

Author

Hiiro Shimotsuki

Illustrator

Takashi Iwasaki

vol. **7**

Thank you
for your
purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**

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Summary of the Previous Volume

On arriving back in town after my trip to the royal capital, I'd made my way to the Fairy's Blessing guild to tell my friends I had returned, but imagine my surprise when I heard the mind-boggling piece of news that a party of adventurers had found a set of ruins where you could talk to the dead. These ruins were the creation of Nathew, a renowned scholar considered by many to be the father of alchemy, and naturally, the prospect of exploring the structure was a tantalizing one for every adventurer in the guild. There was a *slight* issue, however, in that no one knew how to perform the ritual that would summon the dead. As such, they were all forced to sit and wait while the adventurers with knowledge of the ancient tongue set about translating the grimoire that had been retrieved from the ruins.

Meanwhile, Ninoritch was in the middle of a housing crisis, brought about by an influx of refugees from a neighboring nation, and it was soon abundantly clear that the town simply didn't have the funds needed to take in so many people all at once. To remedy this situation, I convinced a few deep-pocketed merchants to invest in the town and ended up securing enough money for us to not only build the houses and inns we needed but also entertainment facilities—namely, a casino—a public bathhouse, an auction hall, and a movie theater. Ninoritch had always been somewhat lacking for entertainment, so it came as no surprise that every single one of these was a roaring success. And once the refugees had moved in, Ninoritch officially became a large town.

After that was all dealt with, the whole summoning-the-dead saga took an interesting turn. It turned out that the ring grandma had given to me allowed me to understand *all* of this world's languages, including the ancient tongue, meaning I could read Nathew's grimoire. As soon as I had recited the tome from cover to cover, we formed a dungeon exploration team composed of me, Patty, the Blue Flash crew, Ney, Eldos, and a bunch of other adventurers, and because of this, that, and the other, Aina, Celes, and Dramom joined our group too. We all ventured to the bottom level of the ruins together, where I performed the

ritual to summon the dead, allowing Patty to talk to Eren—her deceased best friend and Karen’s great-great-grandfather—for the first time in over two hundred years. However, when Aina attempted to summon her father, he didn’t show, which could only mean one thing: he hadn’t died in the war like they had always believed.

Aina’s father was still alive and out there somewhere.

Chapter One: The Daily Routine

On that day as on every day, I went through the portal in grandma's house and emerged in the break room on the second floor of my shop. I headed down to the first floor and found Aina already there.

"Good morning, Mister Shiro!" she chirruped.

"Morning, Aina," I replied.

A week had passed since the final day of the meteor shower festival. With the housing crisis, the dungeon crawling, and the whole summoning-the-dead ritual, it had been a hectic couple of months, to say the least, especially for a small town like Ninoritch. But thankfully, everything had finally started getting back to normal now that all of it was behind us.

"I'm going to start cleaning now," Aina told me.

"Okay. Thanks, Aina."

I started getting the shop ready for the day, while Aina tidied up the place. *Okay, I've got plenty of change, the shopping bags are fully stocked up, and all the new products are out on the shelves. Yup, everything's ready.*

"Aina, I'm gonna open the shop now."

"Okay!"

The instant I turned the sign on the door from "Closed" to "Open," a wave of customers flooded in.

"Five boxes of matches, please."

"I've never seen this thing before. Is it a new product? I'll take one."

"My kid *loves* these snacks."

"Gimme some white paper and a pencil, will ya?"

The items I'd brought from Japan flew off the shelves one after another, and the piles of copper and silver coins on my desk grew higher and higher. The first

customers of the day must have told their friends about the new stock I had in, as footfall in the shop surged steadily throughout the morning, leaving Aina and myself very little time to even breathe between customers.



“Phew! We can finally take a break,” I said when things had calmed down a little.

It was 1:42 p.m. and my shop opened at 9 a.m., meaning we had just spent over four and a half hours serving customers without a single break. Not that I was complaining, of course. There was nothing I loved more than the sight of money piling up, and I could easily work all day long if it meant I could revel in the satisfying jingling of coins by closing time. I looked up and saw that Aina was replenishing the shelves while humming a little tune. It felt like this was a good time for us to take our lunch break, so I went over to the door and flipped the sign on it to “Closed.” Only way out in the countryside would you find shops that closed altogether over lunchtime.

“It’s a bit on the late side, but let’s have some lunch, shall we?” I said to Aina.

“Okay!” she replied, trotting back over to me when she was done restocking the shelves.

“It’s nice and sunny outside, so wanna go eat upstairs? We’ll get more sun on our faces up there,” I suggested.

“Sure!”

The two of us made our way upstairs to the break room, whereupon I produced two rice bowls topped with fried pork cutlets from my inventory and set them down on the table.

Aina opened the lid on her bowl and looked up at me with stars in her eyes. “Mister Shiro, what is this?” she asked excitedly.

“It’s a specialty from my homeland,” I said. “It’s called ‘katsudon.’”

“Katsudon?” she echoed.

“Yup, katsudon.”

And this wasn’t just *any* katsudon. No, this was grandma’s katsudon. She’d

prepared a couple of bowls for me and Aina to have for our lunch and I'd chunked them into my inventory as soon as they were ready, which meant, since time stood still in my inventory, the katsudons were still steaming hot. The smell of the dashi—that is, the bonito soup stock—wafted through the air, whetting my appetite.

“Katsudon,” Aina repeated again. “What a cute name.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah! It sounds like it could be some kind of small animal!”

“Really?”

“Really!”

I prepared some tea for the two of us while we chitchatted about the word “katsudon,” and when I was done, I sat back down on the sofa. I brought my hands together and opened my mouth to say, “Thanks for the food,” like I did before every meal, when I heard a little clap beside me.

“Hm? Why'd you just put your hands together, Aina?” I asked the little girl.

She giggled. “I'm imitating you!”

“Oh, are you now?” I said with a smile. “Do you know what comes next? Should we say it at the same time?”

“Yeah!”

“Okay. One, two, three...”

“Thanks for the food!” the two of us chorused in unison before reaching for our food.

“All righty! Let's dig in. Did you want a spoon, Aina?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nope! I wanna try eating with chopsticks like you today.”

“Well, *someone's* feeling a little adventurous, huh? Here you go, then,” I said, handing her a pair of disposable chopsticks. “If you find it too hard, you can ask for a spoon at any time.”

“Okay!”

She split the chopsticks with a little snap, and gripping them in shaking hands, she thrust them toward the bowl. I couldn't help feeling extremely anxious watching her. *You can do it, Aina!* I cheered internally. *Almost there... Almost... Yes! You did it!* She was holding her chopsticks more like a pen, but she had successfully managed to get a chopstick scoop's worth of rice and pork into her mouth. I did a discreet fist pump, feeling incredibly proud of the little girl.

As soon as the food hit her tongue, the sparkling in Aina's eyes intensified. "Wow, it'sh sho good!" she exclaimed before swallowing it down and looking up at me in amazement. "Mister Shiro, katsudon is so good!"

Well, she seemed to like it all right. Not that I was too surprised, since grandma's katsudon was truly scrumptious.

"Really? That's good to hear. Have as much of it as you want, okay? If you're still hungry, I'll ask grandma to make us some more."

"Okay!"

I watched her shoveling more rice into her mouth for a little while longer before digging into my own bowl. All meal long, she kept saying over and over how delicious it was.



After being rushed off our feet all morning, I decided we'd earned ourselves a longer lunch break. Usually, Aina would sneak in a little nap after lunch, but on this day, she didn't.

"Is that a map?" I said as she opened up a large piece of parchment and spread it across the break room table.

"Yeah. Mister Rolf gave it to me."

She stared at the map, her little brow furrowed in concentration. I spotted the Giruam Kingdom in the east, so I assumed this must have been a map of the continent. Aina silently placed her index finger on the rightmost border of the kingdom—Ninoritch's location, most likely—then dragged it up and to the left. Her little finger slid its way through several countries before stopping on one in particular.

“What’s that country?” I asked.

“The Republic of Aptos,” she replied quietly. She sucked in a short breath, then said in a sad, nostalgic voice, “It’s where I lived when I was little.”

“I see.”

When Aina was just four, war broke out in her homeland. Thinking her husband had died in battle, Stella decided to leave the country with Aina and find a new place to call home—a place so remote that she would never have to worry about losing anyone in her family to war again. After a long journey, they arrived in Ninoritch and settled down.

“I wonder where my papa is,” the little girl mumbled quietly. In fact, she probably hadn’t even realized she’d said it. Aina’s father was alive. We had been given firm proof of that in Nathew’s ruins. The reason she was studying this map so intensely was most likely because she was trying to figure out a way to see him again.

I didn’t know if I should say something or simply stay silent and keep her company. I ultimately opted for the former. “What would you want your dad to do if he were here?” I asked her.

I saw tears welling up in her eyes and she remained silent for a few seconds before eventually saying, “I’d want him to give me a big hug.”

“I see.”

She nodded and lowered her gaze to the map again. “Mister Shiro,” she said without looking at me.

“What is it?”

“Um...”

She seemed hesitant to say what was on her mind, so I encouraged her with a little, “Yeah?”

“I... I...” She was gripping the hem of her skirt tightly, and I couldn’t help noticing that her little hands were shaking. “If I told you I wanted to go looking for my papa, what would you say?”

She finally raised her head and looked me dead in the eye. It was clear to see

that the poor mite was on the verge of tears, and I figured she must have been thinking about this nonstop since the final night of the meteor festival.

“If you wanted to go looking for your father, you say?” I mused aloud. That meant leaving Ninoritch. I gave it some thought before reaching out my hand to pat her on the head. “I’d do everything in my power to help you,” I said.

“Huh?” The little girl clearly hadn’t been expecting this answer, as her eyes widened in bewilderment.

“You heard me. So if there’s anything you need me to do, don’t hesitate to ask, you got that?” I said, ruffling her hair gently.

Her face instantly scrunched up and a few tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Thank you, Mister Shiro.”

Chapter Two: Stella and the Adventurers' Guild

I eventually reopened the shop when I felt like we'd rested up enough, and fortunately, the shop wasn't overly busy that afternoon, which was perfect since I had to swing by the Fairy's Blessing to deliver some ready-made meals to the adventurers there.

"Aina, do you think you'll be fine if I head over to the guild now?" I asked the little girl.

She nodded. "Yup! I'll look after the shop while you're away."

"Thanks. I'll get going, then," I said.

In the past, I had piled my items onto a handcart and transported them to the guild that way as I hadn't wanted anyone learning about my Inventory skill, but since pretty much everyone and their mother knew about it by this point, I simply headed over there empty-handed, sipping a canned coffee as I strolled through the streets. It didn't take me long to reach the guildhall, and the sign reading "Fairy's Blessing" greeted me as I approached. As always, the place was absolutely teeming with adventurers flitting in and out of the building, but a familiar silhouette leaving the building caught my eye.

"Is that..." I muttered to myself.

At first, I thought I must have been mistaken, but after staring at the person's retreating form for a couple more seconds, I was sure it was her.

"Stella?" I whispered.

Yup, that's right. The person I'd spotted coming out of the guildhall was none other than Stella, Aina's mother. But what had she been doing in there? She appeared quite disheartened, if her slouching shoulders were any indication. Did she need help with something? I thought about it for a bit, but couldn't for the life of me figure out why she would have come all the way to the guildhall. I decided the best thing to do was ask her directly.

"Hey, Ste—" I called out, then stopped. "Oh, she's gone."

I'd spent so long wondering about what she was doing here that by the time I'd resolved to call out to her, she had disappeared into the crowd. If I'd gotten here a little bit earlier, perhaps I would have crossed paths with her inside the guildhall.

"Oops. Mustn't forget why I came here in the first place," I mumbled to myself, remembering the delivery.

I strode into the guildhall and headed straight for the reception desk. There were four counter positions, and almost immediately, I spied a pair of familiar bunny ears peeking out above the crowd at the rightmost one, so I purposefully stood in the line that was furthest away from that one. But to my dismay...

"Next! Oh, hiya, mister!"

For some unknown reason, the receptionist that had been at my counter position had magically transformed into a certain bunny-eared girl when it was my turn.

"Did you come to see little old me?" she said, and I could almost hear the heart symbol that punctuated her sentence.

"Emille..." I hissed between gritted teeth. "Weren't you working at the rightmost counter position until just now?"

"Trell *begged* me to swap with her, so I had no choice."

I glanced over at the counter position Emille had previously been manning, and sure enough, Trell was standing there in the bunny girl's stead, looking on the verge of tears. I quickly realized that Emille must have forced the poor girl to change counter positions with her.

"And just as I got to this position, it was your turn," Emille continued. "That's fate, mister! Fate, I tell you! It's *such* a coincidence that I'm always the one taking care of your requests. Of course, if you insist, I wouldn't say no to taking care of *you* for the *rest of my life*."

"I'd rather you didn't," I said, quickly shutting her down.

"Aw, c'mon. I already told you there's no need to be so shy around me, mister," Emille cooed before reaching over the reception desk and giving me a

big old slap on the shoulder, and because beastfolk were several times stronger than humans, it hurt like nobody's business. "Anyway, what brings you here today, mister? Ah, I know!" she exclaimed, her face lighting up. "Did you finally decide to invite me on a date? Aw, you're hopeless, mister, coming all the way to my workplace to ask me out like this."

She clambered over the counter and I hurriedly tried to push her away, but as we'd already established, beastfolk were strong, and I basically stood no chance.

"I'm so glad you came to see me today, mister," she said with a giggle, her face edging closer and closer to mine. This was a nightmare—a scene straight out of a horror movie.

"D-Delivery! I came to deliver food for the guild's shop!" I squeaked in a desperate attempt to repel her.

"Food? Oh! Are you saying I can eat you up?" Emille asked.

"No! *Definitely* not!" I cried.

"Oh, mister, you're so cute. Don't worry, I won't leave a single crumb," she said in what I guessed was an attempt at a seductive tone as she quickly unfastened the first few buttons of her shirt.

"Don't start *undressing*!" I exclaimed.

She put her hand back on the counter and started crawling toward me, her fingers making indents in the wood of the desk due to the sheer strength of her grip as her face approached mine.

"Misteeer," she cooed.

I let out a pathetic little squeal before grabbing her by the head with both hands and pushing her away with every last ounce of my strength. "Leave me alone!"

"Misteeer...let meee...eat you...r-right up!" she managed to splutter even though her face was being squished.

I looked around in a panic and started crying out, "H-Help me, please!"

Unfortunately, my Blue Flash buddies weren't here, and the other

adventurers simply stared at us from a safe distance, with some even making bets on the outcome. Over the course of the last few months, my interactions with Emille had somehow become one of the guild's main attractions.



“C’mon, mister.” Emille chuckled menacingly. “Let’s go to a nice, dark room, just the two of us.”

“Noooooooo!” I cried out at the top of my lungs.

Thankfully, Ney came to my rescue just before Emille managed to drag me into the aforementioned “dark room.”



“Here you go, mister. That’s 5 gold coins and 53 silver. That’s what we owe you for today’s delivery,” Emille grumbled with a sour look on her face as she piled the coins up on the reception counter.

After rescuing me from Emille’s clutches, Ney had grabbed the bunny girl by the scruff of the neck and dragged her off to another room, where I could only imagine she got the scolding of a lifetime. Her face was all swollen, as if she’d been crying.

“I think we’re good,” I said once I’d finished counting the coins. “Thank you for another successful deal.”

I started pocketing the coins, but Emille stopped me with a soft slap on the hand. “We’re not done yet,” she said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked.

“You haven’t paid your debt yet, so I’ll be taking it from the money we owe you,” she told me.

My debt? As someone who was a firm believer in the superiority of cash over credit, I had pretty much never been in debt in my whole life. I watched with bewilderment as Emille removed a few dozen silver coins and all of the gold coins from the pile and placed them in the guild’s safe. I’d initially thought she was playing one of her usual games and would try to distract me so she could pocket the coins herself, but it seemed I’d been wrong on that, which made me extra confused.

“My debt?” I repeated. “Did I have one?”

“Yep, and it’s a huge one at that.” She paused and glanced pointedly at one particular table in the guild’s drinking hall. I followed her gaze and found

Dramom, Celes, and Suama sitting there, having lunch.

“Hey, you,” Celes said to the waitress. “Bring me seven more plates of this meat dish.”

“And I will have five more plates of the stir-fried vegetables and six more of the fish meunière,” Dramom ordered, then she turned to her daughter.

“Suama, would you like anything else?”

“Meat!” the little dragon girl squealed.

“Did you hear, hume?” Dramom said. “Bring seven meat dishes for my daughter.”

As always, there was a mountain of dishes on their table. Seriously, the three of them could have put competitive eaters to shame.

“You can thank the two hoes with the huge hooters,” Emille drawled. “They said you would be paying for everything they eat at the guildhall, so you’ve racked yourself up a huge tab.”

“I-I see.”

“You’ll probably have to pay even more next month, considering how much they’ve been eating,” Emille added.

“Well, Suama *is* a growing child.”

My gaze drifted back to the drinking hall, and I watched as Suama sank her little teeth into a slab of meat, a huge grin on her face. That sight was priceless, so I absolutely didn’t mind paying whatever it took to keep Suama happy. Celes and Dramom were another matter, though. They were both adults, and I decided it was high time they became a bit more independent and started looking for jobs. I made a mental note to mention it to them later.

“So I’m gonna have to pay their tab every month, am I? Well, I guess that’s fine for the time being,” I said, tossing the meager eight silver coins still on the counter into my inventory.

“Good to hear,” Emille said.

I hadn’t expected to pay out that much money, but I was glad our transaction had been a success once more.

“Oh, and thank Ney for me,” I said to the bunny girl.

“I don’t want to, but sure thing. I *really* don’t want to, though,” she said, pouting like a bratty child. “Make sure the guildmaster *isn’t* here when you come next time, mister.”

“I’m impressed you can still say stuff like that after just being scolded by Ney,” I pointed out.

“What can I say? Nothing can get in the way of a pure maiden’s love. I won’t give up so easily.”

“I really wish you *would* give up,” I muttered. “Well, anyway, I should probably head back to—”

I was about to say, “*I should probably head back to the shop,*” when all of a sudden, I thought of something.

“Oh, yeah, right. I had a question for you, Emille.”

“For me?” she said, her interest instantly piqued. “Are you finally going to ask me out on a da—”

“No, I’m not,” I said, cutting her off. “Well, you see, I saw Stella coming out of the guildhall earlier, and—”

This time, it was Emille’s turn to interrupt me. “*Stella?*” she spat as she grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. “You *dare* to talk about another woman in front of *me*?! And who’s this Stella bitch? Well?!”

She looked absolutely furious. I was terrified.

“S-Stella is Aina’s mother!” I squeaked.

“Aina’s mother?” Emille repeated, a blank look on her face. She paused for a few seconds as the cogs whirred, then she at last slammed her fist down into her open palm, seemingly remembering something. “Oh, *right*. Aina’s mom is called Stella. Yeah, she did come to the guild earlier.”

So it really had been Stella I’d seen in front of the guildhall.

“She wanted to send a letter, so I offered to help. Y’know, out of the kindness of my heart,” Emille explained.

“I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t have forgotten her name so soon if you were as kind as you made out you are,” I pointed out.

“Oh, *puh*-lease! I have to deal with, like, a hundred clients every single day. I can’t possibly remember *everyone’s* name. It just goes in one ear and out the other, to be honest,” she said.

I was so shocked by how freely she had admitted that, all I could manage to utter was a little “wow.” I was sure Ney would be just *thrilled* to hear that her most senior receptionist couldn’t remember the names of the guild’s clients.

“Well, anyway, let’s set aside how you approach your work for now, and—”

“And who said *you* could set that aside?” Emille interrupted, puffing her cheeks out in annoyance.

I decided to simply ignore her and continue. “That letter Stella wanted to send... Was it addressed to someone in the Republic of Aptos?”

“How’d you know that?” Emille said, blinking in surprise. “Yup, that’s right. But when I told her how much it would cost to send a letter there, she just looked all sad and left.”

“Hm, is that so? Is it that expensive?”

“Well, *duh*. The Republic of Aptos is really far from here, after all, and our kingdom has no diplomatic ties with them,” she explained.

“I see. And just out of curiosity, how much *would* it cost to send a letter there?”

Emille held up her right hand with all of her fingers extended. “It’d be 5 gold coins, at the very least.”

“What?! Did you say 5 *gold* coins?” I repeated in shock. That was equivalent to five million yen, and it was about as much as I’d just paid to cover the tab Celes, Dramom, and Suama had racked up. The average monthly salary in Ninoritch was 10 silver coins (about 100,000 yen), so that was way beyond being classed as “a little pricey.”

“Why do you look so surprised?” Emille asked. “And that’s just the bare minimum. If you were to send a silver-ranked party like Blue Flash to deliver the

letter, it'd cost you three times that amount."

"Three times..." I breathed, staggered by the kind of numbers we were talking. "Though, well, I suppose that does make some sense."

I'd once commissioned the Blue Flash crew to let me tag along on one of their adventures and it had set me back 30 silver coins for a grand total of three days in the forest. And the longer an adventuring party spent on any given mission, the more expensive it got, so I supposed it stood to reason that it would cost so much to send a letter to another country.

"Stella..." I murmured.

After learning her husband was still alive, she must have decided to send a letter to where she had formerly called home to ask after him. I didn't know who exactly she was planning on sending the letter to, but I figured it must have been someone who would have known her husband before the war, and she wanted to know if he had returned.

"From what I've read, the Republic of Aptos was at war up until a few years ago," Emille said. "Things tend to get messy when countries get involved in wars, whether they win or lose them, so sending adventurers there won't be cheap."

From what I could remember of the map Aina had been looking at earlier that same afternoon, it seemed like there were several nations between the Giruam Kingdom and the Republic of Aptos. In this world, you already had to pay a fee if you wanted to enter a town, so I couldn't even begin to imagine how expensive it would be to cross the border of a country. On top of the adventurers' fee, that was probably what hiked up the price. Still, 5 gold coins just to send a single letter... Stella definitely didn't have that kind of money.

"Good grief. She could've just asked me," I grumbled. "I would've given her the 5 gold coins."

As soon as these words left my mouth, gold coins appeared in Emille's eyes, and she looked at me with renewed interest. "M-M-Mister! I have to send a letter too! I have to send it all the way to the other side of the continent, so I'll need 10—no, wait, 30—no, let's say 50 gold coins! You understand, right? Since it's going to the other side of the *continent*. Think you could help me out and

give me 50 gold coins?" she babbled, grabbing me by the shoulders and shooting me a pleading look.

"Oh, really?" I asked, thoroughly unimpressed and raising an eyebrow. "And who did you want to send this letter to, exactly?"

"Um, uh, a friend! Yes, a friend of mine who moved right over to the other side of the continent! That's why it's so expensive, you see. Actually, now that I think about it, I might even need *100* gold coins!"

She treated me to her best puppy dog look, but I completely ignored it. Instead, I had let my gaze wander and my eyes had come to rest on the figure that was standing directly behind Emille.

"Hey, mister, are you even listening? I need you to give me money so I can—"

"Psst, Emille. Behind you," I interrupted, pointing behind her.

"...send my letter. Huh? What do you mean 'behind me'?" She spun around in annoyance, and her face fell instantly.

Ney was standing there with a pleasant smile on her face, though I could see that the vein on her forehead was pulsating. "What were you saying, Emille?" she said, her smile unwavering. "I believe I heard you talking about gold coins just now. But I'm *sure* you weren't asking Shiro to lend you money. Were you?"

"Eek! G-G-Guildmaster..." Emille squeaked.

"It seems you and I need to have another little *chat*," Ney said, as calm as always as she reached out and grabbed Emille by the scruff of her neck.

The bunny girl let out another high-pitched screech, but Ney ignored her caterwauling and dragged her off to a room somewhere. "Come on, Emille. This way."

"Nooo!" Emille cried out at the top of her lungs. "I don't wanna get yelled at again! Mister, save meeeee!"

Without paying one iota of attention to the bunny girl's pleas, I turned around and exited the guildhall.

Chapter Three: A Secret Talk

By the time I made it back to the shop, the sun had already started setting.

“I’m back, Aina,” I announced as I went inside.

The little girl immediately rushed over to the door to greet me with a wide grin on her face. “Welcome back, Mister Shiro!”

When I saw her, I couldn’t help feeling a pang of sadness in my heart as my thoughts turned to Stella. Had she told Aina that she was going to write a letter to someone in their old hometown? No, that seemed unlikely, because if she had, Aina would have mentioned it to me.

“Is something wrong, Mister Shiro?” the little girl asked, her innocent eyes gazing up at me curiously.

I hurriedly shook my head. “Nope. Everything’s fine.”

There must have been a reason Stella had refrained from telling her daughter about the letter, so I decided not to bring it up.

“Sorry for taking my time up at the guild, by the way. Did you manage okay by yourself?” I asked, changing the topic.

“Yup! It was easy-peasy!” she chirped while flexing her biceps like a bodybuilder as if to say, “*I could’ve kept this up for hours!*” despite having worked all day long already. I couldn’t help feeling slightly jealous of her vitality.

“Wow, you’re so *strong*,” I marveled, smiling at her. “But the sun’s about to set, so I think we should call it a day.”

“Okay!”

Aina started tidying up the shop while I flipped the “Open” sign on the door, then once that was done, I started tallying up the sales for the day.

All of a sudden, there was a knock at the door, and a masculine-sounding voice called out through the wood. “Hey, Shiro. Are you in there?”

I opened the door and found a familiar blond-haired blue-eyed figure standing there, looking as handsome as ever.

“Duane,” I said, surprised to see him on my doorstep. “What brings you here at this hour?”

He brought his hand up to his chest and breathed out, seemingly relieved to see me. “Thank goodness you’re here. The door was locked so I thought you were out.”

This, ladies and gentlemen, was Sir Duane Lestard, a knight who worked for Lord Bashure, the earl in charge of the region. He had been sent here a few weeks back to escort the refugees from Hyord to Ninoritch and had decided to stick around for a bit to act as a mediator between them and the townsfolk. But as it turned out, the refugees had adapted to life in Ninoritch pretty quickly, meaning there wasn’t a great deal for him and his subordinates to do, so they were spending most of their days patrolling the town and upholding public order.

“Sorry for bothering you so late in the day, but something urgent has come up and it concerns you directly, so may I steal a few minutes of your time?” he said, an apologetic look on his face.

Passersby on the street outside kept throwing glances in our direction. Were they curious about what a knight could possibly want with me? Or were their gazes simply drawn to Duane’s striking features? Considering the majority of the onlookers were women, the latter scenario seemed more likely.

“It concerns Aina too, so I’d like her to join us if that’s okay,” he continued.

“Me too?” the little girl said quizzically.

“Yep. It’s *very* important, so I’d like to have this conversation as soon as possible.”

I looked across at Aina. “Well, you heard the man. It’s getting late, though. Are you gonna be all right staying here for a little while longer?”

“It’s fine!” she replied.

The two of us exchanged nods, then turned back to Duane. “Well, come in,

then,” I said.



We led Duane up to the break room on the second floor.

“I’m really sorry for bothering you after you closed up for the day,” he apologized again.

“It’s totally fine,” I reassured him, then gestured to the couch. “Take a seat.”

“Thank you, Shiro.”

He sat down on the couch while I made some tea for the three of us. Light from the setting sun danced across his blond hair, making it shimmer like strands of gold, and I marveled at how even in the simple act of taking a seat, he somehow looked like a character straight out of a movie. If my sisters had been here, they probably would have been losing their minds and squealing like the high school girls they were. *Thank goodness today’s a school day*, I thought to myself.

I finished preparing the tea, then set three cups of the stuff and a plate of cookies down on the table, before taking a seat on the sofa opposite Duane. Aina hopped up and settled on the cushion next to me.

“What a lovely aroma,” Duane said as he picked up his teacup. “Did you know that your tea is very popular in Mazela?”

“So I’ve heard. The guildmaster of the Eternal Promise—that’s the guild I belong to—mentioned he wanted to increase how much of it he holds the next time he comes by to restock.”

“Speaking of which, I was surprised at how cheap that tea is in your shop. It’s much more expensive in Mazela,” Duane pointed out.

“Well, supply and demand is an important consideration in the business game. Practically no one in Ninoritch drinks black tea, so if I made it *too* expensive, I wouldn’t sell any at all,” I explained. In fact, if you took Stella and Karen out of the equation, my primary customers for it were a handful of housewives and a bunch of other merchants looking to resell it elsewhere.

Duane nodded to show he understood. “I’m not too surprised by that. After

all, your alcohol selection is exceptional, so I reckon most folk here prefer booze over tea. You can't get anything of that quality in Mazela."

I chuckled. "We'll have a few drinks next time we get together, then. Whaddaya say?"

"Sounds good to me."

With the pleasantries out of the way, I decided it was time we got to the topic at hand. "So what was it you wanted to discuss with Aina and me?" I asked.

"I actually have a request for you two," he confessed.

"A request?"

"Yeah. But before I tell you what it is, you absolutely *cannot* tell anyone outside of these four walls about this conversation, okay?"

Aina and I both nodded, though I still felt a little puzzled. What could Duane—a knight of all people, let's not forget—need from a mere merchant like me?

Hold on a minute. I may have an idea. You see, Duane was in love with Karen. Trouble was, Karen didn't give a damn about him and wouldn't even give him the time of day. Was Duane here to ask for some advice on matters of the heart? If that were the case, what should I tell him? I should have anticipated this. After all, being friends with both of them made me the obvious candidate to be a confidant that Duane could come to with his romantic struggles. But I knew for a fact that Karen didn't want anything to do with him, so wouldn't I be betraying her if I agreed to help him out? Karen had been nothing but helpful and kind to me ever since I came to this world, so I really didn't want to get roped into a situation where I would end up betraying her trust. But come to think of it, why would he have insisted on Aina joining us if he wanted to ask me for advice on love? Maybe he wanted a female perspective on the matter? Nah, Aina was way too young to be dishing out relationship advice.

The cogs inside my head were whirring so fast that it felt like my brain might overheat while I sat waiting for Duane to tell us the reason for his visit.

"I'm here at Lord Bashure's behest," he said after what felt like an eternity.

Oh. I'd gotten it all wrong. It had nothing to do with Karen.

“I-Is that right? T-Tell me more,” I stammered, before clearing my throat and straightening up. Beside me, Aina did likewise, sitting up as straight and tall as she could.

So it was the earl, Lord Bashure, who had sent Duane here, huh? I took that to mean that this was a matter related to the nobility in some way and sighed inwardly. Those kinds of things were always an absolute pain to deal with.

“Put simply, a certain *someone* has decided they will be taking up residence in Ninoritch,” Duane said cryptically.

“Judging from your wording, I take it this ‘certain someone’ is rather an important ‘someone,’ yes?” I surmised.

Duane flashed me a grin. “Bingo. You’re good at reading between the lines.”

“So a noble of some variety has decided to move to Ninoritch. But what does that have to do with me? Shouldn’t you be having this discussion with Karen instead?” I asked.

“I thought you might like to know. After all, the two of you are pretty familiar with this person,” Duane said, giving Aina and me meaningful looks in turn.

“Who, me and Aina?”

“Yeah.”

I glanced across at the little girl beside me but she looked every bit as puzzled as me by this. I hadn’t interacted with all that many nobles in the few months since I first came to this world, to the point where the only ones that sprang to mind were Lord Bashure and his wife. Would that haughty countess really consider moving to Ninoritch? She *did* like fashion, so maybe she’d heard about my sisters’ boutique, Beauty Amata, and wanted to check it out for herself. It did seem a little far-fetched, but I couldn’t for the life of me think of any other nobles that I knew personally. Aina was in a similar state of confusion, and I could almost see the question marks dancing above her head.

“I heard you were quite *busy* when you visited the royal capital. Isn’t that right, Shiro?” Duane hinted, clearly amused by our reactions, and as soon as the words “royal capital” passed his lips, realization struck and I knew *exactly* who he was talking about.

“Wait, do you mean Shess—um, Princess Shessfelia?” I asked nervously.

“Bingo!” Duane treated me to a wide grin once more. “Her Highness, Princess Shessfelia will be taking up residence in Ninoritch.”

Shessfelia—or as we called her, Shess—was the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom. I was already puzzled by the idea of a noble deciding to move to Ninoritch, but a member of the royal family? It was so out of left field, it hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Are you...” I hesitated. “Are you joking? Why would Shess—I mean, Princess Shessfelia... Why would she move *here*?”

“Nope, I’m not joking. Her Highness is already on her way. She left the royal capital a few days ago,” Duane said matter-of-factly.

Shess was definitely the kind of person who followed the mantra “act first, think later,” so while I didn’t know exactly *why* she would be coming to Ninoritch, I was well aware that whenever she got an idea in her head, she wasted no time in putting it into action.

“But why are you telling *us* this?” I spluttered. “This is an important matter! You should’ve gone straight to Karen about it.”

“Fair point,” Duane conceded. “But Her Highness wants her identity to remain a secret. And I mean from *everyone*, including Miss Sankareka.”

“What? So even *Karen* can’t know?” I said, puzzled by this.

“Nope, she can’t,” the knight confirmed.

So Shess moving here was such a confidential matter, even the mayor couldn’t know about it?

“Other than me, the only people here who know Her Highness’s real identity are you, Aina, and the people who went with you to the royal capital. I’d greatly appreciate it if you could tell them to keep their lips sealed too,” Duane said, emphasizing his request by bringing a finger up to his lips and winking. If I’d been a woman, that gesture might just have stolen my heart.

“Uh, so I have a question...” I mumbled.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Why would Princess Shessfelia be moving to a tiny town out in the middle of nowhere like Ninoritch?”

“To be completely honest with you, I have no idea either. Lord Bashure just told me to make all the arrangements for her arrival without giving me any more details than that,” Duane admitted.

“And I suppose telling us to keep Shess’s identity all hush-hush was included in these ‘arrangements,’ huh?”

“You would suppose correctly,” he confirmed.

Still, I found it rather surprising that the earl hadn’t told one of his most trusted knights the reason for Shess moving here.

“Stop overthinking it,” Duane said with a smile, as if he could read my thoughts. “It’s really not that uncommon for a young noble to spend their childhood far away from the royal capital.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. A lot of nobles and royals send their children off to study in the city-state of Zussa that’s known for its academic excellence, while others simply choose to have their children grow up in smaller towns to avoid assassination attempts, or prevent them from getting undesirable boyfriends and girlfriends if their offspring are older. There are plenty of cunning schemers out there who will try to win the favor of young nobles by dropping a few sweet words. There’s also the ever-present fear that their precious children will get caught up in whatever factional disputes are currently playing out,” Duane explained. “Anyway, I could list plenty more reasons why nobles might wish to send their children away, but you get the picture.”

He paused, flashed me a conspiratorial smile, then continued. “We’re not usually told the official reason for these kinds of decisions, but I think it’s pretty easy to guess why Princess Shessfelia is being sent to Ninoritch of all places.”

“Really?” I said. “Mind sharing your thoughts with me? Just for future reference, I mean.”

“Sure,” he said with a nod, then lowered his voice as if divulging a secret even though there was no one else in the room apart from the three of us. “Shiro,

you've somehow managed to harness the power of a shape-shifting dragon, right?"

When I visited the capital two months back, my companions and I ended up having to save Shess from a conspiratorial plot involving the king's second wife. As a way to ensure that no one would ever try to threaten the little girl again, I asked Dramom to shape-shift into her dragon form in the middle of the royal palace's courtyard to warn anyone who would think of doing the princess harm that messing with Shess meant messing with a dragon.

"As I'm sure you are aware, only the strongest dragons can take on human form," Duane continued. "And a dragon of that caliber could effortlessly annihilate an army of a hundred thousand on its own."

While I affectionately called her Dramom, she was, in fact, the Immortal Dragon, a creature of legend and one of the mightiest dragons in existence. Duane was suggesting she could easily take out a hundred thousand people all by herself, but I felt his estimate wasn't quite right. He could probably add two more zeros to the end of that number.

"So they're basically sending Princess Shessfelia here as a way of keeping an eye on me to see what I'm getting up to," I deduced. "Is that what you're saying?"

Duane smiled at me but didn't say anything. His silence could only mean one thing: I was bang on the money.

"I see. So Shess—Princess Shessfelia, I mean—is being sent out here to the middle of nowhere all because of me," I summarized.

Duane looked momentarily awkward. "If you were a knight, it would've been different, but since you're a merchant and everyone *knows* a merchant's loyalty can easily be bought with gold coins..." he suggested, before quickly adding, "Of course, I know you're not like that. But the royal family doesn't."

I didn't say anything. By this point, Ninoritch was a flourishing town with hundreds of merchants visiting every month to get their hands on rare items and treasure, but the only reason I knew that was because I was living here. To the people in the big cities—especially the royal capital—Ninoritch was just some town out in the sticks with nothing of value to offer. And everyone knew

that appearances were all nobles cared about, so what would they say if they found out that the *first princess* of all people was being sent to this remote little town? Rumors would surely sprout up left and right about it, and that made me worry for Shess, for she was a very fragile girl. Not to mention, she might end up resenting me for her fate.

“I’ll make sure I apologize to Shess when she arrives,” I muttered to myself, sighing. Duane kindly pretended not to have heard me calling the kingdom’s first princess by a nickname.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina said, grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze to get my attention.



I just about managed to cough out a dejected-sounding “Hm?”

“Mister Shiro, Shess is a really strong girl,” she reassured me.

“Aina...” I breathed in surprise.

“If she doesn’t want to do something, she won’t do it,” the little girl said firmly, looking me straight in the eye.

She had a point. Shess pretty much wore her feelings on her sleeve, and she wasn’t above tying up her maid and escaping out through a window if things weren’t going the way she wanted them to. Aina and I knew this all too well, as did her escort, Luza.

“So I’m sure if Shess is coming to Ninoritch, it’s because she wants to!” Aina concluded.

“Do you really think so?” I said skeptically.

“Yup!” the little girl replied, beaming at me.

Her radiant smile effortlessly dissolved any lingering guilt I was feeling, and I couldn’t help letting out a soft chuckle. “I’m sure you’re right. After all, Shess can definitely be a handful sometimes. *Especially* when she’s not in a cooperative mood.”

“I know, right?” Aina agreed. “She even once tried to drop a plate on the head of a nobleman she didn’t like.”

“Wait, really?”

“Really! And from the fifth floor of the castle too! But I stopped her just in time,” she said, puffing her little chest out with pride.

“What a good girl you are, Aina. If you hadn’t intervened, we might have had to deal with a noble’s murder on top of everything else,” I said with a grin. The sound of Duane chuckling made me look in his direction.

“Did you just call the princess ‘a handful’? Well, I hear you two are close to her, so I shouldn’t be so surprised, I guess,” he said, an amused smile playing across his lips. “Though be careful not to say stuff like that in front of her retinue. She might be coming here undercover, but she’s still a member of the

royal family.”

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning to. Besides, if I ever do get too casual with Her Highness, Luza—that’s Princess Shessfelia’s escort—would probably...” I trailed off, and pretending my hand was a sword, made a gesture as if slashing my own throat. I was about a hundred and twenty percent sure Luza would be tagging along, because Shess was pretty much the most important thing in her life.

“Let’s return to the topic at hand, shall we?” Duane said. “I—well, that is to say, Lord Bashure has a few requests for you. First...”

In summary, the earl wanted me to have houses built for Shess and her retinue. Ninoritch was a rural town, meaning there was plenty of open space available for construction purposes, and Duane planned to visit Karen later on to secure a plot of land. Lord Bashure must have heard about my contribution to building houses for the refugees, as he had specifically requested that I take on this construction project. Still, I couldn’t help worrying that the townsfolk would be somewhat suspicious of a little girl moving here with a knight and a retinue, so I asked Duane if he had any idea what kind of cover story Shess would be using.

“She’s going to pretend to be a merchant’s daughter?” I repeated after he’d told me the plan.

“Yeah. Well, not *any* merchant’s daughter, of course. The daughter of a *rich* merchant,” Duane clarified.

Well, that would at least explain why she had an escort and a retinue following her around everywhere she went. As for why the daughter of a rich merchant would be visiting Ninoritch, that could be summed up in a single word: me. This was how Shess’s cover story went: her father had sent her to Ninoritch to get to know me, a merchant whose fame had started spreading throughout the kingdom, in the hopes of negotiating with me in the future. A lot of people would probably assume she had moved here to study business under my guidance, while some might even suspect that her father was hoping she would end up marrying me. Either way, it seemed a plausible enough cover story that shouldn’t attract too much suspicion even if Shess and I were seen together.

“The earl strongly suggests that you hammer out the details with Her Highness to ensure you both have your stories straight,” Duane said pointedly. He paused and looked from Aina to me. “Well? What do you think, Shiro? And you, Aina? Will you please grant Lord Bashure’s requests?” he said, bowing his head.

Aina and I looked at each other, then nodded.

“I’m fine with it,” I said.

“Me too! I’ll do my best to help Shess!” Aina chirruped, her breathing growing a little erratic. She was so happy at the prospect of seeing her best friend again, she was practically quivering with excitement.

“I have one last question, though,” I said to Duane.

“Ask away.”

“When is Princess Shessfelia scheduled to arrive in Ninoritch?”

Duane’s handsome face froze. “Well, that’s...” he started, then trailed off.

I gave him an encouraging “Yeah?”

“She’ll be here in five days at the earliest,” he admitted, looking somewhat awkward.

“What? F-Five days?!” I exclaimed in shock.

Duane shot me an apologetic look. “The envoy said she left the capital before he did.”

“She left *before* the envoy? C’mon, Shess, what the hell are you doing?” I muttered.

I was painfully aware that once Shess made up her mind about something, there was no stopping her, but I hadn’t expected her to do something as rash as leaving before news of her move had even been delivered to the feudal lord of the region she was moving to. Talk about being impatient.

“At least the envoy made it to Mazela before Her Highness did. He’s on horseback while she’s traveling by carriage, so he managed to pass her on the way,” Duane said.

“He basically had to race her there, huh?”

“I mean, yeah, pretty much.”

I pondered the situation for a few seconds before something snagged in my brain. “Hold on a minute. If Shess will be here in five days’ time, doesn’t that mean I have to get her house built *before* then?”

“It does,” Duane admitted.

I couldn’t quite find the words to express my reaction to this revelation.

“Ah, b-but I’m sure it’ll be fine, Shiro!” Duane hurriedly tried to reassure me. “She still has to pass through Mazela. I’m sure Lord Bashure can think up some pretext to get her to stay there for a couple of days so that you have more time to work on the construction of the houses. It’s not as bad as you think it is.” He faltered slightly, before adding, “At least, I’m sure it won’t be. Hopefully.”

Seeing that I was still unresponsive, Duane swiftly got to his feet. “A-Anyway, thank you so much for your willingness to help out Lord Bashure. I need to go ask Miss Sankareka to secure a plot of land for Her Highness, so I’ll be off now,” he said, his face twitching nervously. And with that, he left.

An hour later, Karen stormed into my shop. “Shiro, you won’t believe what Sir Lestard has just requested! He wants me to find a plot of land where we can build houses for the daughter of some rich merchant who’s coming here with her entourage!” she exclaimed in a panic. “But the plot of land he’s requesting is *absurdly* huge! So it got me thinking: could it be the daughter of some noble who—Shiro? Are you listening to me? Shiro?”

I couldn’t help feeling extremely bad pretending not to know what she was talking about.

Chapter Four: The Looming Darkness, Part One

According to Duane, Shess would arrive in Ninoritch in five days' time, depending on the weather, which meant I had less than a week to build a suitable place for Shess and her entourage to live in. Duane had already secured the necessary land, so all that was left to do was to make a start on the construction project. Luckily, I already had some experience throwing up houses in a crazy short amount of time, so I knew *exactly* who I should ask to help out: Patty. Thanks to her mastery of the Stone Wall spell, she could whip up a whole house in a matter of minutes. I explained the situation to her and she instantly agreed to help, since Shess was her friend too. I also commissioned Team Dwarf to take care of the interior and craft all of the furniture we would need. They grumbled about the insanely tight deadline, but eventually accepted without too much complaint due to how good the pay was, for Lord Bashure would be the one shouldering all of the cost. I brought them all some good alcohol from Japan as an apology, and this gave them the motivation to get the job done on time. With all of that out of the way, there really wasn't much left for me to do.

Maybe I should go buy her some comfy bedding? After all, I always find it difficult to sleep when I go somewhere new. Feels like the least I could do is try to make sure she has a good night's sleep when she gets here. With that decided, I was just about to head back to Japan and swing by a home goods store when I heard someone calling out my name from somewhere behind me.

"Shiro! I've finally found you, meow!"

I turned around and saw Kilpha running toward me.

"Shiro! Something terrible has happened, meow!" she cried out, sprinting as fast as she could straight at me. Her sheer speed would have put any Olympic runner to shame.

"Hey, ho—"

I didn't get time to finish saying "*Hold on*" before she literally threw herself into my arms—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say: before she *tackled*

me—and while I may have been the star of my college wrestling team back in my student days, compared to the people of this world, I was about as brawny as a toothpick. No matter how much I wanted to entertain Kilpha’s enthusiasm, there was absolutely no way I would be able to catch a cat-sìth dashing at me full speed.

“Eek!” I yelped.

“Meow?”

And so, predictably, gravity took over, and I landed flat on my back like a pancake. I somehow managed to break my fall so that I didn’t actually get hurt, but this led to Kilpha straddling me.

“I-I’m so sorry, meow!” she said promptly.

“It’s all good,” I reassured her.

“Did you hit your head, meow?”

“I managed to break my fall using my arms, so I’m fine.”

She let out a long sigh of relief. “I’m so glad you aren’t hurt, meow.”

A few seconds of silence ensued before she realized the position she was in and made a sheepish little noise.

“A-Am I heavy?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

More silence. *Well, this is awkward.*

“So, um, you said something ‘terrible’ had happened? Mind telling me more?” I said in an attempt to break the tension.

Her eyes grew wide. “Oh, that’s right!” she exclaimed without even attempting to get off me. “It’s really, really bad! Bandits have started targeting the road to Mazela, meow!”



According to Kilpha, a large bandit organization had started attacking people on the highway that linked Ninoritch to Mazela. The reason we knew about them was because they had attacked Gerald, who was one of my customers

and the only loot merchant sanctioned to do business with the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild. Every time he was in town, he would buy up all of the monster loot, plus the expensive medicinal herbs and mushrooms that the adventurers sold to the guild, then cart it all to other towns to rack up huge profits. It felt like each time I saw him, he had more carts for transporting the goods and more people as part of his escort. Seriously, it had gotten to the point where the guy had upward of ten guards with him wherever he went. And he had still been attacked by bandits. Thankfully, no one had lost their life in the attack, though some of Gerald's guards had suffered pretty severe wounds and if they didn't receive urgent healing, they might not last another hour. Kilpha told me all of this as we ran to the guild, which had never seemed so far away.

"Mr. Gerald! Are you all right?" I exclaimed as I burst into the guildhall. The acrid stench of blood assaulted my nostrils, its metallic tang making me feel like I was choking.

The main hall had been transformed into a field hospital of sorts, with sickbeds occupied by wounded mercenaries and adventurers set up haphazardly. Under Ney's directions, priests were going from bed to bed and performing healing magic on the injured, while guild employees were handing out healing potions to those who were still conscious, or simply pouring them over the unconscious ones. Some of them had sustained arrow wounds, sword slashes, and stab wounds, which—while painful—weren't considered life-threatening. On the more gruesome end of the spectrum, one of the mercenaries had lost his arm below the elbow, while another had had his abdomen slashed open, his guts spilling out onto the bed. It was obvious that some of the wounded wouldn't last the afternoon, so feeble and shallow was their breathing.

"Mr. Shiro..." Gerald gasped in surprise, getting up from his chair when he saw me. He had bandages wrapped around his right shoulder and his right leg but he seemed fine otherwise.

"Mr. Gerald, are you all right?" I asked urgently.

"I lost two carts, but I'm bearing up." He paused and glanced over at the wounded mercenaries. "My guards on the other hand..." There was a mix of sadness and frustration in his voice, and he was clearly more upset about the

guards he'd hired getting wounded than about losing his carts. "I don't care about the wares I've lost, but I couldn't bear it if Rick died..." he explained. "He and I go way back, you see. I've asked the guildmaster to try to heal him, but I don't know if it'll be enough." Tears of frustration began streaming down his cheeks.

Judging by his words, I assumed Rick must have been the man with his abdomen slashed open, who was being tended to by Rolf. It was obvious even to me that his wounds were fatal. I was about to offer some words of comfort to Gerald before I remembered something and scanned the drinking hall. Unfortunately, the person I was hoping to see wasn't in there. *Oh. So that's why Kilpha came to get me.*

"Rolf, could you let me take a look at him?" I asked my priest friend as I walked over to Rick's (well, at least that was who I figured he was) side.

"Mr. Shiro, sir?" Rolf said, raising his head and shooting me a quizzical look before a look of realization flashed across his face. "Yes, of course." He must have guessed what I was about to do, for he stood up and took a step back.

"Mr. Shiro, what are you *doing*?!" Gerald cried out in shock, rushing toward me. "He was trying to heal Rick!"

Kilpha intervened. "Don't worry, old man! Leave it to Shiro, meow!"

I had already taken a plastic bottle filled with a transparent liquid out of my inventory and removed the cap, then proceeded to pour it over Rick's abdomen. His wounds instantly started closing up, and his guts returned to their original position.

Gerald gasped. "Rick's wounds..."

"All righty. Let's go take care of the others now, shall we?" I said before moving on to the next wounded man. Prioritizing those who were in critical condition, I systematically administered the transparent liquid from my plastic bottle, and once it was empty, I simply produced another from my inventory and continued.

"M-My arm! It grew back!" the man who had lost his arm exclaimed.

"I can see out of both eyes again!" marveled another man, who had suffered

a severe eye injury.

In a matter of seconds, all of the wounds on mercenary and adventurer alike had closed up and all of the body parts they had lost had grown back. One after another, they hopped down from their beds to examine their healed bodies. It was a miracle, and all of the adventurers who had been watching on were stumped by what they had seen.

“All of their wounds closed up instantly...” one of them mumbled in disbelief. “That was no regular healing potion. There’s no way.”

“I’d heard about that guy having some kind of miracle liquid that could regrow limbs. So the rumors were true!” another one said excitedly.

“W-Were those *Full Potions*?” someone questioned, their eyes widening in astonishment.

“No way! Full Potions are about as rare as Elixirs. Why would some random merchant out in the sticks have a stock of ‘em?” another adventurer countered.

“Well, how do you explain *that*, then?”

“Maybe that guy really *is* an alchemist...”

The room was abuzz with astonished whispers as the adventurers wondered aloud what the mysterious liquid that I’d used to heal the wounded mercenaries was. It seemed that even after all these months, I hadn’t managed to completely shake off those alchemist rumors.

“M-Mr. Shiro...” Gerald breathed, his voice trembling. “What in the world *is* that potion?”

“Oh, this thing?” I said, giving the now half-empty plastic bottle a gentle wiggle.

Gerald and the adventurers in the room had their attention fully focused on me, and all of them audibly gulped down their saliva as they waited with bated breath for my reply.

I brought a finger up to my lips and said, “That’s a secret.” After all, I couldn’t tell them what the liquid *really* was.

“Please, Mr. Shiro, even I can tell that potion was a very expensive one,” he

said with a serious look on his face, and he produced a heavy-looking leather pouch from his pocket, which he held out toward me. “I understand it probably isn’t enough, but it’s all I have on me.”

But I didn’t take the bag, instead waving my hands in front of me to indicate that no monetary compensation was necessary. “There’s no need to pay me back, I promise. You’ve just suffered a big loss, so please, use that money to get your business back on its feet.”

“Mr. Shiro...” Gerald squeaked. “You... You...” he stammered, but his voice failed him and only a strangled sob escaped his lips.

I chuckled. “When times are tough, we merchants should help each other. Isn’t that right?”

“I suppose it is. Thank you so, so much,” he breathed, his shoulders quaking as he covered his face with his left hand.

Some of the adventurers were even more baffled than before, if that was even possible.

“A-A-Are you *kidding* me?! That potion can *regrow* limbs!” one exclaimed in disbelief.

“And he just gave it to him for free!” another equally astonished adventurer chimed in.

“I don’t believe it...” mumbled a third.

If I’d had to guess, I’d say these guys were newcomers to Ninoritch, and seeing their reaction, one of the other adventurers who happened to be an acquaintance of mine said, “You guys didn’t know? Shiro always helps out people in trouble, even if it hits his own pocket.”

“That’s right!” confirmed the other adventurers who were familiar with me.

“If you want a good, long life in Ninoritch, you should try to get on his good side,” another adventurer added.

“That’s right!” went up the collective cry once more.

“And if he ever asks you to help him out, you should seize the opportunity. He’ll make it up to you tenfold.”

“That’s right!”

They continued extolling my virtues like this to the newly arrived adventurers, and truth be told, I didn’t mind all the attention.

“Please don’t worry about that potion. Expensive or not, one thing’s for sure: it can’t replace a human life,” I said with a smug look on my face as if I was posing for an imaginary camera.

The adventurers’ reaction was instant and the whole hall erupted into cheering and clapping. And it wasn’t just a polite clap either. It was a full-on thunderous storm of applause! I had to admit that drawing this kind of reaction felt pretty darn good, especially since I hadn’t really done anything special. In fact, it was all down to Dramom. Yup, that’s right. All I’d done to make this “miraculous potion” was to mix Dramom’s spit—which could cure any ailment—with some water. I had simply asked her to turn into a dragon, then collected a bucketful of her saliva, poured it into some plastic bottles that already had water in them, and boom: a potion that could heal any wound.



I always kept a few bottles of the stuff in my inventory in case of emergencies. Kilpha was well aware of this, which was why she had come looking for me in the first place. Now, I know what you might be thinking: wasn't it a bit creepy for me to keep bottles of spit from a beautiful woman on me at all times? Well, maybe. But...

"I'm alive?"

"M-M-My arm! Look! My arm's grown back!"

"Thank the gods!"

It had allowed me to save every single one of the wounded in the guildhall. So, yes, while it might be a bit off-putting at first, I hope you will all turn a blind eye to it.

Chapter Five: The Looming Darkness, Part Two

With Gerald's guards all healed up and back on their feet, it was time to grill them for information about these bandits. Shess would be taking the very road they had been ambushed on to get to Ninoritch, which meant if I didn't do anything about the situation, she would almost definitely be attacked on the way. And if the princess were to go missing in his territory, Lord Bashure would undoubtedly be in huge trouble.

"As a merchant myself, I simply can't allow these brigands to roam the highway as they please," I lied in order to get information out of Gerald. "Could you please tell me exactly how and where you were attacked?"

He nodded. "They set upon us about a day after we departed from Ninoritch. At first, everything seemed normal, but then..."

Here's the summary of what had happened: Gerald had come to Ninoritch to buy stuff from the guild like he always did and was on his way back to Mazela to sell it, when on the evening of the day following his departure, he was attacked by a group of bandits. His escort was made up of sixteen men, all veteran mercenaries and adventurers, but there were about fifty bandits in total, and they immediately attacked Gerald and his retinue without even giving them a chance to bargain for their lives. The guards did everything they could to fight off the brigands, but there were simply too many and they fell one after another. By the time they had all been cut down, the bandits had already stolen two of the three carts in the convoy, and in a last-ditch effort to escape and save his men, Gerald tossed all the cargo off his last wagon, lifted all of the injured guards into it, then made for Ninoritch as fast as he could. He used a spell that enhanced the stamina of his horses, and fortunately, he made it to the town before it was too late, and without any of the brigands giving chase. He rushed straight to the guild, explained the situation, and that's when Kilpha had come to find me. If Gerald hadn't been carrying healing potions as a precaution, some of his men probably wouldn't have even survived the journey to Ninoritch.

“Well, anyway, that’s what happened,” he concluded.

A grim silence fell over the room. Bandits roaming the highway was a huge problem, both for merchants and adventurers.

“Thank you for telling us what happened,” I said.

“Oh, please, there’s no need to thank me,” he hurriedly replied. “You saved the lives of my friends. I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

“Maybe, but thanks to you, we are now able to save even more people. I mean it. The information you have just given us is priceless.”

Gerald treated me to a puzzled look but I ignored it and beckoned Kilpha over instead.

“Huh? Who, me?” she said, pointing at her own face.

“Yes, you, Kilpha,” I confirmed, gesturing to her to come and join me.

She practically leaped to my side. “What do you need me for, Shiro?”

“I need you to stop any merchant or traveler from attempting to leave town. We need to lock down the whole area. Don’t worry. I’ll explain everything to Karen myself in a bit,” I told her.

“Sure thing, meow!” she said, then she dashed out of the guildhall.

I watched her retreating silhouette go for a couple of seconds before turning to the cleric standing nearby. “Rolf, could you please get Duane to come here? He’s one of the knights that has been stationed here. You’ll find him either patrolling the streets or in the town hall.”

“Understood, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf said with a nod, before following Kilpha’s lead and leaving the building.

Next, I had a request for the guildmaster. “Ney, could I borrow a corner of the guildhall? I’d like to invite all of the merchants in town here to tell them about the bandit situation.”

“Of course,” she said. “You may use the guild as you please.”

“Thank you. All righty...” I had one final request, and this one was for all the adventurers in the room. “If any of you have some free time on your hands

right now, could you please go around town and ask all the merchants you come across to come here?”

A bunch of them slapped their chests in a perfectly synchronized display.

“Leave it to us!” one man called out.

“I couldn’t bring myself to turn down one of *your* requests,” another added.

“No one in their right mind would loaf around when they could be helping you.”

All of the adventurers who were agreeing to do what I’d asked were people that had been registered at the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy’s Blessing for quite a while, to the point where I even recognized a few faces. The newer recruits regarded the scene in silence before muttering to each other. “We should go too, right?”

“Well, the others said it was best to get on this merchant dude’s good side, so the way I see it, we *have* to go!”

“Agreed. Let’s do this!”

In the end, all of the adventurers in the hall agreed to help me and I watched on as they all swarmed out into the streets, looking for any and all passing merchants. I was very glad that they had all volunteered to assist.



Thanks to the adventurers, merchants started showing up at the guildhall one after another. By this point, Duane was there too, standing in one corner of the drinking hall.

When I deemed that enough people had gathered, I climbed up onto the makeshift stage I had set up in one corner of the room and announced, “Thank you all for coming here on such short notice.”

This drew the attention of the merchants—who still had no idea what was going on—and they all turned to face me.

“First of all, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Shiro Amata. I run a business here in Ninoritch.”

A quick glance at the crowd told me that I had already interacted with the majority of the merchants in the hall before, but I'd decided to introduce myself anyway.

"I've brought you all here today because something terrible has happened: bandits—our natural enemy—have been sighted on the highway to Mazela."

I related the events that Gerald had recounted to us, which caused quite a stir.

"Bandits on the highway? Damn it all. I can't afford to hire guards!" one of them grumbled.

"What the hell is the earl doing? With all the taxes we pay him every time we visit Mazela, you'd think he would at least make sure the roads are safe!"

"We should form a caravan and split the cost of an escort between everyone involved in it," someone suggested.

"I can't believe they defeated Gerald's guards, though. We'll have to hire a *lot* of mercenaries."

About half of the crowd was complaining about the situation, while the other half was trying to come up with a solution that would allow them to travel safely to the feudal capital.

All of a sudden, the main door to the guildhall was flung open and a stark-naked man tumbled inside, much to the shock and bewilderment of everyone in the room.

"P-P-Please help me!" he cried out.

A couple of the female adventurers let out yelps of surprise and quickly averted their eyes.

"B-Bandits..." he stammered. "There are bandits on the highway!" The naked man looked on the verge of tears.

His face was all swollen as if it had been on the end of a few punches, and his body was covered in bruises. It didn't take a genius to figure out he'd been attacked by those pesky bandits. I glanced at him despite every single instinct I had telling me to close my eyes, and realized I had seen him before. If I

remembered correctly, he was a traveling merchant who often bought salt, pepper, and spices from me.

“Are you all right?” I said, stepping toward him.

“Mr. Shiro...” he breathed in surprise.

“Seems you’re not too badly hurt. Thank goodness. First of all...” I paused and shrugged off my jacket, then wrapped it around the man’s shoulders, both as a way to give him a little dignity and to prevent the female adventurers from seeing something they would rather not see.

“Mr. Shiro...” the naked man rasped before bursting into tears. I couldn’t tell if he felt ashamed, relieved, or a mix of the two.

“It’s all right. Everything’s all right now,” I said softly, comforting him by gently rubbing his back.

Never in my life had I thought there would come a day when I’d need to drape my jacket over the shoulders of a naked middle-aged man. And I can guarantee that consoling a crying middle-aged man had definitely *never* been on the agenda either. But anyway, it took a little while, but the man did eventually stop sobbing.



I’d been right about the naked middle-aged man being one of the merchants I’d recently done business with. He had left Ninoritch roughly two days before and was on his way to the nearby fortified town of Gufka when he was jumped by bandits, though luckily for him, unlike poor Gerald, they hadn’t roughed him up. They took all of his stuff, including the clothes he was wearing, but they ultimately spared his life. If you ask me, it was a bit tasteless that they didn’t even let him keep his underwear, but hey, at least they didn’t stab the guy.

“Looks like this is the handiwork of another gang,” Raiya remarked, and beside him, Nesca nodded in agreement of his assessment. Like Kilpha, the two of them had been out searching for me too, only returning to the guild after learning that their cat-sìth partymate had found me.

“*Another* gang?” I repeated in bewilderment.

“Well, yeah. The ones who attacked that man operate differently and aren’t even targeting the same highway, so I’m ninety percent sure they’re not the same guys,” Raiya explained.

Apparently, every group of highwaymen had a different *modus operandi*: some exclusively robbed their targets—a method typically favored by so-called “professional” robbers—while others resorted to killing first, then looting the corpses—a tactic often used by soldiers from armies that had been wiped out or by thoughtless mercenaries. That was how Raiya had come to the conclusion that Gerald and the naked merchant had been attacked by two different gangs.

I let out a long, pensive hum. “Well, this isn’t ideal.”

The highways that connected Ninoritch to the bigger towns in the region had become hunting grounds for highwaymen. In hindsight, I should probably have anticipated this, because while Ninoritch was once a small town with very little to offer and thus a rather unattractive prospect for any bandits, things had changed significantly and merchants now came from all over the kingdom—no, from all over this side of the *continent*—just to buy my wares and the treasures that adventurers had recovered from the nearby ruins. People naturally tended to gather in places where there was money to be made, and unfortunately, that included bandits and other rather unsavory individuals. I felt I had just caught a glimpse into the darker side of fantasy worlds.

“They took *everything*! The cargo, my money, my carriage, my clothes... Even my donkey, Li’l Chi!” lamented the naked middle-aged man, who I am affectionately dubbing Old Man Jacket.

He seemed particularly distraught about having lost his donkey. *I get you, man. Animals are man’s best friend. What kind of monster would just go and steal someone’s furry pal like that, huh?*

“Please could someone lend me a gold coin? My wife and newborn child are waiting for me at home but I have nothing left. I beg you!” pleaded Old Man Jacket.

But no one replied. All of the merchants that were gathered in the guildhall were pretty wealthy by all accounts, yet none seemed willing to extend a helping hand to a fellow struggling merchant. In a way, I understood their

reticence. After all, they didn't know this man. How could they be sure he'd pay them back?

"Please! I'm begging you!" Old Man Jacket beseeched the crowd, yet still no one offered to help him out.

I'd been told before that all merchants should keep in mind that there was always a possibility they might get attacked by bandits on the road, and that they should be prepared for such an eventuality. However, Old Man Jacket had clearly thrown caution to the wind and chosen to spend every last coin he had on buying rare items from me. Most of the merchants in attendance probably felt that he'd brought this situation on himself and that if they lent him money, they'd probably never see it again, given the apparent lack of business acumen displayed by the man.

"Please... Please..." Old Man Jacket's legs gave way beneath him and his head drooped as tears streamed down his face.

I couldn't just stand back any longer. I placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Please raise your head."

"Mr. Shiro..." he breathed as he looked up at me with a glint of hope in his eyes. "Please, Mr. Shiro! Could you lend me a gold coin? Actually, you know what? Even some silver coins would be fine! If I can get 80 silver, I can make it back home and have enough left over to feed my family. Please..." he begged. "I, Baggio, swear on my honor that I will repay you!"

Baggio, huh? Well, guess that means I don't need to call him Old Man Jacket anymore.

"Please calm down—" I began, but he interrupted me.

"Mr. Shiro, please have mercy on me! I pledge to give you everything I own, including myself! I'll do anything you ask! Anything! I swear to the gods!"

He was understandably growing more and more desperate with every passing minute. I could've done without that whole "I'll do anything you ask" spiel, though.

"For now, just take a deep breath, Mr. Baggio, okay?" I said.

“O-Okay...”

“First of all, let’s see what you bought from me...” I took out my smartphone and scanned through my files until I found the one I was looking for. Baggio’s photo was on the corner of the document that had a list of everything he had bought from me a few days earlier. “Three bags of black pepper, ten bags of flour, and three bags of sugar. Is that correct?”

“Yes. I was especially excited to resell your sugar, since it’s such high quality. I was sure I’d make a ton of profit off it, but...” He trailed off, his head drooping once more.

The goods he had bought all came in one-kilo bags, with the flour costing a mere 400 yen, the black pepper costing 2,800, and the sugar costing 250. This meant Baggio had lost a grand total of 13,150 yen’s worth of products, which was about the same as a weekly shop for a couple with a small child. I knew he had lost other things too, of course, but I found it mind-boggling that *this* had basically been the guy’s entire fortune. I mean, maybe it was partly on me for selling all of those things for such a high markup, but wasn’t that *way* too little savings for a man of his age to have?

“All righty, Mr. Baggio, while I’m sorry to say I can’t do anything about poor Li’l Chi, I *can* replace all of the products you bought from me,” I said.

“What?” His jaw hit the floor. “B-But I’ve lost *everything*. I can’t pay for—” he started, but I interrupted him because I could already see where this was going.

“Ah, forgive me. I meant I’d be replacing them free of charge,” I clarified. “To be completely honest with you, I share part of the blame for what you have been through. I should’ve anticipated that bandits might show up near Ninoritch.” I paused and looked around the room to see that all of the other merchants and adventurers were staring at us. Good. “If I’d been more cautious, I could’ve given you a heads-up.”

“Mr. Shiro...”

“I should be the one taking the hit for those losses, not you. So for your sake and for the sake of your family—as well as to drill a sense of caution into my own head—please allow me to replace those goods for you.”

Tears welled up in his eyes once more, but this time, they were tears of joy. “Thank you...” he spluttered with a sigh of relief. “Thank you so much, Mr. Shiro.”

All righty. That’s one problem dealt with, I thought to myself. Meanwhile, the merchants who had been listening in on our conversation started muttering among themselves.

“Sugar and black pepper, huh? I’ve heard they go for two gold coins a bag,” one pointed out.

“And that guy’s sugar ain’t the cheap kind, lemme tell ya. Ya can easily sell it for four gold coins a bag.”

“You can tell he’s still wet behind the ears,” someone else commented. “Offering to replace everything that traveling merchant lost? It’s a bit naive, isn’t it?”

“Or maybe he’s so loaded, it won’t even make a dent in his wallet,” another suggested.

“Think he’ll replace my cargo too if I get jumped on the road?”

They clearly hadn’t been expecting me to offer to cover Baggio’s losses. But I had already anticipated this reaction. In fact, I’d been hoping for it, because I had a plan. After all, I *was* a merchant, meaning I knew how to make the best of a bad situation. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, as they say. This was just the jumping-off point for my new grand scheme.

“I have an idea, ladies and gents,” I announced to the crowd as I hopped back up onto the makeshift stage, and the assembled merchants and adventurers waited with bated breath for me to explain what this idea was. “To us merchants, bandits are our archenemies. Just one single stroke of bad luck and poof! Our life’s work goes down the drain.” I raised my index finger at this point. “For that reason, I have decided I will start providing a damage insurance service.”

The looks on their faces told me they had never heard the term before. “Mr. Amata, what exactly *is* a ‘damage insurance service’?” one of them asked, confirming my suspicions.

I had asked Nesca about it previously, and it seemed there were no insurance businesses in this world. There was a system in place for merchant ships that was somewhat similar, but the implementation was pretty slapdash. Basically, how it worked was you could take the risk of investing in a ship and earn interest if its cargo successfully made it to its destination, but if the vessel got into trouble, you would have to cover the losses.

“A damage insurance service is a system you can enter into that will cover the cost of any losses as a result of unexpected incidents, such as highway robbery, for example,” I explained. “Once you’ve left town, most of you pass through either Mazela, Gufka, or Domtro, right?” I paused and scanned the crowd to see if anyone would correct me on this, but as no one raised a hand or their voice, I figured I was on the right track. “Well, from now on, if you buy something from me, for an extra fee, you’ll be given the option to sign up for my new insurance service. If you run into trouble on your way to any of these three towns, I’ll cover all of your losses.”

Awestruck murmurs coursed through the crowd.

“I have a few questions, if it’s all right with you,” one of the merchants said, raising his hand.

“Of course,” I replied.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘cover our losses’?” he asked. “Would you replace what we’d bought free of charge, just like you’re doing for that traveling merchant?”

I nodded. “Either that, or I will repay you in full. Whichever you prefer.”

Once again, the merchants oohed and aahed in amazement.

“Next question: how much would it cost to sign up for this ‘insurance service’ of yours?” the merchant continued.

“Well, I feel kinda bad because this is gonna seem like I’m taking advantage of a crisis to make more money, but I was thinking of charging five silver coins for every gold coin you spend in my shop. However, if the bandit threat is eliminated, I’m open to bringing it down to as low as two silver coins for every gold.”

The man hummed. “So roughly a five percent surcharge. What if it’s not a whole number of gold coins? Like, not quite two gold coins, for instance.”

“You’d only have to pay five silver coins,” I replied.

More murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“Okay, last question: what if someone lies about being attacked by bandits? What would you do then?”

“I’d pay them back, just like everyone else,” I said without missing a beat.

The merchant raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“However, if I ever learned that they lied to me, they would be immediately banned from buying anything in my shop again,” I added.

“I see. So while they might score some quick cash by lying about being attacked, they’d be forfeiting the chance to build up trust with you to make more down the road,” the man summarized.

“Pretty much, yes. But I’m pretty proud of my wares. If someone wants to play those kinds of games, I can guarantee it’ll be their loss,” I said with a smug grin. I was bluffing, of course, but sometimes, a bit of false bravado was necessary.

The merchant who had been asking the questions chuckled knowingly. “You do seem full of confidence about that. Not that I disagree with that confidence, for your trust is worth more than the rarest of diamonds. No one in their right mind would dare try to pull the wool over your eyes.”

“I can only hope you’re right on that,” I said, smiling.

Seeing that my exchange with the merchant had concluded, Duane—who had been watching from the sidelines—raised his hand. “Shiro, may I?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Thanks.” Duane turned to the assembled merchants, a pleasant smile spreading across his lips. “Greetings, ladies and gentlemen. I am Sir Duane Lestard, a knight in the service of Lord Bashure, the earl of this region.”

Murmurs of surprise spread through the crowd. Duane’s striking looks had

likely had many assuming that he was some kind of entertainer, such as a wandering bard, for instance.

“Just a heads-up that if I *ever* find proof that any of you have filed a false theft report with Shiro, I will *personally* apprehend you and toss you in jail. On my honor as a knight, I will not let you get away with it,” he announced.

Well, that explained why he’d started off by introducing himself. Now that everyone knew I had a knight in my corner, they would definitely think twice about trying to pull a fast one. *Sheesh, Duane, you’re seriously just too cool.*

“Any more questions, folks?” I asked the crowd, and when no one answered, I took out my smartphone and opened the folder where I stored all of my transactions. “If not, then I invite everyone who wants to take advantage of my insurance service to form a line in front of me. I have the records of my recent transactions here, so it shouldn’t take too long to calculate how much it would cost you.”

The merchants hesitated for a few seconds as they exchanged uncertain glances among themselves, but after weighing up the pros and the cons of the scheme, they ultimately decided it would be safer to have insurance in case of a bandit attack and formed a line in front of me.



The 30x30 cm wooden box I’d put out for collecting fees from the merchants was practically overflowing with silver coins. Some of the merchants were filthy rich and had bought several gold coins’ worth of items from me, meaning they’d also had to spend a pretty penny to insure them all. There were at least 400 silver coins in the box, and I was pretty sure that was an underestimate. That was over four *million* yen. Though I could tell that a few of the merchants were treating me to glares when they thought I wasn’t looking, which I could understand, since I was basically making money off people’s fear of potential losses, and merchants, in particular, were very careful people, so convincing them to take part in this venture hadn’t been all that hard. However, if I didn’t do something about the bandit threat, I would end up suffering huge losses. That was the major downside of running an insurance service, but I had naturally anticipated this. It was time to pivot to the third phase of my plan.

I picked up the wooden box with a little “heave-ho” and went to find the guildmaster. “Ney, I’d like to hire the services of your guild. Would that be all right?”

“Sure thing,” she said, and the look on her face suggested she knew exactly what I was about to say to her.

“Could you possibly send some adventurers to find the hideouts of those pesky bandits? Here’s the reward for the task,” I said, handing her the box full of coins.

The reaction from the merchants and adventurers in the room was instant.

“Wait, so he *didn’t* start that ‘insurance service’—or whatever it’s called—to make a profit, but to fund a quest to take out those highway bandits?!” one exclaimed.

“And here I was, thinking he was just using the situation to make some money off us...”

“That man is a saint! I wish our god was so generous!”

Everyone in the room seemed impressed that I intended to use the money I’d collected to ensure the safety of the town and the surrounding highways instead of just keeping it all for myself. It is often said that trust can’t be bought, but I would argue that this statement isn’t quite right. After all, I’d just used money to earn the trust of all these merchants.

“Please let me know if that’s not enough and I’ll make up the rest. I can also supply the adventurers with some useful items to help them out on their quest. Well? What do you say?” I prompted.

“We will take on your request,” Ney confirmed. “But I just have one question.”

“What is it?”

“Do you really only want our adventurers to *find* the hideouts of these bandits? You don’t wish to subjugate or capture them?” she said, looking puzzled.

“Yes. Once I have their locations, I’ll get my companions to deal with them.”

“Your companions?” Ney echoed, seeming even more confused by this answer.

“Yes, my companions,” I confirmed with a smile.

“Wait...” Raiya piped up in surprise. “Do you mean us?”

Nesca’s brow furrowed, Kilpha’s mouth hung agape, and a saddened look appeared on Rolf’s face, as if saying he wished I had told them all of my plan sooner. *Uh-oh. Seems they’ve misunderstood my intentions.*

“Oh, no, no, no. I wasn’t talking about you guys,” I quickly clarified.

Zephyr, the leader of the White Wolf’s Fangs, a party I’d gotten friendly with while researching and then exploring Nathew’s ruins, was next to speak. “About us, then?” he asked, pointing at himself.

“Nope, not you guys either,” I replied.

“Then who are you talking about?” Ney asked.

All of the adventurers in the room were watching this exchange with curiosity, eager to know who these “companions” were that I was planning to foist the responsibility of capturing the bandits on.

A sly smile curled the corners of my lips upward. “I’m thinking of assigning that particular job to the two gluttons who have been dining and drinking on my dime for months now.”

This response only made the adventurers look even more puzzled.

Intermission

“Found ’em, meow!” Kilpha murmured.

The night sky was unusually dark, filled with thick clouds that obscured the moon, but Kilpha had finally found her targets.

“Wow, there are so many of them, meow,” she noted as she peered through her night vision goggles at a devastated village bustling with armed men.

She hadn’t expected this bandit gang to have so many members. She hummed and took off her goggles as she attempted to estimate the number of men over there. *Ten, twenty, thirty...*

“That’s way more than I thought, meow.”

She counted about a hundred men, but she surmised there were probably even more hidden out of sight inside the houses. It really was no wonder that Gerald and his guard had been powerless to repel this horde. He’d been pretty unlucky, though, since bandit groups weren’t usually *this* large. Kilpha pushed the goggles back down over her eyes, and crouching low to the ground, she attempted to count how many steps it was to the village from her position. *About 200*, she concluded.

“This item is incredible!” she murmured in amazement. “The bandits are *super* far away, but it’s like they’re standing right in front of me, meow.”

Being a cat-sìth, Kilpha already possessed good night vision—though it wasn’t quite as exceptional as that of elves and dwarves—but with these “night vision goggles” as Shiro called them, despite how dark a night it was, she could see every bandit’s face with exceptional clarity. *This magic item is insane, meow!* she thought.

Shiro had made a point of telling her to give it back to him once the mission was over, and after using it, she understood why. This item could potentially revolutionize the world by granting members of any race the ability to see in the dark. Hunters, scouts, and assassins would all be clamoring to get their

hands on a tool like this. Shiro could sell these goggles for so much money, he'd never have to work another day in his life. And little did Kilpha know, the other items Shiro had lent her were somehow even *more* impressive.

"So I just have to press this and this..." She raised the goggles again, then pressed some buttons on a second magic item to activate it. "Meow! Hello? Can you hear me, meow? Kilpha here, Kilpha here. I've found the bandits' hideout, meow!" she said after bringing the item—which was apparently called a "walkie-talkie"—up to her mouth. Admittedly, she *did* feel a bit silly talking to a box, but a reply came right away.

"Dramom here," the box crackled. "Cat-sìth, signal the location of the bandits to us."

"Okay, meow! Gimme a sec, meow." From her backpack, Kilpha retrieved yet another magic item, which Shiro had called a "bottle rocket." She lit the fuse using a match, then positioned the rocket to explode directly above the bandits' hideout.

Fizz. Bang! It worked! She quickly put her goggles back on again and saw the bandits running out of the houses and looking around in confusion. But it seemed they weren't the only ones who had heard the explosion.

"H-Hey! What's *that*?" one of them called out so loudly that even Kilpha could hear him from her hiding place in the bushes. The entire group of bandits looked up and saw a white dragon and a demon with large black wings hovering above their hideout.

"My master has ordered us to capture every last one of you," the dragon said matter-of-factly, while the demon simply chuckled.

"As per Shiro's request, I will hunt you down."

"A d-d-d..." one of the bandits stuttered. "A dragon!"

"R-R-Run!"

"Is that..." another bandit stammered. "Is that a demon? Why would a demon and a dragon—" he started asking, but his comrade interrupted him.

"Who *cares*? Just run!"

Panic ripped through the bandits. A dragon and a demon attacking you was basically a death sentence.

“Face judgment, evildoers,” the dragon bellowed.

“Come on, fight back! Show me what strength you possess!” the demon said with a laugh as the two of them swooped down toward the bandits.

“Wow, those guys don’t stand a chance, meow,” Kilpha remarked as she watched Dramom and Celes totally annihilate the bandits through her goggles.

“Not a single one of you shall escape,” Dramom warned, blowing gusts at the brigands and sending them flying.

Celes, meanwhile, had opted to pummel the gang members one by one with her fists. “We will not kill you...” she said, before adding, “but we cannot guarantee that you will survive either!”

Soon, there was a pile of unconscious bandits growing on the ground beside them. The two of them had taken on over a hundred opponents all at once and had absolutely *dominated* them.

“Celes here,” Kilpha heard through her walkie-talkie. “We have captured the prey. Send us to our next target.”

That was the fourth bandit hideout the two of them had destroyed in the space of just two nights. Of course, this had only been possible thanks to the walkie-talkies Shiro had equipped them all with for the mission. *This item is even more insane than the other one, meow!* Kilpha found herself thinking. And she wasn’t wrong, for she could communicate with Dramom and Celes from afar without having to use magic! An item like this could completely revolutionize war strategies. Kilpha couldn’t believe she had gotten to use two insanely overpowered items in one night.

I’ll definitely give them back to Shiro at the end of this, meow, she promised before heading to the next bandit hideout, which she found easily, thanks to Shiro’s goggles and the information the other adventurers had given her after their own scouting mission. Once again, Dramom and Celes took care of beating the bandits to a pulp.

In just three days, the entire highway was cleared of bandits.

Chapter Six: The Looming Darkness, Part Three

Four days had passed since I'd submitted my request to the guild, and thanks to Kilpha and the other rangers directing the deadly combo of Dramom and Celes, all the bandits were now safely behind bars. From what they had told me, sniffing out the bandits on the highways to Gufka and Domtro had been a bit of a pain, because they'd had to deal with a load of small groups scattered around all over the place. On the flip side, the gang on the road to Mazela had been huge and obviously very territorial since it had been the only one hanging around there, which meant a single raid on their base had eradicated that threat entirely. In total, 189 thugs had been caught and put away in those four days, and I had to admit, I was pretty shocked that so many ruffians had made their way to Ninoritch at the same time.

Duane reached out to his colleagues in Mazela's chivalric order to ensure that the bandits were swiftly dispatched to the feudal capital to be tried for their crimes. From what he told me, they would most likely be sentenced to hard labor and sent to toil in the kingdom's mines as slaves to the state. It was one of the cruelest punishments that could be handed down by the courts, and once the rumors spread that this was the price for being a highwayman in this part of the kingdom, it would likely deter future bandit gangs from causing trouble in the area. *And who knows? Maybe a bit of digging might help them find the path to repentance,* I mused.

On another positive note, it turned out that most of the loot the bandit groups had stolen from merchants and tourists was still pretty much intact, perhaps due to how quickly we had dealt with the issue. A gross miscalculation on the bandits' part, but a welcome one. Even Li'l Chi the donkey was retrieved safe and sound, and Baggio shed tears of relief at the sight of his beloved animal companion. Witnessing this touching reunion, I couldn't help a tear or two rolling down my own cheek. Admittedly, I hadn't actively contributed to the process—I'd essentially just waited around for four days while others dealt with the bandits on my behalf—but as an added bonus, the situation had prompted

new people to sign up to my burgeoning insurance service, meaning I could look forward to raking in even more profits in the future.

“I’m glad Miss Dramom and Miss Celes caught all those bad people,” Aina said to me, sounding relieved. The poor mite had been looking kind of glum ever since we learned about the bandits, and I’d guessed it was because she was afraid Shess might get attacked on her way to Ninoritch. “Now nothing will get in the way of Shess coming here, right?” she said, a huge grin lighting up her face.

It may have cost me several million yen to provide Kilpha and the other rangers with night vision goggles and walkie-talkies, but I didn’t regret it one bit. After all, Shess’s life and Aina’s smile were irreplaceable treasures, and I was glad I’d been able to protect them. *I really, really don’t regret having spent all that money, okay? I mean it!*

“I hope Shess gets here soon,” Aina mumbled as she took a break from sweeping the floor.

“Me too. I’m sure you can’t wait to see her,” I said, a small smile dancing across my lips.

“Mm-hmm,” the little girl murmured in agreement before resuming her cleaning.

She couldn’t help fidgeting with anticipation at the idea of seeing her best friend again.

Chapter Seven: The Princess Has Arrived

The day after all of the bandits were apprehended, and the final touches were applied to Shess's new estate, I went over to the town entrance to watch the approach of the dozen opulent carriages. Duane was at the head of the procession riding a white horse, so there was no doubt that Shess was among the passengers. She might have been undercover, but she *was* still a princess, so it was only natural that a knight would meet the convoy and escort it over the last stretch to make sure she reached the town safely.

"Mister Shiro, is Shess in one of those carriages?" Aina asked me, pointing at the procession.

"Probably, yeah," I said.

"I'm finally going to see her again!" the little girl chirped, excited to reunite with her best friend.

Naturally, I was thrilled too. Two months had passed since our last—well, our first *and* last—meeting. *I hope Shess is as excited to see us as we are to see her.*

The carriage procession rumbled into the town, past Aina and me.

"Stop here, everyone!" Duane called out from the front of the line, and the carriages juddered to a halt. A particularly lavish coach had stopped right in front of Aina and me, and a moment later, its door swung open, and a little girl wearing a familiar blue outfit—complete with the hat Aina and I had purchased for her—hopped down.

"Hey, Aina. It's been a while," Shess said cheerfully.

"Shess... Shess!" Aina cried out as she leaped into the other girl's arms, unable to contain her joy. "You're finally here!"

Shess hugged her back with a smile on her face. "Yup! I missed you a lot, Aina," she said, making the other little girl giggle.

"I missed you too!"

The pair squeezed each other tightly one last time before finally untangling themselves.

When it looked like they had finished greeting each other, I stepped forward with a grin spread across my face. “Heya, Shess. It’s been a while.”

Shess’s lips curled upward into a smile as she exclaimed, “Amata!” but a moment later, her face fell and she turned her head away from me with an indignant harrumph.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Shess?” I inquired, but all I received in return was another harrumph.

Suffice to say, I was confused by her attitude toward me. At first, I figured she might just have been feeling a little shy, but in truth, she looked more mad than anything. *Has she entered the dreaded “rebellious phase” or something?* I wondered to myself.

“Heeey, Shess. Little Prin-Shess. Li’l Shessiekins. Why aren’t you talking to me?” I called her a variety of silly nicknames to coax her into turning around, but it was no use. She wouldn’t even look at me. I racked my brain trying to figure out what I could have done to upset her, but nothing sprang to mind. Maybe she was role-playing? After all, she was supposed to be acting like the snobby daughter of a rich merchant, so perhaps she was just embracing that role...

I wasn’t the only one who was stumped by her attitude toward me. Duane—who had dismounted from his horse by this point—looked first at me, then at Shess, then back at me again before whispering in my ear, “Aren’t you and Her Highness supposed to be friends?”

“Well, I *thought* we were, but...” I shrugged. “Seems I was wrong.”

He nodded gravely. “I know just how much it hurts when your feelings aren’t returned,” he said, giving me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

Please don’t lump me in with you and your crush on Karen, Duane.

“Shess?” Aina said softly, looking as perplexed as I was, but no matter what we both did, the little princess in blue refused to respond.

Well, this won't do, I thought, preparing to try something else to get her attention, when all of a sudden, a woman hopped down from the carriage and positioned herself between me and Shess.

"Amata, stay away from the pri—from my lady."

"Ah, Miss Luza!" Aina exclaimed.

Yup, the woman who had just emerged from the carriage was none other than Shess's personal bodyguard, Luza. She was wearing a white shirt with a ruffled collar, gray pants, and tall laced boots, giving her a much more casual look than what we were used to seeing her wearing at the royal palace. Her sword still hung at her hip, however, so I supposed her role was to act as Shess's escort.

"Amata, you're not allowed to come near her. You got that?" she said, glaring at me.

"Huh?" I blinked in surprise. "Now hold on a minute. Could you at least give me an explanation for what's going on here?"

"An explanation? You want an *explanation*?" she spat, jabbing a finger at me. "I don't have *any* explanations for an impudent fool like you! You broke my lady's trust!" Her eyes were filled with anger and scorn, but I still had no idea what I'd done wrong.

"Um, are you sure you've got the right guy?" I said.

Luza clicked her tongue. "My lady, this fool doesn't even remember what he did."

Shess finally turned to face me, putting her hands on her hips to try to make herself look more imposing. "Amata, you really don't know why I'm mad at you?"

"No, I really don't. What did I do?"

The little girl's breath caught in her throat and her little shoulders started shaking. "In that case, I'll tell you!" she declared, her sapphire eyes brimming with tears. "It's because..." She paused. "It's because you didn't come to my birthday party!"

“Y-Your...” I hesitated. “Your birthday party?”

“Yes! My ninth birthday party!”

“That’s right, Amata! My lady has just turned nine,” Luza said, puffing her chest out with pride. “She’s become even more poised and graceful.”

“Hang on, I—” I started, but Shess interrupted me.

“So many people turned up to celebrate my birthday, but *you* didn’t! Why not?”

“My lady spent the entire day looking for you, and ignoring all of the nobles who had come to the party,” Luza added.

“You didn’t have to send me a present!” Shess exclaimed. “All I wanted was for *you* to be there in person!”

“And how cowardly of you to have Zidan deliver your present! Why couldn’t you have brought it to the palace yourself? Are you *sooo* busy that you don’t even have time to pay my lady a visit?” Luza said, glaring at me.

The two of them continued to throw accusations at me, and I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“I *invited* you! So why didn’t you come?” the little girl exclaimed, sounding hurt but also deeply frustrated.

“I can’t believe a mere commoner like you would even *dare* to refuse my lady’s invitation! How disrespectful!” Luza added.

“Um, what invitation?” I interjected.

“The invitation to you that I spent so long writing!” Shess declared.

“My lady hates writing, but she went to all the trouble of making a *personalized* invitation for your sorry self. It was the first time she had ever done anything like that. Do you have any *idea* how precious that invitation was?” Luza barked.

I was flabbergasted. I’d naturally known about Shess’s birthday, and I’d asked Zidan to deliver the present I’d bought for her to the palace, but I hadn’t heard a thing about her holding a birthday party, let alone received an invitation to it.

“Hold on a minute,” I said.

Shess shook her head vigorously. “No! I don’t care about your excuses!”

“How pathetic of you, Amata!” Luza chimed in. “Trying to justify yourself because you’ve been called out for what you’ve done. And you dare to call yourself a man? Well, not with that wishy-washy attitude, you’re not!”

Aina was visibly shaken by how much Luza was berating me, and Duane looked like he wanted to intervene but just didn’t know how.

“I’m not trying to make excuses, I just—” I tried again, but it was no good. I was interrupted by Shess for the umpteenth time.

“I rewrote your invitation over and over and over, so that it’d be perfect!” she pouted.

“She did! And all for a scrawny plebeian like you! Do you have any *idea* just how hard she worked on that invitation?” Luza said, trying to really hammer the point home.

“I even got Luza to post it as soon as I was done writing it, so that it’d reach you as quickly as possible!” Shess grumbled.

“Exactly! My lady gave me the letter and—” Luza started, before suddenly stopping before reaching the end of her sentence.

“Luza?” Shess said quizzically, but her knight didn’t reply.

“Um, Shess?” I ventured tentatively.

“Wh-What do *you* want?” she spat. At least she’d actually answered me this time.

“I never received the invitation you wrote to me.”

Shess squeaked a shocked sound of disbelief, then her head swiveled toward Luza, who had her lips tightly sealed as beads of sweat formed on her forehead.

“Luza...” the princess said slowly.

“Y-Yes? Is something the matter, my lady?” Luza replied, acting like nothing was wrong.

“You *did* send Amata’s invitation, right?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Without saying a word, Luza climbed back inside the carriage, then reemerged with a bag that she frantically started rummaging through. A few seconds later, she produced a crumpled piece of paper from it.

“P-Please wait a minute, my lady,” Luza said, then she turned around and crouched down. She unfolded the piece of paper and placed it on her thighs before using her hands to attempt to smooth it out. “C’mon, uncrumple! Uncrumple!” I heard her mutter. After about two minutes of frantic smoothing, she stood up again. The piece of paper had a few holes in it due to how hard she’d rubbed, but it was now flat enough to be able to make out that it was some sort of letter.

She strode toward me and thrust the letter at me. “Here, Amata. Take this, but don’t say a word.”

I hesitated for a moment, but she insistently pressed it into my hands, her desperation palpable, and before I knew it, I found myself holding the letter, which was presumably the invitation Shess had written to me. *I’m getting déjà vu right now. Didn’t she thrust three copper coins into my hands on our first meeting?*

“A-All right, I’ve given it to him. I did it,” she announced, beaming as she turned back to Shess. “Did you see that, my lady? You saw, right? I *did* deliver the invitation to Amata!”

Shess didn’t reply, choosing to silently glare at Luza instead.

“Look! Amata even has the invitation *in his hands* as we speak! Yet he *still* didn’t come to your birthday party! C-Can you believe the audacity of this man?” Luza said accusingly, attempting to deflect the blame onto me in a manner that was so outrageously absurd, it left me momentarily speechless.

Even the always kindhearted Aina was taken aback. “You can’t do that, Miss Luza,” she chided her.

As for Duane, like the gentleman he was, he was pretending to admire the flowers along the roadside in an attempt to let Luza save face.

“Luza,” Shess finally said, placing her hands on her hips once more.

“Y-Yes?” Luza squeaked, her whole body stiffening.

“You’re having your pay cut,” the little princess said simply.



Aina, Shess, and I were sitting in the carriage Shess had arrived in, which shook and swayed slightly as it clattered along the streets of the town, but it was still a comfortable enough ride.

“I’m sorry, Amata,” Shess said, her head bowed low. The princess and Aina were sitting on the long seat opposite me. “I should have stopped and actually listened to what you were trying to say to me.”

The poor mite looked so ashamed of herself that I felt a pang in my heart. Still, I was glad that we’d gotten to the bottom of the misunderstanding and that Shess was willing to talk to me again.

“It’s okay, Shess,” Aina said, comforting her friend. “Cheer up!”

“Yeah, it’s all fine now, Shess. Don’t sweat it,” I added, reassuring her that all was forgiven.

“But it’s *not* fine,” Shess protested firmly. “I was mean to you again.”

“And I said it’s all good,” I reiterated. “Besides, you didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, you were the main victim of the tale.”

“I guess...” she mumbled.

After the whole invitation debacle had been dealt with, I’d suggested showing Shess to her new home, so Duane had hopped back on his horse to lead the way, and Shess had invited Aina and myself to ride with her in her carriage. Now, you’ve probably noticed by now that a certain *someone* was conspicuously missing from this scene. Luza had refused to join us in the carriage—likely out of embarrassment—and had jogged alongside the caravan until Duane had eventually taken pity on her and invited her to ride on his horse with him. Naturally, she’d jumped at the opportunity, and in fairness, I didn’t blame her, for Duane looked like a prince straight out of the pages of a fairy tale on his white horse. I glanced across at Luza and saw the way she was hugging Duane’s waist to make sure she didn’t fall, and I couldn’t help thinking that she

looked much gentler and more feminine than I'd ever seen her before.

"So you're already nine, huh, Shess?" Aina said.

"Yep!" Shess replied proudly. "I'm older than you!"

"For a little bit, yeah," Aina conceded with a nod, drawing a little self-important chuckle out of Shess.

The two of them had their hands clasped together and were giggling happily. I decided to stay silent so they could enjoy the moment without any interruptions.

"It's nearly my birthday too," Aina told Shess.

"Really?"

"Yup!"

"When is it?"

Aina hummed and counted on her fingers. "In ten days!" she replied.

"Wait, *what?!*" I spluttered, making the two little girls jump. *Good job, Shiro. Way to let them "enjoy the moment."*

"Wh-What's wrong, Amata? You scared me," Shess stammered, her eyes wide.

"Sorry, sorry," I mumbled, quickly apologizing. "Aina, your birthday's in *ten days?*"

"Y-Yeah?" the little girl replied, sounding uncertain about why I was asking.

"I had no idea."

Stella had told me that it was nearly Aina's ninth birthday, but I hadn't realized it was so soon. Well, I was glad I'd learned about it before the day itself, at least.

"Is there something you'd like?" I asked her. The little girl seemed confused by my question, so I added, "For a birthday present, I mean."

"Huh? A present? For *me?*" she said, utterly puzzled by the suggestion.

I was every bit as confused as she was. Why did she seem so shocked by the

idea?

“Amata, you’re going to give Aina a *present*?” Shess asked.

“Yeah?” I replied. “Is there something wrong with that?”

Shess shook her head. “No, I’m just a little surprised, that’s all. Usually, only nobles give presents to other nobles.”

“Wait, really?” I said.

“It isn’t like that where you’re from?” she said, answering my question with one of her own.

It seemed giving gifts to people on their birthdays wasn’t a common practice in the Giruam Kingdom—or perhaps even the world in general.

I shook my head. “Could you tell me more?”

“Of course.” Shess cleared her throat and puffed out her chest, a proud grin appearing on her face. I figured she wasn’t used to being the one teaching things to other people, on account of her being all of nine years old, so she was taking a certain amount of pride in being knowledgeable on the subject. “My mother told me that only nobles and members of the royal family give presents to other people on their birthdays.” She told me that most people organized parties to celebrate their birthday, just like on Earth. “Oh, but that’s not just nobles and royalty,” she added. “Luza told me that even commoners do that.”

Aina nodded at this, which suggested that it was the same in the nation she used to live in before. Perhaps birthday parties were a custom of hume society? Though unlike on Earth, in this world only the rich brought gifts to these parties, which was why it was a custom mostly reserved for the nobility. This explained why Shess had questioned my intention to give a present to Aina.

“Do you understand now, Amata?” Shess said, a proud smirk on her face.

I decided to humor her and gave her a round of applause. “Yes, that was very clear. Thanks, Shess.”

“This is all common sense, so you’d better not forget it,” she warned me with a sassy little flick of her hair. Speaking of her hair, it was still as straight and smooth as it had been when I left the royal palace, thanks to the hair

straightening treatment I'd used.

"So people here don't usually get presents for their birthday, huh?" I mused.

Shess and Aina nodded and made simultaneous "Uh-huh" noises to confirm that this was indeed the case. *In perfect sync*, I noted. *That's best friends for you.*

"I was so surprised when I received your present," Shess continued.

"Sorry. I suppose that must've been kinda awkward," I said sheepishly.

She shook her head. "Not really. If you'd been there, I would've opened it."

She told me that she had a policy of refusing to open any present that wasn't handed to her directly, though she *had* brought the present I'd sent her with her, and she wanted me to give it to her in person one day soon. *If Luza hadn't forgotten to send me Shess's invitation, we wouldn't have to go through all this hassle*, I thought, sighing inwardly.

"So you guys really don't do birthday presents here," I said again, still having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

"That's right, we don't. So you don't have to get me a present, okay?" Aina said. "Besides..." She paused and looked me straight in the eye. "You've already given me so, so, so many things!"

"Aina..."

The little girl beamed at me. "If you keep on being so nice to me, I'm scared the gods will get mad and take something away."

That was her way of telling me that she was happy and satisfied, and that she didn't need anything else.

"Oh, but my mama said she was throwing me a birthday party, so Mister Shiro... Shess..." She paused as she clasped my hand with her left hand and Shess's hand with her right. "Will you come to my party? Pretty please?"

"Sure I will, Aina," I said with a smile.

"Of course we'll come!" Shess confirmed at the same time.

A beautiful bright smile graced Aina's face. "Great!" she chirped.



“So how do *you* celebrate birthdays where you’re from, Amata?” Shess asked.

Just like how I had been curious about birthday celebrations in this world, it seemed she was equally intrigued about the customs of my homeland, and a quick glance across at Aina told me it wasn’t just Shess who wanted to know about them.

“Well, as a rule of thumb, friends and family give presents to the person whose birthday it is,” I explained. “There’s also cake, and we put candles on it.”

“C-Candles? *On* the cake?” Shess gasped.

Oh, right, of course. Birthday candles didn’t exist in this world, did they? They only had the thick, sturdy type used to illuminate rooms.

I couldn’t help letting out a chuckle. “These are super thin candles, not like regular ones.”

“You scared me for a second there,” she said. “I was wondering why you’d destroy a perfectly good cake by putting some heavy candles on top of it.”

The two little girls waited for my next words with bated breath. *Learning about other places sure is fun, isn’t it? Gotta admit, I like it too.*

“So first, we turn off all the lights and light the candles on the cake. The number of candles equals the number of years the person is turning, so for example, you put five on there if it’s their fifth birthday, or nine if it’s their ninth.”

“So if they’re turning twenty, you put twenty candles on the cake?” Aina asked.

“Well, for bigger numbers, we sometimes decide that one candle equals five years or maybe even ten, because otherwise you end up with way too many candles on the cake. Well, it’s not like there’s any set rules or anything. Everyone’s free to do it however they want.”

“Is that so?” Aina said.

“Yup. Some people even choose a certain number of candles to put on the cake and stick to that number every year, without ever adding any more.”

Shess hummed with interest. “What a fun tradition,” she decided.

I grinned. “Isn’t it just?”

“It sounds super fun!” Aina agreed, looking every bit as fascinated as Shess.

“Anyway, where was I?” I said.

“You said you turn off all the lights and light the candles,” Shess supplied.

“Thanks, Shess. So when the candles have been lit, we all gather around the cake, and everyone minus the birthday person sings ‘Happy Birthday.’ Ah, that’s a birthday song everyone knows. Then, as soon as the song ends, the birthday person blows out the candles and everybody cheers. After that, we give the birthday person the presents we got for them, and the cake gets shared out.” I paused, then added, “Different people may do it slightly differently, but that’s pretty much the gist of it.”

I glanced across at the two little girls and waited for their reactions, but they were both completely silent. They hadn’t said a word since I’d started detailing what a regular birthday looked like in my world, and they both had faraway looks on their faces as if they had drifted away from reality and were picturing all of these birthday traditions in their little heads.

“Aina?” I called out. I got no response, so I tried again, a bit louder this time. “Ainaaaaa!”

This seemed to do the trick. The little girl jumped and let out a surprised yelp when she realized I was talking to her. “Wh-What is it, Mister Shiro?”

“I have a proposition to put to you,” I declared.

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you mind if I buy you a cake for your birthday?”

“Huh?!” Aina blurted out, shocked by the idea.

“To be honest, I’d rather buy you a present,” I admitted. “But you said you didn’t want one, so I’m not gonna insist on that. So at least let me get you a cake, yeah?”

“N-No, I can’t accept a *cake*!” the little girl said hurriedly, helplessly waving

her hands around in front of her.

Shess spun around sharply to face her. "Hold on a minute, Aina."

"Shess?" the little girl said in surprise.

"Don't you think we should *try* to respect the culture of Amata's homeland?" the princess said.

Whoa, I never would have imagined that Shess would understand a weighty concept like respecting other cultures. She's grown up a lot in just a couple of months, I found myself thinking.

"That was very eloquently put, Shess," I said before turning back to Aina. "So? What do you say, Aina?"

"I, um..." She hesitated, extending her index fingers toward one another and nervously tracing out circles in the air, then after a few seconds, she grabbed Shess's arm and clung to it. "Th-Then, can Shess and I celebrate our birthdays together?"

"Wh-What?!" Shess exclaimed in shock.

"You said you wanted Mister Shiro to come to your birthday party, didn't you?" Aina said to her friend.

"W-Well, yeah, but—"

"So let's make it a joint party for both of us!"

Shess looked extremely taken aback by Aina's offer, but after a moment's pause, she nodded. "Okay, fine," she said, then pointed at me with her free hand. "Hear that, Amata? Aina and I are having a joint birthday party! S-So..." She paused and took a big breath, as if summoning up the courage to say her next words. "Organize a party for us in the style of your homeland!"

"Does that mean I can buy a present for Aina too, then?" I asked.

"No, Mister Shiro, you—" Aina started, but Shess interrupted her before she could finish.

"Yup!"

"Shess!" the little girl blurted out in horror, gawking at her friend.

“You have to *respect* Amata’s *culture*, Aina!” Shess insisted. “Besides, Amata got me a present. I mean, I haven’t actually *opened* it yet, but still. If we’re having a joint birthday party, you should get one too!”

“I-I guess so...” Aina mumbled.

I found it impossible to stop myself from chuckling at their interaction. “Thank you for helping to convince Aina to allow me to get her a present, Shess,” I said, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible.

“Don’t mention it!” she replied happily. “I just thought we should try to respect your nation’s culture, you know?”

“Still, I’m grateful,” I said warmly. “All right, it’s settled. I’ll throw a birthday party in the style of my homeland for the two of you.”

“Thank you,” Aina mumbled shyly.

Shess, on the other hand, seemed very excited about the prospect. “I’m so looking forward to it!”



Chapter Eight: The Princess's Retinue

Shess's new residence had an astonishing *fifteen* bedrooms in total, as well as a deluxe bathroom with an absolutely ginormous bath. If this were Tokyo, a place this big would have cost several hundred million yen at least, but in this world, this was basically par for the course for a noble's residence. In fact, if anything, this would be considered on the *small* side.

Luza plus Shess's ladies-in-waiting would live with her in the mansion, while the rest of the princess's retinue—the other guards, the servants, and the cooks—would reside in a separate building elsewhere on the estate, the grounds of which were surrounded by a fence. Despite the size of this secondary building, Shess had brought so many servants with her that some of them would be forced to bunk up. *Hm, having to share a room with a member of the opposite sex, huh? Sounds like a recipe for hilarious hijinks. Could be kinda fun.*

Once I'd given Shess the grand tour, I decided I should introduce myself to her entourage, but for some odd reason, I found all of them glaring at me as I approached, especially Shess's ladies-in-waiting. From what I'd been told, a princess's ladies-in-waiting were handpicked from other, less important noble households. Perhaps they disliked the idea of being in the vicinity of filthy commoners like Aina and me? Or maybe they thought their mistress shouldn't be acting so buddy-buddy with us, due to our inferior pedigree? Whatever the case, Shess had five ladies-in-waiting, and they all looked to be between the ages of fifteen and twenty-odd. After looking me up and down a few times, they huddled around and started muttering to one another.

"*That's the dragon rider?*" one of them asked, shooting me a disdainful look.

"It must be, judging from how Her Highness acts around him," another said.

"Are you *sure*? He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who would ever be able to tame a dragon of all things. Perhaps he used an illusion spell to trick Her Highness into *believing* he had one?"

A fourth lady-in-waiting gasped. "I think you're right! Look at his hair and

eyes. They're pitch black! He's a black magic user, no doubt about it!"

"And look at his feeble arms. Even Baron Noa's son has bigger biceps than that. I'm telling you, there's no world in which that man is a dragon rider," concluded the final one to speak.

It sounded like the people in the capital were under the impression that I was some mighty dragon rider who had tamed an extremely powerful dragon. Shess's ladies-in-waiting had never met me before, and judging from their reaction, they'd been expecting me to be a ripped Adonis of a man, not the human beanpole standing in front of them. "Disappointed" didn't even begin to describe how they were all feeling at that moment. They even suspected me of casting an illusion spell to trick Shess and her mother into thinking I owned a dragon.

"What are you all muttering about?" Shess said, glaring sharply at her ladies-in-waiting.

As one, they instantly averted their eyes from me, which suggested they at least seemed to respect Shess. As I casually surveyed the scene, I noticed that it wasn't just Shess's ladies-in-waiting who were grumbling at the situation they found themselves in; some of the other servants were too.

"I can't believe they've sent us this far out into the middle of nowhere," I heard one servant complain.

"Oh, how I already miss the royal capital!" griped another.

"Ugh, this place has an earthy stench to it. Though it's not like I was expecting any better."

"Surely this commoner doesn't expect Her Highness to live in this shoebox he humorously calls a house, does he?"

"How am I supposed to find the quality ingredients I need in order to prepare Her Highness's meals out here?"

I had to admit, I was starting to get a bit annoyed. These people hadn't even taken a proper look around the town, yet here they were, already complaining. Though I probably shouldn't have been too surprised by their reaction, for in their eyes, Ninoritch was nothing more than some little backwater town way

out in the sticks. They had no idea about everything it had to offer. After all, not only did we have a photo studio, where you could create timeless memories by having your picture taken, but for those who felt like gambling away their money, there was also a casino and an auction house. The town also boasted an underground theater, where you could sit and enjoy a movie like at a real cinema; my sisters' boutique, Beauty Amata, where you could buy fashionable clothing as well as have your makeup done; and a large public bathhouse. In short, the entertainment here was top-notch, but that wasn't all: ever since I introduced seasonings to this little town, the food here had become truly delectable. On top of that, the marketplace was busier than it had ever been, with traveling merchants from all across this side of the continent selling rare goods to curious punters, while the bigger companies had started opening up shops left and right. In my opinion, with its entertainment industry in full bloom, Ninoritch was a far more pleasant place to live than the royal capital. If the opportunity were to arise, I would be more than willing to show Shess's retinue around our thriving town.



Shess's servants started unloading the luggage from the carriages, and I decided that was my cue to leave. "Well then, I wouldn't want to get in the way of your maids unpacking your belongings, so I'll be heading off now," I said to Shess. "What about you, Aina?"

"I think I'll head home too," the little girl said.

Shess's face fell. "Amata! Aina!" she exclaimed. "S-Stay with me for just a little while longer."

Seeing the sad look on her face, the two of us agreed to spend a bit more time with her.

"Let's go upstairs," Shess declared.

So that's what we did, following the little girl up to her massive bedroom, which was over 35 square meters in size and already fully furnished. It went without saying that there was a large bed in here, but there were also two sofas on either side of a table that I'd bought in a furniture store in Japan, a dresser, and everything else she'd need for her stay to be a comfortable one. Her eyes

sparkled with excitement as she took in her new room, then the three of us headed over to the seating corner where Shess and Aina hopped up onto one of the sofas, I sat down on the one opposite, and Luza went and stood stiffly behind Shess. It was only the four of us in the room, so I felt like I could finally relax.

“Sorry about earlier. My ladies-in-waiting were saying mean things about you,” the little princess said sheepishly.

She would never have apologized for the misdeeds of her entourage a few months ago, and I was once again impressed by how much she had matured. Seriously, my boss at my old workplace could have learned a thing or two from her.

“There’s no need for you to apologize on their behalf, Your Highness,” Luza intervened quickly, completely forgetting that she wasn’t meant to be addressing Shess by her royal title while she was in Ninoritch. “These girls should feel *honored* to serve you. Whether it is in the royal capital or in a little town out in the countryside, your presence alone can turn anywhere into a paradise. But they clearly don’t seem to *get* that!”

“Please calm down, Miss Luza,” I said on seeing that she was gradually getting more and more worked up about the ladies-in-waiting’s transgressions.

“Listen to Amata, Luza. Besides, it’s not like they’re here by choice,” Shess said before sighing at length.

“But Ninoritch is such an amazing little town,” I chimed in. “Speaking of which, I had a question to ask you, Shess.”

“What is it?”

“May I ask you why you decided to come all the way here?”

The little girl nodded. “Sure. Basically...”

It all started right after I departed from the royal capital two months back. Shess had spent her entire life being shunned by others due to her curly hair and the influence of the king’s second wife, Eleene, but when the latter was removed from her position and exiled as punishment for abducting Shess, the little girl suddenly found herself the center of attention, with nobles trying to

curry favor with her left and right. She was utterly bewildered by this abrupt change in the attitude of the other nobles, and as such, she had a difficult time adapting to her new life. At roughly the same time, rumors started spreading around the royal palace.

“Princess Shessfelia has a dragon rider among her followers!”

“I heard he even used his powerful dragon to destroy one of the underground guilds.”

“From what I’ve heard, he’s some sort of hotshot merchant. The guy’s absolutely loaded!”

And so on, and so forth. This only served to make Shess’s life even more hectic, because not only was she the first princess of the kingdom, she was also allied to a rich merchant who just happened to be a dragon rider. Coupled with her impressive society debut, these rumors ensured that Shess ended up catching the eye of many a young noble, and the marriage proposals came flooding in. Every single faction wanted Shess to marry into their families, and the king and queen were at their wits’ end trying to figure out a way to put a stop to their advances.

Another by-product of this sudden surge in popularity was that her half-sister, Princess Patricia, had become a complete outcast, in much the same way that Shess had been before. Shess had spent her entire childhood being compared to her “superior” sister and the two princesses weren’t particularly close, but even so, Shess couldn’t help seeing her past self in Patricia. She couldn’t bear to see her parents and sister struggling so much because of her, so she came to the decision that she would leave the royal capital. This, she reasoned, would allow her parents more time to figure out which noble suitor should have her hand in marriage, and her absence would also be beneficial to Patricia, who would undoubtedly feel a whole lot better if she didn’t have to witness Shess receiving all of the attention that had once been showered on her. She lied to her parents about wanting to move to Ninoritch to keep an eye on me, and was granted permission to leave.

“So I used you as an excuse to move out of the royal capital,” the little girl concluded.

Both Aina and I were at a total loss for words. Who would've imagined that Shess would willingly sacrifice herself just so that her parents and half-sister could get a bit of respite?

"Oh, but don't get me wrong. I didn't move here *just* because of my family. I was also missing you two a lot," the little princess said, beaming broadly at us, as if trying to lighten the atmosphere. "So I don't regret moving to Ninoritch at all."

Shess was only nine years old, yet here she was, taking the huge step of living away from her parents, and all for their sake. What a strong little girl she was. In that moment, I couldn't help but find the little princess absolutely dazzling.

"Welcome to Ninoritch, Shess," I said softly.



Just as the conversation was dying down, Luza gave me a look and said, "Hey, Amata. I want to ask you something."

"Shoot," I replied.

She walked briskly over to the window and pointed outside. "It's about that man."

I joined her at the window and followed her gaze. She was pointing at Duane, who at present was in the process of helping Shess's servants to unload the princess's luggage from the carriages with a pleasant smile plastered across his face. Duane was a handsome man inside and out, so it was no surprise to see him helping the servants to unload all of those heavy trunks. And it was also clear that Shess's maids and ladies-in-waiting weren't immune to his charms, judging from the way they were all fawning over him. In fact, as I watched them crowd around the handsome knight, all smiles, I could hardly believe these were the same women who had been staring daggers at me earlier.

"Who, Duane? What about him?" I said.

Luza hummed with interest at this nugget of information. "So his name is Duane, is it?"

"Yup. Duane Lestard. He's one of Lord Bashure's knights."

On hearing my reply, Luza brought a hand up to her chin and hummed some more. “A knight? I see. And does he have a wife?”

“No, he’s single,” I replied.

A smirk instantly curled Luza’s lips upward. I had a bad feeling about where this was going.

“I see. So that’s why,” she said.

“Um, Miss Luza?” I said tentatively.

“I’d already guessed his intentions when he asked me to ride with him.” She paused before bursting out into a smile that screamed self-confidence. “That man is in l-l-love with me!”

Shess, Aina, and I were all left perplexed by this declaration.

“Luza?” the princess said.

“Miss Luza?” Aina and I echoed, eyebrows raised.

Luza had gotten the wrong end of the stick entirely.

“A knight, huh? Hm, well, I’m a baroness, so we’re not exactly on the same rung of the social ladder. Still, it’d be rude of me to refuse him simply because of that, especially given how much affection he obviously has for me,” she mumbled to herself.

“Uh, Luza, you still with us?” I asked in an attempt to get her to come down from her cloud. “Also, you’re a *baroness*?” Unless my memory was playing tricks on me, I was *pretty* sure she’d just been a regular knight the first time we met.

Shess was the one who clarified the situation. “Luza helped you and the others save me, and in return, she received a barony.”

I hummed. “Oh, so she got a promotion, huh?”

Luza had indeed come with us to the underground guild’s base of operations to save Shess, and it turned out that she had been furnished with a better title for her part in the successful rescue. *So she’s only been a baroness for two months and she’s already talking about her and Duane’s respective positions on the “social ladder,” huh?*

“Well, I suppose I don’t have much choice. If he’s really *that* desperate to marry me, I guess I can take him as my husband,” Luza said, still mumbling to herself.

She was spiraling further and further downward into her own delusions. So *Luza’s in love with Duane, who’s in love with Karen, huh? The chain of unrequited love just keeps growing, doesn’t it?*

“Ah, but stealing my heart is not a feat that will be so easily achieved, my dear Duane,” Luza muttered to herself as she peered out through the window, a lovestruck smile spread across her face.

Yeah, I’m not so sure about that. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s already snatched it.

Aina, Shess, and I eyed Luza in silence. For her sake, I decided it was best if I refrained from mentioning Duane’s infatuation with Karen.

Interlude

Shessfelia and Aina had been celebrating their reunion by chatting for hours. A few hours earlier, Shiro had said he needed to head on home, but that had perhaps just been an excuse to let the two little girls have some one-on-one time. Aina had tried to leave at the same time, as she didn't want to overstay her welcome, but Shessfelia had pleaded with her to stay for a bit longer. After a couple more hours chatting, the same scene played out again. And then again. It soon got to the point where it was already pitch black outside when Aina peered out through the window. Shessfelia had just left her home to come and live in a completely unfamiliar town, and Aina knew that, although her friend didn't show it, she must have been feeling quite lonely and scared. As such, Aina decided that, just for that night, she wouldn't go home.

"Shess, can I stay at your place tonight?" she asked.

The look that spread across Shessfelia's face was priceless. "Are you *sure*?" the little princess said.

"Yeah!" Aina replied, beaming.

Shessfelia's eyes sparkled with excitement and happiness radiated from every pore in her body after hearing that she would be spending the whole night with her best friend.

"Mister Shiro said I should stay over with you tonight. He got lots of stuff for us too!" Aina said, opening the bag Shiro had given her, which was full of snacks, chocolates, and Aina's favorite animal-shaped cookies. There were also a number of nighttime essentials, such as a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste, as well as a set of pajamas and extra underwear. Stella must have packed these last two items. Aina's dear, dear "Mister Shiro" had anticipated that Aina would want to spend the night with her best friend and had sneakily prepared everything so that she could, even going as far as swinging by her house beforehand to get all the stuff she would need.

"I'll let Stella know you're spending the night at Shess's, okay?" he had said to

the little girl before heading back to his shop.

“Thank you so much, Mister Shiro,” Aina mumbled, moved by his kindness. In that moment, she felt she never wanted to leave his side.

The two little girls decided to take a bath together, but Aina couldn’t believe her eyes when she saw that Shessfelia didn’t even wash herself. She got her servants to do it, and not just one, but *three* of them, all lingering in the bathroom just to help the little princess wash herself.

“I’m older than you!” Shessfelia had boasted earlier in the day, yet she didn’t even bathe on her own.

Even after Shessfelia had been scrubbed and the two little girls had settled down to soak in the bath, the servants remained in the room, making Aina feel so anxious, she couldn’t relax. Once they were all done with their bath, it was time for dinner. Shessfelia was seated at one end of the table and Aina at the other, but the table was so long, it was extremely difficult for the two of them to talk to each other. *Should I just speak louder so Shess can hear me? And why are all those ladies lined up against the wall?* Aina wondered, feeling slightly uncomfortable about the whole setup.

After a few minutes, the meal was brought out. Aina looked down at what had been placed in front of her and saw a tiny bit of food in the middle of a very large plate. Shessfelia’s meal looked the same.

“Let’s eat, Aina.”

“O-Okay.”

The little girl picked up her knife and fork and tried her best to cut up her food into little bite-size chunks—like Shess was doing—before scooping one into her mouth. It didn’t taste nearly as good as the “katsudon” that Shiro had brought her last time, but Aina supposed there was no helping that. After all, her dear Mister Shiro was an amazing magician, even if he couldn’t use normal magic. Every time they had lunch together, he always gave Aina really yummy food, and the “sweets” he presented to her once they were done with their main course were nothing short of heavenly.

“For tonight’s dinner, we used dried food from Mericha in conjunction with...”

A man who looked very self-important and who Aina assumed was one of Shessfelia's cooks prattled on about the meal as they ate, but the little girl had no idea what he was talking about. She glanced at her best friend for some kind of explanation, but saw that Shessfelia was bored out of her mind. *Does she have to listen to this man talk every time she has a meal?* Aina wondered, shocked by this revelation. *Poor Shess.*

When they were all done eating, the two little girls were finally able to return to Shessfelia's bedroom, which was thankfully free of maids and ladies-in-waiting, while Luza was standing guard in front of the door, meaning it was just the two little girls in the room. This meant that Aina and Shessfelia could have what Shiro called a "pajama party"!

After she had changed into her nightclothes, Aina allowed herself to fall backward onto Shessfelia's bed and let out a long sigh. Shiro was the one who had bought the bed for Shessfelia, and it was absolutely huge: even lying spread-eagle on it, Aina's hands didn't come close to touching the edges. The little girl couldn't help letting out another relieved sigh, which made Shessfelia's lips curl upward into a small smile. The little princess changed into her own pajamas and joined Aina on the bed.

"You never get any alone time, do you?" Aina said.

"No. It feels a bit suffocating sometimes. I hate it," Shessfelia pouted.

"It must be hard being a princess," her friend observed.

"Want to swap lives with me?"

Aina thought about this for a long moment. "Nope!"

The two little girls stared at each other in silence for a good few seconds before they both burst out laughing. Aina could already tell that the two of them were going to have a blast that evening.

Aina retrieved the cookies and candies Shiro had gotten for them. "These are really yummy, Shess!" she said, handing one of the boxes to her friend.

Shess tried a cookie and made a delighted noise. "They are! What are they?"

"They're sweets that Mister Shiro got for us. These ones are yummy too."

“Let me try them!”

Sprawled out on the bed, the little girls stuffed their faces with cookies and candies and had heaps of fun chatting and laughing together. Aina’s bedtime had come and gone, but the little girl wasn’t feeling even the slightest bit sleepy. Shessfelicia and Aina stayed up well into the night, while outside, the stars shone brightly in the sky. At some point, their conversation died down and they watched the stars blinking in silence.

After a few quiet minutes, Aina gently took hold of her friend’s hand. “Shess?”

“Hm?”

“Aren’t you...” She hesitated. “Aren’t you a bit lonely? I mean, you’re so far away from your mama and papa. Doesn’t that make you sad?”

For a while, Shessfelicia didn’t utter a word, her eyes firmly fixed on the window, but eventually she mumbled, “Of course I’m sad.”

“Shess...”

“But my mother and father can now have some peace.” The little princess paused and squeezed Aina’s hand. “I love my mother and father. I don’t want them to suffer because of me.”

Aina could feel the determination in her friend’s words.

“And anyway, I’m not lonely now,” Shessfelicia continued.

“How come?” Aina asked.

A smile graced Shessfelicia’s face as she turned her head and let her gaze land on Aina. “Because you’re with me.”

A little gasp escaped Aina’s lips.

“Besides, Amata lives in this town too. And I’ve got Luza, scatterbrained as she is. I’ll be fine!”

Shessfelicia might have been very far away from her family, but she wasn’t alone in Ninoritch. There were three people she loved by her side, so even though she was sad and missing her parents, she felt she could endure it. At the little girl’s words, tears started rolling down Aina’s cheeks.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Aina?” Shess panicked. “Why are you crying?”

“You’re such a strong girl, Shess. I’m just a big crybaby,” Aina hiccuped, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her sleeve. “Can I tell you something, Shess?”

“O-Of course!” Shessfelia said, nodding.

“My, um...”

“Uh-huh?”

“My papa, he...”

“Uh-huh?”

“He’s alive.”

Aina told Shessfelia all about her dad.

“I think my mama wants to go look for him,” Aina mumbled.

“Does she?” Shessfelia asked softly.

“But she can’t just leave me alone, so she can’t go.”

Despite knowing that her husband was alive, Stella couldn’t go looking for him, all because of Aina.

“And I wanna see my papa too, but I don’t want my mama to go... And I know I could go with her, but I don’t wanna be separated from Mister Shiro.”

The little girl told Shessfelia everything that had been weighing on her mind. Of course, Shessfelia couldn’t do anything to help the little girl, so she softly wrapped her arms around her and simply offered a comforting embrace. She didn’t let go until Aina had stopped crying.

Chapter Nine: What I Couldn't Ask

After leaving Shess's estate, I paid a visit to Stella to let her know that Aina would be spending the night there.

"I can't believe Aina finally has a little friend," Stella murmured in surprise on her doorstep before breaking out into a grin. Judging by her reaction, this was the first time the little girl had gone to a sleepover with a friend her own age. "I'm a bit sad she won't be here with me tonight, but it's all right. I still have Peace," Stella said, her eyes becoming watery with emotion.

The little black cat meowed and jumped up into her arms as if to comfort her.

"Yes, Peace, you're a good little kitty, aren't you?" Stella cooed as she gently petted him, prompting Peace to meow again.

Despite having recently learned that her husband was still alive somewhere out there in the big wide world, she seemed outwardly to be her usual self. But the image of her walking out of the guildhall a few days back reared up in my mind and I couldn't help wondering if she was still carrying around the letter she had wanted to send to the Republic of Aptos.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Shiro?" she asked, her voice pulling me out of my thoughts.

I hadn't been expecting the question and could only utter a rather ineloquent "Huh?"

"You've been staring at me since I opened the door. Do I have something on my face?" she said, shifting slightly with embarrassment.

I hadn't realized I'd been staring. "No, uh, I..." I tried to come up with some excuse. "Oh, right! The door! Remember to lock all your doors and windows tight tonight, okay?" I said, swiftly changing the topic.

This drew a chuckle from Stella. "Thank you for your concern," she said, letting her gaze wander down the streets of Ninoritch, a broad grin on her face. "I don't think you need to worry, though. This town is filled with nothing but

kind people. It's so peaceful too."

The sun had started to set, casting a reddish glow over the town.

"Well then, Mr. Shiro," Stella said, stepping back from the threshold. "Have a good night."

"Thanks, you too—actually, hold on a minute!" I stopped her before she could close the door. She shot me a puzzled look. "I, um..."

"Yes?" she said.

"Uh, well, it's been getting quite chilly lately, so be careful not to catch a cold, okay?" I replied feebly.

For a split second, she looked at me as if I'd grown two heads, before quickly pulling herself together and flashing me a warm smile. "You too. Aina and I are always worrying about you, you know."

"I'll take care too," I assured her. "Well then, I should be getting going. Good night, Stella."

"Good night, Mr. Shiro. Sweet dreams."

Once the two of us had exchanged our goodbyes, I walked off. In the end, I was still unable to bring myself to ask the question I'd been meaning to ask her ever since the night of the meteor festival: *"Are you going to go look for your husband?"*



"Um, excuse me. Could I get a beer?"

After bidding good night to Stella, I headed over to the drinking hall at the Fairy's Blessing. I'd been on edge ever since I learned that Shess was moving to Ninoritch. The bandit incident hadn't helped either, and the notion that Shess might have been forced to move out here because of me had been weighing heavily on my mind. But as it turned out, my worries in that regard had been totally unfounded, and I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. As a result, I suddenly found myself craving something good to drink.

"Oh, Shiro!"

I was sitting at a table, waiting for my beer, when all of a sudden, someone called out my name right next to my ear, making me almost fall off my chair. I turned around with a startled yelp and saw Patty hovering next to me.

With my heart still pounding loudly in my chest, I sighed at length. "Please don't do that, boss. I thought my heart was going to give out."

"Sorry," she said with a mischievous little giggle as she landed on the table. She didn't look the slightest bit apologetic.

"What are you doing here so late at night, boss? In fact, why are you here at all? Didn't you go into the forest with some of the adventurers three days ago?" I asked.

Patty was Ninoritch's only fairy resident, as well as being the local (unpaid) tourism ambassador. In a way, she was basically the town mascot. Though contrary to what you might think, she wasn't strapped for cash at all. Quite the opposite, actually. Not only did her homemade fairy mead sell for astronomical prices, she was occasionally hired by the Fairy's Blessing guild to lead expeditions into the Gigheena Forest, the large wooded area to the east of town, and her services didn't come cheap.

"Dude, I'm *telling* you, she makes more money than us!" Raiya, the leader of the Blue Flash adventuring party, had complained to me one day. Blue Flash was one of the Fairy's Blessing's top-ranked parties, yet Patty was making more money than them by working only a few days every month. *Way to go, little boss!* I'd thought at the time.

"We found the ruins they were looking for. Well, it was pretty much all me," Patty boasted, puffing her chest out with pride. "So I figured I'd head back to town."

She had been hired solely to help the group of adventurers find the ruins, so with her job complete, she had been free to return to Ninoritch. She had been in the middle of updating the guild on the situation when she'd spotted me in the drinking hall.

"So anyway, Aina's not with you?" the little fairy asked, peering around for her friend.

“Nope. She’s having a sleepover at Shess’s.”

“What? Shess is here *already*?” Patty said before breaking out into a huge grin.

“Yup. She arrived around noon,” I confirmed. “You should go say hi to her when you can.”

“You betcha!” she replied. “And you’re coming with me. That’s an order from your boss!”

“Sure thing. Shess said she’d missed you a lot too. We should all go hang out with her once she’s settled in,” I suggested.

“Yeah!” the little fairy said, giving the idea one big nod. “But you’re all alone right now, aren’t you? Since Aina’s not with you, I mean.”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Well, looks like I have no choice but to keep you company,” said my very magnanimous little boss. “You know what? T-Tonight will be my treat!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really!”

I’d known Patty for a few months by this point, but this was the first time she had ever offered to pay for me.

“Wh-Why are you acting so surprised? You helped me out in those ruins,” the little fairy explained, her face as red as a tomato. “S-So I just...” She hesitated. “I just thought I could treat you to dinner. Y’know, as a”—another hesitation—“as a thank you!” Her wings were fluttering rapidly, and she placed her hands on her hips with a self-important look plastered across her face, which was still bright red.

“As a thank you?” I repeated.

“Yeah! Isn’t it a hume custom to do something nice for people when you’re thankful for something they’ve done?”

A couple of weeks back, Patty, a bunch of adventurers, and I had ventured into Nathew’s ruins to perform a soul-summoning ritual. Thanks to that, Patty

had gotten to see her deceased best friend one more time and was finally able to say goodbye to him properly, allowing her to close that chapter of her life. Ever since that day, I had noticed she had been living her life more to the full, embracing each moment with a newfound vigor.

“Oh, I didn’t do anything special,” I said to Patty. “If anything, you should be thanking the adventurers and Celes.”

All I’d really done was translate Nathew’s grimoire and take videos of the adventurers. Other than that, I’d spent the entire time moaning about how exhausted I was trying to keep up with the adventurers. I really hadn’t done anything major.

“But... But... When we were in the ruins, you told me I had to keep my promise to Eren, remember?”

“Hm, now that you mention it, I guess I *did* say something like that, yeah,” I mused.

Back in the ruins, Patty had told me she was scared of seeing Eren again, but all I really did was give her a little push to take the plunge. Quite literally, as it turned out.

“Right? S-So I want to thank you for that by treating you to your favorite meal!” she explained, waving her little arms around as she did so.

It seemed she *really* wanted to show me how grateful she was, so I decided it was better not to fight it any more than I already had. “Okay,” I said. “If you really insist, I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Y-Yeah! I’ll pay for everything tonight, so eat and drink to your heart’s content!”

And so, I accepted my very magnanimous boss’s offer of treating me to a nice meal.



“Shiro, you can order whatever you want, okay?”

“Thanks, boss. In that case, I’ll get this one and this one,” I said, pointing to a couple of the items on the menu.

“That’s it?” Patty asked, blinking in surprise. “Celes and Dramom always order *way* more than that.”

“Please don’t lump me in with those two. They could seriously be competitive eaters if they wanted to.”

“What’s a ‘competitive eater’?” Patty asked.

“Someone who’s able to eat a lot,” I explained, and Patty hummed her acknowledgment.

I called over a waitress and placed our order. In a matter of minutes, our food, Patty’s drink, and the beer I’d ordered earlier had arrived and been laid out in front of us on the table. I’d decided to go for the meat skewers, while Patty had opted for a simmered river fish dish and some fruit wine to go with it.

“Come on, Shiro, eat up!” Patty urged.

“Thanks, boss. Well then. Thanks for the—” I started.

“Ah, hold on!” Patty squeaked when I was halfway through my sentence.

“...food. What is it, boss?”

“We forgot to do that ‘Cheers’ thing! *You* know. That thing you always do!” She picked up her drink with both hands and looked at me, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Cheers, Shiro!”

“Cheers, boss,” I said, clinking my glass beer bottle against Patty’s cup. Beaming, she brought her drink up to her lips, and following her example, I took a big swig of my own drink. *She insisted on making a toast even though she doesn’t really know what it is. Patty sure can be cute at times.*

“You can eat now, Shiro,” Patty said.

“Okay. Thanks for the food, boss,” I said, finishing my interrupted sentence before sinking my teeth into one of the skewers.

Meat juices dripped into my mouth and filled it with the taste of salt, spices, and the mystery meat (it was probably some sort of monster meat). I washed it all down with another gulp of beer, and in that instant, I felt the fatigue melt away from my body. I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a sigh of contentment.

“How is it? It’s good, right?” Patty asked me.

“Yup, it’s delicious,” I confirmed.

The little fairy giggled excitedly. “You can have more if you want, okay, Shiro?”

She watched me eat with a huge, satisfied grin on her face. Judging by her look, this was the first time she had ever treated anyone to a meal. Back when I was a student, one of my upperclassmen had insisted on paying for dinner with his first paycheck from his first part-time job, and his expression had been exactly the same as Patty’s as he watched me eat. A feeling of warmth expanded in my chest as I thought about how much Patty had matured since I first met her. Back then, she wasn’t even able to distinguish between a copper coin and a silver one, but here she was now, treating me to a meal. It kind of made me happy in a way.

“Hey, Shiro, you know how I went into the forest with the Blue Flash crew last time? Well, they were...”

She proceeded to tell me all about her little adventure into the forest with Raiya and the others.

“And then, Kilpha found something *incredible*! She...”

Still munching away on my skewers, I gave the occasional nod and uttered the odd “Really?” and “Is that so?” every now and again to show that I was listening.

“Yeah, really! Raiya was super-*duper* shocked too, so I went to find Nesca and I told her about it...”

Patty’s excitement at the idea of having treated her underling—in this case, me—to a meal seemed to know no bounds. She ate and drank so much, I couldn’t help wondering where she managed to store all of that food in such a tiny body, and she spent the whole meal telling me about her most recent adventures.

“Anyway, it was *obviously* a piece of cake for me!” she concluded proudly, bringing her heroic tale to an end. By this point, she was breathing loudly through her nose, seemingly unable to curb her excitement, and her face had

gone all red from the amount of wine she had drunk. Though I couldn't really point any fingers on that score, since I was also pleasantly tipsy.

We ordered some more food and booze, and Patty paused for a moment to catch her breath. When she had calmed down a little, I said, "By the way, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Hm? What is it?" the fairy asked.

"Remember that day when we launched all those lanterns into the sky?"

"The meteor festival, you mean? Yeah! It was so pretty, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "It really was. That was also the day"—I lowered my voice to a whisper and brought my face closer to Patty's—"we found out Aina's father is still alive, wasn't it? I was wondering if Stella had said anything about it since then."

If anyone was likely to know something about Stella's feelings on the matter, it was Patty, the resident freeloader in her home.

But the little fairy simply looked puzzled by my question. "Like what?"

"Has she, like, discussed it with Aina or anything? Or held a family meeting to talk about it?"

"Oh, so *that's* what you mean," the fairy said. The situation was a very serious matter for Aina and her mom, but Patty was completely nonchalant about it. "Well, after the festival, I asked them, 'So aren't you gonna go look for Aina's pa?'"

"What? Just like that?" I said, unable to hide my surprise.

"Yeah."

I couldn't believe my ears. "What?! Boss, you have to be a bit more *delicate* in situations like this!"

"Wh-Why?"

"We're talking about Aina's dad here! Her dad that they thought was *dead*! It's not the kind of subject anyone can just wade into and casually ask about! Though I guess me asking you about it behind their backs isn't all that great

either..." I conceded. "But still! You can't just ask them *to their faces* if they're gonna go look for him or not!"

"But I'm not 'anyone.' I'm Aina's friend!" Patty argued.

"That's not the point!"

"Then, what *is* the point?" Patty screeched.

I couldn't believe Patty had already asked Stella the one thing I'd been wanting to ask her for weeks. The sheer shock of this discovery had fried my brain and I quickly found myself in a screaming match with the little fairy, though it was suddenly interrupted by a familiar voice from somewhere beside us.

"Hm? What's going on here, you two?"

I whipped my head around to see Raiya standing next to our table. "Hi, man," he greeted me. He had Nesca, Kilpha, and Rolf right behind him, which meant the whole Blue Flash crew was here. They'd probably just returned from a quest.

"Hello, Shiro," Nesca mumbled, sounding as lethargic as ever.

"What are you eating, Shiro, meow? It looks really yummy, meow!" Kilpha purred.

"Are you having dinner with Patty tonight, man?" Raiya asked me.

"I was hoping you'd ask me that," I said. "Believe it or not, my boss has offered to pay for my meal!"

"Seriously? Damn, you're treating your underling to a meal? That's just great, Patty. Right, guys?" Raiya said, addressing his comrades.

"Yeah!" Kilpha replied, nodding. "I want Patty to treat me to a meal too, meow!"

"Kilpha, you're shameless," Nesca scolded.

"Miss Nesca is right," Rolf added. "As seasoned adventurers, we should set a good example for our juniors."

Kilpha's shoulders slumped. "Meeow, I know," she grumbled.

A smile curled Raiya's lips upward at the shenanigans of his partymates. He turned to me and said, "Mind if we join you guys?"

"Not at all," I said. "What do you say, boss?"

"I don't mind," Patty replied. "But I'm only paying for Shiro, you hear?"

"Sure, sure," Raiya said as he took a seat. The rest of the Blue Flash crew did likewise.

When we'd all settled into our seats, Raiya was sitting opposite me with Nesca on his left, while I was between Kilpha on my left and Rolf on my right. Due to her size, Patty had been sitting cross-legged on the table the entire time. Once the Blue Flash crew's order had arrived, I whooped "Cheers" and clinked drinks for the second time that evening.

"You two were being pretty loud just now. What were you arguing about?" Raiya asked me right off the bat.

But I couldn't tell him the truth. After all, this was a highly sensitive—not to mention, private—matter for Aina and Stella. While Raiya had a pretty good relationship with Aina, that didn't mean I could just go ahead and blurt out something so personal without the consent of her and her mom.

"It's not really something I'm allowed to share—" I started, but Patty talked over me.

"You guys won't *believe* this! Aina's pa is alive!" she exclaimed, spilling the beans without a second's hesitation.

My jaw hit the floor, though the Blue Flash crew seemed even more shocked than I was. Nesca was completely silent, her eyes wide in astonishment. Kilpha, on the other hand, leaned forward on the table and asked the fairy a follow-up question.

"By 'pa,' you mean her actual father, meow?" she said, her facial expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

Patty nodded excitedly. "Yeah! Remember when we went to those ruins to meet the dead? Well..."

There was no stopping her now. She grabbed her cup of fruit wine with both

hands and downed what was left of it, before letting out a satisfied sigh. Then, absolutely wasted by this point, she began babbling about everything that had happened on the night of the meteor festival.



The Blue Flash crew was rendered utterly speechless by this sudden revelation from Patty. After three whole minutes of complete silence, Raiya finally uttered, “Damn. So Aina’s dad is alive, huh?”

Famine, illnesses, war, bandits, pirates, monsters... Unlike in Japan, there were a great many threats in this world, and almost everyone you interacted with here had lost someone close to them. Yet, Aina’s father had somehow survived the war, and that in itself was nothing short of miraculous.

“It’s a huge shock, I know,” I said, understanding their reaction to the news.

“You can say that again,” Raiya mumbled. He paused, nodded to himself, then shifted his gaze to Patty again. “So you really asked them if they were gonna go look for him?”

“Wh-What? Are you saying I shouldn’t have?” the little fairy grumbled.

“Well, it *is* a bit insensitive,” he said, and everyone at the table aside from Patty nodded in agreement.

“That must have been a rather brutal question for Miss Stella to answer in her present state,” Rolf added, rubbing salt into the wound and eliciting another round of nodding from the rest of us.

Patty looked from Raiya’s shocked expression to Rolf’s severe gaze and started getting flustered. “Why was it brutal?” she pouted defensively.

“Come on now, guys. Calm down, meow,” Kilpha intervened before the situation could escalate. She gave Patty a couple of little slaps on the back as if to tell her not to worry about it. “So what answer did Aina’s mom give?” she asked.

All of our gazes converged on Patty.

“She said...” the little fairy said awkwardly. “She said she wasn’t going to go look for him.”

Chapter Ten: The Reason

“So she’s decided not to, huh?” I mused. “It’s probably because...” I trailed off and exchanged glances with the members of the Blue Flash crew in turn.

“Because of Aina, huh?” Raiya said, finishing my sentence.

“Shiro, where are Stella and Aina from?” Nesca asked.

“Aina told me they used to live in the Republic of Aptos. I looked at where it was on the map and it’s really far from here,” I said.

Nesca considered this. “I see.”

“Stella sure is amazing, isn’t she, meow?” Kilpha marveled. “Coming all the way here when Aina was so little, meow.”

“Moms have to be strong,” I agreed.

Stella loved her husband, but she loved her daughter even more.

“I don’t get it. Why *can’t* Stella go look for him because of Aina?” Patty asked with a pout. “Th-That makes no sense! The normal reaction would be to go there!”

There was some logic to Patty’s reasoning. Stella had learned that her supposedly long-deceased husband was actually alive, so why was she hesitating? She had to go look for him. In the little fairy’s mind, that was the obvious course of action.

“Miss Patty, ma’am, only those without responsibilities are able to do such a thing,” Rolf explained to the confused fairy.

“Responsibilities?” she echoed.

“Yes, responsibilities,” Rolf continued patiently. “In this case, little Miss Aina is Miss Stella’s responsibility.”

“Aina?”

“Indeed.”

But in spite of Rolf's explanation, Patty wasn't getting it at all. Observing her confusion, Raiya scratched his head and said, "Patty, you've never left Ninoritch before, have you?"

"She came to the royal capital with me when I went there," I reminded him.

"Oh, right, yeah. But what I mean is you've never taken a *proper* trip to another hume nation, have you? Crossing borders and all that."

"A-And? Is there something *wrong* with that?" the little fairy snapped back.

"Hey, hey, no need to bite. Listen, Patty. Traveling is super tough. There are towns out there where robberies and murders are just part of daily life," Raiya explained.

Patty's jaw hit the floor. It had been a whole ordeal when bandits had suddenly shown up near Ninoritch, but the idea that there were towns out there where they had to deal with that sort of stuff every *single* day was utterly terrifying.



“Patty, this world is much bigger than you think. On this continent alone, countless races coexist with one another,” Nesca said, looking her disciple in the eye. “There are fairies and humes, of course, but there are also beastfolk, elves, dwarves, lizardfolk, six-limbed folk, ogres...” she reeled off. “And that’s not even all of them. But all of those races have their own nations, towns, and other settlements.”

“Yup, yup! Even if you’re just restricting it to hume nations, there are still so many of them, you don’t have enough fingers on your hands and toes on your feet combined to count them all, meow,” Kilpha added. “And in the more dangerous parts of the continent, around one in five towns is like what Raiya described, meow.”

Well, I can tell you one thing: I sure as hell don’t ever want to set foot in one of those apocalyptic-sounding hellholes.

“I’m sure Aina’s mom has some idea of where her husband might be. He was drafted to fight, so maybe he’s still in whatever nation they were at war with back then,” Raiya said, then paused, his face grave. “But it’s not like she can just whisk Aina away with her to go look for him.”

“Th-Then, she can just leave Aina in Ninoritch! I’m here, and Shiro is too! We’ll take care of her!” Patty suggested.

“Let us assume she did just that. What if something were to happen to Miss Stella on her travels, and as a consequence, she lost her life?” Rolf asked.

Patty gasped. “That’s...” All the color drained from her face. She must have realized what Rolf was driving at.

“Exactly,” Rolf said. “Little Miss Aina would be an orphan.”

“Th-Then, I’ll go with Stella! I’ll be her bodyguard!” the little fairy insisted.

“I am afraid to say, Miss Patty, ma’am, that you going with her would only increase the chances of something happening to her, as most humes are not used to the sight of fairies,” Rolf explained.

Patty knew all too well how rare fairies were in the hume world. If she accompanied Stella, it would only end up putting her in danger, and Patty was

too kind to let something like that happen.

“Well, we might be overexaggerating things a tad, but you get the gist. Traveling to other nations is tough, even for us adventurers. It’d be many times worse for Aina’s mom,” Raiya said.

Patty didn’t reply.

“The more I think about it, the more impressed I am that she actually made it all the way to Ninoritch with little Aina. That’s a miracle in itself, right?” he said to his comrades, who all nodded.

“And miracles are only miracles because they’re so rare, meow,” Kilpha added.

The little fairy was at a complete loss for words, but I could see Stella’s reasoning for not going to look for her husband. I was well aware that this world wasn’t like Japan in the slightest, since not only was there no kind of transportation infrastructure but you also couldn’t even so much as contact someone if they lived in another region. If you ever left your homeland, you’d no longer be able to communicate with former friends and family unless you shelled out a ton of money to send them a letter, and even then, there was no guarantee the letter would reach its destination. Going to look for someone meant literally putting your life on the line, because not only did you have to pay a fee each time you wanted to enter a new town, which meant you could end up stranded in the middle of nowhere if you messed up your calculations at all, but the roads were also swarming with monsters and bandits. Stella cared too much about her daughter to leave her in Ninoritch and make the risky journey alone, which explained why she had told Patty she wasn’t going to go look for her husband.

“So do you get it now, Patty? It’s not that Aina’s mom doesn’t *want* to go looking for her husband; it’s that she *can’t*,” Raiya said.

This appeared to be the comment that finally got through to Patty. She scrunched up her little face and tears started rolling down her cheeks. “I understand now. I said something really horrible to Stella.”

She looked just like a child who had been scolded for doing something naughty. The alcohol had undoubtedly played a role in amplifying her emotions

too.

“Don’t cry, boss,” I said, trying to comfort her.

“Aren’t you gonna scold me too, Shiro?” she said. “Aren’t you gonna say what I did was bad, like Aina does sometimes?”

“No, I won’t,” I replied. “I was just surprised how *direct* your question to Stella was. But I won’t yell at you for it.”

“You really mean it?” she said in a small voice.

“I really mean it,” I assured her. “Besides, between you and me, I’ve been debating whether I should ask Stella about it myself ever since the meteor festival.”

“R-Really?”

“Yup,” I said, nodding. “So knowing that you’ve already asked her that question has really lifted a weight off my shoulders.”

I produced a handkerchief from my pocket and handed it to Patty, who used it first to wipe away her tears, before blowing her nose on a small corner of it. I could see my handkerchief would have to take a little trip to the washing machine later on, but on the plus side, at least Patty had stopped crying.

“Well, I just think you should’ve waited a *little* longer before asking her if she planned to go look for her husband or not,” Raiya interjected. “Or you should’ve at least talked to Shiro about it first.”

“Ah, c’mon, Raiya. We all know my boss thinks with her heart, not her head,” I joked, and everyone in our little group chuckled.

“Hold on a minute. Did you just say you were gonna ask Stella if she was planning to go look for him too, man?” Raiya asked me, his hand suddenly stopping as he raised his tankard to his mouth.

“I was, but it sounds like my boss beat me to it. I’d been debating it for a while,” I admitted, then gripped my beer bottle a little tighter. “I think I’ll need to have a long conversation with Stella the next time I see her.”

And with that, I brought the glass bottle in my hand up to my lips, tipped my head back, and gulped the rest of my beer down in one.

Chapter Eleven: The Royal Chef, Part One

The next day, I made my way over to the Fairy's Blessing guild again. Aina was busy showing Shess around town, so I had to man the shop by myself, but it was now lunchtime and I needed food. Usually, I'd bring some stuff to eat from Japan, and Aina and I would sit and have lunch together, but since she wasn't working, I decided I'd go and eat alone at the guild's drinking hall. Or at least, that was my intention. Things didn't go quite as planned.

"Six plates of grilled giant boar, eight of jackalope stew, and five of grilled rock bird with herbs," Celes said, placing her order.

"I will have the same," Dramom said to the waitress before turning to her daughter. "Suama, what would you like to eat?"

"Meat!" the little girl squealed happily.

"My daughter will have five plates of the grilled murder grizzly skewers, and five mushroom and vegetable medley platters."

"No veggies. Yucky," Suama whined.

"Master said you *must* eat your vegetables, so you shall," Dramom chided her daughter, who pouted in response but didn't argue. "Did you write all that down?" Dramom asked the waitress. "Master, what are you having?"

"I'll have the special of the day," I decided.

"You heard him," Dramom said to the waitress. "Ensure that master's food arrives first."

Like I said, I'd been planning on spending my lunch break alone before bumping into Celes and Dramom (and by extension, Suama), who insisted on joining me. Needless to say, my dreams of a nice, peaceful lunch were thrown out of the window. Ever since the bandit incident, Celes and Dramom had been tasked with patrolling the various highways around Ninoritch on a regular basis, and now that they were spending their days doing something productive—namely, keeping the town safe—I didn't have as many qualms about treating

them to a meal every now and again, even if said meal *was* composed exclusively of rare and expensive meats like murder grizzly, giant boar, and rock bird. Even the highest-ranked adventurers rarely got to eat any of those.

“Bring me the same again,” Celes instructed the waitress once they had finished their first round of food.

“Likewise,” Dramom added.

True to form, Suama indicated she wanted seconds too by squealing, “Meat!”

“Wow. You ladies are *still* hungry after all that?” I remarked, impressed as ever by their seemingly bottomless appetites.

Partway through lunch, the main door to the guildhall swung open and a group of thirty or so people shuffled in, with none other than Aina leading the way.

“And this is the guildhall, Shess,” she said to the little girl next to her.

Shess’s ladies-in-waiting crowded behind her, followed by other servants and attendants. It seemed Aina wasn’t showing just Shess around town, but her whole retinue. I wasn’t the least bit surprised that Aina had decided to bring them all to the guild, since the Fairy’s Blessing was pretty much a one-stop shop for all of the townsfolk’s needs: lost and found, cleaning services, pest control, you name it. There wasn’t a single service they didn’t offer, to the point where, since Ninoritch didn’t have its own dedicated postal service, if you wanted to send a letter anywhere, you had to go through the guild. Aina naturally knew all of this, so it stood to reason that she would bring Shess and her entourage here while touring the town.

“The food here is really yummy!” Aina told Shess.

“Really?” the princess said.

“Really!” Aina replied, nodding. “There are lots of places to eat in Ninoritch, but this is my favorite.”

The little girl’s high praise seemed to have floated all the way to the ears of the head chef who was flipping the food in the pan he was holding in the open kitchen, for a smile broke out on his face. The waiters and waitresses around

the hall looked just as proud. However, in the group behind Shess, someone let out a scornful laugh.

“Are you seriously trying to get me to believe that the food in this shabby old guild is *good*?” scoffed a man in his thirties, who turned out to be one of Shess’s servants. “Please don’t even think of trying to feed that *muck* to my lady, girly,” he warned Aina haughtily.

“B-But...” the little girl started to protest, but the man interrupted her.

“I, Loren, will be the one to cook *all* of the young lady’s meals. There is simply no way that a provincial chef in such a remote little town would be able to produce anything suitable for the young lady’s *refined* palate.”

“Loren!” Shess reprimanded him.

But Loren wasn’t done. “Do not listen to the ramblings of this foolish little girl, my lady. Good grief.” He turned to Aina. “And what will you do if my lady takes an interest in this grubby little place, and heaven forfend, tries to *eat* here?” the pompous man admonished her, drawing concurring nods and murmurs of approval from the rest of Shess’s retinue.

The little girl was visibly on the verge of tears. She had simply wanted to take her best friend to her favorite spot in town, but here she was, getting scolded by this man. It really annoyed me, and a quick glance around the room told me that the waitstaff and the drinking hall’s regulars shared this sentiment, the atmosphere in the room growing noticeably tense. Even Celes and Dramom looked mad, though not nearly as incensed as the head chef, who had swapped the frying pan in his hand for a big kitchen knife. He was a former adventurer, and I got the feeling that if no one stopped him, this scene might quickly turn into a bloodbath. I wanted to avoid that, thank you very much, so I appointed myself the mediator.

I got up from my seat and made my way over to Shess’s group. “Don’t you think that was a *tad* unnecessary?” I said to the man who called himself Loren.

“Amata!” Shess exclaimed when she noticed me.

Aina still looked like she was about to start crying, but she managed to just about exhale a quiet “Mister Shiro...”

“And you are? Oh, wait. You’re a ‘friend’ of my lady, aren’t you?” Loren sniffed haughtily. “I merely speak the truth. Anyway, I’m quite sure you will agree with me when I say there is no way the food served here could *possibly* meet my lady’s standards.”

“I’d argue Shess should be the one who decides whether or not the food is up to her ‘standards,’” I replied, maintaining a calm exterior.

The man chuckled as if this was the most amusing thing he had ever heard. “Sheer foolishness. What if my lady tries this food and falls ill?” He shrugged exaggeratedly and shook his head.

“As it happens, this town has access to rare, high-quality ingredients that even most of the folk in the royal capital have never laid eyes on,” I pointed out.

“So what?” Loren scoffed. “Having rare ingredients at your fingertips means nothing if the chef lacks competence.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the guild’s head chef grab the blade of his knife and raise it into the air, as if he planned to throw it at Loren, who seemed blithely unaware that his life was very much in danger. I nonchalantly stepped into the line of fire to protect Loren from any cooking utensils that might be launched in his direction by the chef. *But what do I do now?*

The head chef wasn’t the only one harboring murderous intent toward Shess’s cook; it seemed everyone in the guild building at that moment in time was on the verge of snapping. I racked my brain to come up with a conclusion to this quarrel that would ensure no one would end up dying, and I eventually hit upon an idea. “How about we hold a little contest, then?” I suggested.

“A contest?” Loren queried, eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” I said. “A cooking contest.”

Perhaps that would succeed in distracting the adventurers and the guild’s head chef long enough for Loren to live another day.

“Are you suggesting that I—a chef who used to be employed at the royal court—engage in a cooking contest with the poor excuse of a cook who works here?” Loren said.

Behind me, I noticed the head chef had taken a few steps to the side to get a clear line of sight on Loren, but I swiftly sidestepped into his line of vision again. “No. The guild’s head chef already has enough on his plate feeding all of these adventurers. I’ll be appointing a substitute to take his place.”

“A substitute, you say? Did you have someone in mind?”

“Me,” I said, then corrected myself. “Well, not just me by myself. Aina is going to help me out,” I said, pointing to the little girl, who responded with a surprised “Huh?” due to how unexpected a turn of events this was. The adventurers behind us seemed just as shocked by my statement.

“What do you say, Aina? Wanna help me?” I asked the little girl.

“But Mister Shiro...” she said uncertainly. “I’m really bad at cooking.”

I chuckled. “I’m not all that great at it either,” I admitted. “Well? What do you say?”

The little girl hesitated, clearly anxious that her skills wouldn’t be up to snuff, but everyone in the room encouraged her, from the guild’s head chef, who gave her a thumbs-up, to the waiters and waitresses, who all told her to go for it. Even Shess slapped her on the back with a wide grin on her face.

“Okay,” she said after a few seconds. She took a deep breath to psych herself up, then declared, “I’ll do it!”

“So you and this little girl wish to be my opponents? Are you trying to mock me?” Loren said, glaring daggers at me.

“Mock you? No, not at all. I’m always serious,” I said to him evenly. “Well? Are we doing this?”

“Hmph. What trifling nonsense. I have no intention of playing this stupid little game of yours.” And with that, Loren turned around with every intention of leaving the guild, but Shess spoke up and stopped him in his tracks.

“Loren, you’re doing it,” she ordered.

He spun on his heels and exclaimed, “My lady?!”

“You heard me,” the little girl said firmly. “That’s an order, Loren. You’re participating in this cooking contest against Shiro and Aina!”

“Understood,” the man growled through clenched teeth, his shoulders visibly shaking with anger. “If that is your command, my lady, then I have no choice but to obey.” He turned to me. “I hope you’re ready to witness the skills of a former royal palace chef. I will show you country bumpkins what *true* cooking is!” he declared loudly, looking like he might blow his lid at any moment.

The adventurers in the hall all started booing him, and quite loudly at that, yet despite being in the middle of “enemy territory” as it were, he showed no sign of backing down. “Your name is Amata, right?” he said. “So when will this contest be held?”

“There’s nothing stopping us from getting started right away,” I said breezily. “But I’m gonna assume you’ll want a bit of time to think about what dish you’re going to prepare. How does tomorrow at noon sound?”

“Fine by me. And what will the format be for this contest?”

“How about we each make a dish and a jury votes for which one they think is best? To keep things fair, we will choose three judges each, and include Shess to make it a panel of seven. How does that sound?” I suggested.

Loren gasped. “You want *my lady* to sample your dish?” he said, horrified.

“I don’t mind,” the princess interjected.

Loren looked as if he wanted to say something in response to this, but bit his tongue at the last minute. “Fine. If my lady does not mind, then these terms seem agreeable to me.”

He somehow managed to keep his expression completely neutral, though it was still extremely obvious that he was mad at Shess for making him participate in this contest, and his face screamed his true thoughts: “*Why should I, a former chef at the royal palace, compete against these country bumpkins?*”

“Are there any ingredients you’ll want that we can get for you?” I asked.

“No. I’ll simply use what I bought in Mazela,” Loren said curtly.

“Noted. Then, we’ll see you tomorrow at noon,” I said, then remembered something. “Oh, but we’ll need to borrow a kitchen, I suppose.”

“Anywhere is fine for me. I cooked all of my lady’s meals using a portable

kitchen while we were on the road,” he said.

“Okay. In that case, what do you think of holding the contest in the town square? That way, everyone can watch us cook. It’ll be fun.”

Loren scoffed. “You want them to see you lose that badly? You have an interesting idea of what constitutes ‘fun.’ But it’s all fine by me. In fact, I would call this a great opportunity,” he said, his lips curling upward into a smirk that was tinged with a hint of disdain. “It means I will get to show everyone in this shabby little town what *real* cuisine looks like!” he exclaimed before rounding it all off with a triumphant laugh.

And so, just like that, I had ended up organizing a cooking showdown between me and a former royal chef. The head chef of the drinking hall had kept his knife at the ready throughout, and it was only once Shess’s entourage had departed from the guild that he finally put it down again.

Chapter Twelve: The Royal Chef, Part Two

The next day arrived and the town square was abuzz with people eager to watch the culinary clash between Loren and myself. I surveyed the crowd and, in among the adventurers who had been present at the guildhall the previous day, I spotted a number of townsfolk who must have turned up because they had heard rumors about the contest. There were also some merchants I was acquainted with, as well as a few tourists who just happened to be passing by. There was a festival atmosphere to proceedings and excitement radiated from every corner of the town square. I also spotted the guild's head chef standing with a throng of waiters and waitresses from the drinking hall, and considering what time of day it was, I could only assume they had abandoned their posts to be here. I noticed they were all wearing matching T-shirts with Aina's face printed on them, which confused me a bit at first, but when I caught sight of the twins in the middle of the drinking hall staff, everything fell into place. My sisters, Shiori and Saori, had obviously made the T-shirts. Sitting at the judges' table, Shess kept glancing across at them with an envious look on her face. Maybe she wanted an Aina T-shirt too?

A long table had been set up in the middle of the town square with seven chairs lined up along one side of it. The seven people we had chosen to act as the jury had taken their seats and were waiting for the cooking contest to begin. Shess was there (obviously), still playing the role of the daughter of a merchant, and beside her were three of her ladies-in-waiting, chosen by Loren. From what I'd been told, they were well-versed in fine cuisine due to their noble backgrounds, though like Shess, they were having to hide their true status. As for the three Ninoritch judges, the first on the list had naturally been Karen, who had kindly rushed over from the town hall the minute her morning duties were all dealt with in order to judge the contest. When I'd asked her to be part of the jury, she had told me she was incredibly busy but would make time for it all the same because she knew that the townsfolk would be delighted to see her in attendance.

“As mayor of this town, I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in an event like this,” she said when greeting the crowd.

Next up, we had none other than the Fairy’s Blessing’s very own guildmaster, Ney. She also hailed from a noble family, which made her the perfect choice to judge a cooking competition. “I shall overlook how that man has affronted our guild *for now* and judge this competition with the utmost fairness. I repeat, *for now*,” she said pointedly.

The last judge on the panel was Duane. “Good afternoon, everyone,” he said, addressing the crowd. “My name’s Duane Lestard. I might be friends with Shiro and Aina, but I promise I’ll keep things fair.”

His self-introduction was met with a chorus of excited squeals from the girls in the crowd, and it was impossible to miss the reddening cheeks of Luza, who was standing behind Shess, and likewise the passionate gaze she cast in the direction of the handsome knight. She was totally gone.

“I see you are here. Well, I admire your courage for not running away, at least. Not everyone would have the guts to take on a former royal chef in a cooking contest,” Loren said, sounding like a B-movie villain. He stood confidently in the middle of the town square, not even paying the slightest attention to the adventurers booing him, and he reminded me a lot of those stubborn ramen shop owners who took their craft way too seriously and refused to let any criticism faze them. Judging from the way he inserted the phrase “former royal chef” into every other sentence, I could tell he was an incredibly arrogant man. A portable kitchen had been set up in front of him, and two young men wearing similar outfits to his stood a little farther back. I guessed they were his subordinates.

“Let’s have a good contest today, Mr. Loren,” I said graciously.

“L-Let’s have a good contest!” Aina echoed from beside me. The two of us were standing inside a food truck.

“Is that what you’ll be cooking in?” Loren asked, looking up at my food truck.

“Yup. Pretty cool, don’t you think?” I said with a grin, spreading my arms wide to show off my new toy. The previous day, I’d gone to a specialized rental place and rented it for the fairly hefty sum of fifty thousand yen a day, and once I was

behind the wheel, I drove it to a place where I knew there'd be no surveillance cameras before swiftly putting it into my inventory. After that, I headed back to grandma's house, "logged in" to Ruffaltio once more, then set up my food truck in the town square early that morning. Inside, there was a gas stovetop, a work table, a water tank, a wastewater tank, and even a small fridge.

To sell food in Japan, you needed to obtain a special business permit and undergo a plethora of procedures, and selling food from a food truck was no exception. But this wasn't Japan. It was another world filled with hopes and dreams, where freedom and the idea of a life in the slow lane reigned supreme. Here, there was no need to go through all that complicated paperwork, meaning I was free to cook and serve up food to anyone who wanted some. Standing inside my truck, I felt a bit like the ruler of my own little kingdom, though I had only rented it so it *technically* wasn't mine.

"It *is* rather impressive, I will give you that. I have never seen anything like it before, even in the royal capital," Loren conceded. He sounded genuinely impressed, his scornful tone from earlier seemingly evaporating into thin air. "But it doesn't matter. You may well have the best kitchen in the world to work in, but without the skills to utilize it effectively, it will all be for naught."

"I'll do my best to make the most of it," I said.

"Hmph. I shall take you at your word and have *some* level of expectation for your dish. Otherwise, what's the point of even competing?" Loren said, flashing me a smirk, which I returned.

I was starting to feel a bit like the protagonist in a story who was about to compete with his rival. It was all getting pretty exciting. And now that we were all ready to go, it was time to begin the contest.

"You may now start cooking!" announced Emille, who had volunteered to act as the MC. She had been in a good mood ever since she'd been told she would be paid for this job.

"All righty, Aina. Let's do this!" I said.

"Let's work really hard, Mister Shiro!" the little girl said cheerily.

I had put her in charge of preparing the vegetables and she got started by

chopping them all up. She wasn't the fastest at it, but she was very meticulous. Apparently, Stella had recently started teaching her how to cook.

"I'll cook for you one day, Mister Shiro," she had said to me once, her lips curling upward into a bashful smile.

As I watched her chopping up the vegetables with a serious look on her face out of the corner of my eye, I felt a pang in my heart. The little girl was probably hoping her father would one day get to taste her cooking, wasn't she?

"You can do it, Aina!" came the cry from the drinking hall employees who were cheering her on from outside, and in my heart, I quietly said the same.



Loren finished his dish first. "Here, my lady," he said as he set a round plate down on the table in front of Shess.

There was some meat in the very middle of it—roughly a hundred grams, by the look of it—with some green vegetables neatly arranged into the shape of a flower around it, and a streak of purple sauce that formed a circle around the entire dish. It was a piece of art and looked absolutely delicious. Not that anyone would be finding out exactly *how* delicious it was anytime soon.

"Today's dish is sautéed earth bison. I have used an exclusive cut of meat that is so rare, one animal only yields a small amount of it. It is the perfect balance between tender and chewy, and..."

Loren was prattling on and on about his dish, even though no one had asked, boasting about the rarity of the cut of meat he had used, how fresh the vegetables were, blah blah blah.

"To sum up, while it may seem a very simple dish, I have put a lot of thought into its preparation, and..." Realization flashed across his face. "Oh, my. I do apologize. It seems I may have gotten a little carried away. Please, try some for yourself."

By the time he had finished blabbering, the meat looked cold. *What a shame*, I thought.

"Very well," Shess said as she picked up her fork and took a bite.

Her ladies-in-waiting did the same right after, as did Karen, Ney, and Duane.

“It’s delicious!”

“That’s a former royal chef for you!”

“I’ve never tasted anything this exquisite before, even back in the royal capital.”

Judging from the reactions of Shess’s ladies-in-waiting, it seemed that even cold, Loren’s dish tasted great. The other members of the jury also seemed to like it, if the smiles on their faces were anything to go by. I wasn’t too surprised by this. After all, the man *was* a skilled chef and he’d used a rare cut of meat.

“Next, it’s Mister and Aina’s turn!” Emille announced.

I exchanged glances with Aina and we nodded at each other.

“Here you are, Shess,” the little girl said as she set a plate down in front of the little princess, and I did the same in front of the other members of the jury. However, as soon as their eyes landed on our offering, their faces collectively fell. Shess’s ladies-in-waiting frowned, clearly not impressed by what they saw.

“Amata, this dish...” Shess trailed off before looking up at me in confusion.

“Yup. As you can see, it’s a plate of skewers. Jackalope skewers, to be precise,” I said.

That’s right: simple skewers was the dish Aina and I had prepared as our entry for the contest. All we had done was cut the meat into bite-size chunks and thread them onto some long skewers before grilling them. Shess was at a complete loss for words. I could tell by her expression that she really wanted to support us, but she just couldn’t.

“Sh-Shiro! Why in the world would you choose to serve up *this* dish?” Karen protested, her face beet red.

“Well, it’s a local specialty, isn’t it?” I said simply.

“I-It is...” she conceded. “But still! It’s not the kind of dish you serve up in a cooking contest!”

Jackalope skewers were pretty much a staple food in Ninoritch, though that

didn't mean they were *good*. In fact, on my first visit to this world, I had ordered some of these very skewers and been incredibly disappointed to find that they were completely unseasoned, not even with salt. Despite being the mayor, Karen seemed really embarrassed about her town's specialty, which I thought was a bit of a shame since this was something that had been passed down through the generations and could be linked back to her ancestor, Eren, the man who founded Ninoritch. I found myself wishing she would take more pride in her family's heritage.

"Come on. Dig in before it gets cold," I said to the jury.

"All right," Shess said as she picked up a skewer and brought it up to her mouth. She took a bite, chewed on it for a little bit, then hung her head in disappointment.

The other judges tried theirs as well, but none offered any comment or reaction to the skewers. They were speechless—in a bad way. Ever since our dish had come out, the atmosphere in the town square had changed dramatically. The excitement from before had evaporated and it now felt more like a funeral than a festival.

"Is that *seriously* the dish you chose to put forward?" Loren asked me. "You didn't remove the tendons, and the chunks aren't even the same size. All you did was grill the meat!" he said, his tone laced with disappointment. When he'd first laid eyes on my food truck, it seemed he had started thinking of me as a true rival, but his respect for me had gone completely.

"Yup. That's all we did," I confirmed.

"Hmph. Well, at the end of the day, you *are* just a country bumpkin. I cannot believe you have the gall to call this 'cooking.' I—"

"Oh, but we're not done yet," I said, interrupting him.

"What do you mean?"

A cocky smirk danced across my lips. I headed back over to the food truck where Aina was already waiting for me with ingredients laid out in front of her.

"Mister Shiro, you can start whenever you like."

“Thanks, Aina. Let’s do this!”

“Okay!”

“First, we need to separate the egg yolk from the white,” I started narrating as I picked up an egg, cracked it, and made sure only the yolk went in a bowl.

“Aina, could you grab me the olive oil?”

“There you go. Here’s the vinegar too.”

“Good girl. Now we slowly add the olive oil and the vinegar to the egg yolks...”

The scent of the vinegar wafted through the air and reached the nostrils of the people in the crowd.

“Is that vinegar?” one adventurer said. “H-Hold on a minute! Is he making *that thing*?!”

“‘That thing’? What thing are you— Oh! *That thing*, you mean?” another exclaimed.

“Hey, hey, hey. Are you seriously saying the shopkeeper’s making *that crazy thing* from last time?” a third interjected.

This drew a gasp from another of his companions. “What? He’s bringing back that *legendary* sauce?”

All of the adventurers had started pointing at my food truck and noisily speculating about what we were actually doing inside. The townsfolk, on the other hand, were at a complete loss, craning their necks with curiosity to try to catch a glimpse of what Aina and I were making.

“Okay, that’s nice and blended. We just need to add some salt now, and...” I paused for effect. “We’re done!”

Just to make sure, I gave it a little taste.

“Yup, it’s great,” I confirmed with satisfaction, before tipping the contents of the bowl into a jar and handing it to Aina. “Could you take this over to the table for me?”

“Sure!”

With the jar clasped tightly in her little hands, she trotted over to Shess. She

set the jar down on the table, scooped out some of the mysterious sauce inside with a spoon, and dolloped it onto the little girl's plate before repeating this process for every member of the jury.

"Shess, try putting some of it on the meat," she said to the little princess.

"Aina?" Shess queried, looking slightly confused. "All right, I'll try."

She picked up a skewer and dipped it in the cream-colored sauce that Aina had just put on her plate, then she nervously brought it up to her mouth. She took a tentative bite and her eyes instantly grew wide.

"Wait, what is this? Huh? What? What *is* this?! Aina, what is it?!" she exclaimed. She slathered the rest of the sauce on her plate onto the skewer and took another bite. "What *is* this sauce, Aina?" she asked again, her eyes glinting. "I've never had anything this good before, even in the royal capital!"

"Ah! You just said it was good, Shess!" the little girl said, beaming.

"I did! It's delicious!" Shess replied. "I was a bit disappointed with the meat, but when you put this sauce on it, I feel like I could eat *hundreds* of these skewers!"

"Hooray!" Aina whooped, jumping with joy on the spot, such was her delight that her best friend had liked our dish.

It took Shess no time at all to devour the rest of her skewers. "Aina, what is this sauce called?" she said, grabbing the other little girl by the shoulders.

Aina was a little taken aback by her best friend's enthusiasm, but she replied all the same. "It's called 'mayonnaise.'"

Yup, that's right: the mysterious sauce I had concocted in my food truck was nothing more than mayonnaise, a simple sauce that anyone can make, provided they have eggs, vinegar, vegetable oil, and salt on hand.

"Hold on. Did you just say *mayonnaise*?!" Ney exclaimed, shooting up from her seat with such force that her chair toppled over backward. "Shiro! Did you make that forbidden sauce again?" she asked accusingly, staring daggers at me.

"I'm sorry, Ney, but I couldn't come up with anything else to submit in a contest against a royal chef," I replied earnestly.

“Still, I can’t believe you would risk making it again,” she said, covering her mouth in shock as she stared down in horror at the mayonnaise on her plate.

“Miss Ney, are you saying you’ve had this sauce before?” Karen asked. She dipped the tip of a skewer into her own mayonnaise and gave it a sniff.

“I have,” she confirmed. “Shiro made this mayonnaise—the forbidden sauce—at the guild’s drinking hall once before.”

“The ‘forbidden sauce’?” Karen repeated.

“Yes, the forbidden sauce. It is so dangerous, it should really be outlawed,” Ney replied, shaking like a leaf from head to toe. “It is said to be so delicious that every adventurer who tried it became addicted.”

The adventurers in the crowd nodded. Some even had drool dripping from the corners of their mouths.

“However, the sauce contains raw eggs, and even children know you shouldn’t eat eggs raw,” Ney said.

This time, it was the turn of the townsfolk to do the nodding. I could see where they were coming from. After all, even on Earth, eating eggs raw wasn’t all that common in most countries. There were a few, like Japan and France, where eggs underwent a very strict washing and selecting process so that they would be safe to eat raw, but these countries were in the minority.

“But the adventurers became so obsessed with this sauce, they tried making it themselves. I was getting report after report of adventurers falling ill, and all the while, quests kept on piling up. It’s no exaggeration to say that this sauce almost led to the downfall of our guild,” Ney explained.

“No way...” Karen gasped, a shiver running down her spine at this.

Vinegar had antibacterial properties, which was why it was used in mayonnaise to stop the growth of harmful bacteria and ensure its safety. However, if you didn’t add enough of it when making the mayonnaise, some bacteria might survive, which could lead to food poisoning. This was most likely what had happened when the adventurers tried to make mayonnaise themselves. After this incident, mayonnaise had been deemed a “forbidden condiment” by the Fairy’s Blessing, and I had complied with the decision

because I didn't want anyone else getting sick because of it. However, I had come to the conclusion that the only way for me to win this contest against Loren was to use mayonnaise in my cooking, and I couldn't help recognizing that this whole situation must have been torture for any of the adventurers who'd sampled my mayonnaise in the past, because the "forbidden sauce" was right there in front of them, but they couldn't have any.

"Mayonnaise... Mayonnaise..." I heard a few of them mumble, tears streaming down their faces as they stared longingly at the sauce. Those guys must have been the ones who'd truly gotten addicted to it.

"Rest assured. I carefully measured each ingredient to ensure this sauce would be safe for consumption," I said. "Go ahead. Give it a try."

Karen volunteered to go first. "All right, I will."

She brought one of her skewers up to her lips and took a cautious bite. Her eyes instantly grew wide. "What *is* this?!" she exclaimed, before taking another bite, and then another and another, until only bare wooden skewers remained on her plate.

Duane was next to sample the mayonnaise, and on seeing that the handsome knight was willing to give the sauce a try, Shess's ladies-in-waiting followed suit. They didn't say anything in reaction to the taste of it, but the looks on all their faces told me everything I needed to know.

"I still have some skewers left. Does anyone want some more?" I asked.

As one, all of the judges instantly raised their hands. Even Ney, the person who had *insisted* that mayonnaise shouldn't be consumed under any circumstances, had her hand in the air. I was very pleased by how much they all seemed to like it.



“Aina,” I called over to the little girl.

“Yeah?” she replied.

“I’m gonna bring out the rest of the skewers. Go get the you-know-what,” I said, winking conspiratorially at her.

“Okay!” she said, and scurried off.

As I handed out more skewers to the judges, Aina reappeared from the food truck with another sauce. “This sauce is really yummy too, Shess,” she said to her friend as she placed a dollop of a different sauce onto her plate.

“What’s this one? It looks a bit like that mayonnaise from before.”

“This is called tartar sauce,” the little girl explained.

“Tar-tar?” Shess said, sounding out the unfamiliar word.

“Yup, tartar sauce!” Aina repeated.

She put some of the freshly made tartar sauce on each of the judges’ plates. All I’d done this time was add some chopped-up onions and crushed boiled eggs to the mayonnaise I’d already made, and boom: homemade tartar sauce. I’d put a lot of eggs in it, so it was possible to just eat it by the spoonful and it’d be delicious on its own, but when slathered all over a nice meat skewer, it was even *better*. All of the judges had a similar reaction to the tartar sauce as they’d had to the mayonnaise, and their bliss was apparent on their faces as they chewed away in an almost trancelike state.

“That sauce *cannot* be that good!” Loren exclaimed indignantly. “Cut out this nonsense! I’m a former royal chef, yet here you are suggesting there is a sauce in this backwater town that—”

“Mr. Loren, why don’t you try some yourself?” I asked, interrupting him. I grabbed a skewer, placed it on a plate along with a scoop of mayonnaise, and held it out toward him. “Go on. Give it a try,” I insisted when my offer was met with silence.

The man clicked his tongue and took the plate from me. “Fine. I will use my vast expertise as a former royal chef to see if this truly is as good as you claim.”

He dipped the skewer in the mayonnaise, brought it up to his mouth, and took a bite. His reaction was immediate. His eyes bulged in their sockets, and after a split second of stunned reflection, he devoured the rest of the meat on the skewer. “Why, it’s delicious,” he whispered. “You say this sauce is called ‘mayonnaise,’ correct?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s a very popular sauce where I’m from.”

Loren silently dipped his finger into what was left of the sauce on his plate and licked it. “I was devastated when I learned I would be moving to this town. But who could ever have imagined that I would come across a sauce even more delicious than anything I’ve ever made before?” He let out a self-deprecating chuckle and looked me straight in the eye. “You win, Amata.”

His expression was bright and cheerful, and all traces of arrogance had completely vanished from his features. It was almost as if he had previously been possessed by a demon and he had been liberated from its grasp.

I shook my head at his comment. “I disagree. There are no winners or losers when it comes to cooking.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Mr. Loren, try putting some of the mayonnaise on your own dish,” I suggested.

He stared at the sauce in silence for a couple of seconds before nodding. “All right.”

I handed him the jar and he went over to his work area to cook another cut of the meat that he had laid before the judges earlier. He flipped it over a bunch of times, and once it was done, he slathered some mayonnaise onto it and took a bite.

“It’s delicious!” he exclaimed, euphoria in his voice. “Exquisite! Divine! Your mayonnaise has just elevated my dish to even higher heights!”

I couldn’t help laughing at his reaction. He offered some of the meat he’d cooked with mayonnaise on it for me to try, and on tasting it, I had to agree with him. “You’re right. It really is delicious.”

The combination of the juicy, piping-hot meat and the mayonnaise was sheer bliss in my mouth. The judges tried this combination as well, and just like the skewers, it was a resounding success.

“‘There are no winners and losers when it comes to cooking,’ huh?” Loren mused. “I never thought I would learn such a valuable lesson so far out in the countryside. I was so fixated on the title of royal chef that I didn’t even realize how narrow-minded I had become. Amata and your little helper, thank you. And I’m sorry for my earlier rudeness,” he said, bowing his head to Aina and me. He then turned to the drinking hall’s head chef and bowed again. “And I must apologize to you too.”

The head chef told him it was all water under the bridge and they exchanged a firm handshake. Then the cooking contest turned into a *real* festival.

“Anyone who wants meat skewers, please form a line!” I announced after climbing back into the food truck again. I had decided to offer all-you-can-eat mayonnaise for the day, and as was probably to be expected, a long line quickly formed in front of the truck.

“Does anyone want to try some food that has been cooked by a former royal chef?” Loren called out to the crowd as he too got into the festive spirit. He and his subordinates tossed ingredients onto the grill over the fire in their makeshift kitchen with bright smiles on their faces.

After that, things got even more hectic as the drinking hall’s head chef, the man who owned the jackalope skewer stall I’d visited the first time I came to Ninoritch, and all of the other food stall owners joined in on the fun. In a matter of minutes, the town square had been transformed and was the site of a full-on food festival. And what mattered wasn’t how rare the cuts of meat were, or anything like that. No, everyone was simply having a great time, enjoying all the delicious food. Even Shess’s ladies-in-waiting and servants were all smiles, their animosity toward small provincial towns completely forgotten. At that precise moment in time, social status was nonexistent, and there was no dividing line between Shess’s entourage who hailed from the royal capital and the townsfolk of Ninoritch. No, there were only smiles on everyone’s faces, and boisterous laughter hanging in the air. After all, regardless of how cheap or expensive a dish was, once you’d dunked it in mayonnaise, it all tasted pretty much the

same.

And so, after much celebration, this strange little festival—later dubbed the “Mayonnaise Festival”—finally came to an end, though all involved would remember the joy and fond memories it had brought them.

Chapter Thirteen: Who to Ask for Advice?

“It’s only six days till Aina’s birthday, huh?”

My cook-off against Loren had ended even better than I could have hoped, and it had been a blast for everyone in town. But it was now time to focus on organizing the joint celebrations for Aina and Shess, since Aina’s birthday was just around the corner.

“Hm, what should I get her?” I mumbled to myself. I was alone in my shop since business hours were over and Aina had already left. I had absolutely no idea what to get the little girl for her birthday. Naturally, I’d tried asking her what she wanted, but her answer wasn’t very helpful.

“Um, uh...” she had replied. “Gum! Grape-flavored gum!”

Gum. Or more specifically, grape-flavored bubble gum. She had even told me to get the cheapest type possible. I’d somehow managed to get out of getting her that by telling her she really shouldn’t be having more sweet things since we’d already be having cake, but I was no closer to knowing what to get her instead.

“She’s too old for dolls now, isn’t she?” I pondered. “Besides, Patty might get jealous if I give her a doll that’s bigger than her. Hm...”

I sighed. Unlike Shess, Aina wasn’t used to receiving presents, so if I tried to surprise her by giving her something that seemed even a little bit on the expensive side, she’d be more flustered than happy.

“In all the time I’ve known her, I’ve only once seen her request something, and that was the bracelet she got from Zidan,” I said to myself.

When Aina and I accompanied Karen to Mazela to attend Lord Bashure’s banquet, Aina found a bracelet in Zidan’s shop and insisted on buying it. But the only reason she wanted it in the first place was because it looked like the bracelet her dad used to wear, so I could hardly use that as a reference for what to get her for a birthday present. Besides, she didn’t even want it for herself.

She got it for her mother.

“Hm, what to do, what to do?”

I couldn't for the life of me think of anything Aina had mentioned that she wanted for herself. *If this were modern-day Japan, I could've just taken her to a toy store and called it a day,* I sighed inwardly. I figured sitting around complaining about it wasn't going to help anything, so with a little “hup,” I heaved myself out of my chair, ambled out of the shop, and locked the door behind me.

“Guess I'll go ask Raiya and his crew for advice.”

After all, who was best placed to know what the children of this world would want? That's right: a native of this world. And so, I made my way over to the guild as the sun sank below the horizon.



“A gift for Aina, huh?” Raiya mused.

“Yep,” I replied. “I'm at my wit's end here. I have no idea what to get her.”

The Blue Flash crew and I once again found ourselves seated around a table in the guild's drinking hall. Luckily for me, they were already at the guild when I arrived and had immediately agreed to help me. Unluckily for me, however, an uninvited guest had also decided to join us.

“Ya gotta give her *money*, mister! Money! Coins! Don't you know that money makes the world go 'round, mister?” Emille said.

“I'm pretty sure Aina doesn't want money, meow,” Kilpha pointed out.

“She's not as greedy as you, Emi,” Nesca added.

“The girls are right,” Raiya interjected. “If it was as easy as Shiro giving Aina some money, it wouldn't be a problem at all. Right, man?”

“Yeah. I just have no idea what Aina, or in fact, what *any* kids her age want.”

For some reason, Rolf was fidgeting in his seat. “Mr. Shiro, sir. I have a suggestion,” he said.

“Oh, really? What is it?” I asked excitedly.

“What about furnishing Little Miss Aina with a copy of the holy scriptures of the sky goddess, Florine?” he proposed, a hint of reverence in his tone.

“Holy scriptures?” I said slowly, taken aback by the idea.

“Indeed,” Rolf said with a nod before producing an impossibly thick book from his breast pocket. “These scriptures hold the answers to all of life’s biggest questions.”

“All of them?” I said, nonplussed.

“Yes, all of them,” Rolf assured me. “On occasion, people falter, their vision clouded and uncertain of the path ahead. However...” He paused as he held up the massive book. Seriously, this thing was thicker than a dictionary. “If you read this book, the sky goddess, Florine, will guide you back to the righteous path,” he explained, talking insanely fast.

I couldn’t remember ever seeing him look this excited before. I, on the other hand, had no idea how to respond, feeling completely overwhelmed by the barrage of information he was throwing at me.

“All of your doubts and worries will dissipate, and one path shall become clear before your eyes: the path forward!” he declared.

I was too stunned to speak, but I wasn’t the only one, for Raiya, Nesca, Kilpha, and even Emille seemed to be similarly thunderstruck. All four of us simply stared blankly at Rolf as we waited for him to finish his spiel.

“Well? What do you think, Mr. Shiro, sir? I can even provide you with two copies: one for Little Miss Aina, and the other for Ms. Stella,” Rolf offered, looking one hundred percent serious about it.

I scratched my cheek awkwardly. “I mean, it’s a *fairly* good idea...”

“It is, is it not?” Rolf interrupted, his enthusiasm overflowing. *That’s too much, Rolf. You’re scaring me now!*

“But I’m not a follower of Florine myself,” I continued, trying to keep my tone as steady as possible. “So it’d be kinda strange for me to give Aina a copy of those scriptures, don’t you think? I mean, it just wouldn’t carry the same kind of weight as if she were given it by a true worshipper of Florine.”

Rolf pondered my words for a couple of seconds before nodding gravely. “You do have a point. Then, what do you say to joining the ranks of—”

I knew how that sentence was going to end and I did *not* want to carry on with this discussion, so I quickly added, “So while I appreciate the suggestion, I think I’ll pass on that idea for now. Anyway, what about you guys? Any ideas?” I said, looking around expectantly at the rest of the group. Rolf’s shoulders slumped, his holy book still cradled to his chest.

Raiya hummed. “Nothing’s springing to mind. You’re right, man. It’s really difficult to come up with an idea for a present for Aina,” he said, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Well, what kind of present would *you* want to receive?” I asked my companions.

I’d heard that if you had trouble deciding what to get someone for their birthday, you should get them something you yourself would like to receive. Of course, the more interests you had in common with the person, the better your chances of coming up with the perfect gift, but I decided to ask the Blue Flash crew all the same. Perhaps it would give me some kind of idea about the direction I should be looking in.

“A sword, for sure,” Raiya said. “Especially a magic sword. Like the kind you sometimes find in ruins.”

“A grimoire about advanced magic,” Nesca said.

“A fish caught at sea, meow! I’ve always wanted to try one!” Kilpha chimed in.

Holy scriptures, a magic sword, a grimoire, a fish, and money. I supposed the fish was the closest thing to what Aina might *actually* want, but I wasn’t about to get her a *fish* for her birthday. Especially not a *raw* fish. After all of that, I was still just as stumped as before, if not more so.

“Something wrong, Shiro? Have more bandits appeared?” a voice asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. It was Celes, accompanied as always by Dramom and Suama.

“Good evening, master,” Dramom greeted me. “Is there something on your mind? If anything is troubling you, I shall resolve it.”

“Pa-pa!” Suama squealed excitedly.

The three of them must have come to the drinking hall to have dinner. Since we hadn’t eaten yet either, we pushed another table against ours so they could join us.

“Oh, is that Shiro over there? What are you guys up to? Having a dinner party? Lemme join you!” called out another voice. Mere minutes after Celes and Dramom had ambled into the guildhall, Patty spotted us soon after she had pushed the door open to come in.

As always, Celes, Dramom, and Suama ordered way too much food, and we all got some alcohol to enjoy with our meal. As they were here, I decided to ask the newcomers what kinds of things they would like to receive if it was their birthday, and while it was true that asking a demon and a dragon might not give me the *best* indication of what to get, I felt they could perhaps bring a new perspective to my predicament.

“Something I would like to receive?” Celes repeated before chuckling sinisterly. “A strong opponent. I would hope to get a strong opponent who would challenge me head-on!”

Yay for violence, I guess? I turned to Dramom and Suama next.

“As for me, anything you gave me would become my greatest treasure. If I received it from you, a mere pebble would be more precious to me than even gold, master,” stated Dramom, who still hadn’t dropped the whole “master” thing, despite my protests. “What about you, Suama?” she asked her daughter.

“Suama want meat!” the little dragon girl squealed happily.

Oh, and yay for meat. Lastly, I turned to Patty.

“Something I want? H-Honey! If I have good honey, I can make the *best* fairy mead!”

And yay for fairy mead. Except not really, because Aina is underage.

Unfortunately, I was still just as stuck as before over what to get the little girl for her birthday. I was just about to resign myself to buying her the same thing I’d gotten for Shess when a voice dragged me out of my thoughts for the second time that evening.

“Hey, Shiro. You always have a big entourage around you, don’t you?”

It was Zephyr, the leader of the adventuring party known as the White Wolf’s Fangs. He wasn’t wearing his armor, so I assumed it must have been his day off. He was smiling at me, as if amused by the size of our group.

“Good evening, Zephyr,” I said. “Care to join us?”

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

I got Celes to finish the giant bowl of stew she’d ordered so that we could make some space on the table, and Zephyr sat down next to me, placing his drink where the bowl had been.

“Did you have the day off today?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess you could say that. I haven’t been taking on quests since we came back from Nathew’s ruins,” he admitted.

“Really?” I said in some surprise. “May I ask why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really have any reason to continue as an adventurer.” He took a sip of his drink before continuing. “When I started, it was because I hoped to get rich by laying my hands on cartloads of treasure, then spending the rest of my life enjoying myself without a care in the world.”

I nodded sagely. “Nearly everyone has that dream at least once in their lives.”

“Right? But then, the woman I loved, Tina, passed away. I was so desperate to see her one last time and kept hoping for a miracle, thinking that maybe, just maybe, there was a way I could talk to her again if only I could find it. That was what motivated me to continue as an adventurer.”

Zephyr had been one of the adventurers who had journeyed with us to Nathew’s ruins, and just like Patty with her friend, Eren, he had gotten the chance to say one last goodbye to the woman he loved.

“And thanks to you, my wish finally came true, so I’m finally calling it quits. My partymates and I have spent years venturing into ruins and clearing out dungeons, and we’ve each earned enough to live comfortably at least five lifetimes over. There really isn’t any point in us continuing as adventurers,” he

explained.

“I see,” I said. “So you’re retiring, then?”

After retiring from the profession, most adventurers tended to head back to their hometowns, and I had to admit, after bonding on the journey to Nathew’s ruins, I’d be a little sad to see Zephyr go. But I could see it from his position too. After all, being an adventurer was a dangerous occupation, and at some point, you just had to draw a line and find a safer path to follow.

“I’m thinking about it. I do have one final regret, though,” Zephyr admitted.

“Really? May I ask what it is?”

He smiled and slapped me on the back. “Never getting to repay you for your kindness. That goes for me and the rest of the White Wolf’s Fangs.”

“Oh, come on. I didn’t do anything—” I started, but Zephyr quickly interrupted me.

“You did, though. Tina wasn’t just my girlfriend. She was our valued companion. And the only reason we all got to see her again is thanks to you.”

“Zephyr...”

“We owe you a debt, Shiro. One so large, we’ll never be able to repay it,” Zephyr said, his expression solemn. “So is there anything you need right now?”

“Let me think. Oh, there *is* something you could help me out with, actually,” I said.

“What is it?” he asked eagerly. “If it’s in my power, I’ll do whatever I can.”

“So I’m currently trying to come up with an idea for a gift for Aina, the little girl who works in my shop, but I’m a bit stumped, you see. Do you have any— Zephyr?!”

I was in the middle of my sentence when he comically keeled forward and let his forehead slam into the table. But as soon as I called out his name, he sat up straight again. “Sorry,” he said. “I just wasn’t expecting you to want to ask me for advice, of all things.”

“Oh, uh, sorry about that, I guess,” I said with an awkward chuckle.

“It’s all good. Aina’s the girl who accompanied us to Nathew’s ruins, right?”
he guessed.

“Yeah.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Then, I know for a fact that there’s someone who’ll be able to answer your question far better than I can.”

“Huh? Who’s that?” I queried. I had no idea who he was talking about.

“The girl’s mother.”

Chapter Fourteen: A Homeland and a Promise

The next day, I followed Zephyr's advice and went to see Stella. I had it on good authority that Aina wouldn't be at home, since she was spending the night at Shess's again. This was at least the third time she had slept over since the little princess had arrived in town. *Good for you, Aina. Pajama parties are what being young is all about. Maybe I should invite Raiya and Rolf over and we can have a boys' night in for once?* I mused. On reaching my destination, I knocked loudly on the front door.

"Stella? It's Shiro," I called out.

"Mr. Shiro? Just give me a minute," Stella replied from inside the house. A few moments later, the door opened and she stood on the threshold with a big smile on her face and Peace the little black cat in her arms. "Good evening, Mr. Shiro. What brings you here so late?" she asked. The sun had set a while ago and everywhere was pitch black.

"I actually came to ask you for some advice on something," I explained.

"Who, me?" she said, blinking in surprise.

"Yes. You're the only person who can help me, so..." I paused, placed my hands together, and lowered my head. "May I?"

Stella seemed taken aback, but nodded all the same. "Sure thing. If you really think I can be of some assistance to you, then I'm happy to help. Come in."

"Thank you very much," I said, following her inside to the living room.

"Please take a seat," she said, gesturing to an empty chair.

I did as instructed, then produced a bottle of red wine from my inventory and set it down on the dining room table. "Here, I brought you this."

I would've felt awkward if I'd shown up at Stella's house to ask her for advice empty-handed, so I'd decided to bring along a bottle of slightly fancy red wine, since I knew wine was her alcohol of choice.

“Jeez, Mr. Shiro. You didn’t have to do that,” she chided me.

I chuckled. “I’m going to be talking your ear off, so consider this an apology gift,” I joked, and it was her turn to laugh this time.

“Fine, fine,” she gave in. “If you *insist*, I’ll savor the wine to my heart’s content.”

“Drink as much as you want. This wine’s actually pretty popular among the adventurers,” I told her. “Even Ney likes it, and she’s very particular about her alcohol.”

“Is that so?” Stella said. “Well, I’m looking forward to tasting it, then.”

“Should we open the bottle?” I asked as I produced two wine glasses from my inventory.

Stella stared at the glass bottle in silence for a few seconds before shyly saying, “Well, I suppose *one* glass won’t hurt.”



I yanked the cork out of the bottle and poured wine into the two glasses.

“Should we propose a toast?” I suggested.

“What would we be toasting?” Stella asked with a chuckle.

I audibly mulled it over. “How about we toast the fact that Aina is growing up healthy and strong?”

She looked at me in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I said. “After all, it’s something to be celebrated.”

A soft smile curled Stella’s lips upward. “Thank you, Mr. Shiro. In that case, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

We clinked glasses, then took a sip of our drinks. For the occasion, I’d chosen a light, fruity wine that went down easily, and judging by her reaction, Stella seemed to really like it.

“Incredible...” she breathed. “This wine is delicious!” A blissful smile broke out

across her face and her eyes sparkled.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said. “I wasn’t sure if it was one that would suit your tastes or not.”

“Your taste in alcohol is impeccable, so any wine you choose is bound to be delicious,” she remarked, flashing me another smile.

An embarrassed chuckle escaped my lips. “Aw, c’mon. You’ll make me blush. Anyway, you don’t have to limit yourself to just the one glass, so go ahead and enjoy the wine. I brought some snacks to go with it too.”

And as soon as I said this, I opened my inventory and produced some cheese, some dry-cured ham, and a few other morsels that paired well with wine, plus some chocolate and potato chips similar to the kind I figured Aina and Shess would also be munching on at this moment in time.

“Thank you, Mr. Shiro,” Stella said. “Well then, if you don’t mind...”

She reached for the dry-cured ham and took a sip of her wine. Next, she had some of the chocolate, washed it down with some more wine, then grabbed a handful of potato chips, took three more sips of wine, and went back for some more chocolate. I watched on as she entered this endless loop of alternating between sweet and savory treats, the wine in the bottle gradually reducing. It didn’t take long for her cheeks to become flushed.

“Mind if I have another glass?” I asked.

“Of course not! Go right ahead!”

Stella had paused in her drinking to fix us a quick meal. Wine, snacks, and Stella’s homemade cooking. This was heaven. My satisfaction levels were off the charts. In a way, it felt a bit like a dinner party, even though it was only the two of us here.

“Oh, I just remembered. You said you wanted to ask me for advice about something, didn’t you?” Stella said. “I’m sorry. The wine you brought was so delicious, it completely slipped my mind.” She straightened up and looked me in the eye. “What was it you wanted to discuss with me?”

“There’s something that’s been troubling me for the past couple of weeks,” I

replied, returning her look.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to help you with it, but could you tell me what it is?”

“Well, it’s Aina’s birthday in five days’ time, right?”

“Yes, it is. Things were rather *difficult* last year, so she didn’t get to celebrate properly,” she said with an apologetic look on her face.

“Oh, really?”

She nodded. “But Aina said she didn’t mind. She told me she’d be happy even without a party, as long as I was there.” With the past on her mind, Stella’s eyes glistened with tears. “That’s why I want her to have the most amazing birthday to make up for missing out last year. I’m going to make all of her favorite dishes and invite all of her friends over,” she told me, a soft smile gracing her lips.

Her expression alone spoke volumes, and there could be no doubt that this was the face of a woman who really, really loved her daughter.

“I actually plan on getting Aina a present for her birthday,” I told Stella. “I hope it’ll help to brighten her day even more.”

“I know,” she replied. “Aina told me how it is part of the culture in your homeland to give people presents on their birthday.”

“Oh, she told you?” I said, slightly surprised.

This meant Stella must also have known that Aina was planning to make it a joint birthday party with Shess. I wondered how Stella felt about that. After all, while Shess might have been her daughter’s best friend, she was a total stranger to Stella (and a princess too, but I guess she didn’t know that part). Perhaps she didn’t want Aina’s first birthday party in two years to be shared with another little girl?

But when I voiced these concerns, Stella simply smiled. “Aina’s really happy that she gets to celebrate her birthday with her friend,” she said diplomatically.

It seemed my worries were unfounded, and she seemed genuinely glad for her daughter. Judging by Stella’s bright smile, it was evident that Aina’s happiness equated to her own. *What a sweet mother-daughter relationship*

they have.

“So what I wanted to ask you was...” I paused and leaned forward like I was about to tell her a secret. To my surprise, Stella mirrored my action. If Aina had been here, she would have said her mom was “copycatting” me.

“What you wanted to ask me was...” she repeated, a playful grin on her lips.

“What type of present would Aina like?” I asked.

“What would she like?”

“Yeah. I’ve asked lots and lots of people for ideas, but none of the suggestions so far have quite fit the bill.”

“Well, that’s not all that surprising,” Stella reflected. “Aina doesn’t really have the same kinds of interests that other children have. It feels a bit weird saying that as her mother, but...” She chuckled before instantly schooling her expression into a more serious one again. “Hm, something Aina would like?” She appeared deep in thought for a few moments before saying, “My husband would probably have gotten her flowers.”

“Oooh, flowers, huh?” I mused. “I didn’t think of that.”

Stella nodded. “Aina loves flowers, after all,” she said with a loving expression on her face, staring at one of the empty chairs like she was imagining her daughter sitting there. “Her favorites are lapas flowers.”

“I’ve never heard of those before,” I admitted. “What kind of flowers are they?”

“They’re from my homeland.”

Apparently, lapas flowers only grew in the Republic of Aptos and nowhere else on the whole of the continent.

“There used to be a hill that was covered entirely in lapas flowers only a few minutes away from our old home. It was... It was beautiful,” Stella told me, closing her eyes. She must have been picturing that sea of flowers in her head. “They used to start blooming a few days before Aina’s birthday, so my husband would always take her up there to celebrate. She’d jump around and do twirls and dance among the flowers, and her laughter would echo all around,” Stella

reminisced fondly.

“I see.”

“My husband and I used to love watching her having the time of her life.”

“That hill must be a place that’s full of memories for your family,” I commented softly.

Stella nodded. “It used to be a very special place for all three of us. But...” A look of sadness clouded her features. “We only went there four times in all.”

“Because you only went there on Aina’s birthday, you mean?” I surmised. Aina was only four years old when Stella decided they would move to another nation, so she couldn’t have gone to see that hillside of flowers since.

“Yes,” she confirmed sadly.

I didn’t know what to say, so I stayed silent.

“If I’d known things would turn out the way they did, I would have gone there more often,” Stella lamented, sounding full of regret. “I wonder if Aina even remembers that hill... If she remembers going there with her father and me.”

Aina obviously wasn’t here to answer that question, so I decided to do so in her stead. “She does,” I said with certainty.

“Mr. Shiro?” Stella queried, blinking in surprise.

“You said that hill was full of memories for you and your family, right? In that case, I’m sure she must remember it,” I explained.

“I...” Stella started. “I guess you’re right. She must remember it, right?” Her tone was hopeful and her eyes were wet with tears.

“Yes. I’m sure of it. So please, Stella...” I paused to hand her a handkerchief. “Don’t cry, okay?”

As soon as these words left my mouth, Stella’s face scrunched up and tears started streaming down her face. She took the handkerchief from me and pressed it to her face, attempting to stifle her sobs.

“She remembers,” I repeated, trying to console her. “Aina has a very good memory.”

“She does...” Stella conceded.

“She remembers. Both her father and the lapas flowers,” I said firmly.

“Yes...” she hiccuped in between sobs. “I’m sure she does.”

“Stella, thank you for your advice today.”

She wiped her tears away with my handkerchief and lifted her head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Shiro. I ended up showing you a rather pathetic side of me.”

“No, you didn’t,” I assured her, then grinned. “Besides, you’ve given me a great idea of what to get Aina for her birthday.”

“Really? I’m glad I could help,” she replied, a faint smile breaking out onto her face through her tears.

In fact, not only did I have an idea of what to get Aina as a birthday present, our conversation had also given me the boost I needed to ask Stella something I’d been meaning to ask her for a few weeks. I felt like it was now or never.

“Stella, do you want to go look for your husband?”

“Mr. Shiro?” she gasped in shock. She clearly hadn’t been expecting me to bring that subject up.

But I wasn’t about to back down. “Do you want to see him?” I reiterated, staring her in the eye.

“Of course I do,” she said, a sad smile on her lips. “If I could have, I would have already gone to look for him.”

She paused. I waited for her to continue.

“But I can’t,” she concluded, shaking her head gently left and right.

“Might I ask why?” I said.

“The day he left, he told me to look after Aina, and I told him I would. I said I would never leave her side and that he could rest easy in that knowledge,” she explained.

That had been Stella’s last conversation with her husband. There must have been so many things he had wanted to say to her, but his last words before going off to war had been about Aina.

“But to go looking for him, I would need to leave Ninoritch. And it would be a much longer and much harder journey than when I left my homeland before, so I obviously wouldn’t be able to take Aina with me. But that would mean...” She paused and looked me straight in the eye, her own eyes full of determination. “That would mean breaking the last promise I ever made to him, and I absolutely refuse to do that.”

It was clear to me that she was clinging to that promise as a lifeline and it was tethering her to the memory of her husband.

“He’s alive. Mr. Shiro, my husband is alive,” she said. “Simply knowing that is enough for me. More than enough, even.”

“But, Stella—” I started to argue, but she simply shook her head.

“He’s out there somewhere, gazing up at the same starry night sky, feeling the same breeze caressing his skin, and basking in the warmth of the same sunlight. We might be far apart, but we’re still experiencing a lot of the same things, and that’s enough for me.”

I couldn’t find any words to respond to that.

“Besides, back when I was waiting for him to come home...” she said slowly. “I was so worried, I made a plea to the gods.”

“What did you ask them for?”

She closed her eyes and recited the prayer she’d offered up. “‘I can bear never seeing him again, but in exchange, please spare his life.’ That was my plea. And it seems the gods granted my wish.”

I ruminated on what to say for a few moments before settling on saying, “I’m sorry for asking such a painful question.”

“Oh, please, do not apologize,” Stella said, shaking her head from side to side. “Besides, I was thinking I should probably get around to telling you all that one day. Oh, but one last thing: lapas flowers are light purple, so if you found some similar flowers, I’m sure Aina would love them.”

I wasn’t sure if I should take that as a hint that our discussion was over, but regardless, I decided it was time to go so that I didn’t overstay my welcome.

“Thank you, Stella. I’ll keep it in mind.”

And with that, I bid her good night and left. As soon as I was outside, I looked up at the night sky, its vast expanse filled with twinkling stars, and Stella’s words replayed themselves in my head. *“He’s out there somewhere, gazing up at the same starry night sky, feeling the same breeze caressing his skin, and basking in the warmth of the same sunlight. We might be far apart, but we’re still experiencing a lot of the same things, and that’s enough for me.”*

Stella still clung to her memories of her husband, using the promise she’d made to him as a lifeline and refusing to let go.

“Only five more days until Aina’s birthday, huh?” I mused aloud.

I’d made up my mind.

Chapter Fifteen: The Birthday Party

The next few days passed in the blink of an eye and the joint birthday party for Shess and Aina was soon upon us. The guest list for the event went as follows: me, Patty, Celes, Dramom, Suama, Karen, Duane (and his huge crush on Karen), the Blue Flash crew, Ney, and—for some unknown reason—Emille had turned up too. Shiori and Saori had also been invited, but they had to get a few bits done before they could make it to the party. This meant there would be fifteen guests in total when everyone finally turned up, plus Stella—who was hosting the party—and not forgetting the two birthday girls themselves. Oh, and of course, Luza was there too. And yes, she was still convinced that Duane was madly in love with her.

The house Stella and Aina lived in wasn't all that big, meaning there was no way the nineteen of us were all going to squeeze in there, so I'd decided we should have an outdoor party and set up some camping tables and chairs outside under a large tarp to protect us from the sun. We had some big eaters in attendance, so I'd brought along a portable barbecue grill and plenty of meat for us to have alongside the food Stella had already prepared. The head chef of the guild's drinking hall and Loren had also kindly prepared a few dishes for us, and Loren's dishes in particular were the type you found yourself itching to upload to social media because of how absolutely stunning they looked.

And so, we all merrily ate and drank away, and it seemed like everyone was having a great time, to the point where, from the outside looking in, it was impossible to tell that we were in another world, as this kind of scene was replicated in western countries whenever someone decided to throw a house party. Shess and Aina were all smiles as they downed glass after glass of juice.

"This is really good," Shess remarked after trying some grape juice, which was Aina's favorite.

"Isn't it? Mister Shiro brought it for us," Aina replied.

Before the party, I had stopped by a specialized store in Ginza and bought all

sorts of fruit juices for the two girls: orange, apple, kiwi, mango, and—of course—grape. It was all top-notch stuff and you could definitely tell, since they tasted amazing.

“Shess, try the mango juice next!” Aina suggested, handing the little princess a glass. Shess’s eyes sparkled every time she tried a new flavor, which Aina must have found rather amusing, as she kept giving her friend new juices to taste.

“Mango? Is that a fruit too?” Shess asked.

“Yup!” Aina confirmed. “Mister Shiro said it’s a fruit found in southern countries.”

“In southern countries, huh? Okay, I’ll try it!” Shess said, bringing the glass up to her lips.

It warmed the hearts of everyone present to see the two little girls getting along so well.



“Sorry for making you wait, bro-bro.”

“Hi, bro! Sorry we’re late.”

Shiori and Saori arrived just as the sun was setting.

“Here you go, bro. That *thing* you wanted,” Saori said conspiratorially as she handed me a bag.

“Thanks, Saori.”

The three of us sneaked away to the very edge of the garden, where I took out the box that was inside the bag and opened it to take a peek at its contents. I couldn’t help letting out a gasp at what I saw.

“It’s so cute,” I remarked.

“Right? I’m the one who picked it out!” Shiori said proudly.

Inside the box was an adorable-looking cake decorated with bear and rabbit faces, and adorned with a chocolate plaque bearing the words “Happy Birthday” as well as a candle shaped like the number nine. The sides of the cake

were covered in sprinkles, which only added to its general cheery appearance, and I was totally blown away by just how cute it looked from every angle. It definitely got a ten out of ten for presentation, and since it was from Shiori's favorite bakery, I was sure it would be a ten out of ten in the taste department too.

"Good job, Shiori," I said, impressed.

"You bet it was! Praise me some more, bro-bro," she demanded, and I obliged by half-heartedly patting her on the head.

"Yes, yes," I said, humoring her. "You did great."

By the time the three of us had finished our little routine, the sun had sunk below the horizon and it was dark. The timing of the twins' arrival at the party couldn't have been any better.

"Here, bro. The candles," Saori said, handing me some candles—nine to be exact.

"Thanks, Saori."

I planted them in the cake, lit them, then gave Raiya the signal that we were about to bring it over. He nodded and exchanged glances with the other guests to let them know too. Everything was set for the big reveal, so with all three of us carrying the cake, my sisters and I made our way over to Shess and Aina, taking them by surprise. We set the cake down on the table, the two little girls watching on open-mouthed.

"Wow, it's so cute!" Aina breathed in amazement, her eyes sparkling.

Shess had a similar expression on her face. "Is that really a *cake*? It's so pretty."

Under the starry sky, the flames of the candles danced whimsically, and the two little girls were mesmerized by the sight. We couldn't let them blow out the candles just yet, however, for there was one step left before that if we wanted to truly "respect the culture" (to borrow Shess's words), and that step was for the three Amata siblings to start singing "Happy Birthday." My singing was, quite frankly, horrendous, but Shiori and Saori were in perfect harmony. That's twins for you, I guess. Everyone smiled and clapped when the song ended, and

it seemed as if they'd more or less understood the point of it, even though they didn't speak the language.

Then at last, it was time for the most important moment of the day. Shess and Aina looked at each other, exchanged nods, and started counting down in perfect sync. "Three, two, one..." Then they blew out the candles.

"Happy birthday, Aina and Shess!" we all cheered in unison, firing party poppers.

The party was in full swing by this point. Rolf had started preaching about his goddess's teachings, explaining to the two little girls that they should be thankful they were born, while Emille sneakily tried to steal some of the cake. Luckily, Kilpha spotted her and slapped her around the back of the head, then Ney dragged the bunny girl off to a dark corner to lecture her about her manners. As for the rest of them: Raiya and Nesca were flirting with each other; Dramom, Celes, Suama, and Patty were all busy eating; Shiori and Saori were taking selfies with the cake; and Duane had approached Karen and been shot down while Luza gazed intensely at them both. Seeing the shenanigans that everyone was getting up to, Shess and Aina burst out laughing so hard, they had to clutch their stomachs. All in all, it was a very pleasant evening.

Once we had polished off the cake, it was time for the little girls to open their presents. I produced a gift-wrapped box from my inventory and made a beeline for Shess. It was actually the present I'd asked Zidan to deliver to her on her *actual* birthday, but she'd insisted on me giving it to her again in person, so I'd swung by her estate to grab it the day before.

"Shess," I called over to the little girl to get her attention.

"What is it, Amata?" she said.

I held the present out toward her. "Once again, happy birthday. Will you accept my present this time?"

Her face instantly turned beet red. "S-Sure," she stammered, taking the box from me and holding it to her chest. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," I replied.

"Can I open it?"

“Of course.”

She ripped off the wrapping paper and opened the box to find that it was full of wooden blocks. She picked one up and cast a confused glance in my direction. “What are these?” she asked.

“Mister Shiro, did you get Shess building blocks?” Aina asked me before turning to her friend. “They’re toys,” she explained.

“Toys? These things?” Shess queried, seeming even more confused.

“Yup!”

The present I’d picked out for Shess was an educational toy made in Switzerland which had become pretty well-known in Japan after being mentioned in an article about a famous shogi player’s childhood. At first glance, they looked like ordinary wooden blocks, but on closer inspection, it was easy to see that there was more to them than just that. Each block had ruts, grooves, and holes carved into them so that when you put them together in the correct order, you had a course for marbles to travel down. If you could put all of the blocks in the box together in such a way that a marble could travel down the “run” without being impeded at any point, that meant you’d solved the puzzle. It was a lot harder than it sounded, because it required you to actually visualize the exact movements of the marble to know where to put each block.

“Here, watch,” I said, stacking some of the blocks to show her how it worked.

I made a very simple track for my demonstration, aligning the grooves on the blocks to form a downward arc in the shape of a semicircle.

“Okay, that should work.” I picked up one of the marbles that came with the set and turned to Shess. “I’m going to put the marble in this groove now,” I told her.

And that was just what I did. The marble started rolling down the path I had made for it, but just before it reached the bottom of the simplistic run, Shess let out a horrified screech. “Amata! What are you *doing*?!”

“Huh?”

“That... That...” she stammered, her voice shaking, and pointed at the blocks.

No, wait. It seemed she was actually pointing at the marble. In fact, her gaze was positively fixed on the small sphere.

“What, this thing?” I queried. “The marble?”

“Yes! That’s...” she said breathlessly. “That’s a magic orb!”

“A magic orb?” I said, thoroughly confused.

“Yes, a magic orb!” she repeated. “Amata, why are you playing with one like it’s a *toy*?!” She picked up the marble and brought it nearer to the lantern to get a better look at it. “Yup, it really *is* a magic orb,” she murmured.

“May I take a look?” Nesca said, and Shess handed her the marble. She likewise held it up to the light, and as soon as she did, her eyes grew wide. “It’s a perfect magic orb,” she breathed, her disbelief writ large on her face.

Utterly confused by this reaction, I glanced across at Aina and saw that she was just as lost as I was. “Nesca, what’s a ‘magic orb’ exactly?” I asked.

She looked even more shocked than before, if that were possible. “Shiro, you don’t know what a magic orb is even though you’re a merchant?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said sheepishly. “I’m not all that knowledgeable about these kinds of things. Though from your reaction and Shess’s, I understand it’s pretty valuable?”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t understand anything. Magic orbs are crystals that have been cut into a spherical shape and polished.”

“Um, but these are glass, not crystal,” I pointed out, picking up another marble.

“The shape is more important than the material itself,” Nesca said. “The degree of transparency is a major factor too.”

To summarize her explanation, anything that was transparent and spherical in this world was referred to as a “magic orb.” They were apparently great magic catalysts and highly sought-after, because they could hold immensely powerful and complex spells, making them far superior to basic scrolls. The more transparent and spherical the orb was, the greater its value, and the largest ones even got used as bargaining chips in intergovernmental trade deals. Nesca

had one affixed to the tip of her staff, and from what she told me, it was crazy expensive. The staff had been in her family for generations and had a bunch of magic-amplifying enchantments on it, and she reckoned if she were ever to sell her staff, she would be able to buy a castle with the money from it.

“So do you understand now?” she asked me.

“M-More or less.”

This tiny marble was far more valuable than a gold coin, yet I’d been casually rolling it around and playing with it. Even nobles with more money than they knew what to do with wouldn’t have dared to handle a magic orb so carelessly, so it really came as no surprise that such actions would shock Shess. I neglected to mention that, in Japan, you could literally buy marbles like this one at the 100-yen shop.

In the end, I decided to get her some iron marbles to use with her new set of blocks instead, and she seemed fine with that.

Chapter Sixteen: The Bouquet

I had given Shess her gift, so it was now time to present Aina with hers. I took something out of my inventory and hid it behind my back, then went over and stood in front of the little girl while everyone else watched on.

“Aina,” I began.

“Y-Yes?” she stuttered.

“Happy birthday.”

I held her present out toward her: a bouquet of light purple flowers. The little girl gasped and gently took the bouquet from my hands.

“Mister Shiro, are these...” she started, but she couldn’t finish her sentence and instead looked up at me with expectant eyes.

I nodded. “They’re lapas flowers.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, tears started streaming down Aina’s cheeks. She cradled the flowers to her chest and crouched down, her little body wracked with sobs. Naturally, everyone was stunned by her unexpected reaction, but I reassured them all with a look and wordlessly asked them to let me deal with the situation.

I crouched down next to the little girl and softly called her name to get her attention. “Do you know what those flowers are?” I said.

She nodded. “My... My papa really...” she hiccuped. “He really liked these flowers.” She paused and looked at the flowers longingly. “And I... I love them too.”

So she did remember the flowers, just like I’d thought she would. When she laid eyes on them, memories of birthdays spent with her father must have come flooding back to her, causing her to weep. And she wasn’t the only one who was surprised.

“Mr. Shiro...” Stella breathed, her voice quivering. “How did you come by

lapas flowers? They only bloom in my homeland.”

“Yep. They sure weren’t easy to find,” I agreed.

“What do you mean exactly?” she uttered, looking confused.

“Mister Shiro?” Aina said in a small voice.

“Hm? What is it?” I said.

“What are these flowers?” she asked, still clutching the bouquet to her chest.

“They’re flowers from your homeland. I picked them myself,” I answered with a grin.

The little girl could only stare at me with wide, uncomprehending eyes. I glanced over her shoulder and signaled with my eyes for Dramom to step forward.

“I took my master to pick those flowers,” she explained to Aina.

“So they’re...” the little girl said haltingly. “They’re *real* lapas flowers?”

“Yup. They’re real lapas flowers,” I confirmed.

Tears welled up in the little girl’s eyes once more, and I could see that Stella had started crying too.

“I can’t believe I actually got to see some again,” Stella whispered, her trembling voice a mix of sadness, longing, and joy as she gazed upon the flowers.

“Thank you so, so much for this, Mister Shiro. I’m so happy,” Aina said, treating me to a beautiful smile in spite of the tears that were running down her cheeks.

I shook my head. “Oh, but this isn’t your present,” I said, which drew a confused little questioning noise from the girl. “Aina, would you like to go to the field of flowers that you used to go to when you were little?” She gasped at the suggestion. “Stella told me all about it, so I know exactly how important that place is to you. Dramom has agreed to take you there. Well? What do you say, Aina?” I paused and looked the little girl straight in the eye. “Would you like to go?”

“Mister Shiro...”

“I want to take you to that little hill with the field of flowers, just like your dad used to. Will you let me, Aina?”

I really wanted to take her to see all the lapas flowers in bloom for her birthday. I waited for her answer, and she eventually gave one in the form of a little nod. “I want to go there,” she mumbled.

“You do? I’m glad. Let’s go tomorrow, then, okay? I’ll—” I was about to set out what my plans were to her, but Shess interrupted me.

“What do you mean ‘tomorrow’? Take her there now!” the little princess ordered bossily, giving me a big slap on the back.

“But we’re in the middle of a party and—”

Yet again, Shess didn’t let me finish my sentence. “No, go *now*! Aina’s birthday is *today*, not tomorrow!” she told me, placing her hands on her hips, which was her way of telling me she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Okay, fine,” I said, then I turned to Aina and held my hand out toward her. “Should we go, then, Aina? To the Republic of Aptos, I mean.”

Beside me, Stella’s jaw hit the floor. “Mr. Shiro, what are you saying? The Republic of Aptos is...” Her voice faltered as she struggled to find the words to finish that particular sentence, her expression a mix of disbelief and utter confusion.

“Do not fret, Stella,” Dramom jumped in. “I will take my master and Aina there, and ensure they are safe every step of the way. I will also do the same for you, of course.”

“Miss Dramom...” Stella said breathlessly. “But my homeland is awfully far from here. Are you sure about this?”

Dramom didn’t answer. Or at least, not verbally. Instead, she changed into her dragon form right there and then, though unlike the previous times, she transformed into a much smaller version, so that she wouldn’t attract too much attention from the townsfolk. I had only learned she could pull off this little trick a couple of days back, when she originally took me to the Republic of

Aptos. I couldn't really say why this ability of hers surprised me, because after all, I already knew she could turn into a human that was much, *much* smaller than her real form, so what would be stopping her from adjusting her size in dragon form too?

"To you, it might be far away, but to me, it is little more than a leisurely stroll. Come now. Hop on my back," Dramom said once she had finished transforming. She stooped down so we could climb up onto her back.

I held my hand out to Aina again. "Let's go, shall we, Aina?"

The little girl wiped away her tears with a corner of her sleeve, then grabbed my hand. "Okay!"

"Stella?" I said, turning to the little girl's mother.

"Let's go, mama," Aina urged, and she too thrust her small hand in her mom's direction.

After a slight hesitation, Stella took her dear daughter's outstretched hand and the three of us climbed up onto Dramom's back. "Yes, Aina," Stella said. "Let's return to our homeland."



"Karen, I'm so sorry to ask this of you, but do you mind wrapping things up here?" I called down from where I was sitting on Dramom's back.

Everyone aside from Shess was in complete shock at our abrupt departure in the middle of the party.

"Good grief. What *are* we going to do with you?" Karen said with a smile once she'd gotten over her surprise. "Oh well. You know I can't possibly refuse a request from you. Off you go, then. I'll handle the rest."

Next, I turned to my sisters. "Shiori, Saori, could you look after Suama while we're away?"

"Sure thiiiing," Shiori drawled.

"Just be sure to pay us for babysitting," Saori said, smirking.

With that out of the way, there was one last thing I needed to do. "Shess, I'm

sorry,” I called down to the little princess.

“It’s all right. I’ll forgive you just this once,” she pouted with her hands firmly on her hips before breaking out into a wide grin. “But in exchange, you have to promise me you’ll give Aina the *best* birthday present ever!”

This sudden change in attitude took me aback slightly, but I quickly pulled myself together. “You bet I will.”

We said goodbye to all the party guests, then Dramom took off and soared gently upward. Just as we were about to zoom off to our destination that lay to the northwest of Ninoritch, I took one final glance down at the ground and saw all of my precious friends waving us off, and they continued to do so until we gradually faded from view.

Chapter Seventeen: Homeland

We reached the Republic of Aptos the next morning. I'd been here a mere three days before with Dramom, so I already knew how to get to the hill with all the lapas flowers, but we also wanted to visit the town where Stella and Aina used to reside this time, so we got Stella to guide us there. She took us to a small town with around five hundred inhabitants on the western side of the nation called Iphrit. This was where Stella had grown up as well as being the place where Aina was born.

We told Dramom to set down somewhere outside of the town, then we walked the rest of the way, though as soon as we entered the little town, Stella's face scrunched up as if she was about to start crying. I wasn't too surprised by this, because after all, she'd spent this whole time thinking she'd never get to come back here. But as we walked through the familiar streets from her childhood, the flood of memories coming back to her must have been overwhelming.

"Mama?" Aina said to her mother, a note of concern in her voice.

"I... I'm fine, Aina," Stella said. "I'm fine." She smiled at her daughter and stroked her hair gently.

A few seconds of silence followed, then she turned to me. "Mr. Shiro."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to go say hello to an acquaintance of mine. Could you and Miss Dramom look after Aina for a little while?" she asked me.

I immediately understood that the "acquaintance" she was talking about was the same person she had been trying to send a letter to that day I saw her exiting the Fairy's Blessing guildhall. And once I knew that, it seemed pretty obvious to me *why* she wanted to go and talk to this acquaintance.

"Sure. We'll take a bit of a walk around town, then. Let's see..." I looked around for a landmark where we could meet up after, and my eyes landed on a

nearby square. "How about we meet back in that square at around noon?"

She nodded. "Sounds good. Thank you, Mr. Shiro. I leave Aina in your care."

"Actually, Aina will probably be the one keeping an eye on us, considering how it's our first time here," I joked, which earned a chuckle from Stella. It seemed my little quip had helped her to relax, if only just a little bit.

"Stay with Mr. Shiro until I get back, okay, Aina?" she said to her daughter.

"Okay," the little girl said without much enthusiasm.

"Mama will be right back."

"Okay," Aina repeated.

Stella gave her daughter one last pat on the head before setting off, and Aina watched her mother's retreating form with a look on her face that was both sad and anxious. Iphrit might once have been her hometown, but she hadn't lived there since she was four, so who knew how much of it she remembered? Maybe she felt her mom had left her in the middle of a place that was totally unfamiliar to her. I couldn't bear the thought of the little girl feeling so lost and alone, so I held out my hand for her to take.

"Here, Aina," I said. "Give me your hand."

"Hm? Okay," she replied absentmindedly as she took my hand, and I could feel just how nervous she was from her grip.

Right. In this situation, I'm sure her father would have said something like...

"Let's go explore the town, Aina!" I said cheerfully.

She seemed taken aback for a second before her expression brightened and I spied a hint of excitement in her eyes. "Yeah! Let's go!"

Back when we were in Mazela, she had told me that on her first visit to a big city with her parents, her dad had suggested that they go "exploring," which is why, the moment she heard my suggestion, her worries seemed to just melt away.

"Master, I shall wait in the square for Stella to come back. It would be a problem if she returned and we were not there," Dramom stated, though I

could tell that her *real* motivation for saying this was because she most likely wanted to allow Aina and me some alone time out of consideration for the little girl.

“Thanks, Dramom. If anything happens...” I paused and gave the holster on my belt a few quick taps. “Let me know on the walkie-talkie, okay?”

“Understood, master.”

I gave her one last nod, then set out to explore the town of Iphrit with Aina.

Chapter Eighteen: Memories of Her Father

“Look at that huge bird, Aina! It’s so big, it’s drawing a cart!” Shiro marveled as he and Aina strolled along the streets of Iphrit.

“That’s an ebrasornis, Mister Shiro!” the little girl said.

“Whoa, it is?” he gasped. “Man, they really *are* bigger than horses, aren’t they?”

“I told you so, didn’t I?” she chirped.

“You did, but I’m still surprised!”

Her mother had called this place Aina’s “hometown,” but the little girl couldn’t bring herself to call it that in her mind. After all, she barely remembered the place.

“The people here all dress like Stella,” Shiro noted.

“It’s because mama ‘respects’ the ‘culture’ of her town!” Aina said, proudly echoing the words she’d heard Shess use before, which made Shiro chuckle.

“I see.”

But then, the little girl’s eyes landed on the river that coursed through the town and a little “Oh” escaped her lips as she stopped in her tracks.

“Hm? Is something wrong, Aina?” Shiro asked. There was no reply, so he tried again. “Aina?”

“I’ve...” she said hesitantly.

“Hm?”

“I’ve been here before. With my papa,” she mumbled.

The moment she’d seen the river, memories of her time spent with her father had come flooding back to her.

“Papa...” she half-whispered as she recalled one time when her father had scooped her out of the water after she’d fallen in. She remembered now. She

remembered all of it.

The little girl broke into a run and Shiro was forced to scramble to keep up with her, though he didn't try to stop her. She slowed to a halt on reaching a tree at the end of the main street, and it was such a huge tree, you had to crane your neck to see it in all its glory.

"When I was little, I tried to climb this tree, and papa got really angry at me," she said.

A smile curled Shiro's lips upward. "Is that so? In that case, this tree must be a very important memory for you, right?"

"But I got yelled at," the little girl pointed out.

"Sure, but it was for your own good, wasn't it? So it must be important."

The little girl pondered this for a few seconds. "Is that really how it works?"

"Yup."

The pair resumed their exploration of the town, and the more they walked, the more memories started coming back to Aina.

"I went to that shop with my papa once!" she said, pointing to one of the buildings.

"Oh, did you?"

"And my papa and I splashed water at each other when we got water from this well!"

"You two had a really good relationship, didn't you?"

Her father wasn't by her side at that moment. As far as they knew, he wasn't even in this town. But despite that, Aina couldn't stop herself from mumbling "Papa..." as she walked around the streets. In effect, her papa was nowhere and everywhere at the same time. The little girl squeezed Shiro's hand as tight as she could.

The pair returned to the square to find that Stella was already waiting for them with Dramom. When Shiro asked her how things had gone with her acquaintance, Stella simply shook her head with a saddened look on her face,

which Aina immediately understood to mean that her papa hadn't come back. She didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as her beloved Mister Shiro enthusiastically suggested going to the field of flowers next. Dramom said she would stay in the square, so only he, Stella, and Aina went off to find the hillside in question. The three of them held hands and chatted away as they walked, with Aina between the two adults—just like how it had been back then—and it wasn't long before they reached the little hill.

When they got there, none of them dared to speak a word, for they were too overwhelmed by the beauty of the field of flowers that lay before them. The whole of the hillside was covered in light purple flowers. Aina remembered this field of flowers very distinctly. She sometimes even saw it in her dreams. It still looked exactly the same as the field in her memories and her dreams.

"It's so pretty, mama," she breathed in amazement.

"Yes, it's very beautiful," Stella agreed.

As the little girl gazed at the flowers, she felt Shiro give her a gentle push from behind.

"You're not going in?" he asked, pointing to the field of flowers.

"Yeah, I am!" she said, and she dashed off at full speed into the field, where she jumped, twirled, and danced her little heart out. It wasn't a choreographed dance as such; she simply danced how she used to back when she was very small, spinning around and around. When she came out of her reverie, she found her mother by her side, twirling along with her.

"Aina," Stella called out to her softly.

"Mama!" the little girl chirruped. She grabbed hold of her mother's hands and the two of them danced together in the field of flowers. It was so much fun. So, so, so much fun.



I want to see my papa.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Aina fell to the ground in the middle of the lapas flowers and buried her face in her hands.

“Aina?!” Shiro exclaimed, rushing to her side.

Stella did the same and crouched down beside her daughter.

“Papa...” the little girl hiccuped.

Tears started streaming down her cheeks, and it was obvious to both Shiro and Stella why she had suddenly burst out crying.

“Papa... Papa... Papa...”

She couldn’t stop herself from crying out for her father. She wanted to see him so badly, it hurt.

“I wanna see my papa,” she sobbed. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but she wasn’t able to stop herself.

“Aina...” her mother whispered beside her.

“I wanna see him!” the little girl howled, her words heavy with longing.

On her knees in the middle of that field of flowers, she sobbed her heart out, desperately wishing that her father was there by her side.

Chapter Nineteen: Mother and Daughter

"I miss my papa," Aina sobbed on her knees in the middle of the field of flowers.

"Come here, Aina," Stella said gently as she hugged her daughter tightly before whispering, "Mama wants to see him too. I want to see your papa too."

It was the first time she'd ever uttered these words to her daughter.

"I'm sorry, mama," the little girl said, her voice muffled due to her face being buried in her mother's chest.

"Why are you apologizing, Aina?" her mother asked.

"Because it's my fault you can't go looking for him."

"No, Aina, that's not—" Stella started, but Aina raised her head and interrupted her.

"Mama, I'm already nine, you know," the little girl pointed out. She stood up, wiped away her tears with the corner of her sleeve, and looked her mother straight in the eye. "I have a friend now. A best friend even. And I have lots of other people I love too. Mister Shiro, Patty, Miss Karen..." The little girl paused briefly, then got to the point. "I'm not alone anymore. I'll be fine."

A soft gasp escaped Stella's lips, and tears started streaming down her cheeks, but she made no attempt to wipe them away. Instead, she turned to me. "Mr. Shiro."

"Yes?" I replied.

"Do you remember our first meeting?"

"I do."

The first time I met Stella, she was so weak, she couldn't even stand up. Yet here she was, standing unaided in her homeland, a place filled with memories of her family.

“Back then, I asked you if you would take care of Aina after I died.”

“I remember. I wasn’t expecting you to say something like that to me, so you really caught me off guard,” I admitted, drawing a chuckle from Stella.

“That’s just how desperate I was,” she said. “My daughter is and always will be more important to me than my own life.”

“Well, in that case, I guess I can forgive you for nearly giving me a heart attack at the time.”

We both laughed at my little quip, but we quickly went back to being serious.

“Mr. Shiro, if it’s not asking too much, would it be all right if I made a request now, similar to the one I made to you on that day?”

I wordlessly reached for Aina’s hand and grasped it tightly. The little girl squeezed back without any hesitation.

“Go for it,” I said to Stella.

“In that case, could you please look after Aina for me?” she asked.

“Leave it to me,” I said confidently. “To be completely honest with you, I would’ve gotten super mad if you’d asked anyone else.”

This caused another chuckle to escape from Stella’s lips. “I would never.” She wiped away her tears with the tip of her finger and smiled as she turned to her daughter. “Aina.”

“Yeah?”

Stella crouched down, pressed her forehead against her daughter’s, and locked eyes with her. “I need your blessing for something.”

“What is it?”

“Can I go look for your papa?”

Aina was silent for a few moments, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“I promise I’ll find him and bring him back to Ninoritch with me. Will you wait for me?”

“Yup. I’ll wait for you as long as you need me to, mama,” the little girl

declared, her eyes glimmering with determination.

“You’ve become ever so reliable. No one would guess that you used to be a little crybaby,” her mother teased.

“Well, I’m nine now!” the little girl said proudly.

“Yes, you are. You’re such a big girl now. When I find your father, you’ll have to show him how big you’ve gotten. Okay?”

“Kay!”

The wind kicked up petals and made them dance around the mother and daughter as they knelt in the middle of the field of flowers, the pair hugging each other tightly and smiling through the tears that streamed down their faces. It was a beautiful sight.

Final Chapter: Departure

The three of us headed back to the square where Dramom was waiting for us, then we all traveled back to Ninoritch so Stella could make the necessary preparations for her upcoming trip.

“I’m thinking of leaving in ten days,” she said.

She wanted to say goodbye to all of her friends and acquaintances before going, and most importantly of all, she wanted to spend some quality time with her daughter, which is why she had decided to wait ten days. Naturally, I gave Aina the whole ten days until Stella’s departure off, so they could make the most of their last moments together for what could be a long time.

“But I don’t *need* time off,” the little girl had protested when I told her, but I’d insisted she accept my decision. After a lot of back and forth, I’d ended up pulling rank on her as her employer and forcing her to take the time off. *Paid time off: the elusive perk I’d spent the whole of my corporate slave days dreaming about, but never once got to experience.*

“Thank you,” Aina had said dejectedly when she realized my decision was final.

What the two of them got up to over those last ten days together, I could not say. They may have spent them at home like usual, just the two of them, or they may have gone to the public bathhouse and washed each other’s backs, or they may have splurged out a little and treated themselves to a special meal, or they may have sat in the guild’s drinking hall and listened to adventurers telling tales of their recent exploits. All I could say for sure was whatever they did, they did it together and cherished every moment of it.



And then, the ten days were up and it was time for Stella to leave. We had all gathered on the edge of town to see her off. Why had we picked the edge of town to say our farewells, you might ask? Well, Dramom was taking Stella to

lphrit, and if she were to change into her dragon form in the center of town, it would definitely cause a huge commotion, whereas out here, she was unlikely to bother anyone. Our usual group was there: me, Patty, Karen, Ney, Celes, Suama, and the Blue Flash crew, as well as the newcomers to our fold: Duane, Shess, and Luza. Emille was present too, as were my sisters, and for some unknown reason, grandma had shown up too. One by one, we all exchanged fond words of farewell with Stella, wishing her the best on her travels, while some had even brought parting gifts.

“Every single one of these hairs can turn into a familiar. Use them if you ever find yourself in danger,” Celes said, shoving a handful of her own hair into Stella’s hands.

Dramom also had a present for Stella. “If you play this flute, I will rush to your side,” she said. Apparently, the flute she was giving to Stella could only be heard by dragons, or something along those lines.

Grandma gave Stella a bunch of things too. I wasn’t really sure what any of them were, but knowing grandma, they must all have been the kinds of things that were pretty handy to keep on your person. Overall, it seemed like everyone was worried about Stella’s safety while on her travels, and understandably so.

“Well then. I leave Aina in your care, Miss Mayor,” Stella said.

After a lengthy discussion with Karen and a few others, Stella had decided Aina wouldn’t be staying with me while she was away, but with Karen instead. She had said something about me inevitably spoiling her little girl too much and how that would be no good for her education, or something like that. And to be fair, she was right, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to sulk about it.

“Aina can stay with me!” Shess had offered, but this proposition had been rejected for the same reason. Stella didn’t want her daughter getting used to living in a house where all of the household tasks were taken care of by servants.

Raising kids sure is hard, isn’t it? I mused inwardly.

“No need to worry. I’ll make sure to be *extra* strict with her,” Karen announced sternly, though I detected a humorous note in her voice.

It seemed, however, that Stella didn't pick up on it, as she hurriedly started flapping her hands around in concern over how strict Karen would be with Aina. "Oh, um..." she said, all flustered. "Please don't be *too* harsh on her."

"Don't worry, I won't. Besides, Shiro will spoil her rotten like always, so if I'm a little sterner with her, it will all balance out, right?" said Karen, winking at Stella, which drew a chuckle from her.

"I suppose you're right," Stella said. "So you two will be raising Aina for me? That's very kind of you."

"So you're gonna be raising the little girlie with the mayor, man? Like a married couple?" Raiya teased me, a smirk curling his lips.

The second these words left his mouth, Karen instantly turned beet red. "Wh-What are you—" she stammered.

"Yeah, what the hell, Raiya? There are some things you just don't say!" I said, joining in with Karen's protests. *Please just stop, Raiya. I'm begging you. The way Duane is glaring at me right now is making my blood run cold.*

Our little routine caused Stella to burst out laughing, and an embarrassed smile tugged at Karen's lips until she cracked up too. Those two sure got along well, didn't they? Well, they were the same age, so that must've helped.

"Be careful out there," Karen said to Stella.

"I will. And I wish you good health as well, Miss Mayor."

Karen stepped back, because now that those two were all done saying goodbye to each other, it was my turn.

"Mr. Shiro," Stella began.

"Yes?"

"Thank you so much. For everything."

"Oh, no, I haven't done much, really," I protested gently.

"You have. Ever since we met you, my life—and Aina's too—has changed in the best way possible."

"Aw, come on. You're exaggerating," I said bashfully.

“Not even slightly. Isn’t that right, Aina?” Stella said to her daughter, who nodded enthusiastically.

“Yup! I’m so glad I asked you to buy flowers from me that day, Mister Shiro!” the little girl chirped.

Damn, I let my guard down. The words of mother and daughter were getting me a tad emotional, and I could feel the tears pricking my eyes. The fact I wasn’t going to be seeing Stella again for a long time definitely didn’t help matters. But men can’t cry in public like this. *Keep it together, Shiro!*

I heard Patty chuckling beside me. “Are you crying, Shiro?” she said.

“N-No way! Why would I be crying?” I said unconvincingly.

“There’s no need to act so tough, dude. C’mere. I’ll let you sob into my chest,” Raiya offered with a smirk.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass. Your chest looks rock hard. It’s probably not very comfortable,” I quipped back.

“Then, how about I lend you mine, meow?” Kilpha piped up. “It’s nice and soft!”

“Hear that, man? You can use Kilpha’s chest to cry on if you want,” Raiya teased.

“I told you I’m *not* crying!”

Everyone laughed at our impromptu skit, almost as if they were glad that their own minds had been diverted if only momentarily from the sadness of seeing Stella go.

“Seriously, Raiya...” I muttered before turning back to Stella. “Sorry about that, Stella. The conversation took a weird turn just then.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “But if you still need a chest to cry on, what about mine?”

A gasp escaped my lips. “Not you too!” I exclaimed, causing everyone to burst out laughing once more. After all, goodbyes called for smiles, not tears.

I sighed at length and focused my attention on Stella again. “Stella.”

“Yes?”

“There’s a few people I’d like you to meet before you go.”

“People you’d like me to meet?” she said, confused. “Who might these people be?”

“I’ll call ’em over.”

I turned and beckoned the adventuring party who had been waiting slightly off to the side to come closer. The group was made up of men and women, and there were five of them in total.

“Stella, allow me to introduce you to the adventuring party that will be escorting you on your travels: the amazing White Wolf’s Fangs,” I said.

“Escorting me?”

“Yep.” I turned to the adventurers and announced, “This is the lady you’ll be protecting. Her name is Stella.”

A white-haired young man stepped forward. “Nice to meet you, Stella. I’m Zephyrus, leader of the White Wolf’s Fangs. You can call me Zephyr,” he said, extending a hand.

Stella completely ignored him, however, whipping her head around to stare at me. “Hold on a minute, Mr. Shiro! Why... Why would they be escorting me?”

“Shiro has asked us to go with you,” Zephyr replied in my stead. “He wants us to protect you on your travels. Oh, we aren’t going to charge you for our services, if that’s what you’re worrying about. We may not look it, but we’re all pretty well-off.”

As soon as we got back to Ninoritch after our short excursion to the Republic of Aptos, I had started looking around for an escort to go with Stella on her journey. Traveling in this world was a dangerous undertaking, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I let Stella wander off without proper protection. It was then that I bumped into Zephyr and he asked me what I was doing.

“I’m looking for adventurers willing to escort someone dear to me on her travels,” I replied.

On hearing my explanation, Zephyr volunteered himself and the rest of his party for the task of accompanying Stella. Naturally, I made sure to double-check that he was *really* okay with taking on this mission and all that it would entail.

“Are you sure?” I asked him. “She’s looking for someone, but she doesn’t have any real idea where he is. It might take years to find him.”

“Shiro, we stumbled on Nathew’s ruins by using a children’s tale as our guide,” Zephyr said with a cocky grin. “Finding this lady’s husband is going to be a piece of cake compared with all we went through to talk to Tina again.”

I had to admit, in that moment, I found Zephyr incredibly manly and cool.

And so, I’d managed to secure the services of a gold-ranked adventuring party to protect Stella on her travels, and to top it off, Zephyr had refused any sort of payment whatsoever, claiming that he still owed me a debt and this was the perfect way to repay me. I was a firm believer that no one should ever have to work for free, no matter the circumstances, so I went over to the auction house, put in the winning bid for a bag enchanted with the Inventory skill that a group of adventurers had found in a set of ruins, and gave it to Zephyr. With my gold coins clutched in one hand, I didn’t stop bidding until that magic bag was mine. *Who would have thought that I’d end up participating in an auction in the auction house that I built?*

After successfully acquiring the bag, I’d shoved a bunch of food, coins of all denominations, and other useful trinkets into the bag’s inventory in the hope that they would prove useful to Zephyr and his party while accompanying Stella.

“Mr. Shiro, I cannot accept this. Absolutely not,” Stella insisted firmly.

“Hey, don’t go blaming Shiro,” Zephyr interjected, a serious expression on his face. “It’s our idea, not his. We owe Shiro so, so much, there’s no way we’ll ever be able to repay him for his kindness in this lifetime. But if we help you to find your husband, maybe that’ll chip a little bit off that debt.”

“But...” Stella started to protest, but Zephyr cut her off.

“Please let us come with you. It’ll be our last job as the White Wolf’s Fangs.”

Stella chewed on her words for a moment, unsure how to reply.

“Please,” Zephyr repeated, lowering his head. His partymates—who had been watching the interaction—did the same behind him. “Let us repay some of our debt to Shiro.”

After a few more seconds of silence, Stella sighed. “Fine.”

“For real? You’ll let us go with you?” Zephyr said, raising his head.

“Yes. I owe much to Mr. Shiro too, so I understand how you feel,” Stella said, grabbing Zephyr’s hand and smiling at him. “It might end up being a long old trip, but I look forward to traveling with you.”

“Likewise. We shall do our utmost to protect you out there.”

Stella shook the hands of all five members of the White Wolf’s Fangs. With everything else out of the way, there was one last person Stella had to say goodbye to before leaving: her daughter.

“Aina.”

“Mama.”

Stella pressed her forehead against her daughter’s.



“Aina, mama’s going away for a while,” Stella said softly.

The little girl nodded. “I know.”

“Will you be able to sleep all by yourself?”

“No. But it’s okay. I have Patty and Peace,” the little girl replied.

“Good. Make sure you cover yourself properly when you sleep, okay?”

“Kay.”

“And be careful when you’re walking home. I won’t be able to come and pick you up for a while.”

“It’s okay. Mister Shiro said he’ll walk me home,” the little girl reassured her mother.

“Did he? That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah.”

Stella wrapped her arms around Aina and the little girl squeezed with all her might, as if she were trying to imprint her mother’s warmth into her memory.

“Aina, I’m going to tell you something now. Will you try to remember it?” Stella said.

The little girl nodded. “I’ll try.”

“The first time I held you in my arms...” Stella started, then faltered.

“Yeah?” the little girl prompted.

“I was so, so *incredibly* happy. Can you believe that?” she said with a smile. “You’re more precious to me than even my own life.”

“I’m precious to you, mama?” the little girl said, her eyes wide.

“You are. Incredibly precious. You’re my treasure, and I don’t want to give you to anyone else.”

“Mama...” Tears started rolling down Aina’s cheeks. “You’re...” she sobbed. “You’re precious to me too.”

“I love you, Aina,” her mother said tenderly.

The little girl nodded in response.

“I love my little crybaby of a daughter.”

Another nod.

“I love my daughter who’s so very good at cleaning.”

“Yeah, you’re really bad at it,” the little girl interjected.

“I am, aren’t I? If it wasn’t for you, the house would always be a huge mess.”

Mother and daughter giggled in spite of the tears that were streaming down their faces.

“Mama,” Aina said to get her mother’s attention.

“What is it, Aina?”

“I’m glad that you are my mama.”

A soft gasp escaped Stella’s lips.

“And I’m glad that papa is my papa.”

“I’m very glad to *be* your mama too. And I’m sure your papa feels the same way,” Stella assured her.

“Mama,” Aina said again, breaking out into a huge grin filled with love. “Give papa a *biiiiig* hug from me when you find him, okay?”

“I will. I’ll hug him so, so much. Enough for the both of us.”

“Thanks, mama,” the little girl said. “I love you the most in the whole wide world.”

And with that, it was time for mother and daughter to be parted.

“I’m gonna head off now, okay?” Stella said gently.

“Have a safe trip, mama!” Aina chirruped.

“See you soon, Aina.”

Stella climbed up onto Dramom’s back and the two took off. Aina didn’t stop waving at them for a second, even after they had soared away out of sight.

Epilogue

Three days had passed since Stella departed to look for her husband. Dramom—who had already made it back—told us that she had dropped her off just to the west of the town of Iphrit, and it seemed that her plan was to proceed on foot until she crossed the border into the nation the Republic of Aptos had been at war with. I was worried sick about her, and had to constantly remind myself that she had a gold-rank adventuring party for protection, plus the items that Celes, Dramom, and grandma had given her. She'd most likely—no, she'd *definitely* be fine.

“Good morning, Mister Shiro.”

“Morning, Aina. Let's work hard again today.”

“Yeah!”

As for Aina, she was acting as if everything was carrying on as normal.

“We have curry and rice for lunch today,” I said to the little girl, producing two steaming plates from my inventory.

“Curry and rice? But the color of it makes it look a bit like stew,” she pointed out, eyeing the dish with suspicion.

“Don't knock it till you've tried it,” I said. “I made sure it wasn't too spicy, but it's still packed with flavor and really delicious.”

“Okay,” the little girl said.

“Ready?” I said. “Three, two, one...”

“Thanks for the food!” the two of us said simultaneously.

Just as before, we ate lunch together every single day. Sometimes, Karen and Patty joined us for dinner, while on other occasions, Aina went over to Shess's for a meal. We all made sure that she never ate alone.

“It'sh sho good!” she exclaimed with her mouth full, her eyes sparkling.

“Isn’t it just?” I said with a ridiculously self-important look on my face, causing the little girl to burst out laughing.

Even though her mother was away, Aina was still laughing. I hoped that smile would never droop until Stella returned.



“See you tomorrow, Mister Shiro!” the little girl chirped.

“Yup, see you tomorrow, Aina. I know you’re spending the night here at Shess’s, but don’t stay up too late now, you hear?” I warned her.

“Okay!”

I’d brought Aina to Shess’s estate and we were presently standing in the entrance hall. The two little girls were having another sleepover.

“The same goes for you too, Shess,” I said to the little princess who had come to greet Aina.

“I-I *know*!” she replied sharply.

Every time Aina spent the night at Shess’s, she always came to work the next day looking tired, and whenever I quizzed her on why that was, she would respond by saying she’d stayed up late chatting with Shess. While I understood her wanting to have fun with her friend, she was still a growing kid, which meant she needed lots of sleep. Still, it wasn’t as if she slept over at Shess’s *every* night, so I was never too harsh on her over it. I always made sure to remind her not to stay up too late, though, because that was my job as an adult. Not to mention, Stella had left her in my care.

“Well then, I’m off,” I said. “Good night, you two. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Mister Shiro!”

Shess giggled. “Though it’s not like we’re going to bed *just* yet,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that, Shess?” I said.

“Oh, uh, nothing, nothing. Good night, Amata.”

I said bye to the two little girls before making my way over to the guild.



Even though I'd just told the two little girls not to stay up too late, I was planning to drink well into the night with my friends at the guild.

"Sorry for making you all wait," I said as I joined my four drinking pals at their table.

"Heya, man," Raiya greeted me.

"Finally," Nesca commented.

"Come sit, Mr. Shiro, sir," Rolf offered, patting the chair next to him.

"Nooo! Shiro's sitting next to *me*, meow!" Kilpha protested.

Yup, that's right. I was having a little get-together with the Blue Flash crew. Raiya had dropped by my shop earlier in the day to ask if I wanted to join them for some drinks that evening, and I'd naturally accepted.

"Oh, did you hear the news, man?" Raiya asked me.

"What news?"

"The guildmaster wants Dramom and Celes to join the guild as adventurers," Nesca said.

"Wait, really? But is that even allowed? I mean, this is a dragon and a demon we're talking about here. Is that really all fine by the guild's regulations?" I asked.

"Mr. Shiro, sir, one of the guild's main rules is that any race can join," Rolf kindly explained to me.

"Is that so?"

The five of us exchanged all the juicy gossip we'd heard as we sipped our drinks. Back when I was a corporate slave, I was forever doing overtime, so I never got to go out drinking with my colleagues after leaving the office. But here and now, I was finally getting that experience I had missed out on, and with friends I got along really well with to boot. One of us would say something, then someone else would bounce off it, and by the end of it, all five of us would be laughing so hard, we'd be clutching our stomachs. It was an enjoyable

experience.

“Kilpha! Letter for you!” Emille shouted from the reception area, dragging us out of our conversation. Waving the envelope around, the bunny girl beckoned Kilpha over to the reception desk, where the cat-sith filled in the necessary paperwork and was given the letter.

“I wonder who’s written to me, meow,” Kilpha muttered to herself as she started walking back to the table. She broke the seal and glanced at the name at the bottom of the letter. “Hm-meow? It’s from my dad, meow.”

She started reading from the top of the page, and while her expression remained neutral for the first few lines, it turned increasingly serious the further she got down the page, until she got to a part that made her gasp in horror. She raised her gaze from the letter and peered around the drinking hall and the reception area, her eyes sharp as a hunter’s.

“Shiro!” she exclaimed as her eyes landed on me.

“Wh-What is it?”

“I have a request for you, meow!”

“What? For me?” I asked in some surprise.

“Yes, you!” Kilpha confirmed.

“I mean, sure,” I said. “If it’s something that’s in my power, I’ll gladly help you out.”

“You mean it? You’ll really help me, meow?” she said, her eyes sparkling in anticipation.

“Really. After all, we’re comrades, aren’t we?” I said. It was a bit of a cheesy thing to say, but let’s just blame that on the alcohol, shall we?

“Ah, I’m so glad, meow!” she said, letting out a relieved sigh and resting a hand on her chest.

“So? What is it you need me to do?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing major, meow.” She paused and grinned at me. “I just want you to come to my homeland with me, meow.”

“Your homeland? You mean the country of the cat-sìths?”

“Yup! Well, it’s more a village than a country,” she clarified.

“Hell *yeaaah!*” I cheered before I could stop myself, and struck a triumphant pose as I did so.

The Blue Flash crew hadn’t expected me to yell out like that, and they all jumped slightly in surprise. But I just couldn’t help it! I’d be traveling to Kilpha’s homeland, the cat-sìth’s village, otherwise known as cat-ears paradise! Heaven on Earth (or well, on Ruffaltio)! The promised land! In those circumstances, how could I *stop* myself from cheering? In fact, it would’ve been weirder if I *hadn’t* cheered.

“So when are we leaving? Tomorrow? The day after tomorrow? I’m ready to go right now if you are!” I said eagerly, a starry look in my eyes.

“Dude, you’re way too pumped over this,” Raiya remarked.

“You’re scaring me,” Nesca added.

“If more people were as fond of beastfolk as you are, Mr. Shiro, sir, this world would be a far more peaceful place,” Rolf mused philosophically.

Kilpha giggled. “I’m glad to see you’re so excited about going there, meow.”

“I’ve always wanted to visit the land of the cat-sìths,” I admitted. “I’d give up all of my worldly possessions just to go there once.”

“Then, I have another request, if it’s okay with you, meow,” Kilpha said, slightly hesitantly.

“Of course! Go on, hit me with your worst,” I said, slapping myself on the chest. “I’m confident I can handle *anything* in my current state.” I was ready to do whatever it took to go to the cat-ears promised land.

“So, um...”

“Yes?”

“Could you, um...”

“Could I what?”

But the words that came out of Kilpha’s mouth next were beyond even my

wildest expectations.

“Could you be my husband, meow?”

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the seventh volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back To My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiroyuki Shimotsuki.

First of all, I'm really sorry for the six-month gap between the previous volume and this one! I cannot apologize enough to everyone involved. This volume was supposed to come out much earlier, but I ended up contracting pneumonia and had to be rushed to the hospital on release day for the previous volume. I spent four hours in an ambulance as they tried to find a hospital that had space for me, so I couldn't even post on social media about volume 6 being released. According to the doctor, my condition was pretty serious, and my lungs were completely white on the X-ray they took when I finally made it to a hospital. Apparently, if my family had come to check on me even one or two days later, I would have died. Man, being alive sure is wonderful, isn't it? Everyone, if you ever feel like something's wrong, don't hesitate. Just immediately go to your nearest healthcare provider, all right?

So yeah, that's why I was silent on social media when the last volume was released: I was literally having a near-death experience. If you don't see me post anything when a volume comes out in the future, please be patient. I might be on the verge of dying again.

Anyway, with this whole "I almost died" business, I felt like writing something a bit more happy-go-lucky for this volume. The last volume was pretty heavy stuff, so I wanted this one to be a nice, fun, easy read. Princess Shessfelia makes a comeback, and as always, I had a blast writing about Emille and her usual antics. I hope you enjoyed reading this volume as much as I enjoyed writing it.

In the next volume, Shiro will be heading out of Ninoritch and traveling to the cat-sith village (don't tell anyone, but I didn't make up my mind until the last minute over whether it would be Kilpha or Emille taking him to their hometown). There will be a bunch more animal ears on display in this upcoming volume, so I hope you will all look forward to it.

All righty, time to do some advertising.

All three volumes of Shizuku Akechi-sensei's *Peddler in Another World* manga are doing incredibly well. I'm super excited for volume 4 to come out! It would mean the world to me if you purchased the manga as well as the light novel.

Now, onto the acknowledgments:

To the illustrator, Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you so much for your fantastic work on this series. And I'm really sorry that the schedule was all over the place on this volume (*kowtows*)! Every time you send me a new illustration, I set it as the wallpaper on my PC, so that whenever I start feeling overwhelmed by my looming deadline, all I have to do is gaze at your beautiful illustrations and I instantly feel so much better.

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, thank you so much for always producing such high-quality work. I get super excited whenever I receive the drafts of the manga, and every time a new chapter is released, I feel like jumping for joy. I'm really looking forward to volume 4 coming out soon!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for everything and I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you!

To my family who found me on the brink of death, my dogs who cheered me up afterward, my friends, and my fellow authors, thank you for everything.

And as always, the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point! Thank you so much!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to children in need. May the lives of as many children as possible be filled with hope and joy! By purchasing this book, you are also contributing to supporting these children.

See you all for the next volume!

Hihiro Shimotsuki



“Hmph!”

“Amata,
stay away
from the
pri—from
my lady.”



“Okay.”

Shessfelia's eyes sparkled with excitement after hearing that she would be spending the whole night with her best friend.

“Shess, can I stay at your place tonight?”



“Eek!”

“Shiro!
I’ve finally
found you,
meow!”

I turned
around and
saw Kilpha
running
toward me.











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 7

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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