all this made her very happy. Vivi, too, threw herself into training after attending Shiori's lecture, and in time she began to regain the spellcasting abilities in her left hand. She also began asking other adventurers, including Shiori herself, for help and advice when she needed it, though admittedly she did so with some trepidation. The personality troubles that had plagued her in the past were gone, and Vivi had become a respectful young woman, another fact that made Shiori very happy.

The atmosphere in the Guild was very much a case of iron sharpening iron; perhaps inspired by their magically inclined coworkers, Alec, Linus, and others like them also began gathering for study sessions and the like. The cafeteria had even become a classroom for a brother and sister from a viscount's family to teach etiquette. The classes were a hit with young adventurers eyeing clients in the upper classes.

Ask questions to learn, teach when asked. This idea had long been a hurdle at the Guild, but since Shiori's lecture it had lowered considerably, and interactions between adventurers were at an all-time high.

The newly established guild library, too, was a hit with adventurers. Shiori had suggested the room as a place for adventurers to increase their knowledge, and while the book selection—gathered via donations, and containing books from both far and wide—was on the slim side, it was nonetheless a substantial start.

Reading was the simplest means through which a spellcaster could understand the building blocks of magic and develop the imagination to cast it. Given that there was no reason *not* to use the method to improve, the library room was packed just as soon as it opened. Encyclopedias and other illustrated guides, filled with images and diagrams, were available for those who had difficulty reading, and adventurers gravitated to books that caught their interest.

Some looked simply to read for pleasure and admire the color printing, and this was encouraged; it added a dash of flavor to everyday life and also worked

to soothe both mind and soul. In fact, the library had a collection of literature, art books, and even children's books, so it was no surprise that many adventurers enjoyed the location purely for leisure.

The library turned out to be such a hit that a retired adventurer was hired as a librarian.

"It might not be for everyone, but it's definitely heading in the right direction," commented Zack, who had himself brought a number of books about swordsmanship and military strategy for donation.

The days of lively study and discussion continued, and it was on one such day that Shiori found herself answering yet another question, after which she sank down onto the room's sofa.

"I need...a little break," she muttered.

It felt like she'd just endured a deluge of questions, and being an introvert by nature, she was now thoroughly exhausted. Rurii gave her a soft poke in the legs as if to say: "Everything okay?"

For the last two weeks, Shiori had often been surrounded by her fellow adventurers, and she was beginning to tire of all the attention. A large part of it was that the people asking her the questions were mages of higher rank; she couldn't help thinking that they would be better off asking more seasoned and experienced veterans like Nadia and Daniel. Kai, however, thought differently.

"They're getting advice and insight from all-new angles," he'd said, "so naturally they're going to be a bit clingy."

"Drink some of this," said Alec, passing her a low-level magical recovery potion. "It's a little different from the usual."

Alec was always keeping an eye on his lover, who he knew was on the weaker side in terms of physical strength and endurance (at least, when it came to adventuring standards). He was so concerned with her well-being, in fact, that he carried potions with him exclusively for her use. Shiori felt a little awkward about accepting the bottle, which was a herbal tea infused with fruit juice, concocted by the herbalist Nils. But upon tasting it, she couldn't hide her

surprise.

"Oh," she uttered. "Is that water grape I taste?"

Water grapes were a fruit that Shiori had suggested were good when it came to practicing control of your magical powers. It had a scent similar to grapes with some of the aroma of raw melon mixed in, but it was very much its own fruit.

"Yep," replied Alec. "It's also packed with nutrients that relieve exhaustion and strengthen the body. Nothing you'd call medicinal in terms of effects, but now I know that parents weren't buying them as snacks for their kids just because they were cheap."

Ever since the most recent king had been appointed to the throne—a man who was said to be very forward-thinking—the quality of food in daily life had vastly improved. While water grapes weren't nearly as prevalent in homes in the cities, the number of people buying them had risen of late, and so suppliers were increasing their stock. The fruit brought back memories for older housewives, and recently it seemed as though water grape syrup—once a staple in every home for children's health—was making something of a comeback.

"I had Nils share some of his water grape syrup," said Alec. "He says this is one of his best herbal teas yet."

"My...so I suppose this is the start of his herbal cuisine?"

"It might just be. The stench of his herbal tea I can do without, but this stuff I'm all for."

Shiori couldn't help but laugh. His sweet tooth always surprised her.

"Oh, Alec..." she murmured fondly.

The scent and sweetness of the water grapes helped ease the bitterness of the herbs. It was the kind of taste that a child could also drink with ease.

"Did you drink water grape syrup when you were just a boy?" Shiori asked.

"I did. My mother loved water grapes, so the fruit and the syrup were always on our kitchen table. She was so utterly awestruck by the fruit. 'I can't believe something can be so sweet and have no sugar,' she'd say. I never thought about it much at the time, but I can see now that for my mother, who was brought up as a noble, it might have been quite the curious discovery for her."

As he spoke, he watched a group of adventurers silently munching away at water grapes of their own. Just like Nils and Kai, most of them had memories of eating so many as children that they'd grown entirely sick of them. And yet, for a few others, who—like Clemens—hailed from more affluent upbringings, it was a most curious fruit indeed.

"Water grapes used to be an emergency farming crop," said Yksel, revealing a slice of information he'd just acquired from the library. "They're sweet, but it's said that the upper classes ignored them because they've got that raw melon smell to them and the color isn't much to look at."

He then put the skin—which was very much like a circular shell—in a basket. When the basket was nice and full, Joel came and carried it off; the plan was to wash them all and get them ready for use in training.

"They're like a little factory all of their own..." muttered Alec.

"Well, at least none of it is going to waste..." added Shiori.

"Yeah, there is that."

Alec seemed to enjoy the sight playing out before them. Joel had been on the sulky side during the lecture, but was in much higher spirits of late, which was fun for both Shiori and Alec to see.

"Looks like the experience helped him to level up," Alec commented.

"Yes. It wasn't easy, but I like to think there was great value in having him try his hand at new things. How did things go with you, by the way? You had a study meet recently, right?"

"Yeah, it wasn't bad. At about the midway point, I kind of turned into a straight-up teacher, but it's also true that you can learn a lot through imparting what you know. Oh, that reminds me—do you remember Toby from the orphanage? He came along and attended, and he's got potential. He can use some magic too, so I think with practice and training he'll make a fine swordsman. In a few years he might even be working alongside us."

"Wow... I see. He's giving it his best, isn't he?"

The casual conversation was good for Shiori, who felt a little reenergized. It was good timing, too, as that was when Zack arrived with messages that had come by way of messenger bird.

"Sorry," he said, interrupting the two. "Got a minute?"

"What is it, brother?" asked Shiori.

"Inquiries from another Guild branch and the knight corps."

Shiori had a feeling she already knew what the inquiries were. The look on her face said it all, and Zack chuckled.

"The Melbye and Chevelly branches are asking about the next lecture dates, and the knights have issued a dispatch request for a lecture of their own. I've also got letters from the last lecture's attendees."

Shiori took a look through the papers—which detailed follow-up questions from attendees and requests from people for content to cover in follow-up lectures—and her gaze grew a touch distant. It was a little too much for her to juggle all on her own. She had come away from her lecture feeling as though she'd had an impact, but never had she thought that the effects would ripple quite so far.

"Given the amount, I figure you'll keep things as they are for a little while," said Alec, "though you might want to switch to holding lectures periodically."

One or two inquiries arrived daily from other guilds, but over time this grew to be quite the amount. Shiori's own fellow adventurers were already asking her if she was planning another lecture, and Alec was thinking that instead of attending to everybody individually, she should hold regular lectures instead.

"Not a bad idea," added Zack. "I'd be grateful for it too, though I don't want you overdoing it."

"Yes, but given my regular work duties, I think once a month is as much as I can handle," said Shiori. "But I'm not sure. I think it would be easier with fewer people than last time."

"Fine by me. Those working support have their own schedules too, and I can

direct things once we've got a framework in place. Let me handle securing your assistants and arranging dates."

"Thanks, brother," said Shiori.

She saw Zack off with a smile and a wave, and then, when she felt a gaze on her person, she turned to find Alec watching her with a worried look. However, his gaze was not like the one she sometimes felt back when she constantly worked herself too hard; in his eyes now she saw trust.

"You've learned to rely on people," he said.

His fingers reached to the nape of her neck, where they gently took a strand of stray hair.

"Hmm...I have," Shiori agreed. "It's because of everyone here. Knowing when to rest is Adventuring 101."

Alec chuckled.

"That it is. But you know, when I started out I was reckless and I went too hard too, so I can't hold that over your head."

"Really?"

"Where I grew up, I was made to learn very quickly just how much I didn't know. So when I started adventuring, I wanted nothing more than to be independent as quickly as possible. I took to it all with everything I had, and Zack never let me hear the end of it."

Alec refused to acknowledge his own limits, and pushed himself every time. It was why he had often found himself bedridden at the time.

"Come to think of it, Zack *did* mention that the last time you came down with a fever," said Shiori. "He said you were always in bed with fevers and whatnot."

"Ugh... Zack," muttered Alec, his brow furrowing. "Couldn't you keep your big mouth shut...?"

"I remember thinking at the time, 'For someone who keeps telling me not to overdo it, he sure just went and overdid it,'" said Shiori jokingly.

"Ugh," Alec repeated, shrinking a little. "One day, though, Zack just snapped.

He had his greatsword unsheathed and he swung it around, shouting, 'Which is it?! You want to go back to living under someone's care, or do you want to learn your own limits?! Make up your mind, and do it now!' And well, he had quite the...grin...on his face. I quickly mended my ways."

"Oh..."

Zack was in many ways the picture of calm, but as a younger man he'd been somewhat extreme when it came to guiding those under his charge. When Rurii and Bla saw Shiori's reaction—both of them consuming water grapes at the time—the two seemed to giggle in their unique slime-like way. Alec smiled somewhat painfully at the trip down memory lane, but his features soon softened.

"In any case, the point of the story is that I wasn't all that different from you," he said. "I was drawn to you for a number of reasons, but...perhaps I wanted to reach out with a helping hand because I saw something of myself in you."

Favors received were favors passed on, and it was within the flow of such favors that Alec and Shiori both existed. Shiori now felt herself to be at the stage where it was time to pass the favor on.

"You know, after I actually taught a class," said Shiori, "it occurred to me that it would be so nice if there were a dedicated place where adventurers could study and learn."

The thought had been quite vaguely formed until now, but with a clearer image now in front of her, she found the courage to share it with Alec.

"I know that all adventurers go through training," she continued, "but there are no options for them to enter into a more structured apprenticeship, the way merchants and craftsmen can through their respective guilds."

Once a person registered as an adventurer, they entered a short-term teacher-student relationship with a high-ranking adventurer, but this period was very brief. At most it stretched out to three months, which was just barely enough time to cover preparation, the basics of the job, and the fundamental principles of combat. Once this training period was over, adventurers were considered ready and were thrown into the fray. On top of that, if the adventurer doing the teaching was called in for a request, the training was

suspended or stopped.

"This makes it hard to ask about things you want to learn, and the Guild environments aren't always set up so that they're conducive to research or self-study," explained Shiori. "I have a feeling that this is where many adventurers hit a wall."

It was of course possible for rookie adventurers to take requests while their training was on suspension. However, jobs for rookies were limited, and there was only so much that they could learn on their own with that free time.

"Yeah," agreed Alec. "I mean, it's one thing if you happen to live in a big city and have access to bookshops, but oftentimes working-class homes don't own even a single book. It's easy to tell a person from a background like that to study, but they're not even going to know where to start or what to look at. There are a lot of adventurers like that."

"That's why I was thinking that maybe things would be different if there was a dedicated place where such adventurers could study what they needed, when they needed it. But I think if you were to take such a thing really seriously, a place like the Guild would be too constricting."

The Tris Guild's meeting rooms and its library were currently playing such a role in a limited capacity, but the location had started its life as an old lodging house; in many ways, it was simply too small. The library was just barely big enough to hold its selection of books and have space for about ten people to read. It wasn't a space conducive to bringing in pens and such for dedicated study, and then there was also a risk that books might be loaned out to adventurers who were gone for days at a time. Adventurers were already booking the cafeteria and meeting rooms to hold their small study groups.

"We'd need something bigger," said Shiori. "A place with teachers. Seeing Rupert here makes it clear that teachers are a must."

"You've got that right. The younger adventurers simply love having him around."

Rupert Fagerholm, an archer who had retired after a leg injury, had been employed as the guild librarian. A drop in physical strength left him unable to draw a bow, but books were his hobby, and he had some thirty years of

adventuring experience and knowledge to draw from; when younger adventurers had a question, he almost always had an answer for them. It was good fortune that when they'd needed someone for the library, not only did they have just the man for the job, but he'd brought even more to the table than what they'd originally hired him for.

"It was very hard for me when I first started," said Shiori. "I was lucky to have Zack and the others watching over me, and though I managed to keep things together when I was just an assistant at the Guild, adventuring was another world entirely. There was just so much I had to remember and keep in mind. I know the job is all about freedom and that the cream of the crop rises to the top, but it became clear to me very quickly that wisdom, knowledge, and experience were everything."

For Shiori, she was saved in part by her past experiences growing up in a developed country with a dedicated education system. In her case, it wasn't just hard work; the knowledge she'd acquired growing up helped keep her alive.

"Yes, I see," mused Alec. "The way I was raised, and my education... I was nothing if not blessed. That foundation has supported me through my career. It's helped me get to where I am today."

Alec's mother had been born into the nobility, and she had served as a maid at the royal palace. That was the very reason she was able to teach her own child to read, write, and do mathematics. Her graceful manners and etiquette, too, were things Alec saw as a boy, and so he adopted them quite naturally. When his mother passed away and he was brought into the royal family, he had received the highest standard of education in both literary and martial skills. All of this had given him clear advantages when he began life as an adventurer.

Shiori continued, "On top of that, if we're really letting ourselves dream big, then along with the library and study rooms, I think something like a sharehouse where you could hold dedicated training sessions would be really great. Something that the residents could even use during the evenings. That said, given that the teachers would also be living there, there's lots to think about in terms of salaries and whatnot..."

Alec watched Shiori voicing her thoughts aloud, and his gaze softened, his

gentle smile stretching to the arc of his dark magenta eyes.

"Oh...um...what is it?" asked Shiori. "Why the look?"

"You're practically blinding," Alec said with a chuckle. "You've always been utterly charming, but when you talk about the future, it's like a blinding light just streams from you. It's beautiful."

"Oh, erm...Alec...while I'm overjoyed, I..."

The sudden and cringeworthy statement left Shiori feeling as though her skin were ablaze. She knew immediately that she had gone bright red. What was he even thinking, saying something so lovey-dovey in a place where anyone could hear them? And to Shiori's dismay, Alec's words did not go unnoticed. Linus whistled his approval, and Daniel laughed.

"Ah, what a thing to be young," he said.

A giddy air had swept through the room, but Alec seemed not to notice as his face once more took on a thoughtful look.

"But you know, I think a sharehouse is a great idea," he said. "You'd have a dormitory for adventurers, complete with an environment conducive to self-study and training facilities. It would be appealing to younger adventurers, and if there's a shared kitchen space, then you could just as easily hold cooking lessons too. If you're serious about it, then let's do it together. I'll post up some capital for it. If the idea goes well, we can expand on it by building more educational facilities."

The nature of adventuring work meant that attending a school with a strict schedule wasn't particularly easy. However, learning facilities with limited curriculums held over set periods wasn't a bad idea.

"The best thing would be for the guilds to invest in this kind of infrastructure, but that's easier said than done. For starters, let's just go as far as we can with our own ideas."

Alec smiled, but the glimmer in his eyes showed that the idea was one he believed in. Shiori knew that he would put lots of thought into it, and she was reminded he really did want to share his future with her.

"Yes, so shall we draw up a plan?" Shiori asked.

"Well, we've got work and your lectures to think about too, so let's not overdo it."

"That goes for both of us."

The two adventurers shared a chuckle as Rurii and Bla hopped around at their feet. Both Shiori and Alec had long felt uncertain when it came to their positions in the world, and the future had always felt vague and uncertain. Now, however, they could see the shape of the road ahead.

And on this particular day, they took the first historic step towards the sharehouse that would become the Adventurers' Training Academy, which a century later would become the Institute of Magic, heralded as the best place in the world for the study of the magical arts.

4

Once Shiori had reached a good place to stop, she let her body fall back against the chair and stretched. As the stiff joints in her body loosened, she let out a relieved sigh and turned her gaze out the window. Dusk was falling, and the city outside was lit up in gold.

But even then, it was actually well past nine in the evening already. For Shiori, who had grown up in Japan where even during the solstice the sun went down at seven, the unsinking sun of Storydia over this season was something so curious she just couldn't get used to it.

Over the next month and a half, the daylight hours would stretch until sundown, which was after ten in the evening. In Storydia, the month of May brought with it dawn at four and nightfall at nine, and was a lively, busy season for its inhabitants. The temperature often went above ten degrees, and the warmth encouraged trees and plants to sprout and bud, covering the land in vibrant colors. It was also a popular birthing time for forest animals, and among humans it was a great time for farming and carpentry.

Many magical beasts, too, grew more active with the melting snow. Those that had come out of hibernation or just given birth were on the search for

food, and their hunger led them to visit human settlements to feast on both recently planted and sprouting crops as well as young livestock. This, in turn, led to an influx of requests at the Adventurers' Guild.

May was also an easy time for people to exhaust themselves; with dawn so early and evening so late, people who worked by the height of the sun often found themselves working far later than intended. This was especially true of immigrants who had moved from lower-latitude areas.

"Winter makes people depressed, but summer can make people work themselves to exhaustion. Make sure you choose a good time to wrap up for the day."

Alec had left around noon to see to some personal business with the margrave, but he'd since returned home, which came as a surprise to Shiori. Alec couldn't help but chuckle at how lost she'd been in her work, and he walked over to her side, looking at her papers while he held out a cup of hot milk with honey.

"How's the draft going?" he asked.

"Once I write the conclusion, I'm done."

"That's very quick. I guess the process is different for people used to writing."

"I wasn't writing about too many different spells in the first place," explained Shiori. "I handled clerical work when I lived in Japan, so assembling something with a defined structure like this isn't too hard for me."

The writing of a magical tome was essentially the writing of a technical manual, and it was quite the challenge for one who hadn't undergone a specialized education. However, the booklet that Shiori planned to distribute at the Guild—which was a place where people of many different classes met—was a comparatively simpler piece of work; as long as the format was acceptable, the Guild would print it.

"The notes I made for the lecture last month worked great as a foundation," continued Shiori, "so it's been much easier than I expected. I think we'll be all done by the middle of next month. I'm scheduled to meet the illustrator at the end of this month."

"Oh, you mean Walt's recommendation?"

"Yes. Apparently they've published a number of books through the Lovner guild, and they have experience with textbooks."

"That's some connection... I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"Oh, and Annie has work here at that time. She said she'll come along with the illustrator."

"Wow. I bet the countess sure is busy."

"I just hope she doesn't work herself sick..."

"And you too. We've got an expedition next week. The itinerary is set so we don't have to rush, but take good care of yourself. I'll do likewise."

Shiori didn't know if he was born that way or had been cursed with the trouble as a youth, but Alec was prone to coming down with fevers. His warnings to Shiori were just as much warnings to himself.

"Okay, seeing as there's no need to rush your booklet either, I'd say you're done for the day," he said.

Alec was something of a worrywart, but Shiori knew that his heart was very much in the right place. His excessive worry about his lover's physical state came from him having lost his mother at a very young age. And so Shiori was happy to go along with his suggestion. She took the warm cup of milk on the side table next to her desk and brought it to her lips. The taste of warm milk and sweet honey, and the scent of flowers filled her mouth.

"Tasty," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it."

Alec sat on the bed by the desk with a smile, and took a sip from his own cup of hot milk. Rurii, too, sipped from its own cup happily. The slime always went heavy on the honey. The three spent the time before bed enjoying the sweet scent of honey that wafted in the air. Alec and Shiori looked out the window as the sun continued its descent, and spoke of the future.

"I received a letter from Conny," said Shiori. "While the exact start date hasn't been decided, the church would like me to teach illusion magic once a year.

That, along with helping the performance during the Nativity Festival."

"The ball is rolling, then."

"Yes. Now that the ceremony to instate the new archbishop is over, things have calmed considerably."

"I see. Even within the church there are factions, so it couldn't have been easy. Especially with an archbishop so young."

"True, but they say he's very capable, so there's nothing to worry about. They've asked for as many flowers as possible in my next performance at the Nativity Festival."

Alec chuckled.

"I see. So that's the plan. But we'll put that connection to good use for *our* future too."

"Yep."

"As for me, it looks like I'll be able to see Olivier somewhere between the end of June and the start of July. Rebecca will come after that."

Olivier was Alec's half brother, whom Alec had left to handle things at the castle. Rebecca was the woman who had broken his heart at that time, summarily tearing it to shreds. For Alec, who was such an earnest man, it was important that he meet with these two figures from his past, and reveal to them his honest feelings and the guilt he had long carried on his shoulders.

"Then you'll have to keep our schedules open," said Shiori.

"Yeah, and I'm going to ask Zack for some help. But I think as long as nothing sudden comes up for Olivier, things'll be fine. I might need you by my side when that time comes... Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't."

"Thanks. Oh, and about potential locations for a sharehouse. It hasn't been easy to find a place that meets our specifications. There are a couple of potential spots in the second district, but they're pretty close to the first district, so..."

"So they're quite far from the Guild, and being so close to the wealthy part of the city might make adventurers uncomfortable," said Shiori. "But anyway, even if we're managing the location together, there's no way I can afford a place in that part of town."

"That's nothing to fret about. I've easily got enough savings to buy two or three villas, as long as we're talking about meeting the expectations of lowerlevel nobility."

"What?!"

Alec was talking about purchasing multiple *villas* as casually as one might have spoken of buying *apples*. Shiori was in shock.

"I donate some of it occasionally, but otherwise I don't have much to do with my money," Alec said with a wry grin.

Designated requests from high-ranking nobles and the wealthy brought with them enormous monetary rewards to match the danger involved. But in Alec's case, he had also taken on work at the request of the margrave and his half brother; he would have accumulated quite the sum over his long career.

"I mean, it's true that I was shocked by how much I was paid for Annie's designated request, but..."

The countess's request had been an important one upon which her potential marriage had depended, and so she'd paid very handsomely for the work. Shiori had been so incredibly bowled over by the sum, however, that she'd gone to Zack to make sure that someone hadn't added an extra zero by accident.

"But you would have saved up quite a bit by now, I'm sure of it," said Alec. "At least enough to consider running a sharehouse."

Requests that designated a particular adventurer were, naturally, more expensive. Shiori often undertook such requests for both the Guild and for friends in her capacity as a housekeeping mage, and had saved enough money to live comfortably. Thanks to having been requested by the likes of the Lovner family and Tris Cathedral, Shiori had amassed enough in the way of savings that she could afford to buy a small house in the third district.

That said, things weren't as simple as just buying a house. Shiori had to

consider a potential future in which adventuring was no longer possible for her, and if that were to come sooner rather than later, she could not afford to be making any big purchases.

"Well, yes," Shiori admitted, "but I was thinking of something about as big as this apartment of ours."

"Well, it's going to be a big purchase for us either way. Fortunately it's not a decision we have to rush, so let's think it over and make our choice carefully."

"Okay."

There was a lot to think about in the meantime too. If they were going to continue adventuring while they ran their sharehouse, they would want to hire someone to work as the house caretaker.

"I discussed a little of our sharehouse plan with Kris," said Alec, "and he said he'd be happy to lend us someone to help."

"Sir Kristoffer did?"

"Yep. He's sympathetic to our circumstances. They wouldn't just be a caretaker for the house; they'd be a guard against suspicious activity while also acting as a messenger with the margrave. Of course, he made it clear that he'd only do it if you were comfortable with the arrangement."

Even if the people living in the sharehouse were fellow adventurers, you would nonetheless have a yet-undetermined number of people all living together. Kristoffer wanted to make sure things went smoothly for them.

"Oh, I think we'll want to take him up on that offer," said Shiori. "That would be a big relief for me, and convenient for him too, I assume."

"Really? Then I'll write him back soon."

"Great, thanks. And will you tell His Excellency that I wish him well?"

"You got it. But don't forget, he's probably got something of an ulterior motive, and I bet it has to do with those portable foods of yours."

"I don't doubt it," replied Shiori.

She couldn't help but giggle at their conversation.

"What's that all about?" asked Alec.

"We're so busy, but at the same time, it's so much fun."

At this time last year, all Shiori could think about was being able to survive from day to day. Now, she lived a life in which she truly felt she had laid down roots. It was like seeing the world through a wider lens; everything was so bright and vibrant.

"If you're enjoying it all," said Alec, tracing the line of her cheek with a finger, "then that's just proof that your heart is in a good place. Nothing could make me happier."

He meant every word, and she could hear the sincerity in his voice. He really was overjoyed to see the vast darkness inside her heart being cleared away. She put a hand to his fingers and smiled up at him.

"It's thanks to Rurii, Zack, Nadia...and more than anything else, you, Alec. You healed me."

He was kind in his approach, and he brought to her a gentle warmth, heartfelt words, and an overflowing love. He had guided her back to a place of comfort. His eyes were like the gentle peace of the evening sky, and the reflection of the magical lantern in them glimmered like the north star.

My guiding star. He's my guiding star.

"Shiori..." Alec said, his voice low and husky. "You are my guiding star. I spent so much of my life looking behind me, letting the past control me, but you brought me around, and helped me look forward, into the future...and I want to live that future with you. That's why you're my guiding star."

Alec took the cup from his lover's hand and placed it on the desk, then kissed her. It was a soft, sweet kiss that tasted of honey, and in it Shiori felt herself melt.

"Um, Alec..." Shiori started.

She pulled herself away just slightly, but they were still so close that their noses were touching. She felt the warmth of their breath between them.

"We've been so busy recently, and it's been such a long time..." she said.

Tonight she wanted to bask in his touch. Alec's eyes went wide for a moment as Shiori's request sank in, and he chuckled quietly.

"And to think I kept telling you to take the rest of the day off and relax," he said.

"You won't give me your touch?" Shiori asked, a pleading look on her face.

"I didn't say that," replied Alec, shaking his head. "Ask and ye shall receive. I will give you all the love you can handle."

His risqué smile told her to prepare herself, and he lowered her to the bed as he pressed himself on top of her and kissed her again. As they indulged in the touch of one another's bare skin, their warmth flooding between them, Alec whispered to Shiori sweet nothings, his voice soft and sweet, and filled with all the emotion he could not suppress.

"You are so adorable..." he uttered.

His lips tickled her skin with the warmth of his breath, and as Shiori ran her fingers through Alec's hair, she smiled. The magical lantern dimmed, and their voices softly echoed through the room as it sank into darkness.



Interlude 1: A New Beginning for the Girl Who Fell from Grace

1

"You want to visit her grave...?"

Vivi had come with her head of soft wheat-colored hair lowered into a bow. Ludger Lanellied was puzzled by the girl's request. Or rather, he was troubled by it. Vivi's friend Sheila had been part of the scandal involving Shiori, and in its aftermath she'd lost her life taking on a request that was beyond her ability to handle. Ludger, her fellow adventurers, and even the guild master had warned her against it, but Sheila had ignored them all. All that had come back after the failed request was a lock of her hair.

Vivi was now asking to visit her old friend's final resting place to offer her flowers. As he'd been Sheila's teacher, this was not an ask that Ludger particularly welcomed.

"I know just how shameless a request this is," Vivi said. "Especially after how rude we were to you. But I can't help feeling that I'm at least partially responsible for Sheila's fate. I simply have to see her."

Vivi had been the one to encourage Sheila Ander's bullying. Sheila had had her eyes on a man, and she'd seen Shiori as a rival for that affection. Vivi had used that to her advantage. But when it had all come crashing down around them, Vivi had fled. And now that she had come back, she could not help feeling that if she had stayed, then perhaps Sheila might still be alive.

"It wasn't your fault," Ludger said. "Sheila died because of her inexperience. I don't want you to get things twisted. If you carry that on your shoulders, it'll break you."

His words were blunt, but he spoke them because, to Vivi's surprise, it seemed he cared about her.

"Look, if you really want to go," he continued, "I'll take you. And don't worry about the request fees or the carriage fare—I've got that covered. Sheila was under my charge; she was my student."

Ludger also knew that Vivi was doing her best to confront the sins of her past. He said it was his job as her senior to help her along.

"I actually thought he was pretty cool for a while there, but he's married. Talk about a disappointment."

Sheila's words drifted back into Vivi's mind, and she understood then why Sheila had developed a crush on the man.

Now I get it. He's a blunt character, but he looks after the people he cares for. He's exactly what you'd expect of a cool grown-up.

While Ludger and Alec were very different people, in this way they were quite similar. Regardless, both of the men that Sheila had taken a liking to were already interested in—or married to—others. But even though Sheila was always destined for unrequited love, Alec was at least still single, and so she'd likely wanted to believe that she had a shot. Anyone who had a clue would have been able to see that Alec only had eyes for Shiori, though, and this had perhaps further stoked Sheila's jealous rage. And so, in the end, the reason that Sheila had refused to listen to Ludger's advice was at least in part due to spite.

It dawned on Vivi then that love was a truly, truly troublesome thing.

"Thank you so much," she said.

And though she felt the eyes of nearby adventurers boring into her person, Vivi lowered herself into a bow of thanks. Then she felt a hand tap her gently on the shoulder. It was Marena, Ludger's wife.

"Well, if that's the plan, then I'll come along for the ride. It might be a bit awkward if the two of you went alone."

Vivi, who actually *had* felt that traveling alone with Ludger would be totally awkward, felt the tension in her shoulders melt away with relief.

Grown-ups totally get it...

Now that she could think about things more calmly, Vivi understood the

bigger picture. She and her friends had been desperate and tense. They'd lacked calm. They couldn't relax. Seen through that lens, it was only natural that the "cool older guys" they were interested in kept their distance.

All of it served to remind Vivi of how far she was from the women she saw as "grown-ups." How much work would she have to put in, and how much effort, to reach that standard? The sheer gap in experience left Vivi dazed, and she realized once again that, when it came to some things, her innate talents would only get her so far.

2

Sheila's final resting place could be found in the farthest western corner of Torisval's western forested area. The location was not particularly far, and by carriage it was possible to make a day trip of it. Vivi, Ludger, and Marena all boarded a route carriage to a village near the forest and, after a short break upon arrival, set off on foot for their destination.

The trio reached a hunter's resting lodge after about an hour of walking. It was not far from this lodge that Sheila had been eaten by a pack of giant spiders that had made a nest nearby. By themselves, giant spiders gave rookie adventurers a little trouble, but nonetheless could be handled solo. In packs, however, they became far more difficult to manage, and even made life difficult for seasoned adventuring parties. Given that they made their homes in trees and long grass, some weapons and spells were better suited to the beasts than others, and one had to be constantly aware of one's footing. Then there were the webs that the spiders attacked with, which weren't just incredibly sticky, but also laced with a paralytic toxin. Those who found themselves frozen in the midst of battle were almost always destined to become spider food.

"I warned her until I was blue in the face," Ludger muttered. "I told her that the spiders were especially dangerous right before winter, because they're all so keen to fill up on food before the cold weather hits. She told me she'd be careful, but..."

It was then that he realized he'd actually spoken his thoughts aloud, and his shoulders shook.

"Oh, sorry," he continued. "I wasn't trying to blame you or anything, it's just...
Thinking about it leaves me a bit disheartened."

When Sheila studied under Ludger, she had listened closely and been a good, conscientious student. Good enough that he'd let her accompany Mia on a giant spider suppression request. He was certain that both of the girls understood the dangers involved.

"Sometimes I just can't help thinking that...maybe I could've done more," Ludger said.

In the world of adventuring, once your three months of training were up, you were on your own. And in truth, it wasn't at all uncommon for rookie adventurers to die not long after finishing their training. The casualty rate among adventurers in general, in fact, was far higher than the knight corps, which ran on a strict hierarchy of rank and order. In comparison, adventurers often worked solo or in small groups, and some also accepted requests outside of the Guild's usual channels.

"And when I think about that, I feel like I should have been more vocal and more pushy, even if it meant she would have gotten totally fed up with me," Ludger said. "I was the one that decided enough was enough, and that I couldn't hold her hand any longer, but...even then, you know? These things stick with you."

"I know the feeling," said Marena, "but what happened to Sheila wasn't anybody's fault. Her problems were just that: her own. And wasn't it *you* who said that carrying such things on your shoulders would only break you in the end?"

Marena was right. Vivi remembered the time vividly, and she knew. Back then, all of them—Vivi, Sheila, and Mia—believed that everybody was simply jealous of their abilities. It wouldn't have mattered what anybody had said; they would have ignored any and all criticism and advice.

"I think maybe the both of them believed that they could handle it," Vivi said. "Sheila probably thought she could do it on her own. When I heard that Shiori had defeated a pack of giant spiders by herself, I was absolutely certain that it meant I could too. Sheila was so sure of herself, so confident in her abilities,

that she probably felt exactly the same way..."

Knowing Sheila, she'd thought that if a low-level mage could take out a pack of giant spiders, then for her, the same task would be easy work. Or perhaps her actions had been born of a strong need to rebel against the man she had harbored feelings for.

"And I know this goes without saying, but Shiori wasn't fighting alone. She was with a party," Vivi continued. "She might have landed the finishing blows by herself, but the whole reason she could cast her spell in the first place was because she had her party there to protect her and buy her time. I never realized that until I returned home..."

Vivi had once been a member of the local vigilance squad, which she had joined again upon fleeing Tris and returning home. It had taken some time, but over countless hunting expeditions, the truth had dawned on her. She'd come to understand exactly why it was that she could fight without worry, and why she had time to cast her high-level spells. Simply put, it was because there was nothing to get in the way of her doing so; her fellow hunters fought to provide her the openings she needed.

"When Sheila, Mia, and I fought together, we all attacked in turn," Vivi explained. "I launched the first strike to keep the targets in place, then Mia used that opening to fire her bow, which disrupted the beasts' sight or further hampered their movements. Finally, Sheila launched a special attack to cut down whatever remained. Each of us always had the other two making it possible for us to attack, and ensuring that nothing got in our way. But when I returned to the vigilance committee, I couldn't fight at all the way I was used to, and in fact I kept getting in everyone's way. That was when I realized it."

When Vivi had fought with Sheila and Mia, the order in which they attacked had come naturally to them. They hadn't needed to think about things, and because they were all so talented, they had been able to continue their winning ways. That was the only way Vivi knew how to fight, and so she had a glaring weak point when it came to adapting to situations on the fly. Vivi believed that this weak point would have been shared among her friends. They had all been arrogant because they had all been exceptionally talented. None of them had ever given any thought to the idea that the whole reason they had survived as

long as they did was because the three of them had fought as a single unit.

And so, when one corner of their triangle—Vivi—suddenly disappeared, the party structure had collapsed.

"I know it might have taken some time," said Marena, "but coming to that realization means a lot. You had good people working in your vigilance committee, didn't you?"

"Yes...I did," Vivi replied.

When Vivi had returned home, many had looked down on her. They'd laughed at her, saying things like, "So in the end she wasn't all that, huh?" But for all the people who looked to disparage her, there were others who supported the disheartened Vivi, and looked to encourage her.

One such person, Vivi's neighbor, had offered her food, saying, "Look, I don't know what happened, but just make sure you keep yourself well fed, you hear?"

Another, one of Vivi's childhood friends, had dragged her from her room.

"If you've nothing better to do, come back to the vigilance committee."

It was then, as she had worked with the vigilance committee, that one of her seniors had spotted her weaknesses and bluntly pointed them out.

"Your magic has really improved," she said, "but your bad habit of not looking around you hasn't gone anywhere."

"I think the reason everyone was so kind to me," said Vivi, thinking back, "was because none of them knew anything of my part in the incident with Miss Shiori. But they all knew that I'd done *something*, and that it wasn't good. They couldn't bear to see it, so they looked out for me."

In a small village like Vivi's, everyone knew everyone else, and so the village was in many ways like one big family. It was the very image of a small countryside village, and it had nothing to offer save for the bounties of the local mountain and its farming produce. As such, when one of the village's daughters had come running home, it could not simply throw her to the wolves, and so had welcomed her with a warm, reassuring embrace.

After undergoing a fierce scolding from her sister, Vivi had spent a few quiet, peaceful months among the people of the village, who'd helped her rediscover the simple young girl she had once been.

"That's the stuff," said Ludger. "When you've got people who'll catch you no matter where you've fallen from, that's a precious thing. Sounds to me like going home was exactly what you needed. I just hope that *she's* back on her feet too..."

Ludger didn't utter a name, but Vivi knew immediately who he was talking about: the archer Mia Tern, Vivi's friend and the last person to see Sheila alive. Vivi had actually sent Mia a letter inviting her to come along on this pilgrimage, but Mia had made it clear in her blunt reply that she wanted nothing more to do with the past. Mia's last name in the letter was no longer Tern, so it seemed she'd gotten married since leaving the adventuring world. The letter had been short, but Mia had ended it with the words "I'm sorry," which no doubt showed her desire to at least be polite about it all.

"I think she's married now," Vivi said. "So she's probably doing well."

Vivi didn't know how Mia felt about all that had happened, but she had been the last one standing, so to speak; it was Mia who had seen things through to the end, and so she had nothing more to say to Vivi, who had fled for home and run away.

"Is that so? Well, it's not going to be an easy path for you from here on out, but give it your best, okay?" said Ludger, his face scrunched up as a few tears rolled down his cheeks. "That, and live a good, long, healthy life too."

They'd come to the roots of a big tree, at which sat a simple grave made up of nothing more than a small rock. Vivi wondered about the deep emotions wrapped up in Ludger's last comment. She was still young, and so she couldn't completely parse what Ludger meant beyond the words of the message itself. But even then, she felt the weight of his words, and for the first time since she'd received news of Sheila's death, she let all her tears out, wailing at the sky as she did so.

The simple stone by her feet told the story of everything that had been lost down a path of foolish arrogance. Not even eternity would ever see Vivi and her

two friends reunited.

"I'm sorry!" Vivi cried. "I'm so sorry!"

Her apologies echoed through the forest. She cried out to a friend she'd forced into action only to abandon completely, and she cried for the memories she still clung to, memories of a time that glimmered with an enjoyment she had never before known. Vivi cried for as long as her voice would let her.

Marena wrapped the girl silently in her arms, and Ludger put a hand to her back, which trembled with each sob. And all the while, the gravestone gleamed as it was covered in tears, and rays of warm sunlight shone down upon it.

3

"You feeling better now?"

Ludger looked down at Vivi with a wry grin. She'd cried and she'd cried, and then she'd sobbed, until finally, at long last, her heart began to calm. Her throat hurt from it all, and her eyes were so puffy she didn't want to open them. But all the same she found it in herself to nod, and placed a small bouquet of wilted flowers at Sheila's grave. Then she poured out some of the wine that Sheila had always liked over it, clasped her hands, and prayed. Ludger joined her.

"Well then, should we start on the trip back?" he said afterwards.

Vivi nodded and stood to her feet.

"I'll be back," she said, her gaze on the stone nestled in the tree roots.

She did not think that her arrogant friend would be particularly happy about the idea, but she also didn't think Sheila would begrudge her old pal for making the effort.

And so, that was exactly what Viv intended to do. As the seasons continued on their constant cycle, the small stone grave would eventually be swallowed by the forest and become just another part of its scenery, but until that time came, Vivi wanted to come back at least once a year, as both Sheila's former party member and her friend.

"Let me know when that happens," said Ludger. "Giant spiders don't often

nest in these areas, but you can never be too careful, you know? If I'm busy with other things, I'm sure you can find someone else to join you. Just don't come alone until you've got a good amount of experience under your belt."

Ludger was nothing if not kind at heart. It was the very reason that Sheila had fallen for him. Or perhaps this was just the generosity that came from men who had grown and matured through their experiences.

"I want to be a fully fledged adult, a real adventurer..." muttered Vivi.

Ludger and Marena shared a glance and smiled.

"If it's what you've got your heart set on, then you'll get there as long as you work for it," said Ludger.

"He's right. And you *are* set on it, aren't you? So just give it all you've got. You've got a long road ahead of you, and all your hard work will pay off."

Their words of encouragement felt warm as they soaked into Vivi's heart. Both Ludger and Marena spoke as if it were a given that Vivi would live a long life. Vivi planned to do exactly that. She would give this life her utmost, and she would not let it go; she would make the most of the one chance she had been given.

Vivi clenched her fists together, her resolve settling into a concrete goal in her heart. It was at that very moment that her stomach chose to call out, rumbling audibly. It was her appetite, and Vivi blushed. Lunch was nearing, and though Vivi had been sure to have a hearty breakfast, her body clock never ran late. The Lanellied couple burst into laughter.

"That's just proof that you're healthy," said Marena. "I'm getting peckish too."

"Then let's eat when we get back to town," said Ludger. "We've got time to kill before the next carriage anyway. The skewered barbecue fish here is amazing. Oh, and the mushroom-and-game-bird pie. Given the occasion, let's have a little wine to go with it."

"And you're paying, of course?"

The two bickered playfully, and invited Vivi to join them like it was only

natural. Vivi saw the faces of her old friends in their smiles, and she wiped away a few tears with her fingers.

"If it's Ludger's treat, then count me in!" she shouted, hurrying to join them.

As they left, a quiet, refreshing breeze drifted through the forest, carrying the scent of early summer.

Interlude 2: Swords, Family Portraits, and Pots

Alec and Shiori had come to a blacksmith that Alec was a regular at. It was the place he frequented to ensure his sword stayed in good condition, and he watched as the swordsmith Solveig Hazelius carefully looked over his most beloved weapon. Under the gentle light of magical lanterns, the sword glimmered a stunning silvery blue. The glimmering light, unique to moon ore, could be seen shifting from a deep magenta to a sapphire blue not unlike that of a jewel.

The blade of Alec's sword was so tough that it could slice to the bone of a dragon without chipping, but supple enough to absorb and deflect the same monster's attacks. It was quick to absorb magic too. No matter what magical element it carried, the sword never lost its strength or luster. It was neither too heavy nor too light, and instead felt just right in the hands of its wielder.

A magical sword made from moon ore was a weapon that all magical swordsmen longed to wield at least once in their lives. Alec had come into the possession of this one just as he was entering his late twenties.

Moon ore was fairly well distributed and could be bought if money was not an issue. However, acquiring the pure ore necessary for the forging of a magical sword was anything but affordable. Furthermore, given that the ore was also difficult to work with, the number of swordsmiths capable of handling moon ore was limited. As such, these weapons did not come cheap.

Nonetheless, Alec had continued to save money in hopes of someday realizing his dream. Even now, he could still remember it all as clear as day: the nervousness he'd felt at knocking at the door of the blacksmithing shop after accumulating a few years' worth of adventuring money, and the awe that had enveloped him upon finally laying hands upon the sword itself that was produced. It had been more than a decade since he'd saved his own money to have his sword forged. It was now dyed in his magical power, and its full potential was only ever realized when Alec himself wielded it. In the hands of

anybody else, it was nothing more than a blade.

When somebody let their magical power flow into moon ore, it took several years—sometimes decades—before that magical power dispersed. This was why moon ore was so incredibly difficult to work with, and why so few swordsmiths could handle it; unless they kept their own magical power below a set level, it would inevitably seep into the weapons they forged.

But Alec's beloved blade was for him alone, and over the years since acquiring it, he had cultivated its power.

"Ah, yes. I remember you," muttered Solveig.

She slid the sword from its scabbard and surveyed it with a keen eye, then let out an impressed sigh.

"Now this is quite the color," she said, referring to the blade. "I didn't mind what it was before, when it had that tint of gloom in it, but this here is the color of a person who is truly determined."

She spoke with the instincts of an experienced swordsmith. It was as if, by merely handling a blade, Solveig could look into the heart and mind of its owner. Her unique way of expressing what she read there was something that had troubled Alec on their first meeting, but many years had passed since, and Alec was now used to it.

"I can't speak to the color of the blade," said Alec honestly, "but the determination part? That is very much true. But, that tint you mentioned...was I really so melancholy?"

"Huh? You weren't even aware of it?" replied Solveig, her eyebrows lifting as she chuckled. "I don't even know what to make of that, young man."

The swordsmith was over sixty now, and apparently that meant the thirty-five-year-old Alec was still young, as far as she was concerned.

"You glimmered like an unsheathed sword," she said. "Ever cautious, and always ready to attack anything it did not deem a trustworthy friend."

"Always...?"

It was true that Alec was wary of strangers, and especially those who sought

to get close to him. Zack had pointed it out several times and Alec had looked to mend his attitude, but perhaps he hadn't been entirely able to shake it off.

Come to think of it, Alec also remembered both Linus and Ludger saying something along the lines of him being "kind of hard to approach."

"When you came here last year, after being away all that time, there was something worn out about you," said Solveig. "I could see it in your eyes. That came as a real shock to me, as did the sulking feeling I got from your sword."

Alec grunted. He had been unable to take his sword with him to the Empire, and though they had been inseparable for well over a decade, work had seen them forced to part for a number of years. Alec had made sure to leave the sword with a trusted friend to ensure it was taken care of, but Solveig's eyes and instincts missed nothing. After all, she was the swordsmith who had given the sword life in the first place. Her expression was like that of an overbearing mother's, and Alec barely had it in him to make eye contact with her strict gaze. Fortunately for him, the man polishing a pot nearby was ready to jump in and save him.

"Now, now," he said, "that's enough of that. Look at how uncomfortable you're making the young'n."

The chuckling old man was Botvid, Solveig's husband. He was the owner of the smithy and a skilled craftsman when it came to pots. In truth, the shop did not advertise itself as a swordmaker, and on the face of things, Solveig's specialty was knives and cleavers. The existence of Solveig the swordsmith was a secret, and only those in the know were aware of it.

Botvid grunted and stood to his feet, then slowly trudged over to his wife and looked up at Alec.

"Hmm," he murmured. "I have to say, though, you do look different. Like you've had some luck of late. A fortuitous meeting. No?"

Botvid's gaze flowed past his wife and the man she was gently bullying to Shiori and Rurii, who were avidly looking through the pots and knives on display.

"Never imagined someone as aloof as yourself would bring a woman here," he continued. "You found something to protect. Changes things, doesn't it?"

There was a joking prodding in Botvid's words, but a warmth in his gaze.

"Indeed. Meeting her changed everything for me. But it's far from a one-sided thing; she's protected me too. She saved my heart."

Shiori was not a woman who had to be saved, or a woman who had to be protected at all times. She was his equal. She was his lover, his comrade in arms, and his partner.

"Well, I never," said Solveig. "Looks like you've found yourself a keeper."

"The way you say it gives it the feel of a fateful encounter. Destiny," said Botvid. "Treasure that, you hear?"

Botvid stroked his white beard while Solveig laughed, her brown, curly hair wavering as she did so. Botvid planted a kiss on her head. The couple looked completely natural in one another's company. Theirs was a love that would have been filled with passionate whispers as youths, but had since settled into calmer, quieter maturity.

Alec had never forgotten the couple. They were seared into his memory, along with the family photo that adorned the wall of their workshop. Alec had never once seen his parents together, and so the photo of Botvid and Solveig had become like a symbol of the ideal couple and family that he dreamed of.

Though he knew his parents had loved one another, theirs had been a love that would not allow them to live together as a couple. It was true that, at the time, polygamy was allowed among the aristocracy, but Alec's mother had not gone through any of the preparations to become a concubine. It was a time in which a man having a mistress was not uncommon—indeed, it was even allowed—but by his actions, Alec's father had indeed betrayed his wife and family. This was true also to Alec's mother and the child she would bear.

In this sense, Alec's mother, too, bore some of that sin, for having entered a relationship with a married man, and desiring from him a child. Alec's father, Robert, had been the ideal king, and Alec held great respect for the man. He was grateful to his father, but he could not easily rid himself of certain muddied emotions. Yes, he felt indebted to his mother and father for raising him so lovingly, and yet he felt a deep sense of incongruence in them as a couple and as parents. He was their child, and yet he had been made to suffer far more

than either of them for their actions, trapped somewhere between who he was and society's accepted ideas of what it meant to be good and proper.

Neither of his parents could have been said to be without fault, no matter how much he loved and was grateful to them, and this feeling clung to him like dissent taking root in his heart.

Which is why Alec answered Botvid the way that he did.

"I will. I hope the two of us end up just like the two of you."

Botvid and Solveig were taken completely by surprise by this.

"Knock it off," said Botvid, rubbing his nose but grinning ear to ear. "You're making this old man all bashful."

"What a nice thing to say," added Solveig, dabbing at a slight redness in her eyes.

Alec had come to meet the Hazelius couple through swords and the forging of them, but he could easily tell that they cared and worried about him. But it wasn't just them. There was Olivier, his younger brother; Zack, who was like an older brother to him; his friends; his fellow adventurers; and of course, his lover. Knowing that so many watched over him—including Botvid and Solveig—made Alec happy.

Connections between people weren't always a good thing, but everyone was capable of connections formed of warmth and kindness. As long as one could remember this fact, it was enough to keep a person going.

And to think that she came to this world entirely alone, all of her past connections torn away, just like that...

Shiori had come to this world without a single thing to rely on, and had been plunged into despair. The strong bonds that she had built from those around her had taken great effort. To say that she had shed blood, sweat, and tears did a disservice to just how hard she had struggled. Alec closed his eyes as he thought about just how much she had been through.

"Erm..."

Shiori's voice drifted up nervously from behind him, a sound that stirred Alec

from his thoughts. He turned to see her holding a beautiful silvery blue pot in hand.

"How much is this pot?" she asked timidly.

"Aha! I see this one's got an eye for quality!"

Botvid bounded forward, the glint of the salesman in his eyes. In an instant, the quiet air of the blacksmith was suddenly vibrant.

"Usually it'd be ten gold pieces, but I'm prepared to give it to you for just five! Think of it as a celebratory discount. It's a gift, sure, but a man's got to feed his family! That's just business!"

"A gift...? But, well... I had a feeling this would be expensive, but five gold coins..."

The pot wasn't too big, nor was it too small. It wasn't too deep, nor was it too shallow. It was literally the perfect size. To Shiori's delight, it was also incredibly light, and appeared very durable. She'd thought it perfect for expeditions, but all the same, she couldn't quite believe the asking price.

"Maybe it's a waste to use something so valuable for campsite cooking..." she uttered.

"Nope! That there is made especially for adventuring," said Botvid. "Thinner and lighter than steel, that pot is made of stuff that'll even block a dragon's attacks... All right, maybe not a dragon's, but a serpent's, most definitely! Spatulas won't leave scratches, for one thing, but it also heats easily and holds that heat well! And it's pretty much nonstick to boot! Grime'll come off with a simple wash, and cleaning ain't no thing! That pot is *the* perfect piece of cooking ware for the campsite!"

"Wow! That's amazing!" remarked Shiori. "That certainly is worth the money. The design is so pretty too, I feel like just using it will brighten my mood."

"You said it! It keeps heat, it's durable, it feels wonderful to use, and the design is a delight for the housewives that lay hands on it... But uh, yes...the price *is* admittedly something of a hurdle for buyers, that much is true. Most visitors are put off by the fact that a regular steel pot functions just as well."

"That shouldn't come as a surprise," commented Alec, inspecting the pot with a frown. "A rookie adventurer could fully deck themselves out for the price you're asking."

That was when he felt it—the slight hint of drifting magical energy, and the glimmer of the pot itself...

"No way..." he uttered. "You didn't..."

"Oh, you bet your bones he did," said Solveig.

There was a clear hint of exasperation in the swordsmith's voice as she glared at her husband, who, under her gaze, suddenly looked decidedly shrunken.

"This is made from moon ore?" Alec asked.

"That it is," replied Solveig. "I put aside some moon ore for a knife, and he goes and makes a pot so expensive that no self-respecting lady in town will lay a hand on it."

Low-grade moon ore wasn't suitable for forging swords, but that didn't make it cheap by any means. Fashioning a knife from such moon ore, however, would likely find a customer in a rich adventurer or a collector among the influential. Instead, Botvid had seen fit to craft a luxury pot of such quality that a buyer for it would be near impossible to find.

"Well, look," said Botvid, struggling to explain himself. "I just knew that the stuff would make for quite the frying pan, and so I just had to make a pot, even if it was only the once..."

Botvid had indulged himself purely out of passion. The pot was, in every way, a product of his obsession. So he'd gone to chefs around the area to see if any were interested, but all of them had turned him down; they were used to working with very particular materials, and did not want something new spoiling their workflow.

"So that's why you pounced on Shiori's interest in it," said Alec.

But even then, and even after the half-price discount from ten to five gold coins, it was still a hefty price to pay for a pot. The moon ore element made it unlike anything else, but among pots it was prohibitively expensive. Or at least

so Alec thought, but when he next looked at Shiori, he saw that she could not easily give it up.

"What should I do...?" she muttered. "Should I just go for it...? Hmm, but then again... I do so love the lightweight pot set I have at present, but the coating is a bit mediocre. That's probably because of how much I use them, but given that I have to buy a new set twice a year, I don't think they're a good fit for me. Not to mention that even when it's light, steel is heavy, and I'm always carrying at least two pots with me, so..."

Aha—so in Shiori's case, pots are no different from any other adventuring equipment.

Botvid was a bona fide craftsman when it came to pots too; if he gave something his seal of approval, it was legit. Which meant that in reality, there was only one correct decision.

"Buy it," said Alec. "A pot is no different from a weapon or a piece of armor for you. In which case, why bother laboring over the choice? I'll chip in to pay for some of it."

Shiori was shocked by Alec's sudden push, but eventually she nodded.

"Okay," she said.

It was her weapon of choice, so to speak, but all the same she politely refused Alec's offer to chip in. Instead, she asked him to loan her what she didn't have on hand, then presented the coins to Botvid.

"Bet you didn't expect to stumble across a deal like this today," said Alec.

"Not at all. Thanks, Alec."

Solveig told Alec she'd have his sword ready by the following day, and Botvid looked ecstatic to have finally sold the moon ore pot he thought might never leave his smithy. The couple saw Alec and Shiori off with a smile, and Rurii slid after them, happy to have received a shiny piece of metal as a gift.

"Are you going to use the new pot tonight?" asked Alec.

"Yes. There's so much I want to try before I head out and use it on an expedition. Do you have any requests?"

"Pork shogayaki," replied Alec immediately. "And vegetable soup, the one with the pork fat in it."

Shiori laughed in surprise, then flashed Alec her usual smile.

"Those are the first things I cooked for you on our first expedition together," she said.

"You remember, huh?"

It had been Alec's first job as an adventurer since returning from his mission in the Empire. It was also his first time meeting Shiori. It was as if he could still remember each of her words and gestures. When she'd suggested a bath that evening and made one out of the earth, he'd been stunned. When he'd tasted the food she'd cooked at the campsite, he could have died with shock. But he'd also caught a glimpse of the grief and gloom that scarred her heart. All of those moments he could recall as if they had happened just yesterday. That was the extent to which she'd left an impression on him. He'd been bowled over by both her thoughtful approach to work and the unique magic she wielded, but it was her kind, gentle character that drew him to her. By the time their expedition had come to an end, Alec was in love.

The dishes she had cooked on that first fateful evening had become his favorites, and Shiori, too, remembered them.

"That was the first time we ever worked together," she said. "I remember everything...all of it."

Shiori had thought him aloof and distant, and had been surprised at how openly he said what he thought. He had shown a great interest in her work, and had offered her the help of a warm hand as though it were the most natural thing in the world. His gesture had touched her with unspeakable joy.

"So I think that even from that first day, you became a part of my thoughts," Shiori admitted.

Their first expedition together was a fateful encounter, and so for Shiori, too, those dishes were meaningful.

"I'm so happy you'd say that," said Alec.

With the moon ore pot in one hand, and his other around the shoulder of his lover, Alec nuzzled his nose into Shiori's black hair and kissed her. Shiori laughed, and as she looked up at him, he covered her mouth with his own, enjoying the lingering sweetness in their kiss.

"Well then, I guess the menu is sorted," he said. "I'll prepare the bread and salad. The whole grain bread on the shelf is fine, right?"

"Yes. It'll go great with the shogayaki."

"Making shogayaki sandwiches with that bread is delicious. I just can't get enough of that bread when it's soaked in the ginger soy sauce. But then again, rice is just as tempting... What's a guy to choose...?"

"You really do like shogayaki, don't you?"

Rurii seemed to enjoy their interaction, and the slime bounced up and down, holding the shiny piece of metal above its head. There was a relaxed and gentle air about the three of them as they walked the streets, chatting about nothing in particular. And yet, each moment felt so very precious.

Alec looked to the photo of Botvid and Solveig as the portrait of his ideal family, but there were many others—both adventurer and passerby alike—who passed by Shiori and Alec in these moments with envy in their eyes, and the hope that someday they, too, might be a part of a moment so warm and loving.

Interlude 3: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ March XX

It was snowing almost every day, but recently we're seeing warmer weather and the snow is melting. The sun is out for longer, and everyone is a bit happier and brighter for it. My slimekin back at the Blue Forest are playing games where they "hunt for spring." I thought maybe I'd play long-distance this year.

You see, in town you get lots of people walking the street in colorful clothes like spring flowers, and shops selling cauliflower mushroom soup and grilled aurora trout flavored with salt. Even in town you can find all sorts of hints of spring! It's so much fun! I bet all the slimekin back home would love to hear about it!

Shiori and Alec are enjoying the season too. They like looking out the window together and talking. Sometimes they drink tea, then they kiss and get touchyfeely, and then they hug each other close. They look really happy. Last year Shiori looked kind of lonely in the spring. She had lots of friends and she was always smiling, but there was a big hole in her heart, and it was like all of the good things and all of the fun things just fell right out of it. It was really sad.

So it makes me really happy to see my dearest friend smiling as brightly as a beautiful spring day. Fyrklover told me it's because that hole in Shiori's heart was filled with an abundance of warm, kind words. Fyrklover works at the orphanage, where there are lots of lonely kids, so it's really knowledgeable when it comes to that kind of thing.

Huh. Words really *are* important for humans. Sure would be nice if I could communicate directly with Shiori like that. Hmm. Maybe I'll practice writing. My compatriot Pel is slowly learning letters too. It says that Olivier and Cecilia are teaching it.

Today Shiori had a surprise visitor waiting at the Guild. It was Vivi, who tried to bully Shiori in the past. She and her friends thought it was weird that everyone talked about how good Shiori was even though she was a low-level mage. They decided to see for themselves, and they tried to attack her. Since then, Vivi has been thinking over things a lot, and she came to apologize.

Alec and Zack were worried. I didn't really like Vivi much either, but she really had learned her lesson. She'd gone back home where everyone was kind to her. It made her realize what she'd done wrong. So in the end, Shiori and Vivi shook hands and made amends. Then Vivi cried, but Zack said he'd look after her. Apparently he's good at that. So all's well that ends well!

Shiori was still conflicted about it, but Alec held her close and that seemed to help. Sometimes that guy is about as dense as a brick wall, but he's nothing if not reliable.

"Deep in my heart I can't quite let go of things, and I'm still not entirely comfortable around her, but she's really thought it through. She understands that what she did was wrong, and she came in person to apologize. So I think we can put it to rest. The two of us will be fine from here on out."

That's what Shiori said, and then she smiled like always. She's so strong. Humans are really complicated creatures, what with their convoluted emotions and all. But that also makes them interesting, and it's why I like them.

■ April XX

Shiori and Alec were really busy today preparing for the housekeeping magic lecture tomorrow, so I went out by myself.

I went to hang out with the grandpa in the sewers, and found the wandering slime down there with it. I hadn't seen it for ages. Not since we both ate that snow bear in Silveria. The wandering slime is one of the grandpa's brethren, and it travels all over the place gathering information.

After the wandering slime and I parted ways, it went south. It visited the town where the king is and saw all these wonderful buildings and a huge lake. It ate delicious fish and clams, and it even met with Pel. From there it felt the call of the ocean and so that's where it went. It ran into all sorts of trouble; it got

chased around by a fish as big as a mountain, and got caught in the clutches of a big brown creature like a brain sucker variant. Still, the wandering slime said that the ocean is so vast and deep that it couldn't see the other side of it, and it's really interesting because it tastes like salt. It picked up lots of shiny and beautiful shells, met with ocean slimes, and said the ocean was a delight full of the unexpected.

The wandering slime made friends with some humans who treated it to a feast of delicious seafood. They even brought out the brain sucker variant that almost caught it early. Boy, the wandering slime was sure surprised by that. But as it turned out, the creature wasn't a brain sucker at all; it was actually a giant octopus from the northern seas, which humans grill and smoke as food. Brain suckers don't taste good at all, but according to the wandering slime, the giant octopus was really juicy and it tasted like the sea.

I'm so jealous. The ocean sounds like so much fun.

There's so much interesting stuff to see and so many surprising experiences to be had. I totally want to go someday.

Anyway, I had a great time talking with the wandering slime, and then it set off on another journey. It was headed west this time. It wanted to see the big city out that way, then head over the mountains and far into the distance.

I hope it has a safe trip! And I bet it'll bring back a whole heap of interesting stories!

■ April XX: Departure

Today was the day of Shiori's housekeeping magic lecture. She's an instructor today, set to teach everyone her magic. When we arrived at the Guild, it was packed full of people. Even Walt was there, whom we traveled with back in Silveria. He's been really busy of late, and so Annelie told him to get out and enjoy the fresh air for a change. I had no idea. I hope he gets a chance to relax and refresh his spirits!

Speaking of which, Zack's familiar Bla joined us for the lecture. Zack said he wanted Bla to get out and enjoy the forest every once in a while, and Bla just couldn't wait. Apparently the Hasslo Forest is jam-packed with all of Bla's

favorite bugs, but it was really hoping to see something new, like something that wasn't already in the Blue Forest.

Shiori was really nervous to be front and center and to have so much attention on her, but she did her best not to let it show. Apparently there were people at the lecture that were waiting for her to slip up so they could laugh at her. That's not too different from magical beasts when you think about it; snow wolves and other animals that live in packs have it really tough sometimes.

Us Blue Forest slimes only ever really take it easy and try to have a good time, so unless it's something really dire, we never have any issues between ourselves. I mentioned this to the blizzard cat Sigurd, who was like, "And to think you slimes made it this far as a species..." Sigurd couldn't believe it.

But us slimes are really good at hide-and-seek, and when push comes to shove, we're strong too!

■ April XX: Hasslo Forest

When everyone had gathered, we all jumped into carriages and were on the move! It took about an hour to get to the forest. Also, it was Bla's first time riding a caravan, and so it was jumping every which way with excitement, and Alec couldn't help but laugh.

Some people were sneaking glances at Shiori on the way, probably because she's an Easterner and they're not very common. It made her nervous because some of the people didn't seem very nice, and some of them were saying that if her magic turned out to be nothing special, they'd show her up. I was thinking that maybe I'd eat a couple of them all secretive-like.

But it turned out that my plan wasn't necessary, because as soon as Shiori demonstrated her magic, those doubting types didn't have anything to doubt anymore. The spells that Shiori uses are all quite unique and very difficult, which makes them hard for ordinary people to cast. But Shiori doesn't think her magic is all that special, and so today's lecture wasn't really about teaching people spells, but more about how to use magic and how to practice for improvement.

And you know what? Everybody who attended was already pretty powerful to

begin with, so I bet that with some practice they'll be even more powerful!

While Shiori was doing her teaching thing, us familiars went for a stroll through the forest. Sigurd can fly, so it just took off all like *whoosh*! Bla and I were content just oozing over the snow, and sliding up and down trees so Bla could look for bugs. In the Hasslo Forest, there are white star ladybugs, crystal bugs, snowfield phasmid infants, and fairy dragonflies, which are a bit on the rare side.

I have to say, Bla really likes bugs. I was surprised at how much it knew about bugs suddenly, and it turned out that Zack had bought it an insect encyclopedia. Bla says it's been studying, but I had to wonder: Was Zack reading the book for Bla? Zack *hates* bugs, so I was really curious.

■ April XX: Eklof Village

Lunch was prepared by the people that work at Annelie's manor. Their food tasted a bit like Shiori's food. It was delicious. Later we found out that Dennis had used Shiori's dishes as a reference. Everyone was like, "That makes so much sense."

Everybody loved the food, but Nils only drank a little soup, then collapsed and had a rest. He's not used to using magic a lot, so he actually exhausted himself by trying too hard. And to think he's a doctor! He practiced until he went really pale. I thought it was a bit odd. He drank lots of recovery potions, and some of his familiar Eir's very nutritious sap. That made him feel a bit better.

After lunch, it was back to practice and study...well, it should have been, but then there was this great big avalanche at a village not far from where the lecture was, so everyone took off to help.

The village houses had been crushed and people were trapped under them, and a group of people who went to hunt a magical beast still hadn't returned. Fortunately, Shiori cast her search magic and helped to rescue all the people who were trapped in the snow.

Hmm, you know what? Shiori's magic is really something. She can find living creatures even faster than a magical beast can sniff them out. Everyone around was really shocked by Shiori's speed.

Still, it seemed like going into the mountains to look for the hunters that hadn't returned was going to be really hard work. It turned out that the mountains might have a really dangerous magical beast lurking in them. Apparently it was called a jormungand, and it was made by the people in the country next to Storydia.

The adventurers knew they had to try and help the missing hunters and slay the jormungand, and so Shiori and Alec headed up into the mountain with a party of experienced adventurers.

And me! I'm totally going to help!

■ April XX: Search and Rescue

The path up into the mountain was a mess. It was all covered in snow and fallen trees. We had to take a detour, and all the while we were checking the snow for the lost hunters, but it was really hard work. We didn't even find one of them.

Even Alec and Nadia were looking exhausted, and they're super tough. Shiori had been using her magic since the morning, so she was tired too.

We didn't know if the hunters were trapped under the snow in the first place, but because they'd walked so close to the path of the avalanche, we had to at least be sure. But it's really hard, tiring work to search when you know you might come up empty-handed. And the search area was so vast, which made it hard for Bla and me too. All we found were some magical beast carcasses.

Snow absorbs sounds and smells, so even magical beasts with a powerful sense of smell have trouble searching for things in the snow. Dogs and wolves are pretty good at it, but even for them it still takes time.

Everyone was getting really worn out, and that was when Shiori thought up an even more amazing search magic. It's much thinner than the usual spell and it has lots of tendrils that branch out in complicated paths as they stretch. Shiori said she was copying something called capillary vessels. Whatever it was, the new spell lets her search both far and deep.

With her new magic, Shiori picked up the signs of two people in the snow!

One of them was badly injured, and the other was just a bit cold, but both were alive. Thanks to Shiori teaching her magic to people back at the village, they were able to find another two of the party: a person and their familiar. We learned about that from an adventurer's bird familiar, who brought us a message.

I mean, seriously, though, Shiori is amazing. She's not strong, but she knows lots and it gives her lots of ideas, so people rely on her. The grandpa of the sewers says that humans are really weak among living creatures, but they're really good at using their heads. Gramps really knows what he's talking about.

"Sorry, Rurii, but can you carry these two back to the village?" Shiori asked. My time had come.

Of course! Leave it to me! Watch and learn, Bla! Also, take good care of Shiori while I'm gone!

I slid back to the village all like *whoosh*! Nils and Ellen were waiting for me and at the ready, because the bird familiar had gotten word to them before I arrived.

"Have the injured hunter drink this," said Nils.

He gave them some of Eir's oddly colored medicine, which was made from its leaves and had a real strong medicinal kick that helped to heal injuries. Looked to me like Eir had learned to concoct medicines after spending so much time with Nils. That's impressive. Here I was thinking that Eir just lazed around doing nothing. Eir called me mean for pointing that out, but I only ever saw Eir lying around in its pot drinking recovery potions. What was I supposed to think?

After Nils and Ellen treated the patient and fed them some medicine, they got a little better. The medicine had a relaxing effect too, so the hunters just fell right to sleep. I prayed that they'd have a quick recovery!

Just as I was about to head back up the mountain to rejoin Shiori and the others, a man came stumbling down the mountain. It was one of the hunters that everyone had been looking for! He'd run away when he saw the magical beast and then the avalanche happened and he'd made it out by himself. He was about as tired as humans could get, but he was unhurt. A good night's

sleep would see him put right. Isn't that just wonderful?

That hunter drank some of Eir's medicine too, and he was out like a magical lantern. I could see then that he really *was* tired.

Rest up and get well soon!

■ April XX: The Guiding of the Souls

When I went back up the mountain, I hitched a ride with the knight Leo, who had a magical dog sled. The dogs are called manegarms, and they fly over the ground as they pull the sled. Like Sigurd, manegarms can only fly a limited height from the ground, but rocky paths mean nothing to them and they're smart as well. They're used a lot for search and rescue.

"Hold on tight and don't fall off, young'n!" said one of the manegarms.

It was odd to be called that, because I was pretty sure I'd been alive much longer than any of them...but then again, it wasn't the dog's fault. There's no telling a slime's age just by looking at one!

The dog sled got us to Shiori and the others in no time flat. By the time we arrived, the jormungand was already slain. But it was a real shock to see, I'll tell you that. It looked totally different from what Alec had said earlier, and there were two of them. Because nobody really knows anything about the beasts, it was decided that they should be taken back to the royal capital so they could be studied.

Bla told me that the jormungand cried out when it died, and it'd said, "You cowards! Throwing us to the blasted cruelty of that merciless witch!" Bla wanted to know who the jormungand was calling a merciless witch...

I had a feeling it was probably Shiori, but the jormungand sure was harsh with its choice of words...

It looked to me like rumors of Shiori's chili-oil-meets-brain-sucker incident had spread even farther than I thought. I decided it was something we could talk about at a later date. All the adventurers were at their physical limits, and we all wanted to get the two fallen hunters back home as soon as we could.

Everybody was waiting for us back at Eklof Village. The two old hunters who passed away were much loved by everyone, so losing them draped the whole village in sorrow. But when Alec told them about one of the old men's last words, nobody could help themselves, and they laughed. The old man had done his duty, so he didn't have to worry about his wife getting all angry at him in the afterlife.

To make sure the old men made it back to their wives safely, the village held a ceremony to pray for their safe passage. Everybody surrounded the coffins of the two old hunters, where they sang, danced, ate delicious food, and shared fond memories. It was a lively evening full of tears and laughter. It was such a big party that I was certain the old men made it to the afterlife without trouble.

During the ceremony, Shiori, Alec, and Walt talked about all sorts of things. But in the middle of it all, Shiori burst into tears. She said she heard the voice of her mother from back home, and the feelings overwhelmed her. Walt explained that sometimes people receive messages from loved ones at the Guiding of the Souls. It was like a show of gratitude from the spirit world; as a thank-you to the people who prayed for the safe passage of others, they delivered the voice of those you couldn't meet again.

And, yeah... Shiori can't ever go back home, which means her family back there can never see her again...

Shiori said that the voice said, "All I want is for you to be happy." It made me a bit sad, but the words are so nice and so warm. You could tell they really loved and cared about Shiori, and that made me all warm inside too.

We're going to be so happy! Shiori and Alec and me, and of course, you too, Walt!

"Me too?" said Walt. "Well, I don't have anything like that on the horizon, you know...?"

He was sipping at some wine and looking through his notebook, and his face looked just like when Alec looked at Shiori. I took a peek and saw that there was a sketch in the pages of the notebook that Annelie had drawn. It was a picture of Yae, the Eastern woman who had come to see Shiori a while back. There was also a beautiful paper wrapping that was used for Eastern sweets, and Walt

looked at that with a gentle smile on his face.

Hang on a second! Say what?!

■ April XX

I slept like a rock that night, and when I woke up, Walt and his group were already getting ready to leave. Their schedule had been thrown off by the search and rescue stuff, so they had to return home on the double. I was a bit sad he was leaving, but I knew we'd see him again.

Bye, Walt! Say hello to Annelie and Dennis for me!

All the adventurers said goodbye to the villagers as well, and we headed back to Tris. Zack looked the same as he always does, but actually he'd been terribly worried, and I saw him hide for a moment to let out a long, relieved sigh. But I mean, of course he was worried! We were only supposed to go out for a housekeeping magic lecture, but then we got caught up in a search and rescue operation, and it was all caused by a weird and mostly unknown magical beast!

But I knew that everyone would be fine because Alec and Shiori and their friends are all so strong. Nobody got badly hurt, and the magical beast was felled in the end. It was a great opportunity for Bla to learn the ropes too, so it's ready and raring to go for the next time it's needed.

"Ah, well, that's good to hear. I'm counting on you, Bla," said Zack.

He grinned and gave Bla a pat, and Bla looked really happy.

"Those two look just like father and son..." muttered Alec.

And you know, I had to agree with him.

■ April XX

Today I went to the Tris Orphanage with Zack and Bla. We were delivering the magical beast parts that Bla picked up in Hasslo Forest. There was a sparkly fairy dragonfly wing, and an alphan cicadetta husk that looked as clear as a soap bubble and even had a little rainbow tint to it. Reverend Jens and all the kids were overjoyed. Even Fyrklover couldn't stop staring at them; they were so

unusual.

Zack, however, looked kind of pale. I guess even wings and husks are a bit too much for the guy. But actually, Shiori offered to go in his place. Zack turned her down, saying that thanks to Bla he'd gotten better about it.

I really hope someday he gets over his fear! Whenever bug extermination requests come in, it always looks like such an ordeal for him!

■ April XX

I got some good news through the grapevine from my slimekin. The slimes of the Blue Forest have become friends with the people of Brovito Village! Sometimes the slimes go over to play with the villagers. The slimes were really curious about the footbath that Shiori inspired Brovito Village to make, and so while they were hanging out in the area, they started to make friends with the locals.

Sometimes the slimes help the villagers with work, and sometimes they play with the kids, and sometimes they show tourists around, and sometimes they get to eat skewered meat or giblets when people are dressing their produce. It sounds like they're having a blast every single day!

One of the white slimekin even became the local doctor's assistant. The clinic has seen an increase in patients, and people are being carried in with injuries or illnesses, so the doctor is really glad to have a helping hand. Apparently the doctor became fond of slimes because of that time way back, when I helped out during the snow wolf attack.

Shiori and Alec are always talking about the importance of connections, and I guess this kind of thing is what they mean. I'm totally going to have to visit the next time I head home!

■ April XX

Today I got a shiny piece of metal! It's a piece of moon ore, and it sparkles just like a star. I put it in the candy tin that Shiori gave me, and I keep it with my other treasures. My collection is growing, and that makes me happy. I have a

magical fire stone that is all smooth and warm, and a crystal bug wing that Bla gave me. It's beautiful and it glimmers like snow.

Shiori says my collection of memories is growing. I'm having such a great time.

■ May XX

When I was heading out with Shiori and Alec for work, I bumped into Solne at the western gate. Solne is a sunset-colored slime, and a familiar of the knight who works on guard at the gates. When Solne saw me, it stood at attention and saluted, just the way the knights do. Solne told me that everyone loves it. I thought it looked really cool.

That reminded me that Pel, Olivier's familiar, learned to greet people in the manner of the royal palace, and it made lots of new friends that way.

Sometimes when I wave at people they think it's cute and we become friends. Greetings are so important for humans, huh?

■ May XX

Shiori and Alec have been really busy recently. Shiori is teaching everybody her housekeeping magic, writing her book, preparing for lectures, and then working even after she makes dinner every day. Alec, too, has been out and about and rushed off his feet a lot.

I was a little worried that maybe the two of them would work too hard and come down with a fever, but they both look happy. They're working hard to live a good life for them and for me, and so they don't feel like it's wearing them down.

I'm so happy to see the two of them having so much fun and smiling so much. Even Zack and all their friends feel the same. It's just nice and warm. I sure hope that things stay this way forever!

Side Story: The Paths and Miracles of Life

1

The sky was a clear cerulean blue, dotted with drifting clouds like tufts of cotton. The sun glittered like a diamond, shining over the lands and the luscious greenery, its rays bringing a gentle warmth. This was Storydia in early May, and the heat was enough to leave anybody in heavy traveler's garb sweating.

All the same, at its warmest the temperature only reached a little over ten degrees, so those who weren't careful quickly felt the chill. The temperature dropped rapidly after sunset, when even a gentle breeze felt like it cut to the bone. For this reason, cold weather gear was still essential, which made late spring a difficult time in areas located at high latitude.

"We'll want to set up camp and get a bath going soon," said Alec.

"Yes...a nice soak to warm the body," added Linus.

Alec pulled Shiori in close. It was a gesture so natural now that none of their party members paid it any mind. Well—nobody except for Rurii, the slime at their feet who wobbled a joyous message along the lines of "If you're happy I'm happy!"

It was just past two in the afternoon. Sunset wasn't until around eight thirty in this area, so there was a good amount of time until sundown. Still, one had to be careful not to overwork themselves simply because it was still light out.

"And when we're all done with our baths," said Linus, "we can indulge in a steaming hot pot and a glass of wine! Talk about bliss!"

The archer excitedly rubbed a small leather pouch in which he carried a bottle of wine.

"Talk about luxurious," joked Nils, sipping at a bottle of herbal water.

What Linus wanted really *was* a great luxury for most adventurers out on expeditions, but Shiori was capable of bringing those very luxuries to life.

Knowing this, Linus was in the habit of bringing some wine and a surplus of ingredients whenever he happened to be working with the housekeeping mage. On this particular day he'd brought bottled mushrooms for a hot pot, a selection of aromatic vegetables, and game bird meat. Alec couldn't help but cringe slightly at the sight of Linus's rucksack, which was—it had to be said—packed rather full.

"You were planning this...right from the outset, huh?" he said.

"Yep," replied the shameless archer. "I brought enough for everyone, so let's all savor it together!"

As an expert hunter and gatherer, Linus lived by the principle that good food was a thing to be shared. He explained that the mushrooms and vegetables he'd brought were all specially produced and came from relatives back home. The game meat, too, had been aged and was just right for cooking.

"All that's left is to pluck some parsley from a water source, I guess," said Linus. "Can you broil that in some soy sauce soup? It makes for the most delectable dipping sauce with whole grain bread!"

Shiori smiled and nodded. When she thought of parsley and the burdock-like vegetables Linus had brought, she couldn't help thinking that they had everything they needed for a kiritanpo hot pot. Her heart warmed at the idea that tonight she might be able to indulge a little in the taste of home.

"Well, I must say I'm in agreement with Alec and Linus," said Nils. "It's a little on the colder side today, so we'd best eat something nutritious, warm ourselves up, and ease some of the strain on our bodies by making sure we rest well."

It was exactly the opinion you'd expect from one who had their doctor's license, and with everyone in agreement, the party decided to set up camp just as soon as they reached the next source of water. Linus had something of a prance in his step now that he knew good food and a warm bath were on the horizon. The others laughed at him as they all proceeded along the main roads.

Along the side of the road were rest areas and open plains, and sometimes travelers relaxing around campfires. There was also a group of younger adventurers who'd come out especially to fish. It was a peaceful sight, and it brought a smile to Shiori's face. When she noticed Rurii looking longingly at the

grilled fish over a campfire, she thought it would be nice to grill her slime friend some Tris salmon.

Just then, everybody noticed a commotion.

First there was a man's cry, followed by a woman's scream.

"What the ...?" uttered Linus.

A little farther up ahead was a carriage that had come to an awkward stop. It was a route carriage on its way to Tris. Several people could be seen rushing around it in a panic. That appeared to be the source of the trouble.

"I wonder... Think it's a fight?" asked Linus.

None of them wanted to get wrapped up in anything troublesome, but if it really was a fight, they might have to get involved. The party picked up their pace just as a woman's pained scream emerged from the chattering voices around the carriage. Nils frowned.

"Could be an emergency," he said.

"Certainly sounds like it," said Linus.

"Let's go," said Alec.

Everybody jogged over to near the carriage. They were met by a series of strange sights. The two-horse carriage was missing one of its horses, and a number of women stood blocking the door into and out of the carriage proper, glaring at any onlookers who even dared to peek inside. It made for a most unusual tension, and the adventurers quickly found themselves on the wrong end of the women's glares upon their arrival at the scene.

"If you're here because you think this is some kind of show, then you can get lost!" shouted one. "Nothing to see here!"

The women, it seemed, had made it their job to protect someone in the carriage from curious passersby. They were particularly quick to snap at the men, and at a glance it looked as though the men and women were in conflict. The reason for this strange split across gender lines, however, soon revealed itself when Nils politely made his way to the spirited woman doing the shouting.

"I'm a herbal physician," he said, his smile easing some of the tension in the

air, "and a licensed doctor. If someone is ill, I might be able to help."

"A doctor, you say? Well, you're just in time..." said the woman, flashing a brief smile before falling into a troubled frown. "A woman's pregnant, and she's gone into labor."

The women had been wary of any men—including doctors—viewing a sensitive part of a woman's body meant only for a husband's eyes. That was why they had been so on edge, and one could understand their worries. Nils, however, was shocked by something else entirely.

"You mean a pregnant woman on the verge of giving birth was riding a carriage?! How thoughtless!"

"I tried to stop 'em," said the carriage driver, offering an explanation. "I could tell by the girl's stomach that she was ready to pop. But the couple were at their wit's end; said they 'aven't seen their father in a long, long time and that he's terribly ill. So I let 'em on board. If I'd known this was gonna happen, I never woulda done it."

Nils's expression softened as the driver went on.

"Someone's gone off to look for doctors in the nearby villages, but we dunno if'n they'll make it back in time."

That explained the missing horse. Unfortunately, the area they were in brought with it certain geographical challenges, and so there wasn't much to speak of in the way of settlements. It would take at least an hour to make the return trip from the nearest village, and even then there was no guarantee that they'd find a doctor. If the rider was forced to go to another village, or even as far as Tris, just how long would it be before they returned with help?

All the while, the cries from the carriage grew more pained. One didn't have to be a doctor to know that a birth was imminent. Shiori, too, felt herself growing anxious and impatient.

"Given the location and the cold weather, we've no other choice; the woman needs a doctor," said Nils. "Obstetrics isn't my specialty per se, but I can't simply stand by and do nothing. Is the husband with her?"

"He's by her side, yes," replied one of the women.

"Then please call him for me. Depending on the circumstances, I may need to see things through, and he'll need to be informed...if not convinced...that I should be at hand."

"Got it. Hang on a second."

A young man emerged from the carriage who, in terms of age, was very much still a boy. His wife's labor pains had left him completely pale and weak on his feet. Even then, however, he did his utmost to hold himself steadfast and resolute.

Perhaps he's a noble...?

The young man was dressed like a commoner, but his gestures and bearing revealed him to be someone more accustomed to leading others. As expected, he was uncomfortable with the fact that the doctor at hand was male; Nils was a complete and utter stranger to him, and the young man was clearly hesitant to let the doctor see his beloved wife's most private area. He was perhaps born of the upper classes, and so this would have felt like a humiliation of sorts.

In recent years it was becoming more and more common to see male obstetricians, and as such it was slowly gaining traction and recognition as a specialized field of medicine. However, there was still a strong tendency to deny these obstetricians from conducting examinations and lending a hand in the act of childbirth. Even in Japan, many couples still felt an aversion towards male doctors in the field, and that sentiment was all the more pronounced here.

Still, the young man seemed to recognize the serious and unpredictable nature of his predicament; it had been some time since his wife's water had broken, and her labor pains were getting sharper with each passing moment.

"Nobody's goin' to look down on you, young'n," said the driver. "You'd best do as the doctor says. You disobeyed your own father to run off with your wife, and if you lose 'er 'ere, you lose everythin'."

The driver, who seemed to be aware of the young couple's circumstances, gave the young man a gentle push with his words. The young man took a moment to settle his nerves, then nodded.

"You're right. My wife, my child...their lives are indispensable. Please," he

said, looking at Nils. "Please help them."

"Leave it to me," replied Nils. "I'll do the best I can so as not to lay hands on your wife."

It was decided that the women who had some experience with childbirth would handle most of the work in the carriage. Based on the interval between the young woman's labor pains, Nils knew that no other doctor would arrive in time, and he informed the group as such.

"Shiori, I'd like your help too," he said. "I'm going to need you to boil a lot of water."

"Got it," Shiori replied.

"Then leave us to handle security," said Linus. "We'll get some help from the others too. All us men are just going to be standing around anyway!"

Linus laughed, and the men in the vicinity—who had literally just been standing around—looked relieved to be put on guard duty. They were sent off to various points around the carriage, and told not to take on any magical beasts or opportunistic thieves on their own, but to call Alec and Linus the moment they noticed anything.

Rurii, who also had its feelers free, had decided to act as babysitter for the children. The slime bounced around to the children's delight and the relief of their parents, who finally had a chance to relax.

Shiori was prepared to get straight to work, but she couldn't help noticing Alec, frozen in place with a distant look on his face. This wasn't like him at all. Emergency situations were where his leadership skills usually shone brightest.

"Alec...?" she asked softly, and then, with a little more prodding, "Hey, Alec...?"

Shiori reached out a hand and gently shook him. Alec reacted as though he had been suddenly shunted back to earth.

"Huh? Oh? What's up?" he uttered.

He looked around, suddenly embarrassed at having been caught so unawares.

"Are you okay?" Shiori asked.

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"Uh...yeah. Sorry. Um...so what's the plan again?"

"You're on guard duty. I'm going to help Nils."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, that's right."

"What's wrong? Do you not feel well?"

"Uh...no. I'm fine. Just a little lost in thought."

"A little...?"
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Shiori had a feeling that was a huge understatement. Before she could say another word, however, Linus called for Alec, who said goodbye and was gone with the wave of a hand.

"Huh...?" Shiori uttered.

Whenever Alec got lost inside his own head, it was usually when he found himself wallowing in events from his past. And judging by the look on his face earlier, he hadn't really enjoyed his most recent trip down memory lane. Shiori was worried, and she wanted nothing more than to be by Alec's side, but their duties had to come first.

I'll ask him later.

Nils urged Shiori over, and she switched straight into work mode and put her focus on the task at hand.

"First we'll want hot water," said Nils. "That and clean cloth... Ideally we'd want a lot of soft fabric, but we'll just have to rely on what we have on hand."

"I'll get my hand towels and disinfect them with hot water."

"You'll need a tub for the 'ot water, yeah?" said the driver. "Ere, use this. And don't gimme that look; it's brand-new, nothin' to worry about."

"I'll give you all the towels I have," said a traveler. "I haven't used any of them today, so they should be quite clean."

"Let me give you this," added a merchant. "It's new merchandise, so think of it as a gift."

Once the tasks were set and made clear, everyone seemed to regain their wits. While Nils and Shiori busied themselves getting ready, passengers and

travelers alike showed their generosity by readying supplies; the driver offered a brand-new tub he'd bought for his horses, travelers offered hand towels, and a merchant gave them some soft cotton fabric.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," said Shiori.

The tub and the cloth were put by the side of the carriage, now a makeshift delivery room. Nils rolled up his sleeves, took a breath, and headed for the carriage door. However, when he rolled up the curtain hanging over the door, he paused and let out a low grunt.

"What is it?" asked Shiori.

"The air inside the carriage, it's horribly stale. This can't be good for the mother."

Shiori put her head inside the carriage and immediately winced. It was filled with the usual unique smell of a route carriage, but the air was also humid and filled with the raw stench of amniotic fluids from when the young woman's water had broken. The carriage wasn't particularly spacious to begin with, and all the windows and doors had been closed to keep the cold from getting in. Unfortunately, this wouldn't just make the mother herself sick, but potentially anyone trying to help her give birth.

"Shall we put some barrier stakes around the carriage?" suggested Shiori. "Then I can use my air-conditioning magic."

"Good call. Can I ask you to make it warmer than usual? Think a warm summer's day, and you'll be right on point."

"Got it."

In Storydia, summer days got about as high as twenty-five degrees. Not too hot, and not too cold. With some help from the carriage driver, Alec and Linus set about quickly hammering in barrier stakes, while inside the carriage everyone set about using luggage and cloaks to set up a makeshift partition. When Shiori saw that all the barrier stakes were in place, she cast fire and wind magic, bringing a gentle warmth into the space. Voices of awe floated up into the air as passengers and travelers became aware of the change in temperature.

Nils quickly opened the curtain by the door about halfway, then secured it in place with string. As fresh air made its way into the carriage, Shiori heard the women in there letting out quiet sighs of relief. This alone still wasn't enough, however, and so Shiori cast another wind spell to gently filter the stale air out of the carriage.

"Thank you," said the young husband, hidden behind the partition where Shiori could not see him. "You've helped put my wife at some ease."

His voice was gentler now, but some worry still hovered at its edges.

"I'm just happy to help," Shiori said.

No sooner had she spoken, however, than another shriek filled the air, followed quickly by the panicked voice of the young man. One of the women helping Nils whispered to the herbalist, who offered her some guidance before she returned to the wife in labor.

"The baby is coming, and soon," Nils said. "I'll need the water and the cloth!"

"On it!"

Shiori got straight to work. She took out a washbowl, readied the driver's tub, and, after washing them both clean, sterilized them with boiling water, just to be on the safe side. After she filled them both with boiling water once more, some of the onlookers—startled by what they'd just seen her do—helped to carry them.

"Just bring me the water!" said Nils. "We'll handle the rest!" "Okay!"

Next, Shiori sterilized the cloth they'd amassed through sheer goodwill: a number of hand towels and soft cotton.

Given that we don't have the luxury of time, I'll just do them all together.

Shiori cast a pillar of water, heated it up, then threw the towels and fabric into it. Everybody standing around looked on in awe while the pillar bubbled and spun the towels and fabric within. The children Rurii had been playing with cried out in surprise, and passersby stopped to stare at the unusual sight. For them, it was like watching a performance of some kind.

"That should about do it," Shiori muttered to herself.

She stopped casting her laundry spell and, after draining everything of water, dried it all with gusts of warm air. Fortunately, given that she was dealing with hand towels and cotton, everything went quickly and smoothly. Some women were standing by and at the ready, and they whisked the dry towels away and into the carriage.

Suddenly, heavy breathing and voices of encouragement could be heard from within. The delivery had begun, and their preparations had been just in time. Shiori wiped the sweat from her brow as Linus approached.

"Here we go," he said, his eyes peeled, focused on their surroundings.

"Let's hope it goes smoothly," said Shiori.

Linus must have heard the uncertainty in her voice, because he responded with a grin and his usual positivity.

"With this many people by her side? I'm sure she'll be just fine."

Shiori had to smile. Linus always knew what to say to lift a person's spirits, and it was why everybody loved him.

"But, uh, Master Alec? He seems a bit out of sorts," Linus added.

"Huh?"

Alec was weaving his way through the men on guard duty, patrolling the area. At a glance, he looked the same as he always did, but he was fidgety and unsettled; while one hand played with the handle and sheath of his sword, his other flicked incessantly at his fringe or otherwise rubbed his jaw. His gaze, too, was not as keen as usual, and seemed oddly distant. It was not often, if ever, that Alec's concentration slipped while he was working.

"Oh, you're right... I wonder what's bothering him?" Shiori said.

She did not know what thoughts occupied his mind, but she could see that what had bothered him earlier still clung to him. Shiori watched as he stopped, his gaze falling upon the carriage turned delivery room.

"He's been like that ever since we got here," said Linus. "It's not like him. I'm a bit worried."

"Me too..."

It's not the birth that has him like this, but that gaze, it's—

That was when the air was suddenly pierced by the cries of a newborn. Alec's eyes, until then distant, suddenly opened in surprise as he came back to his senses. Everybody in the area turned to look at the carriage. They heard the baby's cries, the awed muttering of its father, and the voices of the womenturned-midwives as their comments went from encouraging to congratulatory. At that, everyone cheered.

"You did it!"

"Oh, this is so wonderful!"

"Such a healthy child!"

The sunlight beamed down upon the carriage as everyone shouted words of celebration at the birth of new life. It was only Alec who stood as if abandoned, rooted to the ground, his gaze once again distant.

2

By the time everything was tidied up, and both mother and newborn were safe, secure, and calm, it was nearing five in the afternoon. The rider who had gone off looking for a doctor returned, informing them that a specialist was on their way from Tris. They had been unable to find a doctor at the nearby village, and had decided to go straight to Tris instead of taking any chances on neighboring villages.

"If that's the case, then I'd like t'get movin' once the doc gets 'ere," said the driver. "Sure would like to make it to Tris before the end of the day. I've got passengers that still need to secure lodgings."

"If that's the case, tell them to bill the cost under my name," said the new father. "Think of it as something to pay for the nuisance we've caused you. It was our fault you were all caught up in this."

His fellow travelers, however, refused him with smiles.

"You're going to find yourselves with a lot more in the way of expenses now,

so you keep your money," said one.

"The young get a pass when it comes to this sort of thing," added another with a chuckle.

"Yes, but even still—"

"We said it's fine, so it's fine. Now, before your ride gets here, make sure you have a little something to eat. You're hungry, aren't you?"

The air was cheerful, and under Shiori's watch the women had prepared a simple homemade soup, courtesy of Linus and all the ingredients he'd brought along with him. He'd even gone and hunted down another game bird, and his generosity had the men cheering.

The kids were a little hesitant about the soup, filled as it was with vegetables, but their looks of concern turned to smiles when they were served bowls full of meat and mushrooms, minus the subtly bitter root vegetables. The soup was also served to the new mother, who was being supported by her husband. The two enjoyed their servings in the quiet of the carriage.

"Hmm..." murmured Shiori, "it really does come out tasting like a kiritanpo hot pot."

The soup reminded her of home. It was warm, full of nutrition, and it satisfied the stomach while easing the heart.

After everyone had eaten, the young woman alighted the carriage with her newborn baby and her husband. They slowly walked around, offering both apologies and thanks, and introducing the world to their son. The healthy baby boy had a face just like his father's, and had inherited his mother's curly hair. Nils had already looked over mother and child and determined that both were fine. The baby drank a little milk shared by a mother with a baby of her own, then quickly fell asleep after he was wrapped in a freshly washed piece of cotton fabric.

Those around offered the young couple encouragement and well-wishes for the health and growth of their new son. They waited for the first aid carriage to arrive, then once again boarded the route carriage. The group of kindly travelers then departed. "Well, then," said the newly arrived obstetrician, "let's take a look at you two, shall we?"

As it turned out, the obstetrician was an acquaintance of Nils's, and after the two friends had said a quick hello to one another, both mother and son were seen to the first aid carriage. While they were being looked at, the party of adventurers kept an eye on the surroundings, and the young man told them his story.

The youngest son of a baron's family, he had fallen in love with the daughter of a branch family. Both families had, at the time, agreed that the two would at some point get married.

"But one day..." said the young man, "I think it was about two years ago now, a viscount met my wife at a ball and fell head over heels for her. They were of similar age, and the viscount had an older sister who was also single. Everyone decided that it was perfect; I'd marry the older sister, and she the viscount. We'd strengthen the ties between our families two times over. All of it just came together like puzzle pieces fitting exactly where they were supposed to go, and while both the viscount and his sister were very nice people, they were also quite pushy. There was also the fact that my wife and I were practically relatives, and everyone thought it was better for the family if we married with other families. Our fathers were both very keen on the idea..."

"And so you and your wife made up your minds to leave..."

"Exactly. The viscount's family is very influential and has many connections. My father was hungry for them. The talks were getting very serious, and I, uh...I really thought there was no other way out."

The young man chuckled awkwardly, and his eyes drooped as he went on.

"Technically we were like relatives, but we were already completely set on staying together, and were, for all intents and purposes, essentially a married couple. Neither of us could bear the idea of being suddenly assigned different marriage partners. Our family had already done well enough from my older siblings' weddings anyway."

Linus sighed.

"The trials and tribulations of the nobility..." he uttered.

"I'll tell you, commoners have their share of trials and tribulations too," said the young man. "I thought it would be wonderful for us to be free, but oh, I was so naive. Nobody looks after you, nobody picks up after you, you have to do everything yourself, and on top of it all, if you don't work you don't eat. Those first few months weren't easy, I'll tell you that... Our neighbors took us under their wing, and helped us to stand on our own feet. That was when my wife finally got pregnant, but also..."

It was when the young man's father fell ill. His elder brothers frantically searched for and discovered the young man's address, and quickly sent him word. As it turned out, the viscount was nothing but apologetic. "I had no idea that the two of you were so in love that you were prepared to elope, and I offer my deepest apologies," he'd said. The young man's siblings told him not to worry about the past, and begged that he return home at least once to see his father.

"My father was sorry for not considering our feelings, and he said he would recognize our marriage. He just...he wanted to see us one last time..."

The young man stopped for a moment, his eyes welling with tears. Were he to turn down this chance, they would go the rest of their lives having never found reconciliation. His wife knew that her husband would then live forever in regret, and so she had strongly pushed for them to go, even so late into her pregnancy. And so, the two had found themselves on a route carriage.

"So not only did I leave home without standing up for myself and our relationship, but I put the lives of my wife and my son at risk. And now I won't even make it to my father... What in the world did I think I was doing...?"

Now that things had calmed, reality quickly settled back in. Or perhaps it was that a thread of long-held tension—perhaps from as far back as their elopement—had finally snapped. The young man put his head in his hands and wept. He couldn't have been more than twenty years of age, and yet he had put his responsibilities as a noble on a set of scales, balanced against his own happiness. To see him in such anguish over the results of his decision made for a heartbreaking sight.

Shiori didn't know what to say, and it was as she searched for the words that Alec, who until now had remained completely silent, suddenly spoke up.

"Making the best decision under every circumstance is an impossible task," he said. "Tying everything up neatly and satisfactorily is a task that even the king of this very nation struggles with. You're young, and it would not have been an easy thing to speak up and stand your ground in the face of a decision made by two noble families. But you should be proud of yourself. You did not let go of that which meant the entire world to you."

It was all too common to hear of times when everything came together neatly once a person gave up that which they cared most deeply for. But in giving this thing up—or rather, in trying to—one was then forced to live a life forever stained with regret and resentment. Alec knew that, as "neat" as this made things, it was a life of misfortune that one would live.

"You made a decision for your life, and for hers, and for the one you share together," Alec continued. "You started over as commoners, adapting to a lifestyle completely new to the both of you, and you gave it the best you had. Now you have a son. As a noble, what you did would be frowned upon, but if you ask me, your actions are the mark of a real man. Be proud of who you are, not just for yourself, but for your wife and your son too."

The words seemed to strike a chord with the young man, who looked up at Alec in surprise, nodding as he smiled through his tears.

"Yes..." he uttered. "If someone as upright as you would say such a thing, then it must be so. Yes, you're right. I am proud of myself. I am!"

The young man's hands were rough and calloused, and Shiori knew immediately that they were the mark of someone who had put in hard work doing such things as housework, laundry, and washing. It was clear to her that while his wife had been pregnant, he had taken up the chores around the house.

He really has given life everything he has, just because of how important she is to him...

The couple were nobles, and barely into adulthood. Together, they had continued living as commoners in a lifestyle unlike anything they had previously

known. That they had carved out a life for themselves was no small feat. And while his wife looked exhausted at the sudden and unexpected pregnancy, her face and carriage had been those of a young woman filled with happiness. Hers had been the expression of a woman who was treasured and loved.

"Hey, we're done!" called the doctor. "It's exactly as Nils said; both mother and child are well. The mother is a little low on energy and food, but that just means that it's your job to see her fed, young man. If you need help, I can introduce you to a place that can offer you some support. Now, for a month after the pregnancy, your wife isn't to overdo things. Any shopping or housework that's going to keep her up on her feet, or any strenuous movements are completely off-limits. She'll only slow down her recovery if she tries, and it'll make her more prone to sickness, so be careful. That said, it's no good for her to just lie in bed all the time either, so make sure she does a little walking about the house each day."

"Uh...yes, ma'am," said the young man.

"In any case, I'll tell you all you need to know on the way. At least for tonight, you'll stay in a clinic in Tris. This is hardly the sort of place one usually gives birth, so I'll want to keep an eye on your wife and child just in case something comes up. Oh, and Nils? What are you and your party doing? We've plenty of time before the mother needs to rest, so we can fit the four of you in the first aid carriage."

The adventurers happily agreed. The distance on foot meant they'd have to camp out somewhere, but by carriage they could get to Tris in just three hours. There was nothing quite like getting home without having to worry about a night in the outdoors. After pulling up the barrier stakes, the party boarded the first aid carriage, which slowly rumbled along the road back to town.

As the carriage settled into a steady rhythm, Shiori glanced at her lover. He'd spoken so beautifully in his efforts to encourage the young man, and now he sat silent, his eyes closed. Not asleep, but rather deep in thought. Shiori noticed a hint of gloom in his features, and her worry crept back in.

She wanted nothing more than to ask him what was on his mind, but a carriage full of people wasn't the place for it. There was also no chance to bring

up a conversational topic that might give some insight into his feelings. In any case, before Shiori even knew it, she was fast asleep anyway.

3

The sun was sinking beneath the horizon when the carriage arrived at Tris. The gates to the city were, as expected, closed. An exception was made for the first aid carriage, however, given the emergency nature of its patient, and so after a few words with the gatekeepers, the gates were opened.

The carriage once again trundled onwards until it entered the religious district, home to the Tris Cathedral. Many medical facilities were located in the district, and nestled away in a small corner was the doctor's home, which doubled as her clinic.

When the carriage stopped at the clinic, the young couple alighted with their newborn and, before leaving, bowed deeply to the adventuring party.

"We can't thank you enough," said the young man. "If you hadn't happened upon us by accident as you did, my wife would have been forced to give birth in the cold, in an unsanitary environment. I don't know if my wife or my son would have made it through that. But you provided us warm water, clean cloth, and, uh...air-conditioning magic? Is that what it's called? Anyway, all of it was a godsend. Thanks to you, my wife and son are happy and healthy. I can't express how grateful we are."

"Just learn from this experience and try not to take any such risks again," said Nils. "In the last month of pregnancy, the baby can decide to arrive at any moment."

"Ugh...you said it."

The young couple had given up on visiting home immediately. They had decided to put the health of their family first, and take things quietly for the time being.

"I'll write my father a letter," said the young man. "I don't know if it will arrive in time, but I have a family to take care of now. I know now that I have to keep my priorities in order."

In the following days, the young man's father would find renewed strength at the birth of his grandson, and make his way to a full recovery. The family would reconcile its differences with the runaway couple, and immediately send a carriage so that both mother and son could recover in the comfort of the family manor. It was the very definition of a happy ending.

Shiori, Alec, and Rurii parted with the doctor, the couple, Nils, and Linus, and set out for home. They had a light dinner at a pub on the way, and returned to their apartment quite late in the evening. Even though she'd slept in the carriage, once Shiori had warmed her body in the bath and washed away her sweat, it was like the weight of the day's stresses fell upon her in a sudden and powerful sleepiness.

"Time for bed," whispered Alec, who was ready for sleep himself.

Eating and relaxing in the bath seemed to have brightened the man some, but Shiori sensed that something still lingered in his mind. She found herself hesitant to bring up the topic once they were comfortably nestled in bed, however, and so the day passed without her having a chance to broach the topic.

The next day, Shiori awoke having shed most of the previous day's exhaustion. She turned to Alec, still asleep by her side, and her brow furrowed. Rurii, who had woken before both of them, stared at Alec and wobbled what was on its mind. Shiori put a hand to her lover's forehead.

"Oh, you've come down with a fever," she uttered. "Must be because of your exhaustion..."

She felt an abnormal warmth pulsing through her hand. It was not a high fever the likes of which she had nursed Alec through before, but his breathing had quickened and his features creased with discomfort.

"It's probably the season," muttered Alec with a lifeless smile. "It's so easy to fall sick around this time of year."

"Wait here a second," said Shiori.

She placed a light kiss on his lips, which were warmer than usual, then

hopped out of bed and headed to the bathroom at a light jog. She filled the sink with water and readied a few hand towels in it, then prepared a glass of water and water grape syrup before returning to the bedroom. She fed Alec a little of the water, then placed a damp towel on his forehead. This provided him some comfort, and with a gentle smile he drifted into a light sleep.

"Was that why he seemed off yesterday?" Shiori muttered to herself. "Because he was sick?"

But even as she spoke the words, she knew that wasn't the case. He'd eaten dinner as usual and even had a little to drink with it.

Perhaps it's mental strain...

It wasn't just the events of the past day that led Shiori to this thought. It was because she'd had the same experience—a time where she'd been so down, and her spirit so weak, that she'd fallen ill. She couldn't help seeing some of that in Alec too. She knew for certain that it had started at around the time they arrived at the carriage. Something had happened at that time that had pulled at his heartstrings. Shiori did not know what that something was, but the thoughts tugged at her mind while she had a late breakfast. They were still there when she left a note by Alec's bedside and headed out shopping, leaving Rurii to watch over things at home.

When Shiori arrived at the Guild, Zack was out on business.

"Just my luck. I wanted to ask him about Alec..." Shiori muttered.

Shiori's plan had been to report to Zack on the events of the previous day and use that as a chance to ask about Alec falling ill during the change of seasons. Unfortunately, however, that wasn't going to happen. So she submitted their request report to the girl at the front desk, picked up her payment, and left.

"Hmm...well, there's no use crying about it," Shiori said to herself. "I guess I'll just do the shopping and go back home."

Shiori bought everything she'd need for making some portable foods, then made her way to the Second District to buy some of the vanilla ice cream that Alec liked. As she walked along, lost in her thoughts, a voice called out from

behind her. It belonged to the bewitching mage Nadia Felice.

"It's not often I see you without Alec by your side," Nadia remarked.

"Well, he came down with a fever," Shiori explained. "He's at home in bed."

"A fever..." muttered Nadia, her brow furrowing. "I see."

"Did you have some business with him today?" Shiori asked, noticing the small package in Nadia's hand.

"Oh... Yes, actually. I thought that Alec might be sending his younger brother a package some time soon, and so I was thinking maybe he could send mine with it if he hadn't sent his off yet."

"Package...? You mean, for his younger brother's birthday?"

"Yes. I usually send my own things myself, but this year I thought it might be nice to send them together."

"Oh, well, in that case I think he's going to send it off soon...but..."

Why was Nadia sending Alec's brother a gift? And on top of that, she made it sound like she did it every year. Nadia saw the look on Shiori's face and flashed her a playful grin.

"This is just one of the trial attempts, but let me show you the present I had made," she said.

Nadia pulled out a handkerchief bordered with a design of fresh leaves and flowers, on which was embroidered an adorable slime. It looked just like Rurii, except that instead of blue, it was peach colored...

"I've only ever seen his slime once so I wasn't completely confident when it came to choosing the color. I had Rurii choose it for me. Apparently they're friends, and so they're very familiar with their respective colors."

Shiori's eyes went wide. Not only did Nadia *know* who Alec's younger brother was, she had even *met* the man!

"I've noticed that things have changed between you and Alec recently," said Nadia by way of explanation, "and I thought perhaps this had been part of it. And it would seem that he really has opened up to you, hasn't he?" Shiori was frozen in place and unsure how to respond, but Nadia got her moving again and opened up to Shiori as they walked. Naturally, though, she left out the identifying details.

"I was engaged to one of his older brothers. In truth, it was something we had only agreed to in person; the official engagement was to be made once he was officially of marrying age. But then he passed away in a tragic accident, and I had to go into hiding when a revolt took place in my home country. That put an end to things."

This meant that Nadia would have been Alec and Olivier's older sister-in-law.

Wait, wait. No way... You mean Nadia's a VIP in hiding too...?

Shiori didn't have words for any of it, and so simply listened. Nadia glossed over the details, but it was clear that hers was a terribly tragic tale. Nadia was the daughter of the former Litoanyan royal family, and she had lost everything she had ever known at the age of just thirteen. The devastating story of Nadia Felix Cernando, the youngest daughter of a marquis's family, was an event recorded in modern history.

When the Kingdom of Storydia's second prince had died at just fifteen years of age, a rebellion had also broken out in Litoanya. The ruling class was forcibly removed or driven out of the country, and it was amidst this strife that Nadia had disappeared, never to be seen on the public stage again. Some said it was her sister—who had married in another nation—who'd kept her in hiding, while others believed she had been executed along with her older brother, the marquis. But none could have ever believed that the woman had made a home for herself in the country of her lost fiancé, where she had earned the nickname "Fire Incarnate."

Nadia was so good at holding her liquor that among friends she was known as *the* heavyweight. She could render entire magical beasts to ashes with her fire magic, and to top it all off, she was a bewitching but generous older sister figure to many. The struggles that she had faced were well beyond anything one could consider normal.

"This is the season, actually," Nadia said. "This was when my fiancé passed away, and Alec would have been just nine when his mother left him. He was

brought into an environment that looked to treat him well, but even then...at his own birthday party he was slandered for his upbringing, and by invited guests, no less. Those feelings, and that past, still cling to him, and this season often brings those memories back. But he holds it in, and so it's not uncommon for him to come down with a fever."

"Oh, I see..."

Alec's real father and his half brother Olivier had welcomed him to the family warmly, and treated him as though he'd always been with them. It was just unfortunate that others—outsiders—had looked to trample all over young Alec's heart. The meaning of his own existence had been crushed before his very eyes, on his birthday no less, and from that experience he still bore great scars.

"But having said that," said Nadia, "since coming to live with you, Shiori, he's been in much better health. I had even hoped that perhaps he had overcome his past trauma."

But matters of the heart—and the scars inflicted upon it, in particular—were never a simple thing; this Shiori knew from firsthand experience. Shiori felt herself suddenly worried and anxious at having left Alec all on his own (even if he was, technically, in the company of their slime) and felt an urge to return to him at once.

Before that, however, she realized something.

"Sister," she said, "when is Alec's birthday? Has it already passed?"

She remembered him saying that he was born just a few weeks before his half brother, and that Olivier's birthday was in the beginning of June. Wouldn't that mean that Alec's birthday had to be now, in May?

"Oh, please, don't tell me he hasn't told you," said Nadia.

"He hasn't...but I should have realized sooner. I've asked about his younger brother's birthday in the past..."

Olivier's birthday present had come up in conversation countless times in the past, but never once had they touched on Alec's own birthday. All he had ever told her was that he was born earlier, and even that had been quite some time

ago.

"Oh...and I really wanted to make sure we celebrated his birthday properly..." Shiori muttered.

"I don't think he minds," said Nadia. "And I'm also guessing he's never asked when your birthday is either, right?"

Both Shiori and Alec were past the age of wanting to make their birthdays a grand event. That was perhaps why they'd never made a point of bringing their own birthdays up, but even then Shiori now felt vexed by it. She let out a disappointed moan as Nadia chuckled at her.

"Not to worry," Nadia said. "His birthday isn't until May fifteenth, so you've got time."

And with that, Nadia left her package in Shiori's trustworthy hands, while Shiori rushed about her shopping at top speed so as to make it back to her apartment as soon as possible.

4

Rurii was surprised to see the somewhat panicked Shiori when she arrived home. The slime had been playing with its collection of treasures—the fire stone from their trip to Silveria and the shiny metal it had received at the blacksmith—and it pointed to the bedroom with a feeler: "He's still in bed."

Shiori put her shopping down and quietly peeked into the bedroom. Alec was taking a sip of water, and had just replaced the towel across his forehead with a new one.

"Welcome back," Alec said.

"Thanks."

He looked relieved to see her, and Shiori felt a swirl of love and care with a slight edge of melancholy. She went to him quietly but in a rush, and put a hand to his cheek.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" he asked with a chuckle. "It's not like you to be so openly affectionate like this."

"Affectionate...? I suppose I just wanted to pamper you."

"I don't understand."

But even as Alec spoke, there was a joy etched into his features. He reached out from bed with a hand and stroked Shiori's back. His touch was softer and weaker than usual, and from that alone Shiori could sense that he still had a ways to go before he recovered.

"Ever since yesterday, you just haven't been yourself..." Shiori admitted.

Alec's hand paused, just for an instant.

"You noticed," he said.

"Yes. You barely talked at all after we met with that carriage. You just stared off into space most of the time. That's not like you. Even Linus noticed."

"Oh... I see. I'm sorry that I worried you both."

He knew exactly what Shiori was referring to, and his eyebrows drooped at the thought. Shiori knew then that she hadn't been imagining the change in his person.

"I remembered her," Alec said.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah."

She was the secret lover of the former king of Storydia. Not a single official record of her existed, and so she was a woman shrouded in mystery. Because of this, many were of the opinion that her past had to be hidden due to it being sullied in nature; they believed that she was likely a prostitute or other despised type. It was also believed, however, that her past was obfuscated out of consideration for both the woman and her family. Those present at the time believed the latter to be correct.

"My parents were involved for a time when they were young," said Alec, "but my mother was the daughter of an emerging noble family; she lacked the knowledge, education, and status to become queen. These days it perhaps would have been fine for her to undertake a few years of education to prepare her for the position, but at the time it was no easy thing to marry into royalty, and especially to the crown prince, when you were not from a family of significant authority. It was a time in which my mother would have been relegated to a position of lowly concubine. This was how it was for Olivier too, but it was all the more prevalent in my parents' generation. One option was to have her adopted by a family of sufficient rank so as to give her the necessary credentials in writing, but this was a thing much easier said than done. My mother knew this, and she was not ready to marry a future king."

And so, Alec's mother had instead backed out of the relationship.

"My parents decided to split, but my mother could never quite let go of the feelings she held for my father. She made peace with the idea that she would live the rest of her life unmarried. But this did not lead to a good outcome. Years later, my father happened to meet my mother by sheer coincidence whilst on an inspection, and saw that she was looking after children at an orphanage. My mother longed for a child of her own, and my father still harbored feelings for her. What played out was perhaps inevitable, though my father hoped to make my mother his concubine by indulging her wish."

At the time, the royal family had two princes. The king had pushed for reform that had helped to vastly lower the child mortality rate, and so two sons was considered more than enough. However, given that it was uncertain whether the queen could give birth to another child, some of the king's retainers, who still felt rather uncertain about the number of heirs, recommend that the king take a concubine. The king refused, and later the retainers' fears would be realized when the two crown princes lost their lives in freak accidents.

"Apparently my mother refused the offer," continued Alec. "Perhaps it was because she was a daughter of emerging nobility, but she had always felt herself more of a commoner. For that reason, she was not comfortable with the idea of marrying a man who already had a legal wife. She also would have realized that, realistically speaking, the position of concubine would come with many difficulties of its own. That was why, when she approached my father, it was with the intent to raise their child alone. To this day, I still cannot forget the expression on my father's face when he opened up to me about this."

So it was that when Alec was born, it had already been decided that he would be raised by a single parent. "From the moment she became pregnant, my mother knew that she would have to do it all on her own. Her pregnancy was kept secret by the monastery, and that was where I was born."

Alec's dark magenta eyes wavered by the light of the magical lantern.

"Naturally, my father was never there. This was no surprise, because shortly after my mother gave birth to me, the queen gave birth to her third son, Olivier. And while I know my mother was aware of her fate, I can't help but wonder how she must have felt, to be without the man she loved while she gave birth to her son in a monastery that was ill equipped for such a thing. I imagine it must have been excruciatingly lonely."

The young woman they had encountered the previous day had given birth with her husband right there by her side; a young man who had not only abandoned his standing, but also chosen his wife and child over the matters of his own home. Alec's father, however, had priorities that went beyond his lover's birth of their son.

"It just...it tears me apart to think about it," said Alec, trying to smile through the sorrow in his voice. "My parents loved one another, but their relationship was by no means a healthy one. Both held firm to ideals from which they would not budge, and together they brought into the world a child whose existence could never be made public. In the end, my mother suffered through her life and died, leaving me all alone. Whatever my father might have thought about it all, he had a wife and sons that he had to put above my mother, and so that was exactly what he did. As their child, I couldn't balance my work with my private life, and as a result I fell terribly ill, eventually abandoning both my younger brother and the woman I loved. That's why, whenever spring arises from winter, I find myself lost in thoughts about it all. I really thought that things had improved of late, but when we came across that incident yesterday, I just couldn't bear it."

Oh, so that's it...

At the heart of Alec was a denial of his own being. He could not accept his own existence. His powerful, brave front and the delicate heart he kept hidden were the result of strong feelings of uncertainty at being a child who was the

result of adultery. Such a fragile human being was the result of the actions of Alec's parents, who could throw away neither pride nor rank and, at the same time, could never truly protect the child they'd created together—a child that they knew, from the outset, would be illegitimate.

As a noble, what you did would be frowned upon, but if you ask me, your actions are the mark of a real man.

The words Alec had spoken to the young father were filled with both his admiration and his envy. They were also, however, a dig at his own parents, and a disparaging of Alec's own person. And yet, whenever Shiori had listened to Alec talk about his past, she could feel the respect and the gratitude he held for his parents, and the deep brotherly love that connected him to his half brother. These conflicting feelings in Alec at times overwhelmed him, and he felt powerless before them. Never was this more so than now, during this season, near Olivier's birthday, which was just a few weeks shy of his own; a closeness that felt almost unnatural.

When the two boys were born within just weeks of one another, many at the time criticized the morality of it. None, however, were strong enough of character to say this directly to the king or his legitimate heir. Instead, those attacks were leveled at Alec, the illegitimate son. This, too, had been a heavy weight on his shoulders.

"There was no special reason that Olivier and I were born so close together; my father simply slept with my mother and the queen around the same time. The queen sensed in my father what had happened, and begged him for another child. My father agreed, perhaps out of feelings of guilt. The queen became pregnant as a result, and Olivier was born. She no longer had to fear that the king would be without an heir, and she even smiled as she announced joyfully that the king had another *two* sons. My father was speechless, but in contrast to his shame, the queen remained strong and steadfast."

The queen had tacitly acknowledged Alec's existence, though she did not say it in as many words. By making it clear that there was no longer a need to worry about heirs, she'd also made it clear that the king had no need of a concubine. The king and queen did not share the love and affection common between men and women, and were more like comrades in arms, leading the nation hand in

hand. But even then, as his wife, the queen likely harbored her own thoughts about her husband's actions. While she was sympathetic to the many lovers whose differing ranks meant they could never marry, hers was a struggle that women faced in the modern age, and the queen's actions offered a glimpse into her emotions; emotions that existed between the two halves of her person—her public persona as queen, and her private persona as an individual.

In any case, the queen was generous in her forgiveness of the king's behavior, and accepted Alec and his mother as "an unofficial prince and concubine." Upon becoming a father himself, and being made to reconsider the past, King Olivier would later state: "My father was, as a king, truly remarkable, and I have nothing but respect for him. As a father and as a man, however, I cannot help but harbor doubts."

The allowance of concubines among the privileged classes was indeed effective when it came to securing an heir. On the other hand, it raised a number of moral concerns and, along with harming the health and self-respect of noblewomen, it often brought dissonance to families along with internal power struggles among potential heirs. There was also no small number of women whose spirits were broken at being forced into marriage with an already married man under the pretense of duty. That both the queen and Alec's mother felt an aversion to the concubine system was only natural.

In later years, King Olivier—having seen such troubles firsthand—would see the concubine system abolished, along with the royal marriage system of selecting partners by rank and lineage. Many long-standing noble families strongly opposed the decision, but the younger generations, with their more modern approach, largely welcomed it. With the mortality rate for infants and pregnant mothers dropping, it was time to put a legitimate end to the concubine system. In addition to it no longer being applicable to the modern day, the royal family had itself set a precedent: Over two generations, it had seen no need for concubines.

"My mother never once complained about the hand she was dealt," said Alec. "She was lonely sometimes, I know that for certain, but she gave me all the love she had. That's why, outside of the suffering that saw her die young, all I have of the woman are fond memories. That's why I can't help but wonder. If my

father had chosen my mother, just like that young man yesterday... No. If I'd never been born, my mother wouldn't have died, and my father would never have been belittled for being 'the wise king who, at heart, is just another man' when he brought me in and gave me a new home."

His last few sentences were spoken in a whisper, and barely audible. Shiori bit her lip. In his words was the contempt he felt for himself, so much stronger than the love he had received from his parents and brother. It was as though she could see the phantom that haunted Alec as a youth. She did not think it was an illusion, not after all he had been through.

"But I'm so happy I met you," she said.

"Hmm?"

"That, and even though your mother knew things would be hard, she really wanted to meet you too."

Alec's eyes, once focused on somewhere far off in the distance, settled on Shiori's own.

"She knew that she couldn't be with your father. She knew she'd have to raise you all on her own. But even then, she chose to have you, right?"

"She did."

"She didn't rely on your father for anything, and she raised you without a single complaint. Don't you think that was amazing?"

"Yeah, she really never said anything that sounded like a complaint. That, and...she never acted like I owed her anything for her efforts either."

Kids from single-parent homes weren't uncommon among Alec's childhood friends, though many such children found themselves suffering under the heavy, twisted love of their parents and their expectations. Some parents said things along the lines of, "The whole reason I have to work so hard and endure this life is because of *you*." Alec's mother, however, wasn't like this.

"Which is to say that her love for you never wavered. You were always important to her, and she raised you with those feelings driving her."

Alec's mother knew exactly what she was in for when she agreed to take on

the burden of giving birth to a son without a present father. She did not complain, and she did not place her own unachieved hopes and dreams on his shoulders; instead she loved and treasured him. One had to be especially strong of mind and spirit to live in such a way.

"My mother was a kind woman," Alec said. "But more than that, she was strong. My father, too, did his best to be earnest in his own way. He took me in, provided me with an education, and raised me with care and affection. I'm grateful for that, even now."

"I can't really speak with any authority, being that I've never undergone such suffering, but...I think both of your parents wanted you, from the bottom of their hearts, and that's why they raised you as they did. I can't help but feel like they'd be saddened to hear you speak of a life in which you were never born."

A strong, determined light returned to Alec's once-wavering gaze.

"Yes, you're right," he said, a smile growing on his face as he placed a hand on Shiori's cheek. "And it's because my mother gave birth to me...that I could meet you."

"Yes," replied Shiori, smiling back. "We never would have ever met if you'd never been born."

Alec's strong arms pulled her close and wrapped her in a hug. Their cheeks touched as they giggled together, their lips meeting in a kiss. Shiori felt herself melting under the heat of his lips, a heat that wasn't just due to his fever. Theirs was a meeting of the souls that was built upon countless miracles and the paths they'd taken in their lives. She had been born in an entirely different world, where she'd lived a life that never would have led her into his arms.

The miracles of life, and the paths they'd traveled, had brought the two of them together. And even now, at this very moment, life was being born throughout the world.

"Alec...?" whispered Shiori, still drifting in the bliss of Alec's passionate kiss. "Let's make sure we celebrate your birthday. I'll make all your favorite dishes."

"A party with a homemade meal? I haven't had that since my mother passed away."

Alec's voice rasped slightly, and so happy was he in the moment that tears fell from his eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "I can't wait. And on the day...let's make all the food together."

"That's a promise."

"Yeah...but it's like a dream."

All the talking had left him tired, and he looked about ready to drift back off to sleep, but Shiori placed another kiss on his lips.

"It's no dream," she said. "So you just relax and get some rest."

"Okay..."

He showed her a gentle smile, and moments later he was fast asleep. Shiori gently patted his messy hair the way one might an infant's. She adored him, and he always charmed her. He was so important to her, and so irreplaceable, that she would give up everything for him. She placed countless kisses down upon his sleeping face, then whispered:

"Thank you for being born. I love you, Alec."

5

Thanks to Shiori's dedicated nursing, Alec's fever had subsided by the following morning. Still, Shiori insisted that he spend the day resting and recuperating, and so Alec did just that, and took the day slow.

He let his mind wander as he leafed through the illustrated weapon guide that the Eastern samurai Shonosuke had sent him, and whenever the mood struck, he went over to Shiori doing her mending work and gave her a kiss. Rurii, who had gone out for the day, came back with a "gift" of sorts: a special nutritional supplement courtesy of the familiar Eir. Alec chuckled wryly to see it, and the three of them chatted over tea. It was the ideal life, just as he had imagined it, and it was playing out before his very eyes. Alec couldn't help but sigh.

This...is true happiness.

There were still many things he had to see to on the long path into the future, but this was a rare day off, and so he decided to bask in the glory of it.

The following day, Alec returned to work fully recovered. His friends looked relieved to see him well.

"You're almost thirty-five," said Clemens. "The days of letting your youth do the heavy lifting are long over. Now please, get in the habit of looking after yourself between jobs."

Clemens was two years older than Alec, and he spoke from personal experience. Alec couldn't help but laugh as he nodded, knowing that it was exactly what he'd have to do to ensure a long, carefree life with Shiori.

Alec's birthday came just a few days later. After lunch, Alec set himself to writing a letter and seeing to some packing. After folding the letter he'd written to Olivier for his birthday, he put it in a beautifully colored envelope and placed it with his present, which was neatly wrapped. This he placed in a wooden box for transporting. The present was, of course, the special slime rucksack he'd had made at Enandel Trading Company.

The wooden box was covered in two layers of wrapping, and did not contain an address or a recipient's name. Instead, it was stamped with a symbol that indicated it was from Alec to Olivier. While in transit, the package would first go to the Torisval Margrave, and would be secretly moved to either Zack's father—Frederick Fauchelle—or his half brother Edvard Fauchelle. From here, the package would be brought to Olivier, either by the men themselves or their aides.

Finally, Alec added the small package that Nadia had prepared. It was a simple thing on the face of it, and one would never have guessed that it was correspondence between the royal family and a woman who once would have married into it.

"I have to say," said Alec. "I never imagined that Nadia would leave this in your care."

"I'm as surprised as you are," replied Shiori. "And even though I was shocked to hear that you're royalty, I might have been even more shocked when I found

out that Nadia was engaged to your older half brother."

"Huh, well...about that..." said Alec.

Shiori was intelligent, and she had known immediately that Nadia hailed from an upstanding family. Even then, however, she never could have dreamed that her sister was engaged to a Storydian prince.

"She did that because she knows she can trust you with the information," continued Alec. "Just like I did. She must have known that we'd both opened up to one another. And you know, she's never told me directly about her past. I have to imagine it's the same with Clemens."

"Really?!"

Shiori looked completely dumbfounded. Rurii bounced at her feet as Alec went on.

"We've always kind of known each other's circumstances, even though we've never spoken about it. That's the nature of our friendship, and the depth of it. Zack and Clemens both have pasts of their own, so in that sense we're all birds of a feather. Nadia lost everything, right down to the place she calls home. I get the sense she feels that it won't do any good to talk about it now."

Nadia fled her home at thirteen, and became an adventurer after living two years in hiding. The years she spent wandering before making a home in Storydia erased much of her past as a member of the nobility. Her carefree and sometimes impudent way of speaking were proof of that.

"When the eldest son of the royal family died, the second brother was first in line for the throne after him. Apparently there were even discussions as to whether or not Nadia should still marry him. Some believed it would be easier to take the eldest son's prospective wife—who'd undertaken the educational duties expected of a queen—and simply slide her over to the second brother. They believed it more realistic than to make Nadia, a foreigner, the crown princess instead. Nadia's engagement had not been publicly announced at that time. As long as everyone agreed to it, the new fiancée could easily be moved in. Nadia and my second brother were already in love by then, however, and he was first to refuse the idea outright. My father, who wanted to put his sons' feelings before their duties, agreed with his son's decision. My eldest brother's

fiancée, too, felt that it was beyond cruel to take someone who had just lost their lover and make them marry that person's younger brother. Even if it was in the name of national interest, it was a sickening proposition. The discussions were therefore postponed, but..."

As it turned out, that second brother would soon die too, after falling from his horse in a freak accident. His young heart, plagued by so many worries—the sudden loss of his beloved older brother, his equally sudden promotion to the position of crown prince, and the potential reality of him being torn from the girl he loved with his whole being—had clouded his thoughts and left his reflexes dull. So when a bird had suddenly swooped down in front of him from on high, he had been unable to avoid it, instead falling from his horse and, in landing badly, dying just like that.

Alec had been living among the general public at the time, and so did not have detailed information on the matter. All the stories about the incident he heard later were tainted by biased points of view or were otherwise little more than just rumors; many of them a mix of the speaker's speculations with the outcomes they most wanted.

Whatever the case, the loss of the second brother left a deep scar upon Nadia's heart. In truth, she had remained single ever since, even now into her mid-thirties. Nadia could not return to her home of Litoanya, and there was likely great meaning in her decision to make a life for herself in the country where she had pledged her life to her lover.

"But I think she's had a change of heart," said Alec. "She and Clemens are getting closer of late, and I think they're finally ready to act on their feelings. At this rate, they might be an official couple before we know it."

"Huh? They're already at that level?!"

"Well, they've always felt a little like an old couple of sorts," replied Alec. "From where I'm standing, I feel like it's more than about time they finally got together."

When Clemens had realized who Nadia really was, he had given up on them being together, convinced that he was not worthy of her. He'd been in his early thirties, and still quite young, and it was near impossible for him to comprehend the idea of being with a woman of such rank that she was almost the nation's queen. Regardless, however, the two got along well, and everyone believed it was just a matter of time before they finally ended up together.

But on his road to recovery, Clemens first fell hard for Shiori, only to have his heart shattered when he was never able to tell her... That's about as Clemens an episode as they come...

Past experiences had made Clemens hesitant and cowardly when it came to matters of love.

"All I want is for the two of them to end up happy," said Alec.

"Indeed."

"And..." said Alec, placing a special label on the now-wrapped box, "that should about do it."

He let out a sigh of relief. No matter how many times he sent packages to his brother, the preparations were always time-consuming work.

"You have to be *really* careful about everything..." uttered Shiori, impressed.

"Well, considering who it's going to, yeah..." said Alec. "It's a pain, but it is what it is."

Packages and correspondence addressed to Olivier had to be prepared in a very particular order due to the unique way in which it was all delivered to him. It was a necessary evil, so to speak, to ensure that an older brother who had vanished from the face of the earth could still keep in touch with his younger brother, the king.

"Any letter or package is always inspected well before it arrives at the hands of such an important recipient," explained Alec. "Even if it comes from family."

"I see. And those inspections can only be handled by people who are privy to the circumstances between the sender and receiver."

"Exactly. With that in mind, I'm incredibly lucky that I made Zack's acquaintance, as our families are strongly tied. Both Zack and the margrave belong to distinguished military families. It would be no exaggeration to call them the linchpins of our national defense. With each generation, their bonds

with the royal family have grown tighter, and so the three families are often sending letters back and forth. That's the very reason that they can sneak in my letters and packages without drawing attention."

Alec had first met Zack some time after having been brought to the castle by his father. By that time, Zack had already decided that he would give up the position of heir to his own half brother and leave the Fauchelle family. Preparations at the royal palace were by then mostly wrapped up, so it was largely just a matter of when exactly it was best that Zack leave. Though it was only a short period in which the two became acquainted, for Alec it was a huge stroke of good luck.

Alec's father, the king, had brought the two together. He knew that Zack's position was not entirely different from Alec's, and so he had called him to be someone for Alec to talk to, given his struggles with identity.

But I bet he never imagined that one day I would take the exact same path as Zack and become an adventurer myself.

In the end, it was Zack's existence that had opened the way for Alec. Alec did not believe that his father had planned for such an eventuality, but his kindness of heart had shown Alec the way to a life he could call his own, even if it meant a long and arduous journey to get there.

In Zack, my father showed me a precedent, without which I might have chosen to remain at the castle, where I most certainly would have been crushed under the pressure.

Alec held deep regrets about leaving the castle for another life, and how it meant leaving his only brother to shoulder the burden of the place all on his own. But even then, by surviving and living on, Alec was able to work to support his brother and, by extension, the nation of Storydia. And more than anything else, that was what had brought him to Shiori.

"All that's left now is to leave this with Zack," said Alec.

He would visit later in the evening, and while he felt bad about making Zack his deliveryman, Zack had always been in constant contact with the margrave and never minded.

"Sorry it took so long," he continued. "Well, shall we get started?"

Alec put the box on a shelf, then spun to Shiori, who was already decked out in her apron. Tonight was Alec's birthday party. They had invited close friends and would spend the night enjoying good food with good company. Alec, however, lacking Shiori's culinary skills, would mostly be playing the role of assistant.

"What are we making?" Alec asked.

"We've got pork karaage, schoner clam gratin, marbled mushroom steak, grilled Alphan bison, smoked Tris perch open sandwiches, grilled Tris salmon, fried potatoes, and Rurii's special salad. Nadia said she'd bring cake!"

"Sounds like quite the feast."

"We're going all out, just like I promised," giggled Shiori.

Alec planted a kiss on her lips, then put on his own apron. Rurii, too, was wrapped in a folded handkerchief in the style of a chef's bandana. Upon closer inspection, Alec noticed a Rurii-colored slime embroidered in a corner of the handkerchief. As it turned out, Nadia had given it to the slime as thanks for its "advice" in the matter of Olivier's birthday present.

"Looks amazing on you," said Alec.

The slime wobbled with joy.

"All right..." said Alec, thinking. "Well, given the menu, I can handle the smoking."

Since he'd learned the basics of smoking food from Linus while on expedition a month ago, the method had since become a specialty of Alec's. Shiori had expected Alec to stick with what he was best at, so she had gotten things ready for him and laid out the slices of dried Tris perch on a tray. Alec took out the pot and netting they used especially for smoking, and began getting ready.

For smoking chips, Alec selected korsbarstrad cherry wood chips. He placed the chips in the pot along with the fish and got it started. It wasn't long before the air drifted with the delicious and unique scent of smoked fish.

"Smells wonderful," remarked Shiori.

"Nadia is going to love this with wine."

Alec couldn't help thinking back to the standing parties common among royalty, and the shameless nobles that looked to get young princesses blind drunk. Had any of them tried the same with Nadia, she would have made a great show of drinking them right under the table.

Alec cut thin slices of bread for the open sandwiches while the smoking was going on, then cut the marbled mushroom while he was at it. By the time he was done, the perch was looking just right. Alec smiled at the sight as he cut the fish into thin slices. All the while, Shiori deftly went about putting the gratin and the Alphan bison in the oven. Then she fried the marbled mushroom in a frying pan while she got the pork karaage and the fries going.

"You are so impressively dextrous..." Alec remarked.

"Thanks," replied Shiori. "But I had a lot of this prepared yesterday, and I'm using bottled ingredients I made earlier, so it's not nearly as troublesome as I thought it would be."

As a specialist when it came to campsite cooking, Shiori excelled at doing things quickly. And even though campsites were suboptimal cooking environments, Shiori could whip up several dishes in less than an hour, all of which tasted just as good as anything made in double the time. She was so good that it was often hard for observers to believe what they were seeing.

As the frying oil began to crackle nicely, Alec found himself suddenly remembering the birthdays of his childhood. Though he and his mother always ate rather simply, on his birthday the table was always loaded with luxuries. And while none of it was comparable to a family of wealthier standing, something about it still never felt right given his mother's financial struggles.

"My mother laughed off my suspicions," said Alec. "She'd say, 'Today's a day worthy of celebration, so just for today we're going to properly celebrate as a family.' Now I realize that it was probably stuff my father had sent."

Alec's mother had promised not to be a burden to his father, and true to her word, she'd refused his offer of financial support. The king, however, worried for his second wife and child, and found ways to secretly help them, ensuring they were able to maintain a basic standard of living. Still, he took the greatest

care to ensure that he never went so far as to injure Alec's mother's pride.

The only time Alec's mother could not refuse the king's support was when it came to a present for their son's one special day, once a year. And while it did not take the form of the usual presents, it was a chance for the king to ensure that, on the day of his son's birthday, both mother and son would end the day satisfied and with full stomachs.

And perhaps that was why, in her heart, Alec's mother always made sure his father had a place in the celebrations.

"So when she said you'd be celebrating as 'a family,' perhaps she really meant all of you?" asked Shiori.

"It's possible."

With both of his parents gone, Shiori's question was one that would remain forever unanswered. But Alec had made his peace with that.

"My mother and my father," he muttered to himself, "they were...both so stubborn, and so awkward."

Shiori heard him, however, and was quick to pounce.

"Which is to say that you take after both of them," she said with a giggle.

"Ugh," uttered Alec, unable to deny it.

As if to quell his embarrassed frustrations, Alec brought Shiori close to him and kissed her. He opened her lips with his own, and as his tongue entered her mouth, he knew he had her at his mercy. He traced the curve of her body with the palm of his hand, and only when she let out a soft, sweet moan did he release her from the spell.

"How dare you leave a girl hanging like that...?" uttered Shiori, blushing and pouting.

"You'll get the continuation this evening... As much as you can handle."

"No drinking yourself to sleep then, you hear?"

As the two made their suggestive promise, Rurii appeared by their feet. "Hate to interrupt your fun..." it seemed to say as it incessantly poked at them with

one feeler while pointing at the oven with another.

"Ah!" exclaimed Shiori, rushing over. "Phew, all good. Thanks, Rurii."

"Don't mention it!" waved the slime.

Rurii quickly returned to preparing its salad, but not before making sure to wash its two feelers just to be safe. The slime looked so much like Shiori in its movements that Alec couldn't help but burst into laughter. In this way, the two adventurers and their slime talked and laughed, and finished all their cooking.

Because they didn't have enough chairs, they moved the table over to the sofa, then gathered all the chairs in the house and placed them around so people could sit and eat as they liked. Then they laid out the food, plates, and cutlery on the table now at the center of it all.

"And now we wait," said Shiori.

"Yep. I haven't done this since I was just a boy," said Alec.

This was not the grand, lavish party held at the royal palace for "the two princes," swirling with ambition and aspiration. Rather, it was a sincere, warm, and intimate dinner, and that alone was enough to make Alec's heart burst.

Soon friends began to arrive. First Clemens and Nadia, then Zack and Bla a little later.

"I'm so glad you could all come," said Alec.

Given the nature of their work, it wasn't easy making time for all of them to meet together like this. Leaving for days at a time on expeditions was part and parcel of their way of life. But at Alec's age, having everyone here together on this particular day really made him happy. He was never the sort of person to let his emotions show, but all the same his friends could see this in him.

Clemens gave Alec a pat on the shoulder, and Nadia shot him her usual bewitching smile. Shiori gave him a kiss on the cheek, and while everyone showered him with words of celebration for another year passed, the slimes raised their feelers and danced joyously.

"So much to be happy for, huh, Alec?" said Zack.

A year ago, Alec had still been living in the Empire and had only just received

an extraction order upon completion of his mission. Naturally, he'd had zero time to celebrate his birthday; all he could think about was returning home alive. Zack knew this, and it was there in the deep creases of his smile.

"I've never been happier to be alive than I am today," admitted Alec. "Everyone, really...thank you."

He gave a little nod of appreciation, and Clemens and Zack once again slapped him on the back. Nadia winked. Shiori watched over it all with a smile, then gestured for everyone to get started.

"Let's eat before the food gets cold," she said.

"You've made a 'greatest hits' of Alec's favorites!" said Zack, laughing as he took a look at everything spread out across the table.

"And don't forget to put this out too," said Nadia.

She handed Shiori a beautifully decorated box in which there was a white cake, decorated with flowers drawn in cream. In the center of the cake were sugar-coated snow violets.

"But this..." uttered Alec.

It was kungens tarta, otherwise known as "king's cake." It was a special dessert reserved only for the birthdays of the royal family.

"Your brother gave me the recipe," explained Nadia. "He said you never much liked the food at the royal palace, but *this* was something you were all too happy to eat. Sir Kristoffer's chefs prepared it for you; I was merely the delivery woman."

"Nadia, I don't believe it..."

Alec and Shiori were practically speechless, and it brought a smile to Nadia's face.



"I went to pay my respects not long ago...for the last time. What's done is done, and I think I'm finally ready to start thinking of the future, and not the past. That's when I picked up the recipe."

Twenty-six years had passed since Alec's two half brothers had passed away. The second prince had left with regrets, his soul lingering in the world for some twenty-five years before finally returning to the heavens, where it could return to the source of life and await a new birth. Now that they were all past that turning point, so to speak, Nadia was finally able to untether herself from the past.

"Your brother was happy," she said. "For me, and for you. 'I'm just so glad,' he said, his eyes wet with tears. I also opened up to Clem about everything. And this time, he said that no matter who I am, he'll be there for me."

Clem. It had been Clemens's nickname since he was just a boy, but after all that had happened in the past, it was a name that he only allowed family to use. Now he had allowed Nadia that same privilege.

"I see. I'm glad, I really am," said Alec. "I'm happy for you, and I mean that."

Clemens and Nadia looked as comfortable as an elderly couple, and they smiled at Alec's words.

"Got a message from your brother too," said Zack. "He says you've got permission to open up about your 'circumstances' to anyone you deem trustworthy. He wants you to increase the allies you have around you."

Zack passed Alec a letter from Olivier, which contained both well-wishes and the very words Zack had just spoken.

"Ollie..." Alec muttered.

He nodded. It all made sense. It must have been why Nadia had opened up too.

"Right now, the only people I feel comfortable opening up to are the people here with me in this room today. So I'll tell you all everything, though I imagine you're all thinking something along the lines of 'it's about damned time.'"

Nadia had already heard directly from Olivier, which meant the only person

Alec really had to tell was Clemens. But Clemens had already realized the truth long ago. He was smart enough to figure it out, and the two had always been close.

"Given the nature of the family business," said Clemens with a wry chuckle, "I've been friends with Zack since he was just a boy. Once I knew who Zack really was, I could put your identity together through our conversations."

"I'm guessing you knew pretty much from the start, didn't you?" said Alec.

"Well, yeah..." admitted Clemens. "Zack brings a young man to the Guild with chestnut brown hair? I knew just based on the timing that you were probably the missing prince."

He paused for a moment before going on.

"'I'm so glad he's alive," he uttered.

"Huh?"

"That's what I thought when we first met. 'Ah, he's safe. I'm so glad he's alive.'"

"Clemens..."

The two young men had been meeting for the very first time, and that was the first thought that had crossed Clemens's mind.

"You really thought that about me?" Alec asked.

"I'd heard a lot of different rumors. I didn't know if you did it for the nation or what, but I knew that there was a battle for succession and I knew it ended with your and your brother being torn apart, even though you were so close. When I thought of the nobles propping the two of you up for their own gain, my blood boiled. And then there was all the commotion when you went missing. And when I thought that perhaps you, a prince, had died, I couldn't help thinking how awful that was, both for you and your brother. We're practically the same age. So when I saw you alive, I just felt so glad that you weren't gone."

Clemens held up his bottle and pointed to Alec, preparing for a toast. Alec, his dark magenta eyes glimmering with tears, covered his face with a hand as he held out his glass.

"We come from such different backgrounds," continued Clemens, "but it was such a delight to discover how well we got along. I'd been brought up with a silver spoon in my mouth and I jumped recklessly into the world of adventuring. You were someone to talk to, and someone to make stupid mistakes with, and a rival to push me to greater heights. It was more than I could have asked for. It was a precious encounter of souls, and I was blessed with it because you chose to live. So happy birthday, Alec. I wish you and your family nothing but happiness in the future."

Everyone's glasses swirled with wine as they were lifted towards the ceiling, and the aroma drifted through the room. It was a celebratory wine, and one that Clemens had served during an expedition, for Countess Lovner and her groom-to-be. Now he was pouring it for Alec. He was glad that Alec had chosen life, and not only did he accept that the woman he once loved was now Alec's beloved, he celebrated their union.

Clemens had been a friend for decades, and his speech was too much for Alec.

"Damn it, don't make me cry," he uttered.

Hot tears ran down his cheeks, and he covered his face, concealing it from the tender, loving gazes of his closest friends. He had been a prince for but seven years—a mere twenty percent of his thirty-five years alive—but the denial he'd felt about his own existence, and the shame that had followed him all that time far outweighed the love of his brother and father. In that sense, seven years was more than enough time to crush Alec's sense of self.

But Clemens, Shiori, his friends—they did not judge him, and instead they told him they were glad that he was alive. They told him they were glad to have crossed paths, and even happier to have built relationships with him.

"Never before has a speech made me so happy," said Alec, his honest feelings right there in every word. "Thank you, Clemens."

Clemens replied with a smile so stunning one could have mistaken him for the god of aesthetics.

"Another toast, then," he said. "To our friend on this most wonderful of occasions, and to his steps into a new life with his beloved."

Glasses were refilled and once more raised towards the ceiling.

"Cheers!"

After the speeches, everyone had a great time watching Alec open the presents from his lover and his friends. Wine was shared, delicious food was had, and good conversation was everywhere. For Alec, it was like floating in the waves of a most pleasant dream, and when he lay down in bed, he felt wrapped in blissful satisfaction. Rurii had worn itself out from all the excitement and was now fast asleep, and after patting the slime gently, Shiori sat down by Alec's pillow.

"That was so much fun," she said.

"Yeah," agreed Alec. "I'm so happy it's kind of terrifying. I feel like it must have been a dream."

A gentle smile rose to Shiori's lips.

"That was no dream," she said as she put a hand to Alec's cheek. "That was and is reality. Feel how warm it is?"

He felt the warmth of her person through her hands, and nodded.

"I do," he said.

The desk was now decorated with all of the presents that Alec had received from his friends. And while he knew it was childish, he wanted to leave them there like that for a while, and bask in the joy they brought him.

Zack had given him a fountain pen garnished with a dark magenta magical stone. Clemens had given him a wine whose vintage matched his year of birth, called "Crimson Moon." From Nadia, he'd received a necktie embroidered with Eastern silk, and from Rurii and Bla, he'd gotten a bouquet of snow violets. Olivier had sent him beautiful tassels woven with hair from a pegasus's mane, while the margrave and his wife had sent a tiepin and cufflinks. Shiori, meanwhile, had presented him with a handkerchief with his name and snow violets embroidered on it, along with a message woven in the same simple white as the handkerchief itself, wishing him peace and good health, and pledging him her love eternal. When he'd discovered the secret message, his

eyes had once again welled with tears, and it was quite the effort for him to maintain his composure.

"I'll take your handkerchief with me everywhere I go. It's my good luck charm. We'll have another party for your birthday too."

"Yes, thank you. That would make me so happy."

"And, as promised, part two of what we started earlier..."

Alec took a hold of Shiori and rolled her over so he was on top of her, then kissed her. Between passionate kisses he whispered his love in her ear, and their skin came together as they felt for and indulged in the beating of each other's hearts. In her heated breath, her sweet voice, and the glistening of her eyes, Alec felt Shiori's love for him, and the adorable, bewitching beauty of her person felt all too dear to him. He felt so strongly for her that it threatened to overwhelm him, and he poured these emotions into her.

"Ah..." Shiori murmured, "I love you..."

The words were barely discernible, and more moans of ecstasy than actual attempts at communication, but they came as she looked into his dark magenta eyes.

"One day..." she said, "I want you to have it... All of it..."

She did not say what "it" was, but Alec knew.

"As you wish," he said, pouring his everything into the woman he loved, enraptured in their rehearsal of what would one day come.

Afterword

Hello there, this is You Fuguruma after having lost a little weight from what was the heaviest I've ever been. I thank you all for taking the time to read volume 8 of *Housekeeping Mage*.

In this volume, we see the starting point of a future that was hinted at back in volume 5. The world that Shiori and Alec know will only expand from here on out. We had the return of Vivi from volume 1, the former knight captain who was injured in volume 2, and we also had Nadia and Clemens putting their past behind them to embark on a new journey together. All of these characters have been through much, and I'm so happy that I could finally show you that they're all taking steps towards their own individual futures.

I owe thanks and gratitude to Nama-sensei for the wonderful illustrations that made me giggle, my editor for all their efforts, Ono-sensei for all the wonderful jokes they place in the corners of the manga pages, all the people that played a hand in this book, and of course, all of you readers.

I look forward to writing you again.

Reference Materials:

Avoid an Avalanche Crisis (The Snow and Ice Disaster Research Team & Avalanche Safety Seminar Institute, Yama-kei Publishers Co., Ltd.)

Bonus Short Story

Reading had become extremely popular at the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild. And though the library that Shiori's recommendation had kick-started was rather small in scale, it had a wide variety of books, and adventurers were always coming and going.

Donated by the branch's supporters (led by the margrave), the encyclopedias and art books were particularly popular. Many loved to simply stare at the beautiful, colored images on the neatly printed pages. Among the fans of reading such books were the two slimes, Rurii and Bla, who on this particular day were once again lost in the wonder of their respective tomes. Bla had gone straight for *The Complete Collection of Insects*, while Rurii was leafing through an encyclopedia titled *Desserts of the World*. The latter was popular among women at the guild, who often gazed longingly at the images and sighed to themselves.

They're so pretty...and they all look so delicious!

There were candies that glimmered like gold, cakes that looked as if they had been cut straight out of the moon above, jellies filled with fruits Rurii had never seen before, and colorfully decorated cookies. There were even small, adorable Eastern snacks that were modeled after seasonal plants and wildlife. It all impressed upon the slime that the world was a vast place, filled with a countless number of different foods. The encyclopedia, too, was but a small portion of all the world had to offer. Rurii couldn't believe it.

There was so much about the world that the slimes had yet to learn, and the Blue Forest slimes were nothing if not brimming with curiosity. The guild library was thus like a treasure trove to them—a place to indulge in their interests. It was a portal through which to travel the world, and Rurii was in awe of the people who had written these books.

But you know what impresses me the most...?

Rurii peeked up at its two friends while its feelers turned another page. Shiori

and Alec had been rushed off their feet recently, but today they both looked quite relaxed, and were also taking some time out of their day to indulge in a little reading. The two adventurers were both already so knowledgeable, but even then they strove to increase that knowledge. Rurii thought they were both very hardworking.

Shiori hadn't come from this world, and when she'd arrived, she had no possessions and could not even speak the local language. She'd worked as hard as she possibly could've since then, and now everyone respected her efforts. Alec, meanwhile, had gone through a troubled upbringing where many looked down on him, but this had also fueled him, and as a result he was a very powerful adventurer.

Now, however, Shiori and Alec were working hard together for a new goal: shared happiness.

Rurii didn't like the idea of them working *too* hard, but the slime was so impressed with Shiori and Alec; they worked hard for themselves, for others, and for the goals they had. Unlike animals and magical beasts—which were all too happy to just maintain the status quo—humans were different. They were curious and interesting, and Rurii liked them a lot. But it liked Shiori and Alec most of all, and recently it had been as though the two were shining, their lives were so vibrant.

I want to stay with these two as long as I can, and just live and have heaps of fun together.

And with that thought, the slime returned to leafing through *Desserts of the World*.



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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 8

by You Fuguruma

Translated by Hengtee Lim Edited by Momo

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