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vol. **2**

Thank you
for your
purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

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

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The Story So Far

If a few months ago, you'd asked me to describe myself (Shiro Amata) in one sentence, I would probably have said: a former corporate slave who'd just escaped from his hellish job at an exploitative company. Short and sweet. I don't think it's possible to give a more concise self-introduction than that. But since that time, my life has changed completely.

After going off the deep end because of my boss's constant bullying, which led to me ultimately resigning from my job, I moved into the house my grandma had left me. She had gone missing seven years prior, and her house was full of memories for me. I got down to unpacking, and as I was putting things away in their new homes, I opened the closet door in the room with grandma's memorial altar and...

"Well, this is an isekai if ever I've seen one."

To my total surprise, I realized grandma's house was connected to another world. She always used to say she wanted her adorable grandson (that would be me) to travel more—though when she'd said it, I never imagined "traveling more" would entail taking a trip to another world. After some deliberation, I pushed the closet door wide and stepped into the world of Ruffaltio.

Grandma had also left two skill books for me to find: one taught me the "Equivalent Exchange" skill, while the other granted me the "Inventory" skill. I decided to put them to good use by starting up my own business in Ruffaltio. My plan was to sell products I'd brought over from Japan and make a ton of money. Before long, people started calling me an "extremely adept merchant" and I even ended up having a proper brick-and-mortar store of my own to sell my wares in.

I also met a lot of incredible people over there: Karen, the beautiful mayor; Emille, the unreliable receptionist of the town's sole Adventurers' Guild; the four members of the "Blue Flash" adventuring party; and last but not least, Aina and her mother, Stella. They had all become dear friends of mine, and I'd been

through a lot with those guys. I'd somehow ended up making an obscene amount of money, saved the town's Adventurers' Guild from destruction, and even cured Stella's illness. But after many twists and turns, I was finally starting to get used to going back and forth between grandma's house and this other world as I pleased, when Karen uttered something that would throw me for a loop.

Wait, grandma's alive?! were the words that bounced around my head moments later.

On hearing this piece of news, I couldn't stop myself from yelling loudly into the night as the stars above Ruffaltio twinkled down at me.

Chapter One: Hopes of a Reunion

“What the hell?! Has grandma been alive *this whole time*?!”

Under the starry sky, my screamed words echoed through the quiet streets of Ninoritch. There I was, standing in the backyard of my shop, screaming “Grandma!” into the night air like a madman. My poor neighbors. I can only apologize.

“Sh-Shiro? What’s wrong?” Karen said, utterly shocked by my sudden outburst.

But I wasn’t finished. “If you’re alive, why didn’t you *tell* me?! I thought you were *dead*!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. I eventually ran out of breath, and I let myself slump to the ground. The gentle evening breeze tenderly caressed my cheeks.

“Sh-Shiro, are you all right?” Karen tried again. “What was all that about?”

“For several years now, I’ve thought my grandma was dead,” I explained. “But here you are telling me she’s not, and well...” I paused as I tried to sum up my emotions. “I guess all the feelings I’d been bottling up just kinda overflowed back there.”

“Hm. Do you want to talk about it?” Karen offered. “It might make you feel better.”

“I appreciate your concern,” I said sincerely. “Well, I guess if you don’t mind listening to me prattle on about my issues for a little bit...”

“No, of course I don’t mind,” she assured me. “And it doesn’t just need to be ‘for a little bit’ either. You can talk for as long as you like. It’s fine.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” I said, then promptly launched into my tale. “It all happened seven years ago. At some point, grandma just suddenly stopped answering my calls and...”

I recounted the tragedy that had befallen the Amata family seven years prior:

grandma's sudden disappearance that had led our entire family and all of her neighbors to assume she must be dead, the ensuing family dispute over what to do with her house... I basically told her everything. Well, except for the fact that I was from another world, of course.

"I see. So Alice the Immortal Witch—your grandmother—suddenly went away without telling anyone, huh?" she summarized once I was done.

"Yeah. But from what you just told me, she's been alive this whole time. That's why I was so surprised, and well..."

"You couldn't help but scream," Karen said, finishing my sentence for me.

"Yup," I confirmed. "I do feel bad about disturbing the neighbors, though."

"Well, you just this minute learned your grandmother was alive when you thought she'd been dead for years. It's no surprise your feelings got the better of you." She paused and glanced at the beer bottle in my hand. "*Especially* considering you've been drinking," she added with a teasing smile.

"Sorry if I weirded you out," I said sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it. Besides, if you hadn't been drinking, we probably wouldn't even have been talking about your grandmother in the first place. Plus..." She brought the beer bottle up to her lips and took a few gulps from it. "I got to try this *delicious* alcohol! From now on, you should always invite me over to drink with you, instead of drinking out here alone."

"Really? You don't think I'm a pain when I'm a bit, uh, tipsy?" I asked.

"Nope. It was actually pretty fun seeing this other side of you."

I laughed. "Well, please pretend that my little outburst was all down to the alcohol and wipe it from your memory, all right?"

"Don't worry," Karen reassured me. "I won't tell a soul what happened here tonight."

"What about the 'wipe it from your memory' part?" I prompted.

"Well, you don't usually let your guard down around me, so let me have that at least."

“I’d say my guard is pretty much always down,” I said and sighed dramatically, which made Karen chuckle. I ended up laughing too. “Still...” I said after a little while, “grandma’s alive, huh? She...” I choked up slightly. “She really, really is...”

I felt my vision going blurry and I quickly turned away from Karen so she couldn’t see my face. She could probably have guessed why, but she didn’t comment on it.

Grandma was alive. So what should I do now? It was no secret that I was a grandma’s boy. If it were at all possible, I’d love to see her again, even if it was just once. No, scrap that. Once wouldn’t be enough. I wanted to see her many, *many* times. I wanted to see her and watch action movies with her, like we used to. But if I wanted to go look for her, it’d mean leaving Ninoritch, and I’d been told the wider world was full of all sorts of dangers. There were monsters, of course, but also all manner of bandits and brigands, which meant there was no way I’d be able to go look for her all on my own. I’d need to at least hire a few bodyguards to accompany me on my perilous journey.

I crossed my arms and let out a pensive “hmmm.” For someone like me, who didn’t know the first thing about the world of Ruffaltio, would it even be possible to find grandma? I let out another “hmmm” and would probably have intoned a few more if Karen hadn’t picked that moment to pat me on the shoulder. She must have been feeling bad for me and decided she couldn’t just stand there and do nothing.

“I imagine you’ll want to go look for your grandmother, Shiro,” she guessed correctly. “But I suggest sticking around in Ninoritch for a little bit longer.”

“Stay here?” I said, somewhat confused by this bit of advice.

“Yes. Last year, your grandmother came to our little town for the harvest festival. Perhaps she’ll come again this year,” Karen suggested.

“She might,” I mused. “Grandma always did love lively places. She used to take me and my little sisters to festivals all the time.”

She would be in high spirits the whole time we were there, claiming that “as a born-and-bred Tokyoite,” festivals always made her tingle with excitement. Except she wasn’t a Tokyoite at all. She wasn’t even from the world Tokyo was in.

“Well, there you are, then,” Karen said encouragingly. “She seemed to enjoy herself a lot last year, and she danced the day away. I think it’s very possible she’ll come back this year.”

Grandma dancing, huh? The only type of dancing I could imagine her doing was the Bon festival dance. If I recalled correctly, I was pretty sure she’d once caused quite a stir at the Bon festival due to how impressive her Bon dance was.

“It’s two months until the harvest festival,” Karen said, holding up two fingers to emphasize this. “This year also marks the town’s 120th anniversary, which means the marketplace will be even busier than usual. You can expect to see plenty of stalls and carts in the town square for the duration of the festival, and many people who have left Ninoritch and moved elsewhere will come back for the day, bringing their families with them.”

“So they’ll all be coming back to their hometown to celebrate, huh?”

“Exactly.”

Quite a few people in Japan also went back to their hometowns for this exact same purpose.

“Also, people must’ve heard about your grandmother—Alice the Immortal Witch—being at the festival last year, as I’ve had quite a few inquiries about this year’s festival,” Karen added. “Most of them asked if Alice would be there again this year, though some just wondered if we had an inn in the town.”

“Oh?” I said. “That means there might be a surge of tourists coming to Ninoritch around the time of the festival, then, right?”

“As always, your deduction skills are mighty impressive, Mr. Merchant. That’s right,” she confirmed with a nod. I noticed her cheeks were slightly flushed because of the alcohol. “Yup, we might get a lot of tourists coming here to celebrate the harvest festival this year. From what I’ve been told, nearby cities are even planning on running stagecoaches to Ninoritch for the festival. So I’m now being forced to organize something that’s on a much bigger scale than anything I’ve ever had to before,” she said with a shake of her head.

Despite putting it like that, she was grinning from ear to ear, which wasn’t all

that much of a surprise because if lots of tourists came to the town, they'd naturally end up spending money here. And if the residents earned more money, the town's tax yield would go up too. Of course Karen would be happy about that.

"The adventurers from the Fairy's Blessing guild will also be here for the festival," I pointed out. "I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun."

"I hope so..." she said with a sigh.

"It will," I reassured her. "Besides, it'll be a good opportunity for the townsfolk to get to know all the new adventurers."

She chuckled. "You know, it's weird. You've somehow managed to convince me."

The biggest guild in the country, the Fairy's Blessing, had recently set up a subsidiary branch in Ninoritch, which had brought an influx of adventurers to the town, but as they'd all arrived at around the same time, they were having a hard time integrating with the townsfolk. After all, adventurers spent most of their time fighting, and they came across as intimidating. I was pretty much used to it, of course, as most of my customers were adventurers, but I could see why the townsfolk would find them a tad difficult to approach.

"120 years ago, my predecessors founded this town," Karen mused. "In those 120 years, Ninoritch has gone from being a village to being a proper town. I can't let my predecessors outdo me. I'll use this year's harvest festival to turn Ninoritch into an even bigger town."

"That's the spirit!" I said, doing my best cheerleading impression. "I'll try to help you to the best of my—admittedly meager—ability."

"Really?" she asked.

"Well, grandma ain't the only one who likes festivals, you know."

"So is it safe to assume you'll be staying in town until the festival?" she asked to make sure she'd properly understood what I was saying.

"Yep," I said with a nod. "Just in case grandma shows up."

"A-Ah, yes, of course. I-I'm sure she will! A-And if she doesn't, you can always

go looking for her after the festival!” Karen said hurriedly, before flashing me an awkward smile. “Also...” she said slowly, “I’d be a little sad to see you go. If you do end up leaving town, let me know before you set off, all right?”

“Of course. I’ll come give you a proper goodbye,” I told her. “Don’t worry. Unlike a certain *someone*, I won’t just disappear in the middle of the night without saying anything.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“A-All right then,” Karen said. “We’ll have to meet up again to discuss the preparations for the festival.”

“Of course. I’m very passionate about festivals, so I’ll be going all out to try and make this harvest festival the event of the century,” I said jovially.

“We both work during the day, so our meetings will have to take place at night. Like we’re doing today, I suppose. Is that all right with you?” she asked.

“A-okay with me. I’ll be sure to keep a few of these bad boys nice and cool for the occasion,” I said as I handed her another bottle of beer.

“I appreciate the offer, but we can’t drink while we’re planning the festival,” Karen said, a stern expression on her face. It seemed she was very keen to keep her work life and her personal life strictly separate. What a shame.

“Ah, of course, yeah,” I said with a nod, trying my best to hide my disappointment. “I guess I’ll just brew us some tea instead, then.”

“That would be great, thank you. But for tonight, I’ll keep drinking this, if you don’t mind.” She gave the beer bottle in her hand a gentle shake. “Let’s make this year’s harvest festival one to remember!” she declared, and I responded with an enthusiastic “Yeah!” as we clinked our bottles together, as if to seal this promise.

Chapter Two: Life in Ninoritch

The next day rolled around.

“I still can’t believe you’re alive,” I said to grandma’s portrait as I placed a vase of fresh flowers on her memorial altar. “You could’ve at least told me you weren’t dead. Or better yet, you could’ve come to see me. Jeez, and I cried so much over you!”

In her memorial portrait—if you could call it that, considering she was actually alive—grandma was still smiling out at me, her hands raised in double peace signs.

“How could you just go off like that, throwing those double peace signs without a single care for how your family would feel about it? Should I tell dad? No, that’s a bad idea. I still haven’t decided if I should tell him about the closet...” I said to myself pensively. “And besides, it’s not like I even know where she is.”

Assuming Ruffaltio was the same size as the Earth, searching for grandma would be similar to traveling blindly around the globe, hoping to accidentally bump into her, and considering I’d never even traveled outside of Ninoritch before, I’d have more luck finding a needle in a haystack than stumbling across grandma. If I really wanted to go look for her, I’d need to be filthy stinking rich, and while my shop was making a decent amount of money, it wasn’t anywhere near enough to fund a large-scale search across the entirety of Ruffaltio. For the moment, all I could do was hope she’d turn up at the harvest festival.

“I’m sure you’ll come, grandma,” I said to the portrait.

The aforementioned festival would be happening two months from now, and while it felt like an incredibly long time to just sit around and wait, I had promised Karen I’d help her organize the festival.

“Harvest festival, huh?” I mused. “I’d love to have my own stall at it. Not a food stall, though. I’m sure there’ll be more than enough of those. But it’d be

fun to do something unique for it.”

I brought my hand up to my chin and put my thinking cap on. The good thing was, I had more than enough money to do something like that. I could even go extravagant if I wanted to. That just left the question of what kind of stall I should go for. Goldfish scooping? Nah. Even if they did manage to scoop out a fish, most people wouldn’t be able to care for it. A shooting gallery? No way. Some people might end up bringing their own bows and arrows, or maybe even throwing knives and stuff like that. A rigged, unwinnable pull-string lottery? Hm, not quite sure that’d be a good idea.

“I could maybe go for...” I started, then stopped. “Hm. It’s actually kinda hard finding something that *isn’t* food-related.”

Candy apples, okonomiyaki pancakes, buttered baked potatoes, sausages... Food stalls were all I could come up with. But if I went down that route, I’d end up stealing customers from the other merchants in the town, like the old man who’d sold me meat skewers when I first arrived in Ninoritch.

“Okay, okay. There *must* be something other than food stalls, right? Think, Shiro, think. Dig through your childhood memories of going to festivals.”

And I did just that. The one thing I could say for sure was that grandma appeared in all of my memories. I stood there and stared blankly at grandma’s portrait as I tried to come up with something. Portrait... Photo... Wait, photo!

“I’ve got it! Photos!” I exclaimed.

After all, memories were priceless. Setting up a photo booth so people could take home memories of the festival... That would draw quite a crowd, wouldn’t it? It’d also mean I wasn’t competing with any of the other stalls.

“Isn’t that a great idea?” I declared to no one in particular.



“Mister Shiro, what’s *that*?” Aina asked, pointing to the item that was dangling in front of my chest. Or my solar plexus, if you want to be precise.

At that particular moment, we were standing in my shop in Ninoritch, and we’d just closed up for the day.

“I’m glad you asked, Aina,” I said like a salesman. “This thing here is called a ‘camera.’ It’s a really cool item, and I’ve been thinking of starting a new business venture using this.”

I’d bought a mirrorless camera at an electronics retailer in Akihabara. I’d gone in intending to buy something entry-level and easy-to-use because I wasn’t much of a photographer, but I’d allowed myself to be influenced by my bulging wallet and the store clerk’s extremely convincing sales pitch, and ended up spending ten times the amount I’d been planning to. And not only had I bought a camera, I’d also gotten a bunch of lenses and a portable printer to go with it. When I mentioned my purchase to my little sister—a high school student and self-proclaimed “camera lover”—she’d berated me and called me an idiot, saying the store clerk had seen me coming. According to her, this wasn’t the type of camera for a beginner. But I didn’t regret my purchase one bit. After all, I could now take photos of people and places that simply didn’t exist on Earth. And who knows, maybe I’d get even richer, thanks to this camera.

“Camera?” Aina repeated.

“Yeah, a camera,” I confirmed.

“What do you use it for?”

“Let me show you. It’ll be quicker. Could you look in my direction, please?”

“Huh? S-Sure,” the little girl said uncertainly.

I brought the camera up to my face and—*click*—took a picture of a very confused-looking Aina. I then transferred the photo I’d just taken to the portable printer I’d also brought with me and printed it out.

“Here, take a look,” I said to the little girl as I handed her the picture.

She stared at me, her eyes wide. “Huh? Wait, th-that’s me!” she said in astonishment once she’d seen the picture. “Huh?” she repeated. “Why am I on here? Why am I tiny and trapped in this piece of paper?!”

She shook the picture and looked on the reverse in an attempt to get her head around what was going on. What a refreshing reaction.

“Surprised? Basically, what this camera does is instantly create a picture of

whatever's in front of it. Like people and places, stuff like that," I explained.

"Create a picture?" Aina repeated, no less confused.

"Yeah, and a super realistic one at that. Look at this photo—I mean, this picture. It's almost like it's you on that piece of paper, right?"

"I've never seen something this cool before!" the little girl marveled. "Is it a magic item?"

In this world, "magic items" referred to tools that used magic as their power source. Most of my customers were adventurers, so I'd heard about them before, and I'd seen a few merchants selling some in the marketplace. Aina probably assumed any item she'd never seen before must be a magic item.

"Well, yes, in a way, it *is* kind of like a magic item. To be honest with you, I don't really know how it works either," I confessed. "All I know is how to use it."

She let out a pensive "hmmm" as she inspected the camera hanging from my neck.

"Ah!" she exclaimed after a while, then pointed at the screen on the camera. "I'm also here! Look, Mister Shiro! That's me!"

The confused expression that had scrunched up her face before had been replaced by one of curiosity.

"Wanna try taking a few more pictures?" I suggested. "C'mon, Aina, give me a big smile!"

"O-Okay..." she said, smiling awkwardly. "Like this?"

Click. After I'd taken that photo, I asked her to try a different pose and took another one. For the next one, I asked her to go stand outside, in front of the store.



“These photos are so wonderful,” I said. “I knew it was a good camera, but I didn’t think it’d be *this* good! Or maybe I’m just really good at taking pictures? Or it might be because Aina’s a really cute model,” I pondered aloud.

“I’m in all of these pictures!” Aina exclaimed excitedly as she looked at the photos I’d just printed out. “That’s amazing!”

After seeing her enthusiastic reaction, I was convinced I could make money selling photos, to the point where I was thinking it might even be worth starting the very next day. Even in Japan, people tended to hire professional photographers to take family pictures or school photos. Well, if I wanted to do that, I still needed to work on my photography skills a bit and at least get good enough to make some money off of it. That meant lots of practice. Aina and I looked through the pictures together, and then it was my turn to be the model.

“So I just have to press this button, Mister Shiro?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I called over to her. “Go on, give it a try.”

“Kay!”

Click!

“Did it work?” I asked her.

“Uh...” She seemed hesitant for a moment or two, but then let out a loud “Ah! It did! I took your picture, Mister Shiro!”

I could tell how excited she was just by her tone. I went over to her and, standing beside her, I peered down at the screen.

“Look! I did it!” she told me, bursting with pride.

“Y-Yeah. You did good,” I said, trying to sound as excited as she was at the blurry picture she’d taken of me throwing double peace signs.



We were having fun doing our little impromptu photo shoot when Stella—Aina’s mother—walked into the store, probably here to pick up her daughter now that her shift was over.

“As always, thank you for looking after Aina today, Mr. Shiro,” Stella thanked

me.

“Don’t mention it. She’s actually helped me out a lot today,” I said.

“Mama!” the little girl piped up. “We had lots and lots of customers today!”

“I see your shop is still doing well,” Stella told me. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Aina, make sure you keep working really hard, okay?”

“Kay!” the little girl said, beaming brightly.

“I’m sure you must be very tired after such a long day, Mr. Shiro,” Stella said to me.

“Oh, no, I’m fine,” I reassured her. “Thank you for coming to get Aina. How’s the new house? You’re not too tired from the move, I hope?”

Aina and Stella had recently moved from their little house on the outskirts of town to a new place not too far from the shop. While I was strolling about town one day, I’d stumbled upon a house up for lease about ten minutes by foot from my store. I decided to rent it so I could use it as company housing. I then offered Stella and Aina the chance to move in there for free. At first, Stella rejected my offer as she thought it was too much, but once I managed to convince her that it was all in the name of Aina’s well-being, she finally accepted. They’d moved in last week.

“You helped us so much during the moving process, I’m actually not tired at all,” she reassured me.

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “Are you already done tidying up the place?”

“I, uh...” Stella hesitated, averting her eyes.

“Mister Shiro,” Aina piped up, “mama’s really, *really* bad at cleaning!”

“What?” I said, dumbfounded by this. “You are, Stella? That’s a joke, right?”

“Nope, it’s true!” Aina insisted.

“Well, I-I’m embarrassed to admit it, but...” She trailed off, hanging her head in shame, her face completely red by this point. “I told you not to say anything to Mr. Shiro about that, Aina,” she chided her daughter quietly.

“Since mama’s so bad at it, when I get home after work, I have to do the

cleaning *there* too!” Aina said.

“R-Really?” I said. “Well, let me know if you need any help, okay?”

“Kay! Thank you, Mister Shiro,” the little girl said. “But I can’t really ask you, because you’re bad at tidying up too.”

“Well, I’m embarrassed to admit it, but...” I said, hanging my head in shame like Stella.

After all, I couldn’t argue with my cleaner-in-chief, because it was all thanks to Aina that my shop was so clean and the items were so well-organized every day. But as she’d been working at my store every day from dawn until dusk, she probably hadn’t had a whole lot of time to tidy up their new house yet. *Maybe I should give her a few days off*, I thought as Stella and I both stood there at a loss for words, our heads still hanging in shame.

“I need to go home and clean the house now!” the little girl declared after a little while. “Bye, Mister Shiro. See you tomorrow.”

“We’ll be on our way then, Mr. Shiro,” Stella said to me.

“Okay. Thank you for your help today, Aina. I’m already looking forward to working with you again tomorrow,” I told the little girl before turning to her mother. “Stella, take care on your way home.”

The little girl let out an enthusiastic little “Will do!” and her mother nodded. They headed out of the store, hand in hand, and as they walked off across the marketplace, Aina kept turning around, waving at me, and shouting things like “See you tomorrow!” and “Bye-bye!” over and over. She kept this up until they finally turned the corner.

Chapter Three: The Fairy's Blessing Guild

I finished closing up the shop, then set off for the town's sole Adventurers' Guild, which was now a subsidiary branch of the Fairy's Blessing, the biggest guild in the country. It had started life as a tiny little guild called the "Silver Moon," but a little under two months ago, the Fairy's Blessing had offered them a very tempting deal and the two guilds had merged. The Fairy's Blessing guild was interested in the large forest to the east of Ninoritch—or well, in the treasures hidden in the ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era, which were said to lie deep in that forest. That was largely what had motivated the guild to set up a branch in Ninoritch.

"Good evening," I said by way of announcing myself as I walked in through the main door of the guild building.

I recalled how the first time I'd set foot in that building, there had been no one in the entrance hall aside from Emille, who had been sobbing loudly behind the reception desk. This time, however, it was a hive of activity.

"Just got back from exploring the northeast part of the forest. Didn't come across any ruins, unfortunately."

"I tried exploring the southeast region, but no matter how deep into the forest I went, it was just trees and more trees. I did make a few notes on the monsters in the area, though. You know, just in case. Here it is."

"I just got back from hunting forest wolves and poison serpents. How much ya gonna give me for all this loot?"

"I found a river out in the east part of the forest, about three days on foot from here. The water was clear, so it's drinkable. I think it'd be a very good spot if you wanted to set up camp around there."

"That's great! The farther we trek into the forest, the more monsters there are, so I was looking for someplace to set up camp."

The room was packed with adventurers, and it was incredibly noisy. Looking

at this scene, you wouldn't have been able to tell that the guild had been on the verge of collapse only a couple of months prior. The reception desk was across from the main door that I'd just entered through, and on the right of it, there was a blacksmith's, plus an item shop (a few of my products were on sale there), and to the left, there was a drinking hall. Beyond that, around the back of the building, I could see some training grounds. I stood there for a moment, taking in the sight. After a little while, the receptionist noticed me and called me over.

"Hey, wait, is that..." she said. "Mister!"

"H-Hi, Emille," I said, greeting her. "Looks like this place is as bustling as always."

"What brings you here so late in the day? I'm pretty sure you don't have a delivery scheduled for today. Ah! Don't tell me..." she gasped suddenly. "You came all the way here to see little old me? Is that it? And maybe you even decided to just, you know, randomly bring me a super expensive present?" the greedy bunny girl receptionist said hopefully.

A couple of months ago, she'd found herself as the acting guildmaster of the Silver Moon Adventurers' Guild while it was on the verge of bankruptcy, but after the merger with the Fairy's Blessing guild, she was back to working as a receptionist, though on a much higher salary than before. She spent her days frittering away all her money on luxury items and making eyes at any rich adventurer who walked into the guild building. Overall, she seemed a lot happier than before. Though there was one *slight* issue: since I'd started selling my items to the Fairy's Blessing guild, my finances were in a healthier state than they'd ever been—and it seemed Emille knew this. Every time I stopped by the guild, she'd try to catch my eye and flirt outrageously with me.

"You're a riot, Emille," I said, forcing a laugh. "But no, I didn't come here for you. I'm actually here to meet up with—"

"Aw, you don't have to play hard to get, mister!" she interrupted. "If you let me live in the lap of luxury for the rest of my life, I'll happily become your wife," she said, and like always, I could almost hear the heart shape that punctuated her sentence.

“Why would I want to inflict that torture on myself?” I muttered.

“Meanie!” the bunny girl pouted. “I’d *definitely* make you happy! You could do whatever you want to me. I may not look it, but I’m a very *caring* woman, you know.”

As soon as she’d said this, she brought a hand up to her chest and started unbuttoning her shirt. Some of the new arrivals in the room gawked at her, utterly shocked by this behavior, but most of the assembled adventurers were already used to her antics by this point, so after a quick glance over to see what the fuss was all about, they resumed their activities.

“Wait! Stop unbuttoning your shirt!” I said quickly. “Haven’t you got work to do?”

“I was actually just about to go on break when you walked in. It must be fate that has brought us together today! Don’t you think so, mister?” she said in a honeyed voice as she climbed on top of the reception desk and started making grabby hands at me. I felt a cold sweat break out over my back and immediately took a few steps back. I didn’t know what had gotten into her, but in that moment, I was genuinely scared for my life.



“C’mon, mister...” she cajoled. “Don’t you wanna come drink alcohol with me in a dark, *empty* room somewhere?” Again, I could hear the heart shape that ended her sentence.

“I really, *really* don’t!” I protested. “My grandma’s last request was that I make sure never to end up alone in a dark room with a woman who can’t handle her alcohol! True, I did just learn that my grandma was actually still alive, but even so!”

“I seriously have no idea what you’re talking about, mister, but it’s not important...”

She inched her way closer and closer, but I refused to let her just have her way with me, so I grabbed hold of her wrists before she could place her hands all over me.

“Just give in already, mister,” she grunted as she tried to force herself closer to me despite my grip on her wrists. “Give in and come with me!”

“I a-actually like bright places much better,” I grunted back, trying to keep her away from me.

She kept pressing forward with her body, and I did everything I could to physically repel her, our shoulders colliding as we both tried to knock each other’s hands out of the way. I couldn’t say how it happened, but at some point, our fingers intertwined and I found myself gripping Emille’s hands, her left in my right, and her right in my left. It almost looked like we were about to start wrestling.

“Y-You’re holding my hands with such *passion*, mister,” she uttered in a strained voice, still trying to free herself from my grip. “I’m so, so happy right now!”

“If I don’t hold you down, you’ll immediately jump me and drag me away to a darkened room somewhere!” I protested.

“Aw, c’mon, I know you...”—she groaned from the exertion of trying to break free from my grip—“I *know* you want it!”

A noise similar to the one she had made escaped my lips. “Stop, stop, stop!

You're too close! *Way* too close!"

She might have been a woman, but at the end of the day, she was also a beast person, which meant her strength was no joke. Growing up, my life had been a comfortable one in a civilized country, so it was perhaps no surprise that I was having such a hard time overpowering her. Before long, she'd pushed me all the way back to the opposite wall, and no matter how hard I tried to fight back, I couldn't stop her from bringing her face closer and closer to mine.

She started laughing, her breathing erratic. "Mister..." she said seductively. "Are you ready to give up?" She puckered her lips like an octopus and inched her face even closer.

"What the heck are you doing, meow?" came a voice from behind her.

"Ouch!" Emille cried out. Someone had hit her over the head. "Ouchie, ouchie. Hey, what'd you hit me for?! Talk about rude!" she said, tears of pain welling up in her eyes. She turned around and I caught a glimpse of my savior.

"Shiro, are you okay, meow? Did Emi do anything weird to you?"

"Kilpha!" I exclaimed. In that moment, the cat-sith seemed like a hero to me. "Thank you! Thank you so, so much, Kilpha! You protected my purity! My chastity was at serious risk of being violated by this brute!" I cried out, pretending to sob.

"It must have been really scary, meow. But everything's fine now," Kilpha said, comforting me by patting me on the head. "It's nearly the full moon, and bunny people get much hornier than usual around then. You'll have to be more careful from now on, meow."

"I-I'm not horny!" Emille protested. "Also, I know we're friends, but some things are private, you know! Don't go saying weird stuff like that!" the bunny girl pouted, then closed her eyes and childishly stuck out her tongue. She was acting even more unladylike than usual.

"*You're* the one who's trying to do weird stuff, meow," Kilpha pointed out. "You can't go around doing things like that. And besides, Shiro came here to have dinner with us, meow."

"Wait, 'us'? No way!" On hearing Kilpha's words, Emille's expression turned to

one of shock.

“Yes way,” said a male voice from behind her. “He already has plans with us. Sorry ’bout that, Emi. Seems the two of you hit it off pretty well, huh?”

“It didn’t look like Shiro was having a good time,” a lethargic-sounding female voice said. “That doesn’t seem like a very healthy relationship to me.”

“I agree with you, Miss Nesca, ma’am,” a different male voice said. “You managed to escape from a very perilous situation indeed, Mr. Shiro, sir.”

The three adventurers who’d joined us were all good friends of mine: Raiya, the handsome swordsman; Nesca, the lazy half-elf mage; and Rolf, the gentle battle priest who was quite scary if you got on the wrong side of him. The three of them—along with Kilpha, who’d come to my rescue just then—made up the Blue Flash adventuring party.

“Sorry ’bout the wait, man,” Raiya said. “Let’s go get ourselves some grub, yeah?”

Yup, that’s right. The reason I’d come to the guild building in the first place was to have dinner with the Blue Flash crew.

“Cheers!”

The Blue Flash crew and I were enjoying dinner together. Well, it was more of a drinking party than dinner, but you get the idea. The people sitting around the table included the four members of Blue Flash, me (obviously), and for some reason, Emille was here too.

“Cheers, everyone!” the bunny girl whooped merrily.

When Raiya told her we were having dinner together, she’d thrown a hissy fit that’d put even the brattiest child in the world to shame, so we’d reluctantly let her tag along. The only saving grace was I wasn’t sitting next to her, thanks to Nesca taking one for the team.

It was evening, and with the sun already below the horizon, the sky was starting to darken. A few dishes—mostly meat-based, by the looks of it—were laid out on the table in front of us. I tried one and thought it tasted kinda like pork. Whenever I asked anyone to tell me what kind of meat I was eating in this

world, the answer was nearly always some random monster I'd never heard of, so I had decided it wasn't worth bothering to ask anymore.

"Guess I'll try this one next," I mumbled as I reached for a fish dish.

It was then that things took a turn.

"What'd ya say, you rat?! What'd ya just say?! Well?!" yelled an adventurer at a table close to the entrance of the drinking hall.

I turned my head to see what all the commotion was about. A man with short hair had gotten up from his chair and was striding angrily toward another adventurer, who—from the way he was dressed—looked like a scholar. It seemed like a brawl might ensue at any moment.

"Go on, say that again, I dare ya! What'd ya say about our hard work?!" the short-haired man continued to yell.

The other adventurer snickered. "There's no need to yell. If you insist, I'll repeat it for you. I said: 'There's no point in you exploring the forest if you're not going to map it properly.'"

"We *did* map it, ya dimwit!" the short-haired man bawled, taking out a piece of parchment with what seemed to be a map of the forest scrawled on it.

"Oh, *please*! What you've done there isn't 'mapping' at all. Now listen closely and I'll explain. The reason we map out areas is because it's a way to share information with the other adventurers of this guild. Do you understand? A 'map' such as yours—if you can even call it that, considering it doesn't tell us where anything actually is—isn't a proper map. I mean, just look at how sloppy it is! Or maybe it's *supposed* to be some sort of riddle? If so, we have enough of those to deal with already when we're out exploring all those mazes, so please don't give us any more," the scholarly-looking man berated the other adventurer with a shake of the head as if he were scolding a child. The man he was addressing seemed on the verge of blowing his top.

"Don't you think you should go intervene?" I said to Emille in a low voice.

"I-I'm on break right now. It's not my responsibility!" she pouted, turning her head away from me.

Oh dear. It actually *was* her responsibility to go break it up, but it seemed that bunny brat would rather pretend she hadn't noticed what was going on. I turned to Raiya and silently asked him to go do something about the situation, but he simply shook his head with a scowl on his face.

"Just ignore 'em, man," he said. "Adventurers fight all the time. It's kind of our way of greeting each other. Besides, everyone's feeling pretty frustrated lately, so it's even worse than usual."

"Really? Can I ask why?" I said.

"Sure, it's no secret," he said with a nod. "It's pretty straightforward actually. You see, the Fairy's Blessing guild has drafted in a bunch of its top adventurers—from their main branch and from other branches around the kingdom—to get them to look for the Ancient Magic Civilization Era ruins that are meant to be in the forest. Most of these adventurers here are either the real cream of the crop, or at the very least, they've been doing this kind of thing for decades."

"So basically, they're all really strong, yeah?" I summarized.

"Exactly," he confirmed, nodding again. "But how long has it been now since the Silver Moon became part of the Fairy's Blessing guild? Around two months or so, right? Well, for the best part of those two months, all of these adventurers here have been out exploring the forest, but as of yet, no one's found any ruins. Not one. I haven't heard anyone complaining about it yet, but it's obvious they're all starting to feel a little on edge because of it."

"Ah, I see," I said. "I guess that's pretty normal if they're not making any progress."

My former boss had been exactly the same, though I hadn't been particularly enamored with the fact that he would always choose to take his frustrations out on me.

"Yep. It must be easier to deal with this kinda stuff in big cities, but in Ninoritch? Well, there isn't really any *distraction* available to help take people's minds off things. So frustration just keeps building up and up without any way to relieve it."

"It's certainly true that there isn't really any sort of entertainment around

here,” I said with a nod.

“Hey, mister! Mister!” Emille—who was sitting diagonally opposite me—called over to me in a hushed voice. She’d probably only intended to catch *my* attention, but as she was sitting a little far away from me, everyone ended up hearing her.

“Y-Yes, Emille? What is it?” I asked. “Oh, and please don’t start unbuttoning your shirt this time, yeah?”

“Oh, *puh-lease*! Do you really think I’d start undressing in front of this many people?” she pouted, puffing out her cheeks.

She had, in fact, unbuttoned her shirt in full view of a bunch of adventurers only a short while earlier, but that didn’t seem to count for whatever reason. What a terrifying woman.

“Anyway, about this ‘distraction’ Raiya’s talking about...” she said, raising her eyebrows suggestively. “He means *that*. You know? *That*.”

“‘That’?” I asked, puzzled.

“Aw, come on now!” she said, sounding exasperated. “Why are you so gosh darn slow on the uptake? I’m obviously talking about *brothels*! Brothels!”

“Wha—” Raiya spluttered, springing out of his chair. “Emi, you dumbass! That’s not what I meant at all!”

So that’s what she’d been hinting at. Brothels. Nesca—who also just happened to be Raiya’s girlfriend—didn’t seem to find the direction this conversation had taken particularly amusing.

“Ouch! Wait, Nesca, don’t dig your heel into my foot!” Raiya cried out in pain.

“That’s what you get for saying something so dirty,” Nesca said sulkily.

“I didn’t say anything! Emi did!” Raiya protested. “Also, I’ve never, *ever* been to a brothel in my entire life!”

Nesca huffed a little “hmpf,” at which point, Raiya cried out even louder. “No, not your heel! Please! And why are you still torturing me? I just said I’ve never been to one!”

“You had it coming,” Kilpha piped up. “You’re the one who started talking about sex in front of so many people, meow.”

“Exactly, Kilpha,” Nesca sniffed. “Give this pervert a piece of your mind.”

“I never knew you were such a massive perv, Raiya,” I teased, joining in.

“Right?” Kilpha said, taking up the baton again. “Raiya, you’re a *huge* pervert, meow!”

“It seems I misjudged you,” I added.

“I just said I didn’t do anything wrong! Emi’s the one who brought it up!” Raiya continued to protest. Nesca simply let out a “hmpf” in response and turned her head away from him. “Wait, Nesca! Oh, c’mon, look at me!”

It seemed like the whole situation had turned into something of a lover’s quarrel, though in reality, it was more like they were flirting than anything else. On the other hand, the two adventurers whose squabble had prompted all of this looked as if they really were about to come to blows.

“If it’s a fight ya want, I’m more’n happy to oblige! Let’s take this outside!” the short-haired man raged.

The scholarly-looking gentleman snickered. “This is precisely why I don’t like oafs like you. You lack intelligence and get easily worked up. But I shall accept your challenge. As a scholar, it is my duty to teach dimwits such as yourself a lesson.”

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!” came the chant from the crowd, and I even heard a few people asking whoever was near them who their money was on.

Seems like this sort of stuff is routine to these people, I thought as I looked around the hall.

“What’s going on here?” a female voice said as the back door to the drinking hall was flung open and crashed against the wall behind it. The woman standing in the doorway had golden hair and was drop-dead gorgeous, her sparkling emerald eyes scanning the room to find the source of the commotion.

“You’re not about to start a fight in *my* guild, are you?” she said pointedly.

This woman was Ney Mirage, the guildmaster of the Ninoritch branch of the

Fairy's Blessing guild. She had first come to Ninoritch to negotiate with Karen about the possibility of setting up a branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild here, and several months on, she had come back again as the guildmaster of this new branch. She was a brilliant woman, and from what I'd heard, she'd been appointed guildmaster of the Ninoritch branch as a reward for making all of it possible through her expert negotiation skills.

"Well? Why have you gone quiet all of a sudden? Didn't you hear my question?" Ney addressed the two adventurers, whom she had fixed with a rather intense stare. Both of them immediately straightened, their backs stiff as boards. "Oh, don't mind me. Please, carry on with your little squabble, if that is what you wish. However, if you *do* intend to continue this distasteful display, please understand that you will no longer be welcome in my guild," Ney declared, as both men tried their hardest to shrink from her gaze.

Ney was still fairly young, yet she already had such influence over these top adventurers. I wondered if that was down to her role as this branch's guildmaster, or due to her own abilities, or perhaps, a mixture of both.

"Sorry," the short-haired man mumbled begrudgingly to the scholarly-looking gentleman. "It's just, I feel like I've nearly explored that whole forest, and I still haven't found even a single trace of those damn ruins. It's just gotten me a little on edge."

"Please don't give it another thought," the other man said to him, accepting his apology. "After all, I lost my temper too. I take back what I said."

Thanks to Ney's intervention, a peaceful outcome had been reached. The two adventurers shuffled back to their respective tables and nursed their drinks, looking sullen. Ney let out a sigh and turned her attention to our table.

"Shiro!" she exclaimed on seeing me. "I didn't realize you were here."

"Hello, Ney," I said. "The way you dealt with those guys just now was impressive."

"I apologize for that unseemly display," she sighed as she approached our table, the heels of her boots click-clacking on the floor.

Emille hadn't expected her boss to suddenly show up like this, and in a panic,

she dove under the table.

“Emille, if you were in here, why didn’t you try to break it up?” Ney called over to her, obviously noticing the bunny girl’s presence despite her attempts to hide.

“A-Ah, well, that’s because I’m on break right now...” Emille answered from under the table. “That’s why I, uh...” she stammered, searching for excuses. “They wouldn’t have listened to me, anyway. There wouldn’t have been any point in me going over there.”

“I guess you’re right there,” Ney mused. “Our adventurers do all have rather big egos. In that situation, most probably wouldn’t have listened to a word you—or anyone else other than me, for that matter—said to them. However...” — she paused and reached under the table—“that doesn’t exempt you from doing your job.”

“Ouchie, ouchie, ouchie! That hurts!” the bunny girl yelped. “Please don’t pull me like that!”

Ney had dragged Emille out from under the table and was holding her up by the scruff of the neck. Impressive. Ney must’ve been pretty strong to be able to lift up a fully grown woman one-handed like that. Guess she wasn’t the guildmaster for nothing, huh.

“You’ve been neglecting your duties a little *too* much recently, Emille,” Ney admonished her. “Remember, you work for the Fairy’s Blessing guild now. I think we might need to re-educate you on a few things.”

“I don’t wanna!” the bunny girl wailed. “I’m on break!”

“Come with me. I’ll discipline you myself,” Ney said and proceeded to drag the struggling Emille out of the room.

“Mister, please save me!” Emille yelled back at me. “Your future wife is in trouble! Your beloved future wife is about to be taken away! If you wanna save me, it’s now or never! C’mon, show me how cool you are!”

I ignored her pleas for help, and not only did I ignore them, I even waved her goodbye with a huge smile plastered across my face.

“Anything but a pay cut, please!” I heard Emille cry as Ney dragged her the length of the room. She continued to beg me for my help until they finally exited the room, Ney slamming the door shut behind them.

“Man, managing a guild seems tough,” I muttered once they’d left.

“Experienced adventurers tend to think they’re always right. A lot of them won’t listen to anyone younger than them. It’s the job of the guildmaster to handle them,” Nesca quietly explained to me.

“I see. Sounds like being a guildmaster is no picnic,” I summarized. It was hard for the person working behind-the-scenes to ensure their instructions reached the people working front-of-house (and ditto in the opposite direction), and that’s even before you factored in how working on different sides of the curtain also meant you thought about stuff differently. That was one of the main reasons management jobs were so hard.

“Anyway...” Raiya said once that little spectacle was well and truly over. “There’s a favor I’d like to ask of you, man, if that’s okay?”

“A favor? Of me? What is it?” I asked. Raiya had sounded very solemn, which had made me unconsciously straighten in my seat.

“So we found these flowers in the forest and...”

Let me summarize Raiya’s story for you: the Blue Flash crew were out looking for ancient ruins in the forest when they stumbled upon some rare flowers that were a key ingredient in high-quality healing potions. However, these flowers were also very fragile, and once picked, they wilted in a matter of hours, making them incredibly difficult to do anything with. That’s why Raiya needed my help. Or more precisely, why he needed my Inventory skill, as anything that gets put in my inventory isn’t subject to the passing of time. So in theory, if I put these flowers in there right after picking them, we could take them to the town’s doctor before they had time to wilt.

“So what do you think?” Raiya asked me. “We’ll be there to protect you the whole time, though the forest is still pretty dangerous, so there’s always a chance something bad might happen while we’re out there. But there’s been a real shortage of potions here at the guild recently. I’m sure you’ve heard about that too, right?”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “It’s because the monsters roaming the forest are much stronger than people initially thought, right?”

“Yup,” Raiya confirmed.

A large number of adventurers from the Fairy’s Blessing guild were presently in the process of exploring the forest in an attempt to find these Ancient Magic Civilization Era ruins that were rumored to be in there. While all of the adventurers engaged in this task were highly skilled, there were a lot of formidable monsters in the forest, and because of this, the guild’s stock of potions had rapidly dwindled. Of course, there were all sorts of medicinal herbs that grew in the forest, and the guild had its own in-house doctor, but despite all that, there was still a real shortage of potions.

“Technically, as experienced adventurers, our main mission is to look for these ruins, and we’re supposed to leave any herb-gathering to the newbies and third-raters,” Raiya explained. “But now that we’ve found these rare flowers, with your help, we could get them to the doc before they wilt. We can’t just pass up an opportunity like that.”

“I mean, it *does* make sense to do it, given the guild’s current situation,” I said with a nod.

Ask anyone what the worth of an Adventurers’ Guild is based on, and they would instantly respond: “its adventurers.” A guild can never have too many potions stocked up, as they are vital items that ensure the guild doesn’t lose too many of its members unnecessarily. One might say that potions are an adventurer’s lifeline.

“We’d also make a pretty penny out of it,” Raiya added. “Doctors offer four silver coins apiece for these flowers.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty hefty sum,” I said, impressed.

“Right? Four silver coins just for one flower. Not too shabby, huh? And you wanna know the best part?” Raiya said, a smug grin plastered across his face. “We found so many of ’em, I thought we’d ended up in a flower field!”

“So not only will you be helping the guild, you’ll also be making a ton of money out of it,” I said, and all four of the Blue Flash crew nodded as one. “How

far is this place from here?" I asked.

"A little under half a day by foot. We'd probably make it an overnight trip, just to be on the safe side. If we leave in the morning, we can probably be back sometime before noon the next day. There aren't any dangerous monsters near where those flowers are growing, and if one does suddenly jump out, we'll be there to protect you."

I let out a pensive "hmm" and crossed my arms. Adventurers made up a good seventy percent of my customer base, and it's safe to say they were the main reason my business was doing so well. For these adventurers to stand the best chance of surviving out in that forest, they needed potions. So far, I hadn't heard of an adventurer dying while out on a mission, but I had heard a few talking about close shaves they'd had.

"All right," I said. "I'll come with you." If it meant adventurers were less likely to die while out exploring the forest, I felt I had no choice but to go on this little side quest, even if it did sound like a bit of a crazy thing to do. "You'll have to protect me out there, though," I added.

Raiya shot me a smile. "Yup, you can leave that to us!" he assured me, patting the sword hanging from his hip. "Y'know, the guild has training grounds now. We paid a bit extra to have someone teach us some stuff, and no kidding, he worked us to the bone. So don't sweat it, man. We're much stronger than before, and we'll prove it to you!"

"Wait a minute," I jumped in. "Are you saying you *want* us to encounter monsters?"

Raiya let out a boisterous laugh. "Guess I did make it sound a bit like that, huh? What I meant to say is: rest assured. If we encounter any monsters on the way, we'll take care of it."

"Yup, yup! We're much stronger than before, meow!" Kilpha piped up.

"I've also become faster at casting spells," Nesca added. "Just a little bit."

Both girls puffed out their chests with pride. Rolf simply smiled warmly at me, just like he always did.

"Anyhoo, let's talk money. Are you fine with splitting the money we'll get

from the flowers fifty-fifty? Half for us, half for you? You'll probably get at least five gold coins."

Five gold coins. That was the equivalent of five million yen. Five million yen for an overnight trip. One night, two days. That was a lot of money. But...

"Let's split it five ways," I declared.

"You sure?" Raiya said, rather surprised by this suggestion.

"Yeah. I might not be a member of Blue Flash, but I do think of you guys as my comrades," I said.

"Dude..." Raiya sighed. "You're a merchant, remember? You're *supposed* to be greedy. So why are you..."

He let out another sigh, but then he shot me a bright, heartfelt smile—the kind you reserved for someone you were really close to.

"All right. But don't come asking for more money later on, okay?" he teased.

I smiled back at him. "Don't worry, I won't."

There was a short pause before Raiya spoke again. "Thanks for this, man. Seriously. Anyway, now that Emi's out of our hair, let's do some more drinking, yeah?"

And that's how I ended up agreeing to go on another adventure with the Blue Flash gang.

Chapter Four: Flower Picking and River Rapids

I explained the situation to Aina and told her the shop would be closed for the next two days while I was away. After that was all sorted, I headed into the forest with the Blue Flash crew, and finally, after about half a day of hiking, we made it to our destination. We found ourselves standing in a field of flowers not far from the river that snaked through the woods.

“Wow, I didn’t expect there to be *this* many flowers here,” I said, marveling at the sight before me.

“Told you there were lots of them,” Raiya said.

“They’re really pretty,” I said as I gazed at the hundreds of pale pink flowers all around me. I couldn’t help thinking Aina would love them.

“They’re called ‘apsara,’” Nesca explained. “They only grow near clear water.”

She went on to tell me that apsaras had very deep roots, which explained why they were so difficult to harvest, and even replanting them in a flowerpot straight after picking them didn’t help to keep them alive. The part about having deep roots instantly reminded me of dandelions, as they were also very fragile flowers that wilted quickly once picked. Or so I’d heard.

“Let’s get to work before the sun goes down, meow,” Kilpha said, and we all set about picking the flowers. I put down my rucksack and crouched down in the field of flowers.

“Hey, man, take these for me,” Raiya said, handing me some flowers to put in my inventory.

“Sure thing,” I replied.

“Here, Shiro, flowers!” This time, it was Kilpha’s turn to hand me flowers.

“Gotcha,” I said.

“Here,” the taciturn Nesca mumbled as she handed me some flowers too.

“Excuse me, Mr. Shiro, sir. Could you please also take these?” Rolf was the

next person to hand me some.

The four of them would pick a few flowers, hand them to me, then go back to picking again. We kept this up for a little while until something interrupted us.

Bzz. Bzzzzzzzzz.

There was something buzzing in the air nearby. And it wasn't a quiet buzz, like you'd expect from a mosquito, but more like a car engine humming away.

"Hey, everyone. Shut up for a sec," Raiya said.

After a few seconds, we saw what was making the buzzing noise. Giant insects roughly one meter in height were flying around on the other side of the river. And it wasn't just one or two of them: there were seventeen of these insects in total.

"Flying rhinoceros beetles," Raiya identified them. "They're pretty annoying to deal with, but they're not a threat right now. Just don't move, man," he said to me. "They won't attack us unless we go bothering them first."

On hearing Raiya's instructions, we all stood as still as we could. Flying rhinoceros beetles, huh? From a distance, they looked like crayfish with insect wings growing out of their backs. These flying crayfish were making an awful lot of noise just flapping their wings, and it looked like they must have crossed the river, as they were getting closer and closer to where we were standing. In fact, they were so close by this point, I could see exactly what they looked like. Their forelimbs ended in pincers, just like crabs, and their other limbs were jointed, which was similar to most other insects. I glanced at them again and... Oh gosh. It seemed part of their legs were missing. I assumed they couldn't *all* have lost the same part of their legs in exactly the same place, so this was probably just how they were meant to look naturally.

"Hey, Raiya?" I said quietly.

"What is it?" he said.

"Do you think the bear repellent spray will work on these things?" I asked.

I was referring to the spray I'd used when we encountered the murder grizzlies during my trial adventure. At the time, I'd managed to incapacitate the

monsters using the spray, but this time around...

“Probably not,” Raiya said, shaking his head solemnly. “We’ve used that spray a bunch of times since you gave it to us, but it seems to only work on animal-type monsters. It doesn’t affect insect types at all.”

The bear repellent spray was composed mainly of capsaicin, which is an irritative agent. By spraying it in an animal’s face, it immediately irritates its mucous membranes—in other words, the areas around its eyes and nose—and incapacitates it. But if it were to be used on a creature that *didn’t* have mucous membranes... Well, it was no surprise that it wouldn’t have any effect on it.

“I have another question, if you don’t mind me asking,” I said. “Is it just me or does it kinda look like all of these monsters have suffered some sort of injury?”

“Oh, what a coincidence, man,” Raiya said. “I was actually just thinking the same thing.”

“Look, Raiya,” Kilpha piped up. “These flying rhinoceros beetles all look like they’ve just been in a fight with some other monsters, meow. They’re bleeding all over the place, meow!”

She was right. On closer inspection, I noticed some kind of fluid spurting out of the stomach of the flying crayfish closest to us. The other monsters were also sporting several cuts on the underside of their carapaces.

“Looks like someone hit them with a Wind Cutter spell,” Nesca noted.

“Judging by the consistency of the fluid, it appears they were fighting mere moments ago,” Rolf added, and Nesca nodded in agreement with this assessment.

I heard Raiya make a “tsk” noise next to me. “That ain’t good,” he said.

It seemed the horde of flying crayfish had noticed our presence, as they had immediately taken an aggressive pose and were baring their fangs at us. It seemed they were already gearing up for a fight, even though we’d done nothing to provoke them.

“Rolf, make sure you keep Shiro safe! Nesca, start casting,” Raiya shouted as he drew his sword.

“Understood,” Rolf said before positioning himself in front of me to act as a shield.

Screeeeech!

The swarm of flying crayfish let out an earsplitting cry as they all hurtled toward us as one.

“Fire Arrow,” Nesca chanted quietly. The fire spell that subsequently shot forth killed the monster at the front of the buzzing throng of insects, but this did nothing to deter the other crayfish, who didn’t even seem to care that their chum had just died. They simply let out another shrill screech and swooped toward us. All I could do was stare in horror as the swarm of giant flying crayfish got closer and closer.

“Mr. Shiro, sir, make sure you stay behind me!” Rolf told me as he readied his mace and shield for combat. I could tell by the serious expression on his face that these monsters weren’t likely to go down easily.

“Ugh, I *hate* flying rhinoceros beetles,” Kilpha huffed as she drew her daggers. “Their shells are *way* too tough. It’s a total pain! Okay, I’ll try to distract them. Use your magic to finish them off, Nesca!”

Kilpha threw three daggers at the monsters, but they had little to no effect, as they couldn’t pierce the outer shells of the flying beetles. The daggers all fell harmlessly into the water, though they had succeeded in catching the attention of the monsters, who all stopped in midair and turned toward Kilpha.

“Fire Bolt.” The second they paused, a fireball shot out of Nesca’s hand.

Screeeeech!

The fireball hit the monsters dead-on, and a few of them plunged into the river.

“So these crayfish are weak to fire, huh? Well, in that case, I have just the thing,” I said, before taking a spray can out of my inventory.

“Mr. Shiro, sir, I’m afraid that item won’t work on flying rhinoceros beetles,” Rolf warned me when he saw me wielding a spray can. He probably thought it was the bear repellent I’d mentioned a few moments ago.

“Not to worry, Rolf,” I assured him. “It’s not the same spray.”

“It’s not?” he repeated, looking bewildered.

“Nope. Just watch.”

I pointed the spray can at one of the flying crayfish and produced a lighter from my pocket. Holding the lighter just below the nozzle, I flicked it while pressing the button on the top of the spray can with my right hand at the same time. And what do you think happens when a highly flammable spray meets fire? Well, it basically turns the can into a makeshift flamethrower! A giant flame instantly shot out of the spray can with a loud “whoosh.” It almost looked like magic.

Screeeeeeech!

The one flying crayfish that got hit by my DIY flamethrower immediately fell out of the sky and writhed about in pain on the ground.

“Rolf, please take care of the rest!” I said.

“Understood,” the battle priest responded before swiftly bringing his mace down on the monster and squishing it with a gross sound.

Hey, that was a pretty good combo, if I do say so myself!

“I’m not stopping at just one!” I yelled as I pointed my DIY flamethrower at the rest of the flying crayfish. Some fell into the river and were washed away, while others crash-landed on the ground in front of us.

“Eat sword!”

“Take this, meow!”

Raiya and Kilpha took care of the monsters once I’d downed them.

“Shiro, over here, meow!”

“Sure thing!” I called back, then pointed my flamethrower in the direction Kilpha had indicated and unleashed fiery hell on the giant insects once more. Thanks to my killer technique—which was *totally* prohibited in Japan, by the way—we’d managed to defeat a good chunk of the flying crayfish in no time.

“C’mon, guys! We’re nearly done!” Raiya shouted to encourage us.

There were six of the giant insects left. Kilpha was facing off against one, while Rolf and Raiya were battling two each. The last one was approaching Nesca, whose full attention was focused on casting spells, leaving her wide open to attack. She squeaked a noise of surprise when she saw the insect making a beeline for her, and her face instantly stiffened. She hadn't been expecting it at all. I pointed my DIY flamethrower in the direction of the monster but quickly realized it was too close to Nesca, and if I'd used it at that moment, she'd have been hit by the horizontal pillar of fire too.

"Nesca!" Raiya cried out, before turning to the monsters he was fighting and yelling at them. "You're in my way, damn it! Move!"

"Meow? Don't hurt Nesca!" Kilpha hissed at the insect bearing down on her partymate.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Blue Flash crew had their hands full with their own fights and couldn't do anything to help her. Nesca was practically defenseless. The flying crayfish was getting closer and closer to her. I was the only one who could move freely.

Nesca shut her eyes tight.

The monster was about to strike.

"Damn it all!" I yelled and started running toward her, almost on autopilot as I tossed the lighter and the spray can aside. I ran straight past the monster, and as I neared Nesca, I screamed, "Nesca! Watch out!"



She let out another squeak of surprise as I pushed her out of the way with all my might, sending her tumbling into the field of flowers. The monster turned its attention to me, and as it was almost on top of me by this point, I shielded my face by crossing my arms in front of it.

Screech!

Without so much as a momentary hesitation, the flying crayfish swooped down on me and latched on, wrapping its squirming legs around my torso. I gasped in surprise as the creature made disgusting clicking sounds in my ear. It opened its maw wide, and just as it was about to sink its fangs into me...

“Jump in the river, man!” Raiya yelled at me.

I didn’t have time to reply. I didn’t have time to think. I only had time to follow his advice, so I threw myself into the water.

Screech!

The monster let go of me the moment my body broke the surface tension, probably surprised to find itself suddenly in the water. It squirmed and struggled, but despite its efforts, it couldn’t get out of the river since its wings were completely submerged. Unfortunately, though, the crayfish wasn’t the only one unable to get out of the water.

“Th-The current! It’s too strong!” I hollered.

I stretched my arms out toward the riverbank in a desperate attempt to grab onto something, but it was no good. I was too far away from it, and the current was too fast. Insanely fast. And the river was deep.

“Damn it...”

“O water spirit, I beseech thee, grant this man thy protection.” I heard Nesca chanting a spell and immediately felt magic being cast on me. My body started glowing softly.

“We’re coming to get you, man!” Raiya yelled. “W-We’ll find you for sure! I promise! Wait for us!”

“Shiro, meow!”

“Mr. Shiro!”

My comrades were calling out my name. I could only listen to their yells as the current spirited me away.

I am Shiro Amata, twenty-five, and in the biggest predicament of my entire life.



I was floating downriver. Yup, that’s right: floating. Despite being swept away by the current, I wasn’t drowning. It seemed the spell Nesca had cast on me had given me the ability to breathe underwater, though that didn’t stop me from instinctively trying to hold my breath. The river was growing larger and larger, and the current was getting faster and faster. I’d been in the water for a few dozen seconds by this point. Or maybe it had been a few minutes?

As I squirmed about under the water, I suddenly felt someone grab hold of me. Had my comrades come to save me? I felt someone yank me up out of the water, and as soon as my head emerged above the surface, I let out the deep breath I’d been holding. My torso followed my head out of the water, until I was finally out altogether and lying on the riverbank.

I coughed up all the water I’d swallowed and tried to get my breathing back under control. Once I’d managed that, I glanced up and found myself looking into the face of a little girl.

“Ah, thank goodness you’re alive, hume!” she sighed with relief.

I was too stunned to speak.

“Hm? What are you looking all shocked for? Heeey! Get a hold of yourself! Can you even hear me?” she said as she slapped my cheeks a few times. If I’d had my doubts before, this girl was living proof that I was very much in a fantasy world.

“Y-You’re...” I spluttered. “It can’t be...” I mumbled, and the girl looked at me like I’d grown two heads.

“What’s wrong?” the girl asked. “You never heard of fairies before?”

A fairy—a creature that only exists in fables and folktales—was hovering right

in front of me.

Chapter Five: The Fairy

“A fairy? Wait, you mean like...” I stammered. “A *fairy* fairy? I’ve never seen a fairy before!”

Fairies were fictional creatures from fairy tales—as the name suggests—that occasionally turned up in other stuff, like mecha anime, for example. Guess it shouldn’t have been all that much of a surprise that I’d ended up stumbling across one in a fantasy world like this one. And at that very minute, a creature like that—a creature I’d only heard of in stories—was hovering right in front of my face. Well, hot damn. I never imagined all it’d take for me to meet a fairy was getting washed away in a river. Come to think of it, I couldn’t recall ever seeing one in Ninoritch either. I *so* needed to tell everyone about it when I got back. They’d never believe me! Or at least I *would* if I ever managed to make it back in one piece...

“S-Stop staring at me like that!” the fairy scolded me. “You’re making me feel self-conscious.”

“Oh, sorry,” I apologized. “I couldn’t help it, you know? What with it being my first time seeing a fairy and all.”

She was about 30 centimeters tall, looked to be around fourteen years old, and had dark skin. I couldn’t help noticing the necklace she was wearing, which had a yellow stone set into it. She also had bandages wrapped around her midriff, though as she didn’t seem injured at all, I assumed they were only there to stop her belly from getting cold. The translucent wings sprouting—was that the right word?—from her back fluttered in the breeze as she gently hovered a few feet off the ground.

“Hey, hume. Seriously, stop staring at me,” she said firmly. “Besides, don’t you have something you want to say to me?”

“Something I want to say to you?” I repeated dumbly.

She nodded, a sullen look on her face. “Yes. Something you want to say to

me.”

“Nice to meet you?” I ventured after a pause, earning me a sigh from the tiny fairy.

“You humes really are brainless, aren’t you? There’s something else you have to say to me before we get to all that,” she berated me. “Think about how you ended up here. Who do you think pulled you out of the water and dragged you over to the riverbank?”

My only response was a very ineloquent “Uh...” as I tried to remember the events that had led me to be sitting here. I’d been struggling against the current in a desperate attempt not to drown, and then, just as I was about to lose consciousness completely, I’d felt a hand reach in and grab me... Wait, a hand? I glanced at the fairy’s hands, and sure enough, they were sopping wet. Which meant...

“Ohhh!” I said, finally understanding. “Are you the one who...”

“So you’ve *finally* caught up. Yep, I’m the one who saved you,” my savior said, placing her hands on her hips and puffing out her chest with pride.

I was puzzled how such a tiny creature could have the strength to pull a full-grown man out of a raging river, but hey, we were in a fantasy world, after all. Things that just seemed plain weird to me were commonplace here.

“So you really...” I started before remembering my manners. “Thank you. You saved my life,” I said sincerely.

“Didn’t I just?” the fairy bragged. “If I hadn’t come along and saved you, you probably would’ve tumbled over the waterfall a little farther downstream and died.”

“A waterfall?” I said in surprise. “You mean, that thing where water drops from way, way up high?”

“What else could I be talking about, idiot?” the fairy snorted. “Anyway, that waterfall is, like, many, *many* times taller than you are, so if I hadn’t come to your rescue, you would’ve been smashed to bits on the rocks and you’d probably be fish food by now.”

Now that I thought about it, I could indeed hear a dull rumbling sound in the distance. Judging by the intensity of it, there was no doubting that it was a long way down over that waterfall. *Damn*, I thought. *It really had been a close call.*

“You really did save me...” I mumbled. I could feel my body shaking slightly—not because my clothes were wet, but because it had just hit me that I’d escaped death by the skin of my teeth.

“Oh, by the way...” the fairy said, pointing her finger at me. “What *were* you doing in the river in the first place?”

“Uh...” I stammered. “Well...”

“I always thought there weren’t any humes living in this forest,” the fairy continued. “Has that changed recently? Are there humes living here now and I just didn’t know about it?”

“It’s actually a bit of a long story, but I can explain...” I said.

The little fairy landed on my shoulder, the wings on her back disappearing as soon as her tiny feet touched my damp shirt, then proceeded to plonk herself down into a sitting position with a quiet little “oopsy-daisy” and without even bothering to ask my permission first.

“Okay, I’m listening,” she said, so I launched into the story of what had happened to me.

“So my comrades and I came to this forest to look for a special type of flower that’s used to make medicine, you see. But then, we were set upon by monsters, and well, I had to jump in the river to escape.”

When I was done summarizing the events that had led me here, the little fairy on my shoulder looked across at me with pity in her eyes. “You’re such a weakling,” she said.

I ignored her comment. “So yeah, I don’t actually live in this forest. I’m from a town called Ninoritch, due west of here.”

The moment these words left my lips, her eyes widened.

“N-N-N-Ninoritch, you say?!” she exclaimed, and I could see that her shoulders had started to shake. It seemed as though the mere mention of the

town I had traveled here from had given her quite a shock. But why would that be?

“You mean *that* Ninoritch, right?” she continued. “The hume dwelling?”

“Oh, you know it?” I said in surprise and nodded. “Yup, that’s the one. Though we call it a ‘town’ rather than a ‘dwelling.’”

“Then...” she stuttered. “Then...”

She jumped off my shoulder and hovered right in front of my face, staring at me with eyes full of hope and an imploring look on her face.

“Then, could you take me to Ninoritch?” she asked.

I hadn’t been expecting this, and could only breathe an incredulous “Huh?” in response.

“Is that a no?” she said, sounding dejected.

“Oh, no, no, it’s not,” I hurriedly reassured her. “I just wasn’t expecting you to say that. Do you know someone from there?”

“I do! A male hume!” she said excitedly.

“Really?” I asked. “Who?”

Someone who’s acquainted with a fairy, huh? It could only have been an adventurer.

“Yep! A male hume! He’s a gangly guy a little taller than me, if I remember correctly. And he’s pretty weak-looking too, but he has a really nice smile. Oh, and his hair and eyes are the color of the sky. Do you know him? He told me he lived in Ninoritch, so I’m sure you must know him!” the fairy blurted out, not even stopping to breathe.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said. “Just because we’re the same species doesn’t mean we all know each other, you know.”

“Oh, you don’t?” she said, sounding dejected again.

I nodded. “Yeah, sorry about that. I guess if you could tell me his name, I might have some idea, but from your description alone...”

“His name...” she repeated. “His name...” She gave up. “Nope, I don’t know it.

He's the only hume I know, so I've always just called him 'hume.'"

"I see." Ninoritch was a really small town, so if she'd been able to give me a name, I could've easily looked for him upon my return.

"I should've asked his name," the little fairy said, her shoulders drooping despondently. She'd been so lively just a few seconds ago, but now seemed totally crestfallen. How quickly her mood flip-flopped.

"He seems like someone you really care about," I pointed out.

"We're friends," she said simply after a slight pause.

"I see."

"Yeah," she said as if to reconfirm it. "I used to sneak out of the fairies' dwelling to spend time with him. But one day, the clan leader caught me, and then I wasn't allowed to leave the dwelling anymore. But now, I can finally go out again, and well..."

"You want to go look for your friend," I said, finishing her sentence for her.

She nodded. "But we always met up in the forest, so I have absolutely no idea how to get to this 'Ninoritch' place."

"You met up in the forest, huh?" I said, pondering this bit of information.

"Hey, did he tell you what he was doing out here?"

"He said he was hunting monsters for food to take back to the people of his dwelling," she replied.

"Hm. So he must either be a hunter or an adventurer," I concluded after some thought. "Still, it's kinda romantic, you meeting up with him in the forest like that. Were you two lovers or something?"

"Are you stupid or what?!" the fairy cried, taken aback. "There's no way a fairy and a hume could have that kind of relationship. We're..." she started before pausing. "We're friends. He and I are just..." Pause. "We're friends."

"Hm. Friends, huh?" I said, leaving the word hanging in the air.

"Y-Yes! He's my friend!" she pouted. "And now that I'm finally able to leave the fairies' dwelling again, I wanted to see him. But I can't find him anywhere!"

she scowled.

“And that’s why you want me to take you to Ninoritch,” I concluded, but as soon as I’d uttered these words, a genius idea came to me.

“Okay, wait, hear me out,” I said, which elicited an inquisitive “Hm?” from the fairy. “So you live in this forest, right?”

“Well, isn’t that obvious?” she said testily. “I’m a fairy. I was born and raised here in Gigheena Forest.”

“So you basically know everything about this forest, right?” I continued. “After all, there are a whole load of monsters roaming about the place, so I’m guessing you must know a few tricks on how to avoid them, right?”

“I-I guess, yeah. I have better intuition than the other fairies. I can tell immediately when a monster is close,” she admitted before feeling the need to add something else. “B-But I’m also really strong! Those monsters don’t stand a chance against me. Watch.”

She extended an arm in the direction of a nearby tree.

“Wind Cutter!”

The burst of wind that shot out from her palm took me completely by surprise, making me instinctively close my eyes and let out a little shocked yelp. When I opened them again, well...

“What do you think?” she said proudly. “Impressive, huh?”

The forest in front of me looked like it had been hit by a massive typhoon. The tree she had been attempting to fell had indeed been cut in half. Trouble was, so had dozens of other trees nearby. Even the ground itself had come up in places due to how strong that gust of wind had been.

“Was that...” I stammered incredulously. “Was that magic?”

“Yeah! Are you surprised?” the fairy said cheerfully.

“I certainly am. But...” I paused. “Don’t you think you went a little overboard there?”

“Um...” she uttered quietly and looked sheepish.

“I mean, you could’ve just cut down that one tree if that’s what you were trying to do, you know?” I chided her. “Look at what you’ve done to the forest!”

“It’s, uh...” she stammered. “I-I’m not very good at controlling my magic. B-But anyway, who cares?! I’m really strong! That’s all that matters! I even managed to make a swarm of flying rhinoceros beetles flee all by myself earlier!”

“Flying rhinoceros beetles?” I said. I’d heard that name somewhere before, hadn’t I? Wait a minute. Did that mean... Was *she* the one who’d injured all those flying crayfish that had attacked us earlier?

“You don’t know what they are?” she asked. “They’re, like, these gigantic insect monsters. I kinda did a number on a group of them with my magic earlier,” she bragged.

While she lacked control, the sheer power of her magic was impressive. So that’s how she was able to fly around this monster-infested forest without coming to harm.

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “I’d like to make you a little deal, if you’re interested. I’ll take you to Ninoritch, if in return, you’ll take me to the western part of the forest. What do you say?”

After all, I wasn’t an adventurer. If I just wandered around the forest all by myself, it was *highly* likely it wouldn’t end well for me. But if I had a guide who was not only extremely knowledgeable about the forest but also incredibly strong? Well, I’d have a better chance of staying alive, wouldn’t I? That was my reasoning behind putting this deal to the little fairy.

“You...” she said hesitantly. “You’ll really take me to Ninoritch?”

“Well, you *did* save my life, after all. I don’t mind helping you out in return,” I said, before adding, “That’s only if I manage to get out of this forest in one piece, though.”

The fairy’s eyes lit up on hearing this. Like, *super* bright. “So you just need to get out of the forest, right? L-Leave it to me! I’ll help you find your way! And while I’m at it, I might as well protect you. After all, you look *really* weak.”

“That’s great, thanks,” I said, ignoring that last part. “Well, looks like we’ve

got ourselves a deal.” I extended my right hand toward her.

“What are you showing me your hand for?” she asked, looking confused.

“It’s called a ‘handshake.’ You’ve never heard of it?” I said. “It’s this hume custom we do with friends and people we negotiate with. You just hold out your hands and clasp them together.”

“Oh, a *handshake*!” she exclaimed. “Yeah, I know about those. He told me about them before. Of course, of course.”

She grabbed my hand with both of hers and shook it vigorously. Her hands may have been absolutely tiny but her strength was no joke, and I was slightly worried she might accidentally rip my arm off.

“By the way,” she said when she’d had quite enough of that, “do you have a name?” She sounded particularly haughty when asking this.

“Of course I do,” I said simply.

“Well, what is it? D-Don’t get me wrong,” she added quickly. “I don’t really care. But it’s gonna be a bit weird if you take me to the hume dwelling and I go around calling you ‘hume.’ Though it’s not like I actually *want* to know your name or anything.”

Even though she was being all defensive, she kept glancing at me as she delivered her little speech, and it was pretty clear she was only *acting* unbothered. *So she really wants to know my name, huh?* I thought.

“I’m Shiro Amata,” I told her.

“Shiroamaata, huh?” she said thoughtfully. “What a weird name.”

“You’re saying it like it’s all one word. Shiro is my first name, and Amata my last name,” I corrected her. “My friends call me Shiro.”

“Oh, I see,” the fairy said. “So should I call you Amaata, then? Since I’m not your friend, I mean.”

“I was just trying to say that I’m more used to people calling me Shiro,” I clarified.

“But we’re not friends,” she repeated.

“Well, I guess not. Maybe partners?” I said, then thought about it for a second. “Hm. Maybe not. You’re more like...” —I searched for the right word —“the commander right now. At least until we’re out of the forest.”

“The c-commander?” she said quizzically.

“Yeah. You’re the commander of our little group. You’ll be the one giving instructions and I’ll listen and obey. And that’s how we’re gonna get out of this forest,” I explained.

“Hm...” she said, ruminating on this. “So I’m the leader, basically?”

“Yup, precisely,” I confirmed.

“Leader...” she repeated. “So I’m the leader, huh? I like the sound of that! I can get behind that,” she said, nodding repeatedly and giggling proudly, before pointing a tiny finger at me. “From now on, I’m your leader, hume! Ya got that?”

“Well, it doesn’t look like I have much of a choice, does it?” I sighed.

“Of course you don’t. I saved your life, after all! A-And anyway, there’s no way you can get out of this forest without my help,” she reminded me, puffing out her chest.

“Fine, fine,” I said, conceding defeat. “Until we make it out of this forest, you’re the leader and I’m your underling.”

“A-And don’t forget to call me ‘boss’ too,” she ordered. “Plus, I’ll still be your leader even after we’ve left the forest!”

“Sure thing, boss.”

She giggled proudly. “That just gave me a tingling sensation in my stomach,” she said. “S-Say it again!”

“Yes, boss!” I obliged, and she let out a loud, happy squeal.

“A-Anyway, Shiro...” she started, then seemed to think of something. “Oh, yeah, as I’m the leader, I will obviously be calling you Shiro, okay? Because *I’m* the leader. And I don’t want to hear any complaints out of you. I’m the leader, after all.”

“Fine by me,” I said with a nod.

“Good, good!” the fairy said happily. “But don’t worry, I’m a nice leader! Y-You can rely on me!”

“More importantly, little boss—”

“Hey, who are you calling ‘little’?!” she moaned, puffing out her cheeks. She didn’t seem to have appreciated my teasing.

“Sorry, I meant ‘boss,’” I corrected myself.

“Good boy. That’s what you *should* be calling me,” she said, hammering home her point. “Anyway, what is it, Shiro?”

“Think ya could see yer way to tellin’ me yer name, boss?”

“Wh-Why are you speaking like that all of a sudden?”

“Dunno. I just thought it was kind of a fitting way to speak, what with me being your underling and all,” I said.

“Well, stop it. Don’t talk to me like that,” she chastised me.

“Wouldst thou prefer instead that I speak in yon manner?”

“No!” the fairy cried.

I cleared my throat and decided to try “business mode” next. “Understood, ma’am. As your underling, I, Shiro Amata, shall do my utmost to carry out your orders to the best of my ability to repay you for saving my life earlier.”

“I don’t like it when you speak like that either, so you’d b-better stop it,” the fairy stammered. “That’s an order from your leader!”

“But I’m your underling, aren’t I?” I pointed out.

“You are, but you’re also my frie—ah! Crap!” she cursed. “Anyway, just stop it! Stop speaking like that! Just speak normally, okay? Normally!”

“Okey dokey, then. I’ll speak normally from now on,” I said. I then looked her straight in the eye and asked, “Could you please tell me your name, boss?”

“Of course. I’m Patty Falulu,” the boss—I mean, Patty—happily introduced herself. “I’ll be counting on you from now on, Shiro.”



After we were done learning each other's names, it suddenly struck me that I was still drenched from my impromptu journey down the river a short while earlier.

I sneezed. "It's starting to get a bit chilly out here, isn't it?" I said.

The sun had already set by this point, and it was gradually getting colder and colder. It was still mild at this time of the year, but if I just sat around in these wet clothes, I was sure to catch a cold. If I were by myself, I could've popped back to grandma's house and run myself a nice warm bath, then changed into some pajamas and slid under the bed covers to get a good night's sleep. But I couldn't just make the door to grandma's house appear out of nowhere in front of Patty.

"Wh-What's wrong?" she asked, tilting her head to one side when she noticed I was staring at her.

"Oh, uh, nothing," I said. "I just got a bit lost in my thoughts there."

"Oh, I-I see," Patty stammered. "Come to think of it, you sneezed just now, didn't you? A-Are you cold? I'll go gather some kindling, okay? Stay right where you are."

"Ah, wai—" I tried to tell her that it wasn't necessary, but she'd already taken to her wings.

"I'm going to get some firewood!" she declared loudly, flying away before I even had a chance to try and stop her.



I eventually found myself sitting in front of a crackling campfire. Patty had come back carrying a ton of kindling not long after she'd gone off in search of it, and once I'd arranged all of it into a pile on the ground, I produced a match and got a fire going. I changed into a spare T-shirt that I had in my bag, and placed my wet clothes near the campfire to dry.

"There are monsters in this area, so be careful, you hear? Not that you need to worry about them, of course—not with me by your side," Patty declared,

puffing out her chest with pride. She had the air of someone who would probably make sure her underling (me, in other words) stayed safe.

“Gosh, what a reliable leader you are,” I said flatly.

“H-Hey!” the fairy pouted. “Say it with some conviction, will you?”

I laughed. “Sorry, sorry. I do mean it, though. You are reliable. I mean, if I was out here all on my own...” I paused as I surveyed my surroundings. On my right, it was just trees, trees, and more trees, and on my left was the river that had almost spirited me to an early demise. I could only see trees in front of me and behind me too, and as Patty had just said, this whole area was full of monsters. “I would be utterly lost,” I said, finishing up my sentence.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah.”

I stared at the river. How far was I from that field of flowers? And more to the point, were my comrades okay? They probably *were*, because they didn’t have to worry about protecting me anymore. Or at least, I hoped they were.

Patty followed my gaze to the river. “Do you want to go back to your companions?” she asked.

“Well, they’re my companions, so of course I do,” I said. “They’re probably out there looking for me right now. Just like you’re looking for your friend.”

“I-I see.” She crossed her arms and let out a pensive “hmm” as she ruminated on this. After a little while, she spoke again. “All right,” she declared decisively. “I mean, I *am* your boss, after all. I’ll help you look for your friends.”

“Are you sure?” I asked in surprise.

“Well, I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Patty said simply. “I’m your boss, so it’s my job.” Her face had gone a little red, and I was pretty sure it wasn’t just because of the fire.

“Anyway, aren’t you hungry?” she said, changing the topic completely. She reached out in front of her and plucked some kind of fruit that looked like an apple out of thin air.

“Wait, boss!” I exclaimed. “Does that mean...”

“Hm? Oh, is that the first time you’ve seen someone use the Inventory skill?” she said.

“No, it’s not. I was just surprised you had it,” I admitted.

“Well, it’s quite common for fairies to have a few skills. A number of us can use the Inventory skill,” she explained.

“Wow, really?” I marveled. Fairies really were something else.

“Well, since you’re my underling, I guess I can give this to you,” she said as she pressed the fruit that looked like an apple against my cheek. “Oh, and drink this too. It’ll warm you up a bit.”

After taking the apple(?) from her, she handed me another fruit. This one looked like a calabash, and when I shook it gently, I heard a splashing sound from inside it. On closer inspection, I noticed there was a cap seemingly made out of a material resembling cork wedged in the top of the strange fruit.

“What is this, boss?” I asked her.

“Mead,” she answered. “I made it myself.” I let out an incredulous “Huh?” which prompted her to ask, “D-Don’t you like mead?”

“No idea. I’ve never tried it before,” I confessed.

“W-Well, try it, then!” the fairy urged. “It’s really tasty!”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’ll have a sip.”

I undid the cap and took a big gulp of the liquid inside. I couldn’t help the immediate noise of surprise that escaped my lips. The mead Patty had given me was the best-tasting alcohol I’d ever had in my entire life, no question about it.

“Holy moly...” I breathed. “Boss, this is amazing!”

She chuckled proudly. “Told you so! There’s plenty more, so go ahead and drink as much as you like!”

“Thanks, boss!” I said merrily.

Mead had a pretty high alcohol content, and I was starting to feel a pleasant warmth spreading out from my stomach. And so, Patty and I munched away on our fruit while drinking this delicious mead, and I couldn’t have been happier.





“Thanks for the food and mead, boss!” I said, clapping the palms of my hands together and bowing my head to Patty to show my gratitude.

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “Now that you’ve eaten, get some rest. Tomorrow, we’ll follow the river upstream and go find your friends. You humes can’t fly, so you’re gonna have to do a lot of walking.”

“Isn’t it dangerous sleeping out in the open without anyone standing guard, though? I volunteer to do that. You can get some rest, boss,” I suggested.

“You stupid or what? There’s no way I’m letting a *hume* keep watch,” Patty scoffed. “I’ll do it. You go sleep. Th-That’s an order, okay?”

“An order?” I asked.

“That’s what I said,” she affirmed. “And my words are absolute!”

“Absolute?”

“Y-Yeah. They’re absolute!” she repeated.

I sat and stared at her for a while.

“Wh-Why have you gone quiet all of a sudden?” she said.

“So your words are...”

“Absolute!” she reiterated once more.

I felt like I was playing this popular Japanese drinking game I’d heard about called the “King’s Game,” and I couldn’t help letting out a quiet chuckle.

“Fine, fine,” I acquiesced. “Well then, I will gratefully accept your offer and turn in, boss.”

“Your boss’s words are absolute, remember? *Absolute!*” Patty kept repeating. “So you *have* to get a good night’s sleep because I said you do. You got that?”

“Hey, boss...” I said, after a pause.

“What is it?”

“Thanks.”

“Um, it’s n-no biggie,” Patty stuttered bashfully.

I propped myself up against a tree and fell asleep almost instantly, with the tiny fairy still perched on my shoulder.

Chapter Six: Reunion

And just like that, the next day arrived.

“Many different races live in this forest. There’s us, the fairies, of course, but there are also goblins, orcs, and even ogres. They’re a scary bunch, I don’t mind telling you. There’s also...”

Patty and I were walking alongside the river, following its course upstream—or well, *I* was walking; she was flying. She fluttered around me, occasionally sitting on my shoulder and even lying on top of my head once or twice. She really was just doing whatever she wanted. When I pointed this out, she said it was her privilege as the boss. As for me, on the other hand, I had to wade through the wild undergrowth of the forest, as I couldn’t fly and there were no proper paths to follow. The ground was also somewhat uneven, and just managing to make any progress whatsoever was already proving quite the challenge.

“And if you go in that direction,” she continued, pointing off into the distance, “you’ll find the elves’ dwelling. They’re the only ones that have a barrier around their dwelling. Don’t you think that’s unfair? They don’t really venture outside of it an awful lot. You know, this one time, I was flying around near their village, and...”

Even though she’d told me there were monsters in the forest and we needed to watch our step, Patty hadn’t stopped talking for more than about a second since we’d set off.

“Hey, all this walking has got me tired,” I said. “Can we take a break?”

“*Another* one?” she asked. “Well, i-if you really need to. But only for a little bit, okay?”

“Thanks, little boss.”

“I am not *little*!” she snapped. “Here, lean against that tree.”

I did as she said.

“Oh, and have you ever seen a baboona flower before?” she carried on. “Their nectar tastes super weird. This one time, I wasn’t paying attention, and I ended up drinking some and...”

Even while I was taking a rest, she kept on babbling away. I wondered if all fairies were like this, or if it was just a Patty thing. She did have a huge smile on her face as she was telling me all these things, though, and I had to admit, I was learning a lot of useful things that even most adventurers probably didn’t know. I now knew a bunch of stuff about what types of monsters and tribes resided in the forest.

But the thing that surprised me the most was that what I and the townsfolk of Ninoritch usually referred to simply as the “Big Forest” was in fact called the Gigheena Forest. Apparently, way before Patty was even born, this place wasn’t actually a forest but a country called Gigheena. After the country fell, the vegetation was left unchecked and kept on growing and growing until a giant forest formed, and ever since, the tribes living in the area had referred to it as the Gigheena Forest.

I tried asking her if this had all happened back in the Ancient Magic Civilization Era, but she just got angry and told me she “didn’t have a clue about stuff from before she was born.” She looked to only be about fourteen, so it was only natural she wouldn’t know a whole lot about a country that fell so long ago. And besides, legends and tales from a country that had existed before the forest had even come into being must’ve been lost to the sands of time long, long ago.

“All righty. Should we get going?” I asked. “Is that fine with you, boss?”

But just as I was about to stand up again, Patty brought a finger up to her lips. I immediately understood that I needed to keep my mouth shut, so I did just that and tried to make as little noise as humanly possible.

Rustle rustle rustle.

It sounded like something massive was passing by just a few meters behind us.

Rustle. Rustle rustle. Rustle rustle rustle.

I held my breath and shut my eyes tight. Thirty seconds passed... A hundred seconds... Five minutes...

"You can open your eyes now. It's gone," Patty said after a while.

I immediately sucked in a big gulp of air, turned around, and saw huge craters in the ground that looked an awful lot like giant footsteps, which I was sure hadn't been there before.

"Do you mind me asking what just went by?" I said slowly.

"You probably don't want to know," she said. "If I tell you, you might be too scared to carry on."

"Huh," was all I could manage.

"B-But if you really, *really* wanna know, I-I don't mind telling you!" she said quickly. She looked impassive, but kept glancing at me as if trying to judge my reaction. It seemed like she really wanted to tell me, but I didn't take the bait.

"No, I'm good, thanks," I said, shaking my head. "I don't wanna stay here rooted to the spot out of fear forever."

"I-Is that so? Well, on your feet, then! C'mon!" she cajoled me. "We need to get going before the sun goes down!"

"Okay, okay," I said.

I did what I was told and we continued on our journey. I remembered her bragging about them earlier, but I'd just witnessed firsthand how truly impressive Patty's instincts were. She had noticed the presence of a dangerous monster practically instantly and decided to stay hidden to let it pass by without noticing us. If I didn't have her by my side, who knows if I'd be able to escape this forest in one piece?

"If you weren't here, I would have died ten times already," I jokingly pointed out.

"What are you saying? Ten times? Don't make me laugh. You'd have died a *hundred* times by now!" she retorted, and it didn't seem like she was joking either. So if she hadn't been here with me, I would've died at least a hundred times, huh? *Thank goodness I met her*, I thought to myself.

“Let’s keep going. Your companions are probably worried about you,” she said in an attempt to make me pick up the pace a bit.

We carried on following the river upstream for an entire day, but just as the sun was about to set, something happened.

“Shiro, something’s coming,” Patty said urgently. “Go hide somewhere.”

“Sure thing,” I replied, and did what I was told, ducking behind a tree and crouching down to conceal myself from view. It was then that I heard a familiar voice.

“Hey!” it was calling out. “Where are you, meow?!”

“Wait, was that...” I said, totally stunned. “Kilpha?!”

“If you can hear us, say something!” the voice continued.

“Where are you, man?” This time, it sounded like Raiya was the one yelling. “I swear, I’m gonna be super mad if you’re dead!”

“Don’t say that word,” a quiet lethargic-sounding voice cut in.

“S-Sorry,” Raiya said.

“He’s alive. I know he is,” said the quiet voice, which obviously belonged to Nesca.

My precious comrades. I felt an overwhelming happiness rising up from the bottom of my heart.

“Rolf, Raiya, Nesca...” I mumbled. “You guys...” I was almost hoarse with emotion. “You guys...”

I stood up almost as if I was on autopilot, but Patty immediately zipped over to scold me.

“I-Idiot! Why are you standing up all of a sudden?” she said in a panicked voice, but I quickly reassured her that everything was fine. “Are those your companions?” she asked after a few seconds.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “They’re my dear, dear friends.”

“I see,” she said. “Well, that’s great! We managed to find your friends!”

She sounded incredibly happy, almost as if it was her who had just been reunited with friends. Yet at the same time, I couldn't help thinking she looked a little sad.



“I’m here, guys! It’s me! It’s Shiro! I’m over here!” I yelled at the top of my lungs as I jumped out from my hiding place behind the tree. The Blue Flash crew were about five hundred meters away from me.

“Shiro?!” Kilpha cried as she started running toward me at full tilt. “Meow! Shiro!” It took her no more than ten seconds to cover the five hundred meters between us. Even an Olympic athlete would’ve been in awe of her incredible speed. “Shiro!”

“Kilpha—oof!”

She threw herself into my arms with such force, I almost thought I’d been shot. “Shiro! Shiro! I’m so glad we found you, meow! I’m so glad, meow!” she cried out.



Now, while I may be a man, I was born and raised in Japan, and up until this point, I'd lived a nice, comfortable life, which meant I was—let's be honest—rather weak. All of which meant only one thing was going to happen when Kilpha threw herself at me with such impressive speed...

“Shiro, Shiro, Shiro!” she bawled. “I’m not ever, *ever* letting go of you again, meow! Never, meow! I’m staying with you forever!”

“Kilpha, please calm down—”

SPLASH.

My legs gave out, and for the second time in the last couple of days, I fell into the river. This time though, I took Kilpha with me.

Chapter Seven: Assessing the Situation

Almost as soon as Kilpha and I had tumbled into the river, Rolf threw us a rope and we managed to haul ourselves out of the water.

“Dude, I’m so glad you’re safe!” Raiya said once we were on dry land again.

“We must thank the gods for this miracle,” Rolf agreed.

“I knew you were alive,” Nesca said firmly. “I knew you were.”

“I should’ve jumped in the river after you!” Kilpha exclaimed. “It would’ve been better than being away from you for so long, meow!”

All four of them crowded around to tell me how glad they were that I was safe. I was so relieved to see them I felt like I might burst out crying at any moment, and judging by the looks in their eyes, they obviously felt the same way.

“If we hadn’t found you, I-I’d...” Raiya started, but he choked up before he could reach the end of his sentence.

“You saved my life again, Shiro,” Nesca said quietly.

“I am incredibly ashamed of my incompetence,” Rolf stated with a serious look on his face.

“Don’t ever leave me again, meow!” Kilpha scolded me.

I could see the tears welling up in their eyes. In that moment, the strong bonds between us were almost tangible.

“I’m sorry for causing you guys all that trouble,” I finally managed.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Raiya said, immediately shaking his head. “We were the ones who failed to protect you. It’s all our fault.” He clenched his fists in frustration.

“Shiro, thank you for saving me. And...” Nesca paused, then added softly, “I’m sorry.”

“If you hadn’t pushed her to safety, who knows what would have happened to her,” Raiya explained before sharing a look with Nesca. The two of them bowed to me at the same time. “Thank you so much for saving Nesca’s life, man,” he continued. “As the leader of Blue Flash—and more importantly, as Nesca’s boyfriend—I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart. Seriously, man, thank you. Thank you so, so much!”

“You saved me,” Nesca said with a nod. “That’s the second time now. I promise I will return the favor one day. Thank you, Shiro.”

“Oh, you guys. There’s no need for that. Lift your heads, please,” I said quickly.

“No, this isn’t enough,” Raiya said firmly. “However many times I thank you, it’ll never be enough. Thanks, man. I mean it. And I’m so, so sorry! As the leader of Blue Flash, it’s entirely my fault that you found yourself in such a dangerous situation. When you report this incident to the guild, please let them know that it was all my fault!” The ever-confident Raiya was practically begging by this point, and his head was getting progressively lower and lower.

“Hey! What are you saying, meow?” Kilpha piped up. “We’re a team, aren’t we, Raiya? When we succeed, it’s a team effort, so it should be the same when we mess up, meow!”

“Yes, it’s not *your* fault,” Nesca insisted. “It’s *our* fault.”

“But I’m the leader, guys!” Raiya protested. “When something bad happens, I’m the one who has to take the blame.”

“Mr. Raiya, sir, we are a party. We are comrades,” Rolf stated. “We work together and grow together. And when we make a mistake, we repent for it together.”

All four of them were trying their best to comfort Raiya. A smirk crept across my face, and I decided I’d join in too.

“They’re right, Raiya,” I said nonchalantly. “I mean, we’re comrades, aren’t we? If you guys messed up, that means so did I. Do ya really think I’m just gonna let you show off how ‘noble’ you are by pretending it was all your fault?”

This was met with general silence as all four of them looked at me like I’d

grown a second head.

“Wh-What are you saying, man?” Raiya said. “It was because of us that you —”

“No, what are *you* saying, Raiya?” I interrupted him. “You keep telling me ‘we’re comrades,’ and ‘we’re friends,’ but now all of a sudden, we’re not comrades anymore?”

“Th-That’s not what I meant! Wait. No, no, wait a minute, man. Of *course* we’re comrades. You’re our friend. But this doesn’t have anything to do with that—”

“Raiya! That’s so cruel!” I said, pretending to be deeply offended. “You call me your comrade, but you’ve been stringing me along this whole time, haven’t you?! You big meanie! You loved-up normie! From now on, I’m not selling you even a single match!”

“I said wait, man!” Raiya protested. “What I’m trying to say is—mmf!” Kilpha slapped a hand over his mouth as he tried to explain himself once more.

“Come on now, Raiya,” she said. “Just listen to Shiro, yeah, meow?”

“Yeah. Just shut up and accept the kindness Shiro is showing us,” Nesca agreed.

Rolf laughed. “Mr. Shiro, sir, you truly are a man of many virtues. As a servant of the gods, I shall strive to follow your example.”

“I’m not saying it out of kindness or anything,” I objected. “You guys really were trying your hardest to protect me. I understand that better than anyone.”

“But for us adventurers, results are what matters—” Raiya started, but I cut across him.

“Results?” I asked. “Well, in that case, look at the results. I’m alive, aren’t I? I’m alive *and* I managed to get back to my comrades. What could possibly be more important than that?”

Raiya sighed and gave up. “I know I’ve said this before, but you’re one hell of a smooth talker, man.”

“Well, I *am* a merchant, after all,” I said smugly. “Anyway, like I said, I’m alive

and I'm with my friends. That's good enough for me. There's no need to throw around mentions of 'results' and all that official-sounding stuff. We're among friends right now. You should keep all that talk for when you're in front of your superiors at work or whatever. And anyway, you don't need to worry on that score. I don't plan on reporting any of what happened to the guild. And I mean that. End of discussion!" I then proceeded to wave my hands around in the air repeatedly to emphasize that this conversation was well and truly over. And I wasn't lying to make them feel better: everything I'd said was exactly how I felt. These guys were my friends, and the simple fact we had been reunited was enough for me.

"Man..." Raiya said, scratching his head. "Okay, fine! I hear ya. If that's what you want, we'll leave it at that." It seemed he'd finally understood that there was nothing he could say to make me change my mind.

"Finally," I breathed, relieved it had been resolved.

"But even if *you* don't inform the guild what happened," Raiya continued, "the second the mayor hears about it, we're in for one hell of a tongue-lashing."

By this point, I was considered a resident of Ninoritch, and Karen was the type of mayor who didn't take too kindly to the residents of her town being placed in perilous situations. I wondered if she'd ever learn what had happened to me. She *probably* wouldn't... Right? Wait, now that I thought about it, hadn't Aina told her I was heading into the forest with the Blue Flash crew? Karen's angry face suddenly floated up in my mind, and I had to admit, she looked a little scary. Scratch that, she looked more than a *little* scary—she looked damn well terrifying.

"Well, anyhoo, at least you're alive. When the mayor finds out what happened, I'll let her rebuke me as much as she wants," Raiya said defiantly.

"I shall do the same, Mr. Raiya, sir," Rolf agreed, though not everyone was on the same page.

"I-I'll pass on that, meow," Kilpha said hesitantly.

"You can get told off in my place, Raiya," Nesca said.

Raiya's eyes grew wide at this. He'd clearly been expecting the girls to follow

suit, but they hadn't. He then turned to me and grabbed me by the shoulder. "You'll come with me, man, right? You'll let her scold you too, right?"

"Nah," I said, shaking my head. "After all, I'm not an adventurer. I'm just a little ol' merchant. I wonder if she'd even lecture me in the first place..."

"Oh, come on, man!" Raiya cried out as he fell to his knees in disbelief.

"We shall pray to the gods to protect us in our hour of need," Rolf comforted him, patting him gently on the back.



"Oh, what happened to those monsters, by the way?" I asked. I figured we'd spent long enough celebrating our reunion and it was time to get onto the important matter of making sure everyone else was all right.

"Oh, don't worry about that. We beat 'em up good," Raiya told me. "Though I guess if you hadn't gotten rid of a few of them with that weird fire-making item of yours, things might not have ended as well as they did." According to Raiya, they'd managed to finish off all of the remaining monsters not long after I'd fallen into the river. "Still, I'm impressed you managed to survive out here all by yourself, man. We had to fight a hell of a lot of monsters on our way here," Raiya said.

"He's right, meow!" Kilpha piped up, nodding away. "Some of them even gave us quite a bit of trouble, meow."

"Oh, but I wasn't alone," I said. "As it happens, someone came to my rescue."

"Someone came to your rescue?" the four of them repeated, looking dumbfounded.

"Yeah. She's waiting over there," I said, pointing at the tree I'd hidden behind earlier.

All four of them peered in the direction I was pointing and immediately locked eyes with Patty, who was staring at us with the top half of her face peeking out from behind the tree. She reminded me of a little girl staring at a group of kids and wanting to join them, but being too shy to actually open her mouth. All four of the Blue Flash crew seemed utterly shocked by the sight of Patty.

“H-Hey, man...” Raiya started hesitantly.

“What is it?” I said.

“My eyes might be playing tricks on me here, but isn’t that little girl, uh...” He paused briefly. “Isn’t she, like, super small? Or wait, is the tree in front of her just absurdly huge?” Raiya said as he rubbed his eyes repeatedly to make sure he wasn’t seeing things.

“Well, of course she’s small. She’s a fairy. She’s basically about this big,” I said, using my fingers to show that she was approximately 30 centimeters tall. The Blue Flash crew just stared at my hand in silence.

“She’s the one who fished me out of the river,” I continued. “Oh, I should introduce her to you guys.” I paused and turned toward Patty. “Hey! Stop hiding back there and come over here!” I called out to her.

“Uh...” she said hesitantly. “I-Is it all right to come over there?”

“Well, if you don’t, I can’t introduce you to my friends. They’re all really nice, I promise. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“A-All right then,” came her reply.

Patty flew slowly—*very* slowly—over to us. She seemed extremely hesitant at first, but when she reached the group, she landed on my shoulder.

“This is my boss, Patty. I owe her my life,” I explained with a grin on my face.

“Your ‘boss’?” all four of them repeated in unison with a synchronized tilting of their heads in confusion. They’d all tilted their heads at exactly the same angle too, which only served as proof of how close they all were as a party.

“And these guys are the companions we’ve been looking for these past couple of days, boss,” I said to Patty. “From left to right, you’ve got Raiya, Nesca, ignore that one, and this guy here is Rolf.”

“Why are you telling her to ignore me, meow?!” Kilpha exploded, outraged to be left out.

“I’m only teasing,” I said with a grin. “Boss, this is Kilpha. She’s a cat-sìth.”

“I-I-I see. N-N-Nice to m-m-mweet you all!” Patty stammered, stumbling over

her words, probably because she was nervous. The Blue Flash crew, on the other hand, still seemed extremely puzzled and clearly had no idea what to say.

“Shiro, explain,” Nesca said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Dude, fairies almost *never* interact with other tribes,” Raiya told me. “People even refer to them as the ‘phantom tribe.’”

“Is that true, boss?” I said to Patty, who nodded.

“Yup. There’s this rule that says we’re not allowed to leave our dwelling, and most fairies respect it,” Patty explained nonchalantly, though it was pretty clear that she did *not* respect that particular rule herself. She didn’t look the slightest bit ashamed of her conduct, though. Thinking about it, my little boss must have been considered something of a rebellious lawbreaker among the other fairies.

“Fairies are extremely rare creatures. I can’t believe we’re actually getting to meet one,” Nesca murmured breathily, her face slightly red. This encounter appeared to have made her very excited.

“Really? With the guild’s name being the ‘Fairy’s Blessing’ and all, I thought they’d be much more common,” I said.

“Huh? Why should we have to ‘bless’ you humes?” Patty protested.

“Who knows?” I said with a shrug. “Maybe a fairy gave her blessing to a hume once and that’s where the name comes from.”

Once again, the Blue Flash crew could only stare at me in total disbelief, all of them blinking repeatedly as they tried to process my ignorance.

“Dude, you don’t *know*?” Raiya asked incredulously.

“D-Don’t know what?” I stammered.

“Damn, he really doesn’t know,” he said, looking around at his comrades.

“No way, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed.

“You know about so many things, yet you’re also extremely clueless,” Nesca added, sounding as lethargic as always.

“I’ll explain, meow!” Kilpha jumped in. “So, um, the Fairy’s Blessing is actually

the name of a kind of alcohol, meow.”

Nesca was usually the one who taught me about all the stuff I didn’t know about in this world, so it was a refreshing change for Kilpha to be the one doing it this time.

“This alcohol is one only fairies know how to make,” Kilpha continued, “and it’s called ‘fairy mead,’ but some people call it the ‘Fairy’s Blessing,’ meow.”

“Basically, the ‘Fairy’s Blessing’ is another name for fairy mead,” Nesca summarized.

“Yup, yup,” Kilpha said with a nod. “And it’s apparently super-*duper* delicious, meow!”

“I really want to try it one day,” Nesca said, and I noticed her eyes and Kilpha’s had glazed over while talking about this alcohol.

“Oh, wait a second,” I said, turning to the fairy on my shoulder. “Are they talking about that mead you gave me, boss? It was really good, yeah.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Patty gloated. “After all, I’m the one who made it!”

On hearing this, the others froze again.

“Shiro. Does this mean you’ve drunk fairy’s mead?” Nesca asked slowly. For some reason, the look in her eye made me feel a little uneasy.

I hesitated briefly, then nodded. “Y-Yeah. Boss gave me some.”

All four of them turned to Patty at the same time, but the little fairy shook her head vigorously. “I-I don’t have any more!” she said quickly. “Shiro and I drank it all!”

“Aw, that’s so unfair, meow!” Kilpha whined. “I wanted to try some too, meow!”

“Are you for real, man?” Raiya lamented. “Y’know, a single glass of fairy mead costs as much as a damn castle! I mean, the last time fairy mead was sold at an auction...” He stopped and thought for a second. “When was that again?”

“According to the guild’s records, about two hundred years ago,” Rolf prompted.

“Yeah, see? Two hundred years ago! Two *hundred*! No one’s drunk a single glass of fairy mead in about two hundred years! But here you are, saying you got to try some?!” Raiya cried, seeming insanely worked up about it. The look in his eye made it clear he wished he’d been the one who’d gotten to drink some.

“I-I did, yeah,” I said cautiously. “I drank quite a lot of it, actually...”

The foursome were once again at a total loss for words.

“Yeah, but Sh-Shiro’s my underling! He’s special! Th-That’s why I generously let him try my mead,” Patty jumped in, and it seemed she was very keen to try to explain the situation to my comrades.



When everyone had finally more or less calmed down, I recounted how and where I’d met Patty to the others. When I’d finished, all four of my friends gazed at us in wonder.

“So that’s what happened, huh?” Raiya said.

“I still can’t believe a *fairy* saved you,” Nesca marveled.

“So basically, we have this little lady to thank for bringing you back to us,” Raiya said, then turned to Patty. “Patty—oh, is it all right to call you by your first name?”

“S-Sure,” the fairy said, nodding bashfully.

“Patty, thank you so much for saving my dear friend,” Raiya said sincerely. “If there’s anything I can do for you, you just name it, okay?”

“Oh, I might have a job for you, then,” I said to Raiya. “When we get back to Ninoritch, could you help me look for someone?”

“Look for someone?” he repeated, somewhat confused by this request.

“Yup. Boss is looking for her friend. He’s a hume.”

I explained the situation to Raiya and the others and gave them the same description of the man that Patty had given me.

“Blue hair, blue eyes, huh? Doesn’t give us a lot to go on,” Raiya said before turning to his companions. “You guys got any idea who this guy might be?”

All three shook their heads. It seemed this description wasn't ringing any bells for them either. When I'd heard he used to go to the forest to hunt monsters, my first thought had been that he might be an adventurer, but it looked like that wasn't the case. Pity.

"I'm terrible at remembering people's names and faces, and I don't really get a lot of opportunities to speak to people who aren't adventurers, so I haven't got a clue either," Raiya said, scratching his head as he racked his brains.

I hummed pensively. "So he might still live in Ninoritch, but he's probably not an adventurer," I summarized.

"Why are you looking for this guy, anyway?" Raiya asked.

"I'm doing it for the boss. She saved my life, so this is kinda my way of repaying her," I explained.

"Huh. So that's how it is," Raiya said.

I nodded. "Yup, that's how it is."

"Still, helping a fairy..." Raiya said, almost whistling in awe. "Your life's so much more interesting than ours, man. You're almost like those heroes the minstrels always sing about. Damn, man, I'm so jealous!"

I laughed. "Well, I can't disagree there," I said. "I have to admit, my life at present *is* pretty enjoyable."

Raiya burst into boisterous laughter, seemingly amused by my response. After a few moments, he turned to Patty again. "All right. To thank you for coming to the aid of our comrade, we'll help you look for this friend of yours."

"Y-You will?" the little fairy squeaked.

"Sure. Just let us know what we can do," he said.

I grinned and also turned to Patty. "Well, you heard the man."

She was grinning from ear to ear and seemed incredibly happy that Raiya and the others were going to help her to look for her friend. She would probably be even happier when we finally managed to track him down.

"Okey dokey, now that we're all together again, should we head back to

Ninoritch?" I suggested, and we all set off in the direction of the town.

However, after only going about ten paces, I noticed something was off and stopped in my tracks. Turning around, I saw that Patty was hovering about a hundred meters behind us.

"Boss..." I called over to her, "why are you so far away from us?"

She treated me to a perplexed look. "I, uh..." she stammered nervously. "Well, I don't know if you guys are okay with me coming with you, and, uh..."

"Of course we're okay with it. I told you I was taking you to Ninoritch, didn't I? C'mere," I said, pointing at my shoulder to indicate that she could park her keister there.

"Shiro..." she started.

"Or would you rather loiter a hundred meters behind us for the whole journey?"

"N-No! I don't want that!" she replied immediately, shaking her head.

And so, we continued on toward Ninoritch with the little fairy perched on my shoulder.

Chapter Eight: The Bond Between Mother and Daughter

After a lot of walking, the outline of Ninoritch finally hove into view through a gap in the trees. Just a little farther and we'd be out of the forest. It was evening by this point, and the sunset had painted the town a beautiful orangey-red.

"A-Amazing! Look at all those humes!" Patty exclaimed. "There are so many of them! Look, Shiro! There are so many humes! Look!"

We were still relatively far from the town, yet Patty could already see the people there. Maybe fairies had amazing eyesight.

"And look at how huge their dwelling is!" she continued, awestruck by what she was seeing. "I never knew it was so big!"

After the reunion with my comrades earlier, I still had to fulfill my side of the bargain I'd made with Patty to take her to my second home, Ninoritch. We'd ended up camping in the forest the night before and had resumed our trip that morning. Another half a day of walking through the forest later and we were finally almost back in Ninoritch. All in all, we'd come home a day and a half later than we'd initially planned.

"Hey, Shiro! L-Let's hurry to the hume dwelling!" Patty urged me.

"It's not a dwelling," Nesca corrected her. "A settlement this size is called a 'town' by humes."

"A 'town'?" Patty queried.

"Yes, a town," Nesca repeated. "Different words are used for settlements, depending on their size. They can either be villages, towns, or cities. You should keep that in mind."

But Patty simply shrugged, clearly uninterested in Nesca's lecture. "Who cares about trivial things like that?" she complained. "Why don't you just call

everything a 'dwelling'?"

"It's just more convenient to stick to the multiple names we have for them," I explained. "It immediately tells us the size of the dwelling that we're talking about. Anyway, boss..." I paused as I tugged on my rucksack's drawstrings to open it. "Could you hide yourself in here before we get too close to the town?"

"Oh, right. I almost forgot about that," she said, whacking the palm of her hand with her fist.

She immediately dove into my rucksack and called out in a muffled voice that she was hidden. Fairies were rare, mystical creatures, which meant if people learned of Patty's existence, it'd likely cause a huge commotion and it'd be a royal pain in the backside—at least, that's what Nesca had told me. She said that if we were to make a list of the rarest creatures in Ruffaltio, fairies would come just below mythical beasts. I wasn't really sure what that signified exactly, but the one thing I took away from it was that they were super-duper rare. Nesca had gone on to say that there had been quite a few, uh, *incidents* in the past related to the existence of these mystical creatures, so in order to avoid ending up in a sticky situation, we decided it'd be best if Patty hid in my rucksack whenever we were around other humes.

"Make sure no one sees you, boss," I reminded Patty.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she said, a little testily. "Anyway, hurry up and get to the hume dwelling already! C'mon, walk faster!"

"'Town.' Not 'dwelling,'" Nesca lethargically corrected her.

"L-Let's go to the hume town, then! The hume town!" she urged me, poking her head out of my rucksack and repeatedly slapping me on the back of the skull with her little hands. "C'mon, Shiro! Move it!"

Raiya let out a boisterous laugh. "Being an underling sure is tough, huh?"

"It really is," I said with a nod.

"I-I saved your life, remember?" Patty protested. "It's only natural that I'm your boss!"

"What an annoying boss you have, Shiro, meow," Kilpha piped up.

Patty seemed to have run out of comebacks and could only let out an enraged little squeak as my comrades teased her. Finally, after a bit more friendly banter, we made it to the outer edge of the forest.



A surprise was waiting for me at the entrance of the sunset-bathed Ninoritch.

“Mister...Shiro?” a little voice asked, its owner sounding on the verge of tears.

“Aina?”

Yup. It was her, all right. Aina had been waiting for me there. And it wasn’t just Aina; her mother was also standing next to her.

“Aina, what are you—”

What are you doing here? was what I’d wanted to ask, but before I had a chance to finish my sentence, Aina leapt into my arms, her head colliding lightly with my chest almost as if she’d been trying to tackle me.

“A-Aina...” I said, trying to get her attention, but the little girl was full-on crying by this point and just kept saying my name over and over between sobs. “Aina?” I tried again, but she wouldn’t stop crying.

What are you doing here? Did I really even need to ask? This was Aina we were talking about. She probably... No, scratch that. I was *sure* she’d been waiting for me to get back. She must have been worried when I didn’t come home on the day I’d said I would and had obviously decided to wait here with her mother for my return.

“Oh, Mr. Shiro, you’re finally back,” Stella said, coming over to stand next to her daughter. She sounded relieved.

“Stella! Oh, um...” I said, stumbling over my words. “Sorry for getting back later than planned.”

“You should say that to Aina, not me,” she chided me gently.

“Oh, right...” I said with a nod and patted the crying little girl’s back. “Aina, I’m sorry for coming home so late.”

But she didn’t say anything, just vigorously shook her head from left to right.

She may only have been eight, but Aina's deduction skills were much better than mine. I hadn't said anything about it yet, but she already knew I'd gotten myself into a scrape.

"I'm so sorry for making you worry," I said to her.

"That's not it..." she hiccuped. "Mister..."—sob—"Shiro..."

"It's not?"

She wiped away her tears with her sleeve and gave a slight nod. "You shouldn't..."—sob—"say sorry..." she sniffed. "I want you..."—sob—"to say..." She was trying to explain how she felt to me, but she was still sobbing convulsively and couldn't get the words out. Thankfully, I immediately understood what it was she wanted me to say.

"Aina, I'm home," I said, smiling at her.

She let out a little "Yeah" and smiled back at me with tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"You shouldn't make little kids cry," said a voice somewhere behind my head.



I rubbed Aina's back for a little while longer, and she soon fell asleep in my arms.

"She didn't sleep a wink last night," Stella explained.

I noticed Stella had rather noticeable dark circles around her eyes herself. She obviously hadn't been able to sleep either. This realization made me feel even more sorry about my tardy return.

"Come on, Aina," she said to the drowsy little girl to coax her into letting go of me. "Mama's going to give you a piggyback ride home, okay?" Aina nodded slightly as she dozed.

"Did you want me to carry her?" I asked as I helped Aina onto Stella's back.

Stella chuckled. "No. This is my privilege as her mother."

"But isn't she a little heavy for you?" I said.

"She is. I struggle to walk with her on my back. I have no idea when she got

this big..." she said. "Kids really do grow up so fast, don't they?"

"Then, allow me to—" I started, but Stella interrupted me.

"Soon, she'll be too big for me to carry her around," she said with a wistful smile. "That's why I want to keep doing it while I still can."

It struck me that, for a mother, noticing how fast her child was growing up must have been a bittersweet feeling.

"Well, I can't really argue with that," I said. "But let me know when you can't carry her anymore, okay? I'll do it for you."

"Nope," Stella huffed, putting on a mock-pouty face. "I won't give her to you!"

"You're so stubborn," I said with a laugh.

"She's my daughter!" she protested.

"And you're both as stubborn as each other," I said. "But I get it, I really do. Even when it gets difficult for you to carry her, give it your all, okay? I'll be there to support you."

"Thanks. If you're here to support me, I'm sure it'll all work out," she said as she hoicked Aina up her back a bit with a quiet "heave-ho."

We continued on in silence for a while until Raiya came up to me.

"All righty, man, we're gonna head down to the guild now. We gotta go trade in these bad boys," he said, holding up the bag in his hand. It was the harvesting bag full of apsara flowers I'd taken out of my inventory a little earlier. "Wanna tag along? You're probably a bit busy, but I figured I'd ask, just in case."

I shook my head. "Not this time," I said.

"Yeah, I guessed as much," he said with a laugh. "I'll drop by with your share later, then. Oh, and..." He pointed to my backpack. "I won't tell a soul about what you've got in there, so don't worry on that score." He brought his finger up to his lips and made a "shhh" sound.

"Thanks," I said. "Say hi to Ney for me, yeah?"

"What about Emi?" he teased.

I immediately shook my head. “Nope, no need for that!”

“Got it, got it,” he said, laughing again. “Anyway, catch you around, man!”

“Yup! See you!” I replied.

“Bye, Shiro!” Kilpha called over to me.

“Get some rest tonight,” Nesca said.

“We shall be excusing ourselves now, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf added, and with that, the four of them left.

Once they were out of sight, I turned back to Stella and said, “Should we get going too?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “Oh, I need to give you back the key to your shop that you lent to us a few days ago.”

I’d given Aina a spare key to the shop in case either she or Stella needed anything from my stock. That was probably what Stella was talking about.

“You can give it back to me tomorrow,” I said, but then thought about it. “Oh, but Aina has tomorrow off, doesn’t she? You should concentrate on getting some rest, then.”

“But—” she started, but I interrupted her with an exaggerated yawn.

“Man, I’m so tired. I probably won’t be up for doing any work tomorrow, anyway. Plus, I’ve got a few things I have to do...” I said, though I didn’t elaborate on what these were. “All right, then. As the shopkeeper, I declare that my shop will stay closed tomorrow as well.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Shiro,” Stella said, chuckling.

“No, that’s my line,” I told her. “Thank you so much for waiting out there for me to come home, Stella.”



With Aina on her back, Stella could only walk slowly and I matched pace with her, strolling unencumbered alongside her. We reached our respective houses about fifteen minutes later.

“Good night, Stella,” I said.

“Good night to you too, Mr. Shiro,” she replied.

“And good night to you, Aina,” I said softly to the little girl who was snoring away quietly.

Just as I was about to walk into my shop, Stella called out to me again. “Mr. Shiro!”

“Hm?” I said. “What is it?”

“I forgot to say something to you.”

“And what might that be?”

She flashed me a gentle yet brilliant smile. “Welcome back, Mr. Shiro.”

“I-I’m home,” I replied.

Chapter Nine: Patty and Aina

I walked into my shop with Patty hovering just behind me. I hadn't been in here in two days, but the place was spotless, thanks to my little cleaner-in-chief.

"What is this place, Shiro?" Patty asked.

"It's my shop," I told her. "And also my house for the time being."

"Your house!" she exclaimed in awe, her eyes surveying the place. "It's huge!"

"Humans usually live in houses this size or thereabouts," I explained. "What kind of houses do fairies live in?"

"We usually build our houses up in trees," the little fairy replied. "There are a few weirdos who occasionally try to build theirs on the ground, but there are so many monsters blundering around the forest, they always end up having to build another one in the trees."

"I see," I said. "I imagine your houses must be pretty small, huh?"

"N-No, they're not! Your hume ones are just stupidly big!" she pouted. She puffed out her chest to make herself look bigger to show me she wasn't small.

"More importantly, you..." she started, changing the topic. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"Of course not. I'll look for your friend, just like I promised," I reassured her.

"G-Good!" came the fairy's reply. "There are a lot of humes in this dwelling—I mean, in this town—so he must be here somewhere. I'm sure you'll find him in no time!"

"Well, this *is* a small town, so if he is here, it shouldn't take us too long to find him," I said. "Let's start the search tomorrow, yeah?"

"Okay!" Patty said happily.

"Anyway, we should turn in. My body aches all over from having to sleep on the ground for so long," I complained.

“What a weakling!” Patty scoffed. “Imagine getting hurt just because you slept on the ground!”

“Hey, you got to sleep on my head the whole time, boss,” I pointed out. “I don’t think you’re in any position to be making fun of me.”

She giggled. “But your head is so nice to sleep on! Your hair’s a bit firm, but it’s super soft. It’s the best!” she declared, gently touching my hair and wrapping strands of it around her tiny fingers.

“Is that meant to be a compliment?” I asked.

“It is!” the fairy asserted.

“Huh,” I mused. “Okay, let’s pretend it is, little boss.”

“I’m not little!” she raged.

Patty had landed on my shoulder while we were bickering, and I proceeded to make my way up to the second floor. I went into the break room and plonked myself down on the sofa there.

“Man, I’m pooped,” I mumbled.

“Are you joking around?” Patty said in disbelief. “All you did was walk!”

“Yeah, well, walking *is* tiring,” I replied with a sigh. “Oh, but I’m sure a glass of that amazing mead you gave me before would make me feel better in no time.”

A glass of that mead cost as much as an entire castle, or so Raiya had said. Even so, I couldn’t help craving more of it.

“Y-You really like my mead that much?” Patty asked, sounding a little embarrassed.

“It was super delicious,” I told her.

“Well, of course it was! I’m the one who made it!” she said, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Is it difficult to make?” I asked.

“If you have the right ingredients, it’s not that hard. Pretty easy, actually. The only annoying part is getting the honey,” she explained.

“Honey? Like *honey* honey? The stuff you get in beehives?” I asked.

“Yup, that’s it! To get to the honey, you have to crack open a beehive, but the second you do that, you get attacked by a whole load of bees! They all come at you in one go, like *whoosh!*” she said, miming a swarm of bees by flapping her wings wildly and pressing her finger into my stomach as if it were a stinger.

“Those guys may be small, but once you’re in their sights, they never let up,” she said, a seriously displeased look on her face. “Sometimes, I try using my magic to get rid of them, but uh, I’m not great at controlling it, you know? So I always end up wrecking the beehive, which kinda defeats the point. After all, no beehive, no honey, right? So I end up having to deal with the bees one at a time, and it’s such a *pain!* That’s why getting my hands on honey is so annoying. I hate it!”

I scratched my cheek as I listened to her tirade about bees. “So, um...” I started. “Does that mean as long as you have honey, you can make mead? Like, now, for example: if you had honey right now, could you make it?”

“I could, yeah. I have all the other ingredients in my inventory,” she said.

“For real?!” I exclaimed. “In that case...”

I rushed downstairs, grabbed a glass container off a shelf in the kitchen, and took it back up to the waiting fairy.

“Could you make it with this honey?” I asked Patty, opening the container and showing it to her.

“That’s honey?” she asked, looking a little puzzled.

“Yup! It’s one hundred percent pure honey, straight from a beekeeper!” I told her.

Grandma used to love honey on her toast, and maybe it was due to her influence that I also preferred honey on my toast instead of jam. I’d even introduced Aina to the wonders of honey on toast, and we would often have it as a snack whenever we managed to find time to take a little break during work hours.

“Well? Can you make mead with this?” I asked the fairy again, getting a bit impatient.

“Hm, lemme give it a try first...” She dipped her finger in the honey and brought it up to her mouth, then let out a little squeak of happy surprise. “Wow, that’s some great honey!” she marveled. “My mead will be extra delicious if I use this!”

“Hell yeah!” I yelled in celebration. “Little boss, could you please make some?”

She made a pouty face at me again. “I am *not* little! But sure, I can make some. Just leave it to me!” she said, and she punched herself in the chest to underline her confidence, before grabbing a few different fruits and a container that looked like a calabash out of her inventory.

“Can I watch?” I asked. “Or is mead-making some secret fairy technique that no one else is allowed to see?”

“I don’t mind you watching, but I’m not sure it’ll be all that fun for you,” she said with a shrug.

“Then, I’d love to watch. Also, teach me how to make it myself,” I urged her.

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “You’re such a pain. Okay, listen up! First, you take one of these cherries.” She picked up a fruit that looked exactly like a cherry and put it in her mouth. “An’ ’en, ya ’afta mash’t’n ya ’outh,” she spluttered as she chewed, her mouth full of fruit.

“You do realize I have no idea what you’re saying right now, don’t you?” I pointed out.

She brought the calabash up to her mouth and dribbled the mostly pulverized fruit into it. “And then, you have to mash it in your mouth,” she repeated now that her mouth was empty.

“That’s...” I said hesitantly. This reminded me of something I’d learned about a few years ago.

Patty dolloped some honey into her mouth, chewed on it for a little bit, and then, just like she’d done with the cherry-like fruit, she let the saliva-infused mess dribble into the calabash. After that, she proceeded to do the same thing with the other fruit she’d taken out of her inventory. *Yup, that seals it*, I thought. I knew what she was doing now. She was making what was known as

“kuchikamizake”: an alcohol produced by chewing the ingredients to start off the fermentation process.

“You got all that, Shiro?” Patty asked in between chewing. “You need to alternate chewing on fruit and honey, then mix them together in the container. After that, you just let it rest for ten days, and you end up with a batch of super delicious mead!” she explained. She seemed to be having the time of her life making the mead.

So this renowned “fairy mead” was actually kuchikamizake, huh? Sometimes, wanting to know the truth about something meant hurting yourself in the process. *I won't tell a soul about this*, I decided, and I could only sit and stare in disbelief as Patty carried on making her legendary fairy mead by mashing up the fruit in her mouth, then spitting the resulting mush into the calabash.



“Mi...er...ro...” I heard a little voice speaking in disconnected syllables and felt someone trying to shake me awake. “Mi...Shi...”

Still half-asleep, I slowly opened my eyes.

“Mister Shiro, wake up!”

I saw Aina’s face right in front of me.

“Aina?” I mumbled sleepily.

“Finally! You’re awake!” she exclaimed. “Good morning, Mister Shiro. It’s already noon.”

“What?” I spluttered. “Seriously?”

“Yup. Look!” she said, opening the window. The sun was high in the sky, and I felt like I’d just been smacked in the face by the sudden rays of light filtering into the room.

“Ack, too bright...” I mumbled.

“Here, I brought you some water,” Aina said, handing me a glass.

I thanked her and gulped it all down in one go, letting out a satisfied “Whew” once I’d drained the last drop. I felt much more awake after that. Hm, what had

I gotten up to last night? After heading back to my store, I'd watched Patty preparing some of her famous mead and then... Huh? I couldn't remember what had happened after that. Wait, did I...

"Did I just fall asleep?" I quietly wondered aloud.

"Mister Shiro, you have to change your clothes before going to sleep!" Aina scolded me as she looked disapprovingly at the state of the sofa. Because I'd fallen asleep without changing, the sofa had gotten all dirty, which must have annoyed my little cleaner-in-chief quite a bit.

"I only planned to sit on the sofa for a bit, but it looks like I ended up drifting off," I said.

"Are you sick?" she asked, a sudden note of worry in her voice.

"No, I'm fine," I assured the little girl. "These clothes may not look it, but they're actually pretty warm."

"Okay. That's good," she said with a nod, sounding relieved.

"Anyway, what are you doing here, Aina?" I asked her. "I told Stella I was keeping the shop closed for the day."

"Mama said you might be hungry, so she sent me here with some food for you! Here!" she said, handing me a box. "Mama made this for you!"

"That's very nice of her," I said.

"It was supposed to be your breakfast, but..."

"Ah. Sorry about that. Guess it'll have to be my lunch," I said as I opened the box.

The meal that awaited me inside seemed to be sausage and some sort of tuber. I couldn't remember what the name of the tuber was, but it had a similar texture to a potato, and it was really good.

"Thank you for the food," I said, picking up the fork Stella had packed with the food and digging in. "Man, Stella's cooking is so *good*," I moaned blissfully after I'd swallowed the first bite.

"I know! Mama's super good at cooking, isn't she?" the little girl said with

pride in her voice.

“She is!” I agreed.

“The other dishes she makes are also really yummy!” Aina told me. “You should come over and have dinner with us now and then, Mister Shiro.”

“Can I?”

“Yeah, of course!”

We chatted a little bit as I ate, but at some point in the conversation, I noticed Aina had started glancing at a part of the sofa just behind me with a somewhat nervous look on her face.

“Um, Mister Shiro...” she started, then paused and pointed at the back of the couch. “Who’s that little girl?”

I turned around in total silence and my gaze landed on the spot Aina was pointing to.

Snore. Snore.

There was my little boss lying spread-eagled and fast asleep across the back of the sofa.



“This is Patty,” I said, deciding I had no option but to introduce her to Aina now that she’d seen her. I’d told the fairy to stay hidden, but she clearly hadn’t even tried, and the little girl had spotted her practically straight away. “She’s a fairy.”

“N-Nice to meet you,” Patty stuttered on waking up. At first, she seemed a little shy, but that didn’t last long. It was only a couple of minutes before she was back to being her bossy self, having taken up her usual perch on my shoulder.

“A fairy? Like a *fairy* fairy?” Aina asked in shock. “Like the ones in picture books?”

“Yup,” I said with a nod, and Aina responded with a loud utterance of amazement, her face instantly lighting up and her eyes sparkling as she stared

in wonder at Patty.

“Little fairy, is your name Patty?” she asked.

“‘*Little fairy*’?!” Patty shrieked, thoroughly outraged by this form of address.

“Yeah! Little fairy!” Aina said, beaming at her innocently.

“H-Hey, Shiro! Who’s this kid?” Patty barked at me.

“This is Aina. She’s my employee,” I explained and the little girl nodded.

“Yup! I’m Mister Shiro’s employee!”

“What’s one of them supposed to be?” Patty asked, looking perplexed.

“It’s, uh...” I started. “Boss, do you know what a ‘store’ is?” I said, but Patty simply tilted her head to one side in confusion. So she didn’t know what one was, huh?

“What about ‘trade’? Is trading a thing you fairies do?” I tried next, but Patty just stared at me and tilted her head to the other side, which told me she didn’t seem to know what that was either.

“Okay, uh...” I said, grasping for a way to explain all these terms. “Could I ask you a few things about fairy customs?”

“S-Sure,” she said with a nod, looking a bit surprised.

“Thanks. Okay, for my first question, let’s pretend you’re back in the fairies’ dwelling for a moment and you desperately, desperately need something. And you know someone who has the exact thing you’re looking for. How would you get it?”

“I-I’d go looking for it myself in the forest!” Patty declared. “I-I don’t need anyone else’s help. I’d rather do everything myself, ’cause that’s what bosses are like!”

“That’s not really what I was asking, but...” I sighed. “All right, let’s try a different approach. What would other fairies do? Could you tell me what they tend to do in a situation like that?”

“The others, huh?” She paused for a few seconds to think about it. “The others are all weaklings, so they’d probably try exchanging something of the

same value to get what they want, I guess.”

“I see.” So it seemed as if trading stuff for money wasn’t really a thing among fairies, but exchanging goods was. “What about other tribes? Do you guys ever exchange stuff with them?” I asked.

“I’ve never heard of anyone doing something like that,” she said, shaking her head. “We’re not allowed to interact with any of the other tribes, anyway.”

“Oh, right. You did mention that, yeah.”

Then how did you become friends with a hume? was what I wanted to ask next, but I decided against it. After all, she also wasn’t allowed to leave the dwelling, yet here she was, the little lawbreaker.

“Hm, I see. So you guys only exchange stuff with each other?” I mused.

“I-Is it different for humes?” Patty asked hesitantly.

“It is. But if I start going over the ins and outs of it with you now, it’ll take a whole day at least, so let’s keep that for another day, yeah? Or better yet, I’ll get Nesca to tell you all about it.”

I didn’t know enough about Ruffaltio’s history and customs to be able to explain it adequately myself, and from experience, I knew Nesca was good at this sort of stuff. I was sure I could get her to agree to giving Patty a quick lesson on hume economics if I bribed her with chocolate.

“Anyway, you’re not here to learn about hume culture,” I said, changing the subject. “There’s something you’ve got to do, right?”

“Y-Yeah!” the fairy said with a nod.

“Mister Shiro, what is it Patty has to do?” Aina piped up.

I turned my head to look at Patty—who was still sitting on my shoulder—and the little fairy nodded, giving me permission to tell Aina everything.

“Aina, have you ever seen a man with blue hair and blue eyes in Ninoritch?” I asked the little girl. “He’s a friend of the boss,” I said, indicating Patty, “and she came here to look for him.”

“A man with blue hair and blue eyes? Hm...” Aina paused for a few seconds as

she searched her memory. “Nope, I don’t think so.”

“You sure you haven’t?” Patty said. “He’s taller than Shiro, and much cooler! H-He also has a really nice voice, unlike Shiro!”

Ouch. Patty’s comments were so brutal, I couldn’t help feeling a bit bummed out by them.

“Oh, and also...” The fairy brought her tiny hands up to the pendant dangling around her neck and held it out in front of her for the little girl to see. “He wears the same necklace as me! His is bigger, though. So? Do you know him?” she pressed, but Aina just shook her head.

“Nope.”

“Oh, I see,” Patty mumbled in a low voice, her shoulders slumping.

“Sorry, Patty,” the little girl sympathized.

“Well, it’s not like Aina and I know the faces of *everyone* who lives in Ninoritch,” I said, trying to make both of them feel a little bit more hopeful.

“Because there are a lot of humes here, right?” Patty suggested.

I nodded. “Exactly. Plenty of people live in Ninoritch. But since it’s still a small town, I’m sure we’ll be able to find him in no time once we start asking around.”

“Y-Yeah! We’ll find him for sure!” the fairy said cheerily.

“Should we go ahead and make a start on that, then?” I asked.

Aina immediately raised her hand. “Oh, take me! I wanna come too!” she said, jumping up and down to show us just how much she wanted to help out.

I couldn’t help chuckling at her enthusiasm. “Okay, okay, I hear ya. Could you help us search for him, Aina?” I asked, and I patted her on the head.

“Yeah!” came her reply.

“Oh, but you have to promise me something,” I said. “You can’t tell *anyone* about Patty, okay? It’d be too much of a shock for the townsfolk if they suddenly saw a fairy flying around Ninoritch. What do you say? Promise me you won’t tell anyone?”

“Yeah, I promise,” she said, nodding solemnly with her little hands balled into fists.

“Thanks. All righty, then. Let’s go look for your friend, Patty! Oh, but before we go...” I said, thinking of something. “Hm, where should I hide you today, Patty?”

I’d put her in my rucksack the day before and she’d proceeded to whack the back of my head the whole time she was in there, so I was a bit reluctant to go through a repeat of that experience. I was busy racking my brain, trying to think of another suitable place where Patty could hide herself, when Aina interrupted my train of thought.

“Mister Shiro, what about in here?” she suggested, holding up the blue backpack I’d bought for her when I’d gotten her some new clothes just after she’d started working for me.

“Oh, good idea!” I said.

I opened the bag and took a peek inside. It was made of leather and looked pretty sturdy, plus there seemed to be more than enough room in it for Patty to chill in comfort.

“What do you think, boss?” I asked her.

The little fairy hummed pensively as she came a bit closer to inspect the bag herself. It seemed to meet her criteria and she nodded, a satisfied smile appearing on her face. “It’ll do.”

“Well, you heard the lady, Aina,” I said. “Do you mind carrying her around in your bag?”

“Of course not!” the little girl chirped.

And so, with Patty hiding in Aina’s backpack, the three of us headed out into the town to try to find the fairy’s mystery man.

Chapter Ten: On the Lookout

We decided to start our search in the marketplace, since it was the busiest part of town.

“Excuse me...” I said, trying to get the attention of an old woman.

“Oh, Shiro!” she said, recognizing me and stopping in her tracks. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m looking for someone. Have you seen a man wearing a pendant that looks like this?” I said, handing her a photo for her to look at.

“My, what an impressive drawing,” she said, marveling at it.

The photo I’d handed her was of Patty’s pendant. Since I didn’t know the man’s name and had pretty much no idea what he looked like, the pendant was the only real clue to go on. That’s why I’d taken a picture of it with the camera I’d bought a few days ago and printed it out.

“Hm...” the woman said, deep in thought. “I can’t say I’ve seen it before, no,” she told me as she handed back the photo.

“I see...” I said. “Well, thank you for your help.”

I’d asked 26 other people before stopping that woman, but every single one of them had told me they’d never seen the pendant before.

“No one’s got any idea about this pendant,” Aina lamented.

“Seems that way, yeah,” I agreed.

“Maybe he’s not from Ninoritch?” the little girl suggested, but I shook my head.

“Boss said he was. Didn’t you?” I said to Patty, her little head poking out of Aina’s bag.

She nodded. “He told me straight ‘I live in Ninoritch,’ so he must be around here *somewhere!*”

“See?” I said to Aina.

“Yeah...” the little girl muttered with a nod, but she looked a little down.

“Maybe we should try somewhere else?” I suggested, but just as I said it, I heard a female voice calling out to me.

“Shiro!”

It was Karen. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Patty disappear fully into Aina’s bag once more.

“Good afternoon, Karen. Are you on patrol at the moment?” I asked.

“Does it look like I am?” she said curtly. “I, uh...” She hesitated. “I heard the Blue Flash adventuring party had come back from their little foray into the forest.”

She looked around before bringing her lips closer to my ear.

“I found out you went into the forest with them, so I wanted to check if you were back too,” she whispered in my ear. “I was actually on my way to see you.”

“I-I see. So that’s why you’re here. Um...” I said hesitantly. “Thanks for coming to check up on me.”

“When will you stop making me worry so?” she sighed. Judging by her expression, it seemed she really had been concerned about my well-being.

“Oh, sorry about that,” I said, but she shook her head.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “But at least let me know in advance if you’re planning on doing something like that again.”

I chuckled. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“You’d better remember,” she teased, returning my smile.

She reached out a hand and gently patted me on the head. Even though she was only a year older than me, she’d recently taken to acting like she was my big sister. She probably viewed me as a little brother whom she needed to keep an eye on at all times, since I seemed to have a knack for getting myself into trouble.

“Mister Shiro, your face is all red,” Aina pointed out.

“It’s n-nothing. I-I’m just hot,” I lied and pretended to fan myself with my hand to hide my awkwardness, though that didn’t put a stop to Aina’s staring.

Okay, I needed to change the topic and *fast*.

“O-Oh, by the way, Karen...” I said, unconsciously raising my voice.

“What is it?” she asked.

“We’re actually searching for someone at the moment,” I explained. “Have you seen a man wearing a necklace similar to this one?”

I handed her the photo of the pendant and she brought it up to her face so she could inspect it closely.

“Hm? Is this a drawing? It’s very good,” she said, sounding rather impressed.

I didn’t have very high hopes, though. We’d been asking around for a while, and so far, no one had been able to give us even a shred of a clue.

“I feel like...” she started. “I feel like I’ve seen this pendant before.”

Okay, I hadn’t been expecting that.

“Really, Miss Karen?” Aina said, her face lighting up.

“I remember the pendant, but I can’t say I recall the person I saw wearing it,” she clarified. “Now where *did* I see it, I wonder...”

She brought a hand up under her chin and continued staring at the photo with a thoughtful look on her face. Aina and I just stood there, waiting with bated breath for what she might say next, and I was sure Patty would be doing the same, hidden away in Aina’s bag. But after two whole minutes of searching her memory, Karen simply shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t seem to remember.”

On hearing this, my shoulders and Aina’s slumped in unison.

“Sorry if I gave you false hope,” she apologized. “Still, I *have* seen this pendant before, I’m sure of it. If you’d like, I can help you with your search.”

“Really?” I said.

“Of course. I still have to repay you for all those times you helped me out,” she reminded me. “Whenever I’m not busy with my work, I’ll try to search for this pendant.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, bowing to her, and I noticed Aina doing likewise. “Please take this with you, then,” I said, handing the photo to Karen. I’d printed off plenty of copies, so it was fine to just give her this one.

“Thank you,” she said with a nod.

“Please let me or Aina know if you find out any more about the pendant,” I said.

“Sure thing,” she replied. “Anyway, I still have a few things I’ve got to do, so I’ll take my leave now, if that’s all right.”

“Of course,” I said. “Work things?”

“Nope. I’m heading over to the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“The guild?” I repeated, surprised by this.

“Yes. The Adventurers’ Guild.”

Hm. For some reason, alarm bells were ringing in my head.

“Oh. D-Do you have a job for the guild or something?” I asked, but Karen just chuckled.

“Nope, not at all,” she said.

“Are you perhaps paying a visit to your good friend, Emille?”

“Do you really think I’d go all the way to the guild just to see *her*?” Karen shot back.

“Th-Then...” I said slowly, “what business do you have there?”

“Oh, well, you know...” she said casually. “I just wanted to go and have a little *conversation* with the adventurers who deemed it appropriate to take one of my citizens into the forest without my permission.”

“Oh, but I went with them willing—” I protested in an attempt to defend the actions of my comrades, but Karen didn’t let me finish.

“I have to go. See you, Shiro.”

The way she smiled darkly before turning and leaving really didn't augur well for my comrades. I clapped my hands together and prayed for all of them to stay safe—especially Raiya, as he was the party's leader.



Once Karen had departed, Aina and I went back to hunting for the owner of the pendant, but sadly, our search ended up being fruitless. For the time being, all we could really do was wait and pray that Karen might remember where she'd seen it. We decided to call off the search for the day, and it was agreed that Patty would spend the night at Aina's.

“Mister Shiro! Can Patty please, please, *please* stay with me tonight?” the little girl had begged me, breathing heavily through her nose because of how excited she was at the prospect. She seemed to really want Patty to spend the night at her place. Though that was hardly surprising. After all, the little girl had just met a fairy, a mystical creature she'd only seen in books before. Of course she'd be excited about that. Even the usually taciturn Nesca hadn't been able to keep her emotions in check when she'd first laid eyes on Patty.

“What do you think, boss?” I asked the little fairy.

“I don't mind,” she said with a shrug. “Aina's hair looks softer than yours, anyway.”

“What's the deal with you always wanting to sleep on people's heads? Aren't you scared you might get squashed when they turn over?” I asked.

“I'm not *that* fragile!” Patty protested.

“Well, if you say so...” I sighed, then turned back to Aina. “Aina, boss says she wants to spend the night with you too.”

“For real?! You'll sleep at mine, Patty?” the little girl asked, her face a picture of unbridled excitement.

“Sure, if you want,” the fairy said. “I mean, since you're Shiro's 'employee,' that means you're kinda like his underling, right? And as Shiro is my underling, that makes you my underling as well. So as your boss, I have to listen to your

requests.”

“Wow, little boss, you’re so cool!” I said happily.

“I am not *little*!” the fairy screamed at me.

Aina was so happy that she’d be spending the night with Patty, she started dancing with joy. “We’re gonna be sleeping in the same bed, Patty!” she exclaimed, a huge smile painted across her face.

“Well, if you really insist on us sleeping in the same bed, I-I don’t mind doing that for you. B-But it’s only for tonight, you hear?” Patty said.

Despite what she said, it was plain to see how happy she really was that Aina had invited her to stay the night. Back in Japan, someone who blew hot and cold like this would be referred to as a “tsundere.”

“Ah, Mister Shiro! Can I tell mama about Patty?” Aina asked. “Or should I keep her a secret?”

“You can tell her,” I said. “Knowing your mom, I’m sure she won’t say anything to anyone else if you tell her not to.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her, then!” the little girl said happily.

Aina and Patty both broke out laughing. I reached for my camera and set the timer on it.

“Aina! Boss!” I called over to the two of them. “Look this way and smile,” I instructed them, before going over to stand behind the pair. “And peace!”

I threw double peace signs, which I’m sure would’ve made grandma proud. Aina and Patty took one look at me and did the same thing.

“Peace!” Aina said joyfully.

“L-Like this?” Patty said a little hesitantly before beaming at the camera.

I was really looking forward to how the photo would turn out. Afterward, Patty went with Aina to her house and I decided to head back to grandma’s place for what felt like the first time in forever.

Chapter Eleven: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Fairy (Part 1)

“Whew, I’m full,” Patty said happily, her stomach bloated from eating so much delicious food. She flung herself onto the bed and Aina followed suit.

“Me too!” the little girl said, bouncing on the springy mattress, which made Patty rebound into the air a little way.

It had been evening when Aina had come home from Shiro’s shop, and as any loving mother would, Stella had greeted her daughter with a smile. Normally, Aina would then run up to her mother and give her a big hug, but on this particular day, she hadn’t done that. Instead, the little girl had swiftly slipped off her backpack and held it out in front of her—a gesture that made Stella tilt her head to one side in confusion.

“Mama,” the little girl had started, her tone solemn, “I’m going to show you something, but you have to promise you won’t tell anyone about it.”

Stella hadn’t seen her daughter this serious in a very long time, and she knew just from the look on the little girl’s face that she had to go along with it. “I promise,” she said with a nod, matching the solemnity of her daughter’s expression.

“Do you really, really, *really* promise?” the little girl insisted.

“Of course,” Stella said, nodding again.

She was really intrigued by what her daughter was about to take out of her bag. She remembered overhearing one of her neighbors complaining about her children picking up random things in the streets once, but Aina was a well-behaved child, so she surely wouldn’t have done something like that, right? Stella really believed that wasn’t something she’d do, but even so, she was a bit worried about what she was going to produce. Perhaps she’d picked a pretty flower? Hm. Probably not. Why would she be sworn to secrecy over a flower? Then, maybe she had found a baby bird somewhere and decided to bring it

home? Or maybe it was actually a baby monster? If it turned out to be some sort of lizard, Stella would be able to cope with that, but please, please, *please* don't let it be a frog. As all these thoughts whizzed through her head, she tried to keep her face as impassive as possible while she waited for her daughter to show her what was in her bag.

"I'm going to open it now, okay?" Aina said, and Stella nodded in response.

She watched in anticipation as her daughter undid the buckle on her bag, and once it was open...

"So you're Aina's mother, huh? Hm. You have the exact same color eyes and hair!"

A fairy—a mythical creature Stella had only read about in stories—flew out of her daughter's backpack. Her sheer incomprehension at what she was seeing had her rooted to the spot.

"Mama, this is Patty. She's a fairy!" Aina said, introducing her new friend to her still-speechless mother.

"N-Nice to meet you," Patty greeted Stella, but the older woman was still too stunned to speak. "Your mother's all stiff, Aina," Patty pointed out to the little girl.

Stella had eventually managed to find her voice to greet the fairy back, but it had taken her quite a while longer to regain the ability to speak normally again.

"You said this was called a 'bed,' right?" Patty asked Aina as she patted the mattress she'd jumped on. "It's amazing! I've never slept on anything as soft and comfortable as this before!"

"It's really nice, isn't it?" the little girl chirped. "Mister Shiro bought it for me!"

"He did?" the fairy said.

"Yeah! He said it was a 'housewarming gift,'" Aina told her.

Shiro had actually bought the bed at a furniture store in Japan. He knew Aina loved to sleep next to her mother, so when they moved into their new home, he'd gone out and bought a good-quality double bed for them to share. At first,

Aina had been a little hesitant about sleeping in it, because of how soft and comfortable it was, but by this time, both she and her mother absolutely loved it.

“It’s so nice, mama and I won’t ever be able to sleep in another bed!” Aina said.

Just as the little girl had finished speaking, Stella came into the room. “Aina. Miss Patty. I’ve brewed us some tea.”

She was carrying a tray with a pot of black tea and three teacups on it. She placed the cups down on the bedside table.

“What kind of tea did you make, mama?” Aina asked her.

“It’s a fruity black tea. Mr. Shiro gave it to me,” she replied, a gentle smile on her face. She picked up the pot and filled all three cups with hot tea. The tea Shiro had given to her had no caffeine in it so it was fine for kids to drink.

“Here you go, Patty!” Aina said as she handed one of the cups to the fairy.

After making sure that Aina didn’t spill any of her tea, Stella brought her own cup up to her lips.

“Miss Patty, while we were having dinner, you mentioned you were looking for a male hume, yes?” she asked the fairy, who nodded in response.

“Yeah. Aina and Shiro are helping me look for him,” Patty said.

“What kind of person is he?” Stella inquired.

“His hair and eyes are blue like the sky, and—” Patty said, starting to describe the man, but Stella quickly interrupted her.

“Oh, sorry, I wasn’t clear. I didn’t mean what he *looks* like. I’m more curious about his personality,” she said. “After all, he ventured all the way into the forest to see you—a fairy—so I just can’t help wondering what kind of person he might be.”

On hearing her mother say this, Aina raised her hand. “I wanna know too!”

“Hm? You both wanna know that bad?” Patty asked the mother and daughter. They both nodded in response.

“Yes, I do,” Stella said.

“He’s your friend, so I wanna know all about him!” Aina chirped.

Patty shook her head, pretending to be slightly irritated by their enthusiasm.

“W-Well, if you really wanna know *that* bad, I guess I can tell you about him...”

Patty took a sip of tea before putting down the cup.

“Where to begin, where to begin...” she wondered aloud while Stella and Aina stared at her, their eyes brimming with curiosity. “Oh, what about our first meeting? Well, it all happened when I left the dwelling for the first time...”

Patty's Story

When I met him, he was hunting in the forest. He was using a, uh... What do you call it again? That thingy that makes sticks fly super far. Hm? Oh, yeah, that's it: a bow and arrow! Anyway, he had one of those and he was running after a jackalope. And he had a really grumpy look on his face like *this*! He was so bad with that thing, the little jackalope just kept running away from him. Isn't that hilarious? I sat on the branch of a tall tree and watched him struggle for hours on end. Each time he missed, his face would scrunch up like he was about to cry, and I laughed so much my stomach hurt. But after a while, he just kinda flopped down on the ground and started wailing like a little kid. He was so pitiful! So I decided I'd help him.

I flew in front of him, and *whoosh*! Killed that jackalope with one hit. And then... Tee hee. He just stared at me for a while after that, and didn't even take one look at that jackalope. His eyes grew *real* wide, and do you wanna know what he said?

Cough. "A-Are you a fai—"

Hm? Why am I speaking in such a high voice, you ask? W-Well, I was just imitating him! Who cares about that, anyway?! Look, if you keep on annoying me, I'll stop the story there! I swear I will! Oh, really? A-All right, then. I'll carry on.

"Are you a fairy?" he asked me. I mean, couldn't he tell just by looking at me? Seriously, what a weirdo. And do you wanna know what I said in response?

"And you're a hume, right?"

That was our first meeting. After that, he cooked the jackalope I'd killed over a fire and we ate it together. That was actually my first time eating jackalope meat, and I have to say, I didn't like it one bit. But while we were eating, he kept crying and saying over and over how good it was. I remember thinking: *Damn, humes seriously have weird tastes.* But then he told me he hadn't eaten any proper food in ten days! And apparently, if you don't eat for ten days, even

jackalope meat tastes good—or at least, that’s what he claimed. It was the first time I’d even seen a hume, so I naturally thought all you guys must be as gangly as he was. But now I realize he was just underweight.

When he was done eating, he thanked me and told me he’d been so hungry, he thought he was on the verge of starving to death. “I escaped my fate, thanks to you,” he told me.

And I answered, “It was nothing. After all, I can cut through destiny!”

What? Th-That’s... It’s what my name means in the language of the fairies: “She Who Can Cut Through Destiny.” Why are you looking at me like that?! Do you want me to stop telling you the story, is that it?

All right, all right. If you wanna hear the rest *that* badly, I guess I don’t have much choice, do I? Hm, where was I again? Oh, I remember.

So I told him I could cut through destiny, and do you know what he did? He looked taken aback for a second or two, then he burst out *laughing*. He laughed and laughed and asked me what my name was. B-But I didn’t tell him. I said I would only tell him it once he was better at hunting. Wh-What? I just figured it’d motivate him to work harder, you know?

Anyway, I decided I would call him “hume,” and he started calling me “Miss Fairy.” I also took it upon myself to help him hunt, since he was forever hungry. B-But we didn’t just hunt! W-We did a bunch of other stuff together! Like, uh... Oh! I remember! We used to compete against each other a lot! Climbing trees, fighting slimes... And we competed to see who could smash open a beehive the fastest. I never lost a single one of our little competitions. Hm, what’s that?

Yeah. He was... Well, he was my friend. My only friend. He didn’t have any other friends either. You see, the two of us... We were loners, basically. When we used to hang out, he’d always say we were “alone together.”

He... He gradually got better at hunting, to the point where he was able to catch not only jackalopes, but fowl and big lizards too, all by himself. He even managed to kill a forest wolf once. A forest wolf! Can you believe that?! When he’d slain it, he looked over at me all smug and said, “What do you think? I’ve gotten much better at hunting, haven’t I? Miss Fairy, do you think you could tell me your name now?”

And well... I said I'd tell him the next time I saw him. But that... That was the last time we saw each other.

That's why... That's why I need to find him. I need to find him and tell him my name. A-And I wanna know his name too! I really... I really want to see him again!

Chapter Twelve: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Fairy (Part 2)

“And well, that’s why I’m currently looking for him. I want to see him again,” Patty said, letting out a long sigh as her story came to an end. Aina and her mother shared a look and nodded.

“Patty!” Aina exclaimed.

“Wh-What is it, Aina?” the fairy said.

“We will definitely, definitely, *definitely* find your friend for you!” the little girl said, her fists clenched and her eyes glistening slightly with unshed tears.

“Huh?” Patty said, taken aback by Aina’s reaction, though she quickly recovered. “W-Well, of course we will! I will! I’ll find him and tell him my name,” she declared resolutely.

Chapter Thirteen: Preparing for a Drinking Festival

After enjoying a long-awaited bath, I opened the closet door to Ruffaltio and headed back to my shop so I could sit in the backyard and look up at the stars, like I did every night.

“Okay, let’s just go grab my trusty rocking chair...” I said to the air around me, and I did just that, plus a little table.

I almost had everything set up when I heard Raiya calling out to me from somewhere in front of the store. “Hey, man, you in there?”

“Yup, I’m back here,” I said, poking my head around the side of the building. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, there you are!” he said, then gave me a little wave of sorts. I immediately noticed the bright red handprint across his cheek as he came over to me.

“Um, your face... Did, uh...” I trailed off.

He nodded sheepishly. “The mayor gave me a bit of a slap, yeah. Though I was the one who told her she should hit me in the first place.”

It was an impressive handprint. I hadn’t even been at the guild when Karen had gone down there, but I felt I had a pretty good idea of how it all went down just from looking at Raiya’s face.

“Well, anyway,” Raiya said, changing the topic, “we’re heading over to the guild’s drinking hall for dinner and I wondered if you wanted to tag along. Oh, and I still have to give you your share of the money for the apsara flowers.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d completely forgotten about that,” I said. I’d been so busy looking for Patty’s friend, it had completely slipped my mind. “How much did we make in the end?”

“A *lot*,” Raiya answered smugly. “Here’s your share, dude.”

He handed me a little leather pouch. I could hear coins jingling in it.

“All in all, we got 11 gold coins for them,” he told me. “You get three, and we’ll split the rest among ourselves.”

“Wait, that’s too much! I thought we’d agreed we were going to split it five ways,” I said, confused.

“You got into a real sticky situation because of us. Consider it compensation for all the hardship you went through,” Raiya explained. “And don’t even think about arguing, ’cause I’m not taking it back!”

“But...” I started.

“Please just take it, dude. I already got an earful from the mayor earlier,” he pleaded with a strained laugh.

“Karen gave you a hard time, huh? I see.” I paused for a second. “All right, all right, I’ll accept it. Thanks, Raiya,” I said as I put the gold coins into my coin purse.

“It’s no biggie. Anyway, wanna come have dinner with us?”

“Sure!” I replied enthusiastically.

So Raiya and I headed off, chitchatting all the way to the Fairy’s Blessing guild. Or well, he did all the talking; I just listened. Ninety percent of the conversation was him telling me over and over again just how scary Karen got when she was angry, and that I should take great care to never get on her bad side.



When we got to the drinking hall, I noticed that a good forty percent of the tables were occupied, and I quickly scanned the seated patrons on the off-chance that I might find someone with the same pendant as Patty, but alas, no luck there. After a short wait, our food and drinks came out, and on Raiya’s cue, we collectively yelled “Cheers!” and bashed our tankards together, spilling ale in the process, though no one batted an eye. That’s adventurers for you.

“Woohoo! Cheers!” cried Emille, who had once again managed to weasel her way onto our table.

“Cheers, everyone,” said Ney the guildmaster, who’d also decided to join us for some reason. Judging by the looks on everyone’s faces, it seemed the Blue

Flash crew were every bit as confused by this as I was.

“To think I’d get to drink with the *guildmaster* herself! It’s really such an honor! I mean it! I’m so glad I chose to work here!” the bunny girl said excitedly in a rather obvious attempt to butter up her boss, though Ney simply laughed elegantly in response. She was clearly having none of it.

“Now, now, Emille, settle down. This kind of boisterous behavior is most unbecoming of a lady,” Ney chided her gently.

“What do you mean, Miss Guildmaster?” Emille said. “I get to drink with *you* of all people! How can I stay calm at a time like this? Besides, don’t you know how much *good* your presence here is doing for our adventurers? The mere sight of you is enough to rid them of their fatigue! And they’re not the only ones! Seeing you makes *me* feel so much better too!”

“My, my, you really are a handful, Emille,” Ney said.

As always, Emille was the source of all our troubles. A few days ago, Ney had given her a severe tongue-lashing after dragging her out of the drinking hall by the scruff of her neck, and there was little doubt Emille had done as much sucking up to her boss as she could to make sure she didn’t lose her job—or even worse, suffer a pay cut. She must have spent hour after hour after hour flattering her boss, which is likely how we’d come to be in the present situation.

“Emille suggested I should spend more time around the adventurers. She told me I’m so beautiful that just seeing my face would motivate them to work harder,” Ney recounted with a shy smile on her face. “At the time, I figured she was just saying that to avoid a pay cut, but then I noticed the look of determination in her eye. You see, when you’re in a position of power like I am, you can immediately tell if someone’s lying to you just by looking them in the eye. And I’ve never seen anyone lie with a look like that on their face.”

Hold up, hold up. That “look of determination” in Emille’s eye *definitely* had nothing to do with the well-being of the adventurers and everything to do with her not wanting to suffer a pay cut.

“You know, Miss Guildmaster, from the very first moment I laid eyes on you, I’ve always been struck by how *beautiful* you are,” Emille continued. “I’m sure all of our adventurers feel *extra* motivated and full of energy whenever they

catch a glimpse of a knockout like you! Don't you agree, Raiya?" she said to the leader of Blue Flash, winking at him repeatedly to get him to play along.

It seemed our nice, relaxing dinner wasn't going to be so relaxing after all.



As I munched away at my food, I took little sips of my ale from time to time.

"What's this? You've barely touched your drink," Raiya said once I'd finished eating. "Not a lover of alcohol?"

He pointed to my almost completely full tankard of ale. Other than me—and Rolf, whose religious principles meant he wasn't allowed to drink alcohol—everyone had been downing drinks at light speed.

"It's not that I don't *like* alcohol, it's just that this particular ale is..." I trailed off, unsure if I should really finish my sentence, but Ney didn't leave me with much choice.

"You don't like it?" she asked.

Kilpha—who was sitting next to me—laughed mischievously. Seeing that I was cornered, I raised my hands in capitulation.

"Exactly that," I said with a sigh. "It's not for me. Maybe I just haven't developed a taste for it yet," I added in an attempt to smooth things over.

As someone who was born and raised in Japan and was therefore used to proper beer, this world's ale was incredibly bland. It had a much higher alcohol percentage than Japanese beer, and in truth, it just tasted weirdly herby. And besides, it was served at room temperature, meaning it was basically the same temperature as my skin. As a lover of cold beer, I found it really hard to drink this ale.

"Sorry," I added.

"Oh, don't apologize," Ney said, shaking her head. "Between you and me, I don't like it all that much either."



“R-Really?” I said with some surprise.

She nodded and peered into her tankard. “But in a region as remote as this, we can’t really be picky when it comes to alcohol, can we? There aren’t exactly all that many types of alcohol available here, after all. I only drink it because I don’t really have much of a choice. Our guild might be named the “Fairy’s Blessing,” but at the end of the day, the only alcohol we have on offer here is ale. It’s a little dispiriting,” she said with a sigh.

“So what’s *really* bothering you is that your guild is named after fairy mead, which is a type of alcohol that’s renowned throughout the land, but you only have access to ale here. Is that it?” I summarized.

“Oh gosh. I didn’t think you knew about fairy mead,” she said.

“I’ve done my homework,” I said simply. “Since you’re letting me sell my wares here, I figured I should learn what I could about the guild. Besides, *everyone* knows ‘Fairy’s Blessing’ refers to fairy mead!”

My bragging drew glares from the whole of the Blue Flash crew, aside from Rolf. I didn’t pay the least bit of attention to them, though. After all, I was a merchant: knowing how to bluff was a key part of my job.

“It’s said that the first guildmaster of the Fairy’s Blessing guild made it his mission in life to get his hands on some fairy mead one day. That’s apparently why he chose it as the name for our guild,” Ney explained.

“I see,” I said with a nod. “So to this day, this guild’s main objective is to acquire some fairy mead, is that right?”

“In a way, yes,” Ney confirmed.

Well, sorry, but I actually achieved *and* guzzled down that objective a few days ago.

“However, our current mission is to find the ruins in the forest.” She paused for a moment before continuing. “The most frustrating part is that, in all of our other branches, we’re always very picky about the kind of alcohol we serve in the drinking halls. If this town wasn’t so remote, we’d have only the best of the best here, but as it is...” She trailed off.

“If Ninoritch was a big trading town, there would be wine on offer, or even cider, meow! It’s such a shame,” Kilpha said with a sigh.

“Can’t you get us some better alcohol, guildmaster?” Raiya asked Ney. “I’m sure the other guys would complain a lot less if we were able to drink the good stuff.”

Drinking tended to help people relax, and in a town like Ninoritch that had very few other distractions, having good alcohol to drink would definitely go some way toward easing some of the adventurers’ frustrations. While I hadn’t witnessed any other fights since the last time I was in the drinking hall, it was pretty obvious that everyone was on edge and could blow their tops at any moment.

“Don’t ask for too much, Raiya,” Nesca chided her boyfriend. “If you take all the overhead costs into account, we should already be very glad we get to drink even something as simple as ale.”

“I agree with Miss Nesca,” Rolf said with a nod. “We must not forget to be grateful to the guild’s staff for everything they do for us. Besides, ale in this place costs roughly the same as it does in the capital. That is all thanks to the guild.”

Emille saw her opportunity to suck up to Ney even more and seized it with both hands. “Nesca and Rolf are right! Don’t you go forgetting everything the guild’s staff has done for you. In fact, every time you come to the guildhall, you should bring our gorgeous guildmaster a present! What do you think, Miss Guildmaster?”

Ney chuckled. “If each one of our adventurers brought me a present every single time they came in here, I’d need a mansion even bigger than this guildhall to store them all.”

“Then you should get our adventurers to *buy* you a mansion! With how beautiful you are, I’m sure everyone will be delighted to contribute,” Emille persisted, still trying to butter up her boss. She was something else. Truly she was.

“Well, I’m not so sure about giving you gifts every day, but I’m still thankful for everything this guild has done for us. ’Course, I’m thankful to you too,

guildmaster,” Raiya said.

“Me too, meow!” Kilpha piped up.

The two of them looked at each other and nodded.

“Still...” Kilpha added, “I’d love to be able to drink some wine.”

“Oh? You like wine, Kilpha?” I asked.

“Meow? No, not really,” she said, shaking her head.

I hadn’t been expecting that response at all, and I was so shocked by it, I almost fell off my chair. “Wh-Why do you want to drink wine, then?”

“I figure it’d just be better than this grape-scented ale, meow,” Kilpha sighed. “Wine here is really sour and not very good at all, though.”

“Oh, is that so?” I mused.

Raiya frowned at me. “And what do ya mean by that exactly? Don’t tell me you’ve never had wine before. Or maybe Mister Merchant over here only drinks *fancy* wine, hm?”

“Oh, no, it’s not that,” I replied, laughing. “It’s just, where I’m from, you can get really good wine for pretty cheap.”

On hearing this, it wasn’t just the Blue Flash crew who paused in the middle of eating. Ney did too. *Uh, is it just me or do they all look kind of pissed off?* I thought. Even though they were staring daggers at me, I decided to carry on.

“So basically, you can get three main types of wine there: red, white, and pink wine, which we call rosé. Oh, though recently, I’ve started hearing about orange wine being a thing... Well, anyway, there are many different merchants selling a whole load of varieties of each type of wine, with all of them tasting different. You’ve got your sweet wines, your dry wines, and everything in between. Some are really refreshing, while some are heavier and stronger. They also come in a range of prices. Some wines cost no more than, let’s say, a kid’s allowance, while some others will set you back more than buying a nice new house with a backyard. Oh, and people who really love their wine tend to drink a different type every day, to go with whatever meal they’re having. Personally, I’m not a huge fan of wine, so I don’t drink it all that often. I’m more of a sake kinda guy,

you see...”

Just as I was coming on to my love of sake, I noticed something was off. The atmosphere in the drinking hall had completely changed all of a sudden.

“Huh?” I blurted out rather ineloquently.

The other patrons in the drinking hall had fallen silent, and I got the distinct impression that they’d been listening intently to my rambling. Even the cooks and the waitresses were staring at our table—or rather, at *me*. The silence was deafening. The adventurers sitting at the table opposite us were waiting quietly for me to continue, while a younger adventurer at another table was fidgeting about in his chair as if he was trying to signal that I should carry on talking. But what surprised me most of all was that a dwarf who’d been sitting at a table toward the back of the drinking hall had moved to a table much closer to ours, and he was staring at me with his arms crossed. He looked hardened, like he’d once been a soldier or something. Oh! Our eyes just met!

“Don’t mind me, lad,” he said gruffly. “Can ya keep talking? I’d like to hear more ’bout the alcohol from yer country.”

“U-Uh, sure,” I said hesitantly.

His appearance screamed war veteran, and the look in his eye was extremely intimidating. I unconsciously straightened my back and continued where I’d left off.

“So, uh, where was I again? Well, where I’m from, there are actually many different types of alcohol. First, you have...”

I spent the next two hours talking about all the different kinds of alcohol you could drink in Japan.



“...and that’s pretty much the long and short of it. My home nation does a lot of trade with the rest of the world, and that’s why you’re able to drink a lot of different types of alcohol there.”

I’d finally run out of things to tell them. As soon as I finished talking, all the adventurers in the room sighed dreamily in unison. I saw a hunter close his eyes

as he tried to imagine how all of these mysterious alcohols he'd just heard about might taste. At another table, a small puddle had formed in front of a mage, who'd been drooling while listening agog to my tale. At a table nearby, the dwarf from earlier was grumbling that he wanted to drink alcohol that was so strong, it could be lit on fire. At our table, Nesca was busy repeating the words "chocolate liqueur" as if it were a chant, while Emille had seen her opportunity to scooch her chair a little closer to mine. Everyone seemed to have had a different reaction to my words, but one thing was for sure: nearly all of the adventurers in that hall loved alcohol.

"Huh. Interesting..." I muttered to myself.

There was a huge business opportunity in this, wasn't there? I grabbed my tankard—which was still about eighty percent full—and gulped down the liquid inside in one. Yup, no doubt about it: it really was disgusting. I could easily bring much better alcohol to this world. All it would require was one quick trip to my nearest convenience store, and I'd be good to go. Raiya had told me before that the adventurers here were the cream of the crop, which could only mean one thing: they were *loaded*. And there was no doubt that most of them—if not all of them—would be interested in drinking better alcohol, right?

"Yeah, that could work..." I said aloud, having just thought of something. "With that, I could kill two birds with one stone. Scratch that, make it *three* birds with one stone. All right, then!"

I could almost feel my eyes turning into yen signs as I coughed loudly to grab everyone's attention. It worked, and everyone in the hall turned to look at me again.

"I have a question for you all. Would any of you be interested in trying some alcohol from my homeland?" I asked. They all gasped in surprise, but I wasn't finished yet. "Because, you see, over at my main store, I actually have a little bit in stock..."

Gasp.

"Well, actually, not just a little..."

Gasp.

“Yeah, come to think of it, I have a pretty big stock of alcohol from my homeland.”

Gasp!

“All that alcohol just sitting in my stockroom...” I said, laying it on thick. “And well, talking about it today got me thinking: maybe I should start selling it at my store.”

Gasp!

“What do you all think?”

The answer to my question came at light speed.

“I’d buy some!” one man said. “I’d *definitely* buy some!”

“I want to drink some sweet and fruity alcohol!” one woman requested.

“Orange wine for me!” shouted another.

“Sake! I want sake!”

“Ya talked about alcohol so strong, ya can set it on fire. I want that stuff. I’m tellin’ ya, I’ll drink every last drop of it, or I ain’t a dwarf!”

“I want to try some sweet alcohol too, meow!”

“Shiro, I want chocolate alcohol. Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate...”

All the adventurers in the room had pushed aside the tables and were crowding around me, each one screaming their requests. I thought I heard Kilpha and Nesca in the chaos, but it was difficult to be sure. I’d gotten pushed back farther and farther by the surge of alcohol-craving adventurers—so far back, in fact, I could feel the wall against my back. Everyone was absolutely desperate to try the alcohol I’d talked at length about. Well, that sealed it. My idea would work, no doubt about it. Though, just to be sure, I glanced at Ney and silently asked her what she thought about it. She didn’t say anything, simply gave me a thumbs up. I was all good to go.

“Well, c’mon then, lad, bring out the alco—” the dwarf started saying, but I raised my hand and interrupted him.

“I hear you,” I said to the crowd. “I hear your demands, everyone.”

I paused for dramatic effect, then finally came out with some words I'd always dreamt of saying.

"Be back here in three days, and I will treat you all to alcohol from my country!"

Chapter Fourteen: The Adventurers' Drinking Festival

That night, at that specific moment, I wasn't my usual self. But what was different, you might well ask. Well, anyone who knew me would tell you: "That night, at that specific moment, Shiro wasn't his usual self. He was wearing a different outfit."

Yup, you heard right. I was getting all set up to serve alcohol to the adventurers at the guild's drinking hall. Now, everyone knows the ambiance is an important part of the whole drinking experience, which was why I was wearing a black vest over a white shirt and black slacks. I'd also swapped my usual shoes out for black leather ones, and had even gone as far as putting on a bow tie. I naturally had to style my hair for the occasion as well, and I'd decided on the slicked-back look. Anyone looking at me right then would instantly have thought I was a bartender, though to be considered a *real* bartender, I needed two things: alcohol and a bar. Which probably went some way to explaining why I was presently standing behind a bar I'd hurriedly installed in the guild's drinking hall a short while before. Well, I *say* a bar, but it was really just a few wooden planks on top of some boxes.

"You're looking really stylish today, Mister Shiro," Aina complimented me when she saw me.

"Thank you, Aina. Right back at ya," I replied.

The little girl giggled. "I'm so happy you think so!"

"Mr. Shiro is really nice, isn't he, Aina?" Stella said to her daughter.

"You're also looking very stylish today, Stella," I said to her. "Very professional."

"Oh, you think so? Why, thank you."

Aina and Stella had offered to help me out with today's operation, and I'd decided they should both wear white shirts and black aprons. And it seemed as

if I'd made the right call there, because the two of them looked like they were employees in a stylish café. At first, I'd planned on manning the bar by myself, but Aina had insisted on helping me out with it. I'd admittedly hesitated a bit at the idea—after all, I wasn't *totally* convinced I should be letting an eight-year-old work somewhere where alcohol was being sold—but then she'd asked if it would be all right if her mother came with her, and when I told Stella about it, she'd just laughed and said Aina simply wanted to spend more time with me. Well, I couldn't really refuse her after hearing that, could I? Besides, grandma always used to say adults should accede to the assertiveness of children. Even so, I hesitated a bit more until I ultimately decided to accept her offer of help on the sole condition that both Aina and Stella had to take the overtime pay I was going to give them for working alongside me today. Naturally, they refused.

"Well, in that case, I won't let you help me," I'd said simply.

They'd finally given in, and here we were at "Bar Shiro."

"Shiro, everything's ready," said a lethargic voice from behind me.

Yup, that's right. Aina wasn't the only one who'd offered to help me in this endeavor.

"The alcohol you put in the buckets is all cool now, meow!"

"Thank you very much, Nesca and Kilpha," I said to my helpers.

"Tee hee. You can thank us some more if you like, meow," she said with a proud nod.

Buckets filled with water had been arranged in a line behind her, all of them full of beer bottles. I'd decided to use buckets as a substitute for a cooler and had gotten Nesca to use her magic to fill them up with ice. By this time, the beers must have been nice and cold. To thank all of my helpers for their assistance, I'd given them a silver coin each, plus a bottle of their favorite alcohol. Kilpha had requested some "fruity" alcohol, while Nesca wanted—you guessed it—chocolate liqueur. Stella asked me for wine, and after a lot of hesitation, Aina said she wanted grape juice. Thanks to Ney's generosity, the drinking hall's waitresses were also helping out.

"Okey dokey. Looks like we're all good to go," I muttered to myself.

I'd set up "Bar Shiro" in one corner of the drinking hall. I glanced over the makeshift counter and...

"Ya still not ready yet? When can we drink?!"

"Look at all those alcohol bottles! I heard they're all filled with different stuff!"

"So they're in glass bottles, not barrels? I-I-I wonder how much it'll cost."

"I hope I've got enough money..."

"Look at all those weird symbols on the bottles. I've never seen a language like that before. I wonder what country they're from."

"Maybe they're all from a continent on the other side of the sea!"

"So we get to drink alcohol that's come halfway across the world? We're so lucky!"

There was a frankly ridiculous number of adventurers gathered in the hall, and I noticed a lot of them were standing—perhaps because there weren't enough chairs? There was no doubt in my mind that every single one of the adventurers on the Fairy's Blessing guild's books had turned up for this, and all of them bar none were staring in wonder at the bottles of alcohol. I'd spent the last three days going around to every single liquor store in Tokyo, as well as ordering a ton of alcoholic beverages online. All in all, it had cost me upwards of three million yen.

Craft beer, Mexican beer, Japanese sake, wine, whiskey, brandy, liqueurs... I had *everything*. All of the adventurers were mesmerized by the sheer quantity of alcoholic drinks in the room, and while I knew they only had eyes for the alcohol, I could almost feel something akin to bloodlust emanating from them. Aina seemed to feel it too, as she suddenly grabbed my hand. The poor kid must have been feeling a little scared by the wide-eyed crowd in front of us. I quietly told her everything was going to be fine and squeezed her hand.

Well, it was about time I got this thing started.

"All right, everyone..."

Gasp.

“Let the...”

Gasp!

“Let the drinking...”

Gasp!

“Let the drinking festival begin!”

A roar went up and echoed around the room as everyone stood up at once, kicking their chairs over in the process and all yelling for joy with their fists in the air. I’d never seen anyone *that* excited about alcohol, let alone a whole room full of people. Once they’d all calmed down again, I cleared my throat.

“First off,” I announced loudly so that everyone could hear me, “I would like to thank you for all your hard work going out and exploring the forest day after day. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Shiro Amata, and I’m the owner of ‘Shiro’s Shop.’” I let my gaze wander over the crowd before continuing. “I’ve brought a portion of the alcohol that I keep stored at my shop with me today in the hopes that it will cheer everyone up after all those dangerous forays into the forest.”

I paused and waited for the crowd’s reaction to this.

“Is he for real?” I heard one man say. “That’s just a *‘portion’* of the booze he has in stock?”

“There’s no way! I dunno how wealthy this dude is, but even the richest merchant that has ever existed couldn’t get his hands on that much alcohol!” said another.

“What if the rumors are true? Maybe he really *is* an alchemist,” a third voice speculated.

“It’d explain a lot. If he truly is an alchemist, it would be easy enough for him to transmute all of that alcohol.”

“Huh? Are you seriously suggesting he made all of that *himself*?!”

“Who gives a damn?! I’m just tired of that awful, awful ale! Bring out the good stuff, I say!”

Some of them were shocked by the implication that the alcohol I'd brought with me was only a "portion" of my stock, while others sought to explain this improbable scenario by—not for the first time—suggesting I was an alchemist. But a good chunk of the assembled adventurers didn't care about any of that and just wanted to drink.

"The guildmaster, Ney,"—as I said this, I gestured toward the woman leaning against the wall behind me—"has authorized me to bring all of this alcohol to the drinking hall today so that we can thank you all for your services. Now, please enjoy this alcohol that I have brought from my homeland! Oh, and you don't need to pay a thing. This is my treat. Call it a freebie from 'Shiro's Shop'! C'mon, everyone! Go ahead and drink up, until there's not a single drop left!"

All of the adventurers in the room hollered their excitement once more.

I wasn't done yet, though. "And I've also brought plenty of snacks for you to munch on while you swig your drinks. These are also from my homeland, and I'm absolutely certain you will find them every bit as delectable as the drinks, so don't hesitate to give them a try."

Like before, a collective cheer went up from the crowd.

Now, you may be wondering why I was just giving away three-million-yen worth of alcohol for free. Well, there were several reasons for that, but the main one was money. Yup, that's right. That three million was actually an investment in my future business venture. And my reasoning was quite simple. While I knew most of the adventurers here were loaded, I had no idea how much they would be willing to spend on alcohol they'd never tasted from a country (well, a world, if you wanted to get technical about it) they'd never heard of. They seemed pretty hyped up at this particular moment in time, but if they didn't like it... Well, they wouldn't be so enthusiastic afterward, right? Now, don't get me wrong—I knew the alcohol I'd brought with me was good. But I had no frame of reference to tell me whether people from this world would feel the same way about it. And if they didn't like the first thing they tried, they might naturally be reluctant to buy something else. Who knows, they might even turn around and say the ale was better after all!

That's why I had decided to make their taste buds—and their stomachs—

realize how superior alcohol from Earth was *first*, and *then* start selling it. After all, if it was being given to them for free, they wouldn't really mind if the first drink they tried wasn't exactly to their taste because there were plenty of other options for them to try. Then, once I'd figured out what would be the most popular types of alcohol here, I could either sell them here in the drinking hall or back at my store, and I'd end up making double my original investment, perhaps more.

"But before we get started," I continued, "I'd like to ask your beautiful guildmaster, Miss Ney, to say a few words. Miss Ney, please come forward."

On cue, Ney—who'd been quietly listening to my little speech—stepped forward. She stood and surveyed the crowd.

"My dear adventurers," she started. "Mr. Shiro here has been kind enough to provide us with alcohol for this little gathering, and I hope all of you will have a good time tonight. Though please make sure you are in a fit enough state to perform the tasks required of you when you turn up for work tomorrow. Is that understood?"

Another cheer went up around the room. Ney glanced over to me and gave a little nod. I returned the nod and turned back toward the crowd once more.

"All right, everyone!" I said above the din. "I will now treat you all to alcohol from my homeland. First up, we have—Whoa!"

I didn't even get time to finish my sentence before a swarm of adventurers surged toward me. They were all itching to be the first to get a drink and were willing to do whatever it took to get it. But as I was getting jostled about by the crowd, I heard Ney raise her voice once more.

"Now, now, everyone," she called out. "If you cause trouble for Shiro, we will call an immediate end to tonight's celebration."

Her hands were on her hips to show her displeasure, and she was glaring at the adventurers who were trying to shove me out of the way. The effect was instantaneous. Practically as soon as those words had left her mouth, the adventurers had organized themselves into a neat line, a guilty look on all of their faces.

“Good job, guildmaster,” Nesca said quietly from off to the side as she cradled a bottle of chocolate liqueur in her arms. I had no idea when she’d gotten her hands on it, but oh well. Maybe she was a tad scared she wouldn’t get the reward I’d promised her after seeing how the other adventurers had pretty much hurled themselves at me.

“You can start now, Shiro,” Ney urged me.

I hurriedly fixed my bow tie, then addressed the crowd again. “All right, everyone! I would like to ask my good friend Raiya to come up here and have the first drink. Get over here, Raiya!”

“Sure thing, man,” the young man replied as he emerged at the front of the crowd, the other adventurers all glaring enviously at him.

“Raiya here was actually my very first customer when I set up shop in Ninoritch. I can’t think of anyone more fitting to have tonight’s first drink. Well then, Mr. Raiya,” I said, turning toward him. “What would you like?” I was a bartender today, after all, so I had to sound the part.

“Something good! Gimme your best drink, man! I’m so tired of the boring ale we have here. My throat’s crying out for the good stuff!” Raiya said theatrically. He seemed to have enjoyed my little act and decided to join in with my improvised skit. He really had a knack for keeping up with my antics.

“Hmm...” I pretended to ruminate on this. “You’ve put me in a bit of an awkward situation there, Mr. Raiya. After all, I only have good alcohol here. Besides, I don’t know your tastes. What I consider to be my ‘best drink’ might not be to your liking at all.”

“I-Is that so? Hm, what to do, what to do...” Raiya said, making a show of pondering this. “Hey, wait. What’s that one in the ice bucket?”

“That’s called beer,” I explained. “It has a very distinct taste and goes down rather easily. I am also currently offering slices of this fruit known as a ‘lime’ for free with any drink you order tonight. I suggest squeezing some of the lime juice into your beer to really enhance its flavor. I don’t think you can go wrong with beer, and it’s one of my go-to recommendations. So, what do you say?”

Raiya listened intently to my little sales pitch, then swallowed his saliva with a

loud gulp. “O-Okay, man! Gimme one of those!” he said.

“Right you are,” I said with a nod.

I looked at Aina, who answered my glance with a silent nod. She took a beer bottle out of one of my makeshift coolers and brought it to the bar. She then dried it with a towel, removed the cap, and stuck a slice of lime in the top.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your drink,” she said as she handed the bottle to Raiya.

“Thank you, girly,” he replied.

“Um...” Aina started. “If you squeeze the juice from this ‘lime’ thingy into the drink, it’ll taste even better,” she said, hesitantly reciting the instructions I’d taught her to say. “Sir,” she added belatedly.

The beer I’d picked out for Raiya was a Mexican beer, which was currently the most popular type of beer in Japan. You could find bottles of it in any bar, and even at the supermarket or the convenience store.

“Like this?” Raiya asked as he squeezed juice from the slice of lime into his drink.

Juice dripped into the bottle and mixed in with the beer, and I heard a fascinated “Oooh” from the adventurers watching the scene. Adding juice to an alcoholic drink probably wasn’t something they’d ever heard of before.

“All right, then. I’m gonna take my first sip of it now,” Raiya declared as he brought the beer bottle up to his lips.

As soon as the liquid hit his tongue, his eyes instantly widened.

“Wh-What *is* this thing?!” he stammered. “It’s got bubbles in it, and the lime juice adds a nice sourness to it without being overpowering. And it’s so cold and refreshing too! I feel like I could drink gallons and gallons of this stuff!” He took another few gulps, then exclaimed, “It’s so good! What the heck, man? This is the best drink I’ve ever had!”

“I’m glad it’s to your liking,” I said. “Now, if you add a tiny pinch of salt to this beer, it’ll taste *even* better, believe it or not. What do you say? Would you like to give it a try?” I suggested, placing a small plate full of salt—rock salt, to be

specific—on the counter, and as soon as I'd said it, I could've sworn I heard an adventurer with a beard purring in response to my words.

"Salt, huh?" Raiya mused. "Well, if you say it makes it better, I can't *not* try it —" He abruptly stopped speaking as something occurred to him. "Hey, wait a minute. Ah, that was close. I almost forgot you were a merchant." He paused and laughed. "You're telling me to add a pinch of salt to this, but how much are you gonna charge me for it, huh? Even if it does make it taste better, if it ends up being more expensive than the drink itself, I ain't buying."

I thought back to my first day in Ruffaltio, when I'd bought meat skewers and been appalled to find they weren't seasoned at all. That incident had told me something: in a town as remote as Ninoritch, salt and pepper were most likely luxury items. As such, it wasn't surprising that Raiya was so wary.

I simply clicked my tongue a couple of times and wagged my index finger. "Just for today, you get it free," I reminded him.

"For real?!" Raiya asked, his eyes goggling again.

"Of course," I assured him. "Oh, but be careful not to put too much salt into your beer. That would wreck the taste of it. You can also try licking the salt off your finger and then taking a sip of the beer for a similar result."

"All right, then..." Raiya said, still seeming a little hesitant. He took a pinch of salt off the plate and looked at me. "About this much?"

"That should do it, yes," I said with a nod.

He sprinkled the salt into his beer and muttered a quiet "Well, let's see how it tastes now," before bringing the bottle up to his lips and taking a few gulps.

"How is it?" I asked.

"Seriously, dude, what the heck?! It's so refreshing!" he exclaimed, and it sounded like he was practically in a trance. "Salt and ale, huh? Oh, wait, you said it was called 'beer,' right? Damn, I never thought that adding salt to alcohol could make it this much better! Hm?" He looked down and noticed his bottle was empty.

"Gimme another one, man!" he said, leaning over the counter. "That thing

was so good, I need another right now!”

“Hey, Raiya! You’ve had your drink! Get to the back of the line! It’s our turn now!” one of the amassed adventurers barked, impatient to get his hands on a drink.

“Yeah, it’s our turn!” the other adventurers yelled in agreement.

“We already waited long enough for you to finish up that drink!” the first man continued.

Yet again, the rest of the crowd showed their agreement by yelling and booing Raiya, who simply stood there totally unbothered by the jeers that were being aimed his way. That is, until the veteran-looking dwarf we’d seen in the drinking hall the previous week decided to pipe up and make his feelings known.

“Hey, kid. I’ll give ya five seconds to clear outta the way. Ya better move while I’m still in a good mood,” he said threateningly, a rather stern look on his face.

This intervention seemed to do the trick, and Raiya skulked to the back of the line with his tail between his legs.

“All righty. Next customer, please!” I called out, and the next person came up to the bar to place their order.

From that point on, the drinking hall was as chaotic as a battlefield. I’d never been so busy in my entire life.

“Gimme the same thing Raiya had,” was my second customer’s order.

“Of course, sir,” I said with a nod. “Aina, you heard the man.”

“Yup! Here you go!” the little girl said as she hurriedly brought the man his drink.

Next in line was a female adventurer. “I really don’t like ale,” she told me. “What other types of alcohol do you have?”

“Would you like to try some wine, perhaps?” I suggested.

“Oh, yeah, you said before that there were a lot of different types of wine, didn’t you?” she said.

“That’s right,” I said with a nod. “Today, I have red wine, white wine, rosé, and orange wine that I can offer you. Do you have a preference?”

“I’d like to try some orange wine, please.”

“Understood,” I said, then turned to Stella, who was standing a little farther away. “Stella, could you take that fourth bottle from the right and pour some of it into this glass for the lady?”

“Y-Yes, of course!” she replied. I’d decided to let Aina handle the Mexican beer orders and have Stella focus primarily on the wine orders.

“Next customer, please!”

We were making good headway into the line of waiting adventurers, and next came the turn of the veteran-looking dwarf.

“Remember our conversation, kid? Last time we spoke, ya promised ya would bring me alcohol so strong, it can be set on fire.”

Chapter Fifteen: The Battle Against the Hero

The dwarf had his arms crossed in front of his chest and his eyes were glinting, indicating that he was ready for a challenge. His order was extremely simple: I had to give him the strongest drink I had. Nesca had told me that dwarves were big eaters and heavy drinkers, but dang, this guy must have been *extremely* confident in his ability to handle his drink if he was ordering the strongest thing I had right off the bat.

“Didn’t ya hear me, kid? Gimme some of that alcohol ya bragged about so much last time. Ya better not tell me ya were lying.”

I chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry. I wasn’t lying,” I assured him and grabbed a bottle. “Here you go. This right here is known as ‘Spirytus.’”

Spirytus. Any alcohol lover would know the name of this particular type of vodka. Back in Japan, it was considered a Level 4 hazardous material, as even lighting a cigarette in its vicinity could cause it to set on fire. It was a very dangerous drink, and boasted an alcohol percentage of ninety.

“Hm. Just looks like water to me,” said the dubious dwarf. “Ya sure this is alcohol, kid?”

“Oh, that’s because it’s been through the distilling process a number of times. That’s why it’s so clear. It may look like water, but if you give it a sniff, you’ll immediately realize it’s alcohol. But at any rate...” I said hesitantly. “Are you *sure* you want to drink this?” I asked, eager to make him change his mind. “I don’t mind getting you something else. I’d recommend a beer or a glass of wine, like the others.”

No one drank Spirytus if they could help it. People usually only ingested it accidentally, as the result of a prank for instance, or as a forfeit for losing a game. I would have much preferred for him to settle on something else to drink. Something he might actually enjoy, you know? But my words seemed to cause quite a stir in the drinking hall.

“Hey, did you hear that?” I heard a man say. “That guy’s trying to provoke *the* Eldos!”

“Don’t tell me he’s never heard of Eldos the Indestructible?!” someone else said.

“Well, this town *is* out in the middle of nowhere, after all,” a woman pointed out. “So it’s not really that surprising, is it?”

“But he’s one of the Sixteen Heroes! In the capital, even kids know his name!”

Apparently, this dwarf guy was a major celebrity in the adventuring world.

The dwarf—Eldos, I think they said his name was—let out a chuckle. “Is that a challenge, kid?” he asked. “I’m in.”

He slammed his wooden tankard down on the countertop right in front of me. It was *huge*. If this were an izakaya—the type of bar you saw everywhere in Japan—you’d probably get something this size if you ordered a mega-sized drink. Surely he wasn’t expecting me to fill that thing up to the top with Spirytus...

“C’mon, kid. I ain’t got all day. Serve me my drink.”

“Um, I don’t think it’d be a very good idea to—” I attempted to warn him, but he simply pushed his tankard toward me.

This was bad. Dwarves might be heavy drinkers, but that didn’t necessarily mean they could handle it well. And Spirytus had an absurdly high alcohol percentage too. I planned on serving it in shot glasses, not this mega-sized tankard!

“What’s wrong, kid?” Eldos said. “Is this alcohol of yours that expensive? Don’t worry about that. I’ve got money,” he said, then paused when he saw my expression. “Why are you making that face? Don’t tell me ya got cold feet now.”

“I...” I started, then nodded. “I do, actually. You see, Spirytus is so strong, a single gulp of it is enough to make anyone unsteady on their feet. And here you are, wanting me to serve it to you in that huge tankard. Oh, I have an idea! How about you take a little sip of it first? If you’re fine after that, you can have another, then another. You know, small sips at a time, and uh...” I paused when

I noticed that Eldos's shoulders had started shaking. "Hm?"

The assembled adventurers had started talking among themselves again.

"Hear that?" one said. "He's trying to egg him on even more!"

"A little sip'? He's talking to him like he's a kid! Eldos is two hundred years old! That's *ten times* that brat's age!" another said.

"He's looking down on us dwarves!" growled a gruff-sounding voice.

"Someone go explain to that kid that us dwarves don't grow up drinking milk out of baby bottles like you humes do. We're guzzling down alcohol straight from the barrel as soon as we leave the womb!"

"Treating the hero Eldos like a kid..." I heard one adventurer gasp at my gall. "That guy has a serious death wish."

Uh, you've got it all wrong, people. I wasn't making fun of him. It's just, drinking that much Spirytus would be *incredibly* dangerous.

"Ya tryin' to insult me, brat?" Eldos barked at me. "Lemme tell ya somethin': I've never been drunk in my life, not even once. Ya better stop makin' fun of me, y'hear?!"

"I'm not!" I said, trying to calm him down. "Eldos—can I call you that? Eldos, I know you probably don't know this, but you can die from drinking too much alcohol. It affects your gag reflex and you can choke on your own vomit! Where I'm from, tons of people die from alcohol poisoning each year! I might have been the one who brought all this alcohol here for you guys, but I don't condone irresponsible drinking! If you *really* want to drink Spirytus..." I paused and rummaged through the boxes, eventually producing a shot glass and putting it down on the counter. "...it'll be out of this little glass right here!"

It was much, *much* smaller than Eldos's tankard. It was like comparing an edamame bean to the moon.

"Ya lookin' for a fight, kid? Is that it? Fine by me if you are! Let's take this outside!" Eldos bellowed, removing his shirt and showing off his insanely muscular chest. He gestured to the door with his chin—which was his way of telling me to meet him outside—and started cracking his knuckles.

It looked for all the world like I'd just gotten myself dragged into a fight. Dang, adventurers really did escalate even the slightest thing into a battle, didn't they? I started freaking out. Glancing across at my friends, I saw that they seemed even more panicked by this invitation to brawl than I was. But just as all hope seemed lost, someone came to my rescue.

"Mr. Eldos, sir, please calm yourself," a gentle-sounding male voice said.

"And who the hell are *you*?" Eldos barked.

"I am but a humble servant of the sky goddess, Florine," the man greeted Eldos with a bow. "My name is Rolf Foss Motzell."

That's right. My savior was none other than Rolf. He had a serene smile on his face as he strategically placed himself between Eldos and me.

The dwarf snorted. "And what business ya got with me, huh? Here to give me a sermon? Or maybe ya want a front-row seat to the beatdown I'm gonna give this kid?"

"Of course not," Rolf said placidly. "It just so happens that Mr. Shiro here is one of my friends."

"Yer friend?" Eldos barked.

"Yes. A very good friend, in fact," Rolf replied, still as calm as ever despite Eldos quite literally screaming in his face.

"So yer here to defend him, then? I have no issues fightin' both of ya at the same time. I'll bet ya think ya can beat me with those bulging muscles of yers, huh?" Eldos said, balling his right hand up into a fist and punching the air. He must have guessed from looking at Rolf's physique that he wasn't just your run-of-the-mill priest.

"You jest, I assume," Rolf said, shaking his head. "I came here to stop you from continuing this course of action. As you can probably tell simply by looking at him, fighting isn't exactly Mr. Shiro's strong suit."

I nodded vigorously at this statement. "I hate fighting," I affirmed. "In fact, I hate *anything* that hurts. On account of it hurting, you know?"

"See?" Rolf said. "If you two were to come to blows, Mr. Shiro wouldn't be

able to so much as lay a finger on you before you were done with him, Mr. Eldos, sir. And as you are one of the Sixteen Heroes, I find it hard to believe you would torment someone who is in no position to fight back. For one thing, it would ruin your hard-earned reputation.”

“Well, he’s the one who started it! He insulted me first,” Eldos sulked. Rolf’s words seemed to have calmed him down a little.

“It’s all a big misunderstanding,” I said. “I’ve seen lots of people who’ve tried to drink Spirytus and ended up passing out. I simply can’t let you drink that much in one go. The reputation of my store is on the line. And besides, I don’t want to cause issues for the guild. But most importantly of all, I’m saying all this for your own good, Eldos.”

The dwarf didn’t say anything to this.

“Mr. Eldos, sir, might I please ask you to listen to my friend’s advice?”

“I get what yer tryin’ to say, kid,” Eldos said after a pause. “But to us dwarves, that little spit of alcohol ain’t even worth drinkin’.”

“I can understand that,” Rolf said with a nod. “But I have a suggestion.”

“What is it? Speak up,” the dwarf urged him.

“Well...” Rolf paused briefly and turned to face me. “Mr. Shiro, sir, as a priest, I can use a holy spell called ‘Cure.’ It is commonly used to treat poison, but it can also be used to free a person from the effects of intoxication.”

“Whoa, impressive!” I exclaimed.

What a convenient spell! You go, other world! I had to admit, it made sense too. After all, drunkenness was basically a status ailment, if you thought about it.

“In the unlikely event that Mr. Eldos does find himself intoxicated from drinking this particular alcohol to the extent that he loses consciousness, I will immediately use my Cure spell to revive him. What do you think? Will you allow Mr. Eldos to drink that alcohol under those conditions?”

“Hm...” I said. “Let me think about it for a second.”

Alcohol abuse was dangerous, as it could lead to acute alcohol poisoning,

which could in turn cause all manner of awful symptoms, like blacking out, vomiting, breathing issues, and in some cases, it could even result in death. But thanks to Rolf's magic, the chances of that happening were practically zero, right? And besides, it might get Eldos with his devil-may-care attitude to understand the dangers of drinking too much Spirytus.

"All right," I said after a few seconds. "Under those conditions, I guess I can allow it."

"Well, you heard him, Mr. Eldos, sir," Rolf said. "What do you think of my proposition?"

"I don't mind either," the dwarf said with a nod. "But lemme repeat what I said, kid. I ain't ever been drunk in my entire life. Alcohol runs in dwarves' veins. And the stronger, the better!" He paused for a moment and glared at me. "You say this stuff might make me pass out? Hmph. I've fought thousands of monsters in my time, and my knees ain't ever touched the ground durin' a battle, not even once. That's the thing I'm most proud of. I've fought the Demon Lord, the Ancient Dragon, the Ghost King... All of 'em absurdly strong, yet not a single one of them managed to make me fall to my knees."

A collective "ooh" arose from the assembled adventurers.

"Those are all mythical monsters..." Nesca gasped in awe.

Well, it looked like that title of "hero" wasn't just for show, huh?

"So c'mon, kid. Pour me out that alcohol already!" Eldos demanded, raising his tankard.

"Okay. Just please don't drink it all at once, all right?" I said as I removed the cap from the bottle. "And if you start feeling dizzy, stop drinking immediately."

He snorted. "If I do actually end up feelin' dizzy, I'll let ya ask me whatever ya want."

"And if you don't?" I asked.

A self-assured grin appeared on his face. "If I don't, any alcohol I get from ya from now on, yer gonna give it to me for free."

"Deal," I said after a slight pause. "I'm not in the habit of making bets, but just

this once, I'll accept your terms."

"Good!" the dwarf replied. "Now fill 'er up, kid! And don't be stingy, ya hear? Ya gotta fill it all the way up until it starts overflowin'!"

"Yes, yes," I said dismissively and started pouring the Spirytus into his mega-sized tankard.

"Huh. Ya were right: it *does* smell strong," Eldos noted, a huge grin plastered across his face. "Much stronger'n any alcohol I've drunk up 'til now, for sure."

All eyes were on him as he brought the tankard up to his lips, threw his head back, and downed his drink in one. Spirytus. He drained a whole *tankard* of Spirytus in one go. Even though I'd told him not to do exactly that.

"Is this guy for real?" I muttered to no one in particular.

"Phew," Eldos said once he'd polished off his drink. "Damn, it feels like my stomach's on fire. Well, what do ya say, kid? Do I look drunk to ya?"

I looked at his eyes and saw they weren't even the slightest bit cloudy. In fact, if anything, his gaze was even more piercing than before—perhaps because he'd finally gotten to have the drink he'd been looking forward to for the past few days.

I raised my hands in capitulation. "Seems I underestimated you," I said to him. "I've lost our bet."

Apparently, dwarves had a level of alcohol tolerance that was frankly insane. Oh well. The more you know.

Eldos erupted into a loud belly laugh. "Finally! Well, a bet's a bet. From now on, yer gonna give me drinks for free whenever I want 'em."

"All right, all right," I said. "But leave some for the others too, okay?"

"Ya better bring me drinks 'til I'm satisfied, then. If ya manage to slake my thirst, I *might* let the others have a turn. Well, not that I'd ever get drunk or anything. As if that could happen!"

Eldos laughed long and hard at this with his head thrown back, when all of a sudden, his legs gave way from under him and he hit the floor. It had been so unexpected, everyone in the drinking hall instantly fell silent. I rushed over to

him and sat beside him on the floor.

“Eldos?” I yelled in his ear. “Eldos! Can you hear...” I stopped and muttered, “Ah, it’s no good. Rolf, hurry up and use that spell on him! The one that cures drunkenness!”

“U-Understood,” Rolf said with a nod, though he was as taken aback as the rest of us.

He hurriedly recited a prayer and cast the Cure spell on Eldos, who was still lying on the floor unconscious with a half-grin on his face. When the spell hit him, a faint glow enveloped his body.



“Eldos, I did tell you to drink it one sip at a time, didn’t I?”

“Y-Yeah. I think I remember ya sayin’ somethin’ like that,” he muttered.

“Yes, I did. I said it very clearly, in fact! But you still went ahead and glugged the whole thing down in one go. Good grief. If it weren’t for Rolf, you’d likely be dead right now!”

“I know,” the dwarf mumbled. “I plan on thankin’ him later.”

“Well, that goes without saying! Listen, you may be a hero or whatever, but from now on, please remember that alcohol is something you are meant to *enjoy*. You can’t just drink it all down in one go like that. Don’t you know how disrespectful that is to the alcohol?!”

The dwarf humphed. Practically as soon as he’d regained consciousness, I’d started laying into him. And I wasn’t pulling any punches either.

“Look at that kid! He’s actually *lecturing* Eldos!” I heard an adventurer say.

“I’ve never seen Eldos look so ashamed of himself!” another piped up.

“He said he wouldn’t drop to his knees, but he ended up flat on his back, didn’t he?”

“After all those battles, in the end, it was a bottle of alcohol that took him down,” a woman pointed out with a chuckle. “That’s pretty funny.”

“Are we sure that stuff was even alcohol?”

“The kid said it was called spiri-something-or-other.”

“We should rename it to ‘Hero Slayer’ or something.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that! I kinda wanna try it now.”

“Me too!”

I didn’t let the other adventurers gossiping loudly distract me from scolding Eldos. Little did I know then that a few weeks after the events of that particular day, a new alcohol from Ninoritch—dubbed the “Hero Slayer”—would take the continent by storm.

Chapter Sixteen: The Real Reason

Around six hours had passed since the commencement of the drinking festival.

“Treating us to such huge quantities of alcohol...” Raiya said while the party was still in full swing, marveling at what I’d achieved. “You really are something else, man.”

I could tell the drinking festival was beginning to wind down, as the majority of the people in the drinking hall were struggling to walk straight. At some point, a few of them had even started stripping. That had been Stella’s cue to take Aina home, even though the little girl had complained about having to leave early. Some things were just not meant for a little girl’s eyes.

“The alcohol you brought with you is good,” Nesca told me. “I’ve never drunk anything like it before.”

“I haven’t either!” Kilpha piped up. “I wanna take some back home to my mom and dad, meow!”

A few minutes earlier, I’d plonked myself down in a chair and removed my bow tie, as if to signify to everyone that business hours were over. Raiya, Nesca, and Kilpha had joined me at the table. The only member missing from our usual crew was Rolf, who was busy casting Cure on all the adventurers who’d had too much to drink. A lot of them had decided to try drinking a few sips of Spirytus, and they’d all ended up passed out on the floor—including Emille, for some reason. Well, she’d always been the kind of person who was more than comfortable drinking alone, so it wasn’t really any surprise that she’d taken this opportunity to get blackout drunk.

“Still...” Raiya continued. “I know your shop’s doing well and all, man, but surely organizing a huge drinking festival like this must’ve put a dent in your finances, right?” Raiya took a sip of the Mexican beer he had in his hand. *Seems he’s taken a bit of a liking to them, huh?*

The alcohol I'd brought here had proved insanely popular with the adventurers, and there wasn't a single drop left out of the three-million-yen worth of alcohol I'd carted here from Japan. That gave a good idea of just how much of a success this night had been.

"It pained me a little to spend all that money on alcohol, yeah," I conceded with a nod. "But it's been worth it. Look at it this way: when I eventually start actually selling this alcohol, people won't be able to say no to it, right?"

When Raiya heard this, he couldn't help but laugh, and an impressed look spread across his face. "So what you've done here is get them hooked on the taste? Is that what you're trying to say? Damn, man. That's a good plan. What a cunning rascal you are, Mr. Hotshot Merchant."

I chuckled. "Stop calling me that. Anyway, that was only half the reason for bringing the alcohol here tonight. I was also thinking it might help the adventurers de-stress a bit, you know? I know you told me it's perfectly normal for adventurers to get into fistfights all the time, but as an outsider, I have to say, it's a little scary. Besides, I often get Aina to deliver my wares to the guild outlet here, and I don't want her stumbling across a brawl when she comes over here. So yeah."

"Yeah, I get what you mean," Kilpha said with a nod. "It's true that Aina comes here often, and it'd be bad if we scared her away, meow. You're a real good guy, Shiro!"

I gasped a pained "Ouch!" as she started whacking me on the back. Maybe it was because she was drunk, but holy cow, that *hurt*.

"Meow-ha-ha! You always make such a big deal out of nothing, meow," she said with a laugh when she saw my reaction. "I didn't even hit you that hard!"

"What do you mean? That hurt like hell!" I protested. "I bet I'll have a big bruise on my back tomorrow."

"Oh, you liar," she teased, and delivered another almighty slap to my back, which inflicted some additional damage to the spot that was already throbbing. The others burst out laughing.

After a little while, Raiya stopped laughing and shot me a glance with some

meaning behind it. “So anyway, what about the *real* objective of today? How did that go?” he asked in a quiet voice, a knowing look on his face. “Of course, you wanted to help everyone to relax a little”—he raised one finger to indicate that this had been objective number one—“give them a taste of the alcohol you plan on selling”—he raised a second finger for objective number two—“and...”—at this point, he raised a third finger—“...you wanted to see if the man li’l Patty’s looking for would be here. Did I guess right?”

“So you figured that out, huh?” I said.

“Yup. It was a good plan. The promise of alcohol would draw all the adventurers in the area to one place, for sure. So...” Raiya pressed, looking expectant. “Did he show?”

“Well, I can’t really tell you that. Let’s ask her directly,” I said as I stood up.

I walked over to the bar and grabbed a little wooden crate that I’d left on the countertop, then headed back to my seat.

“Boss? Did you find your friend?” I quietly asked the box as I sat down again.

Patty had been hidden away in the crate the entire time. I’d made a small hole in it so she could survey the crowd and look for her friend amid all the merriment.

It was a few seconds before she answered, but when she did, she sounded utterly dejected. “No, I didn’t.”

“I see,” I said after a short pause. “Seems he really isn’t an adventurer after all.”

As Raiya had correctly guessed, my main reason for organizing this drinking festival had been to look for Patty’s friend. Since they used to meet up in the forest, my first thought had been that he was an adventurer, so I figured if I gathered all the adventurers in town in one place, Patty could scan the crowd and find him that way. Unfortunately, my plan was a bust.

“I’m sorry,” Patty said. “It must have been hard for you to gather all of these adventurers—or whatever it is you call them—together for the night.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I reassured her. “Besides, half of the reason I

organized this drinking festival was for my own sake, anyway.”

“And the other half was for the sake of us adventurers, wasn’t it?” Raiya prompted.

“Exactly!” I said. “So there’s really no reason for you to feel bad about it, boss.”

“I’m really...” the little fairy muttered. “I’m really sorry.”

“I mean it. You don’t have to apologize,” I said gently. “Besides, now that we know he’s not an adventurer, that means he must just be a regular citizen. Hey, it’s fine, you hear? We’ll find him, I promise.”

For the rest of the drinking festival, Patty continued apologizing to us, saying over and over again how sorry she was for making us go to such lengths when it had ultimately yielded nothing, and I immediately realized that she simply wasn’t used to people being kind to her.

Chapter Seventeen: The Truth

The following day and the day after that, I carried on hunting for Patty's friend, but unfortunately, I had no luck finding him. It'd already been a week since I started my search and I'd spent countless hours traipsing around Ninoritch trying to find someone wearing a pendant similar to Patty's, even going as far as putting up posters with details of his features on them—but it was all to no avail. Whenever I took a break from work during the daytime, I did a bit more searching, plus I dedicated a few hours to looking for the guy every day after closing up my store.

It was dinner time when I decided to call it a day. I headed back to the store and went straight to the break room up on the second floor. As I plonked myself down on the couch, I glanced at Patty and noticed she seemed really down.

"Patty..." Aina murmured. Seeing the little fairy looking so dejected must have made her sad too.

"Maybe he's not actually in Ninoritch anymore," I suggested.

"Wh-What do you mean?" Patty asked as she turned to look up at me.

"Well, not all humes live here," I explained. "There are plenty of other hume towns and cities. Maybe your friend simply moved elsewhere."

Ninoritch was a rural town, after all, and it wasn't uncommon for young people to move to a more developed town in search of work. Even in Japan, a lot of young people tended to move to "the big city" to attend university, and a lot of them ended up staying there.

"Come to think of it, I remember my clan leader saying something along those lines before. He said there were several hume dwellings," she mused before turning to us again. "How many human dwellings are there?"

"There are lots and lots and lots of places where humes live," Aina explained.

"Lots?" Patty repeated, stunned by this information. "What, so like, t-twenty or something?"

“Nope,” Aina said, shaking her head. “Lots more than that.”

“Th-Thirty?”

“Looooots more!”

“Really? That many?” Patty sighed, her shoulders drooping. “Then how am I supposed to find him?”

I noticed that tears had started welling up in her eyes. She must’ve really cared for this man, huh? I sat in silence, unsure of what to say, when all of a sudden, there was a knock at the front door.

“Shiro, are you home?” a woman called from the other side of the door.

I walked over to the window and peered out. It was Karen standing in front of the door to the store.

“Karen?” I called to her from the second-floor window.

She looked up at me. “Ah, there you are!” she replied, sounding relieved. “I think I may have found out who that man you’re looking for is.”

“R-Really?!” I asked, totally shocked by this sudden turn of events.

“Yes. May I come in?”

“O-Of course,” I said quickly. “Lemme come down real quick.”



“I was convinced I’d seen that pendant before, so I went home and looked through all of my belongings...” Karen paused briefly, then said, “...and found this.” She opened the wooden box she was holding and inside was a pendant strikingly similar to the one Patty had.

“That’s...” I breathed. “That’s it! That’s the pendant we’re looking for!”

“I thought as much,” she said with a nod. “So it really was this pendant, huh?”

“But where did you find it?” I asked her.

“Don’t you remember?” she replied. “You’ve definitely seen this before. This pendant belonged to my great-great-grandfather. In other words, Ninoritch’s founder. I think he’s the man you’re looking for.”

I was absolutely dumbfounded by this and had no idea what to say.

“Mister Shiro, what’s a ‘great-great-grandfather’?” Aina asked innocently.

“It’s your grandpa’s grandpa,” I explained, and her expression turned dark, indicating she probably understood what that meant.

“Shiro, can I ask why you’re looking for him?” Karen said.

“It’s, uh...” I trailed off, unable to figure out quite how to finish that sentence.

“Miss Karen, we’re looking for him because, uh...” Aina tried, but she wasn’t sure what to say either.

As we both stood there, trying to find the right words that would explain the situation, a little voice piped up from Aina’s backpack.

“I’m the one who asked them to,” Patty said. She flew out of the bag and perched on Aina’s shoulder.

“No way...” Karen gasped, her eyes wide as saucers. “A *fairy*? Shiro, she’s...” She was momentarily lost for words. “But what’s...” Her voice failed her again.

“Allow me to explain...” I said, and gave her a rundown of everything that had happened to me in the forest, including how Patty and I had met, how she’d rescued me by fishing me out of the river, and her search for her friend, who it turned out was Karen’s great-great-grandfather.

“I see,” she said when I had finished. “I can’t believe my ears. My ancestor, acquainted with a fairy? Who would’ve thought?”

“We aren’t just *acquaintances*,” Patty objected. “We’re friends. We’re each other’s *only* friend, in fact,” she explained haughtily, her eyes firmly fixed on Karen. “Anyway, where is he now?”

“Wh-What do you mean?” Karen asked in some surprise.

“Well, you’re his kid’s kid’s kid’s...” Patty said, starting to rattle off the generations before giving up. “Ugh, it’s too complicated. Anyway, you’re related to him, right?”

“Yes...” Karen said with a tentative nod.

“Then, you must know where to find him!” the fairy surmised.

“What are you talking ab—*Oh!*” Karen said with a gasp. “I see what’s going on now. So that’s how it is...” she muttered, seeming to have realized something. “Patty, may I ask what a fairy’s life expectancy is?”

“Life expectancy? Why are you asking that all of a sudd—” Patty started grumbling, but Karen cut across her.

“Please. It’s important,” Karen pressed. “Could you tell me?”

“The clan leader says we live about 3,000 years. I’m only 300 years old, though,” she said.

Aina and I gasped simultaneously, this new information leaving us utterly speechless.

“That explains it,” Karen said. “Hume life expectancy isn’t even a hundred years. My great-great-grandfather, he...”—she paused briefly—“he passed away a long time ago,” she explained softly to Patty, and she sounded incredibly sorry for the fairy.

“That’s...” Patty murmured in disbelief. “No way...”

Intermission

Patty Falulu. Or “She Who Cuts Through Destiny” in the language of the fairies. That was the name the fairies’ clan leader had bestowed on her out of pity for the young fairy. However, no one in the fairies’ dwelling called her by that name—not even her own parents. The other fairies had many other names for her: the unwanted; the messenger of disasters; the cursed child; the poor girl loathed by the entire forest; and last but not least, the curse-bearer.

Why, you might ask? Well, it was all because Patty was born with a mysterious symbol on her abdomen. According to the legends, this particular symbol was a curse that was fated to visit disaster upon fairykind, and because of this, Patty found herself shunned by the other fairies from pretty much the day she was born.

“Don’t come near us!”

“Unwanted!”

“Don’t touch me! Get away from me!”

“The clan leader should banish you from the dwelling.”

Patty didn’t belong with the other fairies. She was miserable. Utterly miserable. And it was because of this that she departed the dwelling one moonless night. One of the principle rules the fairies all adhered to was that they weren’t allowed to leave the dwelling, but what choice did she have? The fairies had made it abundantly clear that she didn’t belong there.

“No one cares about me,” she muttered as she passed beyond the outer limits of the fairies’ dwelling. “No one will even notice I’ve gone.”

And so, go she did. She roamed the forest for a while, thinking she’d eventually head back to the dwelling after a few days, but that was when she met *him*.

“Are you...” he said hesitantly, “...a fairy?”

The other fairies had always looked at Patty with fear and disgust in their eyes. But he didn't. His gaze was gentle, and he even had a smile on his face. He then said he was happy to have met a fairy. To have met Patty. This encounter changed her life completely. This young hume's kind words *saved* her.

She was so overwhelmed by the way he was looking at her, the best she could do was squeak out her reply. "A-And you're a hume, right?"

"Miss Fairy, could you tell me your name?" he had asked her one day.

Patty started panicking. She'd always wanted someone to call her by her real name. All these years, she'd been waiting for someone—*anyone*—to call her by her actual name. But even so, she didn't tell him what it was.

"Y-You really want to know what my name is *that* badly? G-Guess I don't have much choice, then. I'll tell you..." she said to the man before adding her condition. "But f-first, you need to get better at hunting. O-Once you become a good hunter, I-I'll tell you my name!"

She said this because she was afraid everything would be over once he learned her name. *If I tell him my name, he might leave me...* she thought to herself. *I'd rather not say anything and stay with him forever. I've always... I've always wanted a friend. To have someone by my side.*

She kept these feelings to herself though, and tried her best to always seem strong whenever she was around him. She regularly snuck out of the dwelling to find him in the forest. She didn't remember exactly when it happened, but at some point, she started calling him "hume" while he referred to her as "Miss Fairy." Spending time with him always made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

One day, she stumbled across a beautiful stone and gave it to him. A few days later, he returned to the forest and gave her a pendant as a gift. It was made from the precious stone she had given him.

"Look, Miss Fairy. I made us matching necklaces," he had said, beaming at her.

"Huh. Not bad for a hume," she replied, studying it. "I-I shall accept this as a token of..." She paused as she tried to find the right word. "A token of our f-friendship."

“You’re really going to keep it?” he asked. “Oh, thank you! Looks like my hard work paid off,” he said, his smile even wider than before, and Patty grinned right back at him. The fairy and the hume had become friends.

Time passed, the seasons changed, and the gangly hume grew stronger and hardier. He even got quite good at hunting. Then one day, he managed to slay a forest wolf all by himself.

“Miss Fairy, do you think you could tell me your name now?” he asked, having mustered up all of his courage.

Well, Patty *had* said she would tell him her name once he was good at hunting. But still she hesitated. A little voice in the back of her head nagged at her, telling her the second he learned her name, their friendship would be over.

“W-Well, you haven’t given me much choice,” she said. “I’ll tell you my name the next time we see each other.”

“I look forward to it,” the hume said with a smile. “Oh, I should tell you my name too! I’m—” he started, but Patty immediately interrupted him.

“N-No, don’t! Don’t tell me your name *now*!” she said quickly. “N-Next time we see each other, let’s introduce ourselves properly. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure thing,” the hume said with a nod, a huge grin plastered across his face. It was the same kind of smile he had greeted her with when they’d first met—warm and gentle.

That was the last time Patty saw him.

Chapter Eighteen: Patty's Life

Even once Karen had left, Patty still seemed to be in a daze. She was sitting on the window sill and gazing up at the night sky.

"Um, boss?" I tentatively called out to her.

"What is it?" she asked flatly.

"I don't really know how to say this, but..." I hesitated briefly. "I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything.

"What are you gonna do now, Patty?" Aina asked. "Are you gonna go back to the other fairies?"

"I don't have anywhere to go back to," Patty said after a pause. "The only place..." She paused again. "The only place I belonged was by his side. But now..." She trailed off as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"So you *won't* be going back to the fairies' dwelling? Is that right?" I asked.

She nodded. "I didn't tell you this before, but I was actually kicked out of the dwelling."

"Kicked out? But why?" I asked without thinking, completely taken aback by this.

"Well, I guess I can show you," she said with a sigh. "Here. Look at this."

She removed the bandages wrapped around her abdomen to reveal a huge white symbol on her belly, with her navel at its center.

"Is that a tattoo?" I asked.

"Maybe it's a birthmark?" Aina suggested.

Patty shook her head. "Neither. It's a curse."

"A curse?"

"Yes. I was born with this curse inside my body. That's why I got kicked out of

the dwelling,” Patty said matter-of-factly. Her face was blank, as if she didn’t really care about anything anymore.

“Wait, I don’t get it. Why’d they kick you out of the dwelling for something you had no control over?” I asked, and it was clear from my tone that I was livid.

“Why are you so angry, all of a sudden?” Patty asked, seemingly taken aback by my reaction.

“I’m not angry!” I shouted, then paused for a second. “Well, maybe I am a little. Anyway, that’s total bull! I don’t get why you had to leave your home because of some stupid symbol.” I was so annoyed at how stupid and irrational the situation was, my breathing had gotten a little ragged.

“I don’t get it either!” Aina chimed in, and she was also breathing heavily through her nose. “It’s so stupid!”

“Well, it’s not all that surprising. There’s a legend about this thing, you see.” She paused for a second and let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh. “It says that this symbol will ‘visit disaster upon the fairies,’” she explained. “It’s just so unfair, you know? It’s not as if I can do anything about it.”

According to the legend, when a fairy was born with this particular symbol on their body, it signified that a calamity would befall fairykind in the near future.

“So yeah, all the other fairies hate me because of this symbol,” Patty said with a shrug. She then went on to tell us how she’d been shunned by the other fairies and didn’t have a single friend among them. Even her parents had turned their backs on her and treated her like a complete stranger. In short, no one liked her—not even her own family.

“I’ve always thought it would’ve been better if I’d never been born at all,” she continued. “Still, I persevered, and to be honest, things weren’t all *that* bad. But then...” She sniffed as she recalled the moment things had changed. “Then a group of flying rhinoceros beetles built their nest close to the dwelling.”

Patty explained that her life in the dwelling hadn’t really been so terrible at first, despite the disdain the other fairies showed toward her. But one day, the group of flying crayfish that had attacked me and the Blue Flash crew in the

forest—flying rhinoceros beetles, I think they were called—had suddenly appeared close to the fairies’ dwelling, and everything went south. Her luck really couldn’t have been any worse.

Many different species inhabited the Gigheena Forest, and the flying rhinoceros beetles were the natural enemy of the fairies. These monsters considered any creature smaller than themselves to be nothing more than food, and unfortunately, fairies were included in that. On top of that, their nest was really close to the fairies’ dwelling, making the little creatures the perfect prey, which went some way to explaining why the flying rhinoceros beetles had started aggressively preying on the fairies.

Patty fought several battles against these monsters, but sadly, there were just too many for her to handle by herself. Finding themselves on the back foot in this war against the flying rhinoceros beetles, the clan leader had decided the fairies should all hide away in the grotto that had—up until that point—only been used for rituals. From then onward, the fairies weren’t allowed to leave the grotto.

A lot of fairies could use the Inventory skill, allowing them to stockpile all the food they would need before they relocated to the grotto. But as time went on, their food reserves dwindled, and if things had continued at the rate they were going, they would all have ended up dying of starvation. This became a source of tension in the grotto, and most of the fairies ended up directing their anger at Patty, all because of that stupid mark on her stomach.

“They just used you as a scapegoat!” I exclaimed, outraged by this. “It wasn’t your fault that those monsters built their nest right next to the dwelling.”

“It was, though,” Patty muttered. “It was all because of the curse. The legends said it would bring disaster to my kind, so in the end, it *was* my fault.”

“Patty...” Aina said softly, her eyes filling up with tears. She must have been feeling incredibly sorry for the little fairy who had done no wrong.

“The clan leader was actually the one who gave me the name, Patty Falulu. In the language of the fairies, it means ‘She Who Cuts Through Destiny.’ He gave me this name in the hopes that I wouldn’t let the curse I was inflicted with the moment I was born get the better of me. And yet...” She trailed off. “Isn’t it

ironic?”

All the other fairies screamed at her that it was her fault, and not a single one of her kind even attempted to stand up for her. Discriminatory comments and insults were flying left and right, and just as Patty feared things were about to get physical, the clan leader spoke up.

“Let us exile Patty the curse-bearer,” he said.

No one argued with the decision. Absolutely no one. Not even Patty herself. She simply nodded and laughed, telling them all it wasn’t like she’d really belonged there in the first place.

This banishment order was passed at nighttime, when the forest was even more dangerous than usual for fairies. There were more monsters out at night, and as fairy wings glowed in the dark due to their magical powers, they ended up standing out like a sore thumb in the darkness. Despite all this, Patty left the dwelling while it was still night and the forest was bathed in the pale light of the moon. She’d snuck out of the dwelling many, many times before, however, so she knew how to survive on her own. Once she was all alone out in the forest, she couldn’t help remembering the hume—the one who’d turned out to be Karen’s great-great-grandfather—that she had met there. She decided to look for him and...

“And that’s when you rescued me, right?” I said, having already guessed the ending to her story.

“Yup,” she said with a nod. “I thought if I saved this idiot of a hume who was splashing about and drowning in the river, he might help me find my friend.”

“I don’t think the ‘idiot’ part was *particularly* necessary...” I said.

“It’s all right. At the end of the day, it turns out I was the biggest idiot of all,” the little fairy said with a sad smile on her face.

“Patty...” Aina mumbled. “Don’t say that! You mustn’t say that...”

“Are you crying out of sympathy for my plight, Aina?” the fairy asked tenderly. “That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s not...” she stammered her objection. “It’s not that! It’s not because I’m

kind. It's just..." She sniffed. "It's just..." She couldn't finish her sentence because she was too overcome with emotion.

"Thank you, Aina," Patty said as she gently patted her on the head.

"Patty..." Aina sobbed.

"Don't cry," Patty told her softly. "Why are you crying, anyway? If you don't stop, you'll..." She started sniffing too. "You'll set me off."

The two of them brought their heads close together as tears streamed down their faces. Meanwhile, I was lost in thought with my arms crossed in front of my chest.

"Flying rhinoceros beetles..." I mused. "The natural enemy of the fairies, huh?"

I racked my brain for potential solutions to the fairies' problem. I ended up rejecting most of what I came up with, but I still managed to end up with a few workable ideas.

"Hey, Patty," I said to grab the little fairy's attention.

"What is it?" she said.

"Have the fairies considered moving their dwelling somewhere else?"

"Someone did suggest that, but the idea was rejected," Patty explained. "It'd take way too long to find a place that'd be suitable for all the fairies to live in, and besides, most of them would probably be killed by monsters during the move."

It seemed fairies didn't leave the dwelling except to gather food—mostly fruit and honey—and even then, they stayed as close as possible to home.

"Noted. I have another question," I said. "Are there currently flying rhinoceros beetles residing close to the fairies' dwelling?"

"Well, isn't the answer to that obvious? Once those monsters have built their nest somewhere, they stay put and multiply. Well, until the area they're in runs out of food, that is."

"I see," I said with a nod. "All right, last question: do you want to save the

other fairies?”

“Of course I do.”

“Really?” I asked. “They might be the same species as you, but they did kick you out of your home.”

“Who cares about that?” she said impatiently. “If I can save them, I want to! Besides, even though I did get kicked out, I’ve still managed to do pretty well on my own, haven’t I?”

“Are you sure you want to save them?”

“Of course I am. I still have a debt I need to repay to the clan leader. He’s the one who gave me my name, after all. And also...” She paused briefly. “My ma and pa still live in the dwelling. They might hate me, but at the end of the day, they’re still my parents. I’ve always wanted them to love me and they never have, but...” She paused again. “They’re still my parents. I want to save them.”

Patty was smiling again. Even though she’d spent her entire life up until this point being rebuked and discriminated against by the other fairies just for being herself, she didn’t hesitate for even a second when I asked her if she wanted to save them. To me, in that moment, Patty seemed to be shining as bright as the sun.

“Then...” I started. “How about we go help out the fairies, hm?” I said with a huge grin on my face. Patty stared at me like I’d grown a second head.

“Ah!” Aina exclaimed. “Are you gonna go ask the ad-vent-you-rers to get rid of the monsters, Mister Shiro?”

“Bingo. Adventurers specialize in hunting monsters, you see,” I explained to Patty. “And if I pay them, they’ll get rid of those flying rhinoceros beetles for sure.”

“Wait...” Patty asked, her eyes wide as saucers. “For real?”

“Yup!” I confirmed, and I saw a faint glimmer of hope appear in her eyes upon hearing this.

“Then, please, Shiro...” she begged me. “Please save the others!”

“Sure thing,” I said with a grin. “Well, I won’t *technically* be doing any of the

saving myself, per se, but yeah. Anyway..." I paused and put on my jacket. "Let's head down to the Adventurers' Guild, shall we?"

Chapter Nineteen: The Monster Eradication Mission

Aina and I headed over to the Adventurers' Guild to entrust them with the job of eradicating the flying rhinoceros beetles. Patty came with us too, of course, making sure she stayed hidden in Aina's backpack. When we got to the guild, I opened the door and everyone's heads immediately turned to see who it was. When they saw it was me, however, they resumed whatever it was they had been doing. I quickly scanned the guildhall and noticed the Blue Flash crew sitting at a table near the back of the room with a map laid out in front of them. They were probably heading off on another expedition into the forest pretty soon. I walked up to the front desk, where Emille was standing.

"Oh, hiya, mister," she said with a smile on her face, and I saw her hand inching its way up toward the top button on her shirt. "Oh, wait. Little Aina's with you today, is she?"

Her hand immediately stopped its ascent when she noticed Aina by my side. Well, would you look at that! It seemed she at least knew it was inappropriate to start stripping in front of a child. I heard her tut quite loudly at the situation, though.

"Hi, Emille," I said, greeting her back and acting like nothing had happened.

"Good day to you," she said, switching to work mode. "What brings you here today?"

"I have a job for the guild," I told her.

"A job?" she repeated. "Well, it's unusual for you to bring us one of those. I thought you'd come here to force another one of those weird items of yours onto the adventurers and scam them out of their hard-earned money like you usually do."

"Is that really how you see me?" I said. "Anyway, could you get started on the paperwork, please?"

"Yeah, yeah." She went over to the shelves behind her, grabbed a form, and

placed it down on the counter. “All right, then. May I ask what type of job you plan on commissioning us for today?”

“A monster extermination job,” I replied.

She nodded. “Monster extermination, right. Just so you know, the final price might differ depending on the species of monster you want us to get rid of.”

“I understand.”

“Oh, and I’d also suggest tipping Emille for her amazing work,” the bunny girl threw in casually.

“I think I’ll give that a miss, thanks,” I said.

She clicked her tongue loudly again, then grabbed a quill, hunched over the desk, and started filling out the form. “All right. So what kind of monster do you want us to exterminate?” she asked.

Aina and I nodded at each other. “Flying rhinoceros beetles,” I said. “It seems they’ve built a nest somewhere in the forest, and I’d like you guys to get rid of it.”

The second these words left my mouth, the hall was abuzz with chatter.

“Flying rhinoceros beetles?” one person said. “Did that guy just say *flying rhinoceros beetles*?!”

“I think he may well have done,” another adventurer said.

“Wait, but we haven’t heard anything about there being flying rhinoceros beetles in the forest, have we?”

“Yeah, we have. A few weeks back. The Blue Flash crew reported back that they’d run into a group of them.”

“So on the eastern side of the forest, huh? We’ll have to be careful the next time we head out that way.”

“We still have cure potions, right? If we stumble across those beasties, we’re gonna need a bunch of them.”

“Not to mention, we’ll have to make sure we don’t get hit by that acid they spit out. Not unless we want melted armor.”

“We’ll need to load up on weapons too. Bah, what a pain.”

It seemed that learning of the existence of the flying rhinoceros beetles in the forest was a cause for concern for many of the adventurers. After a while, the chatter died down and the entire guildhall fell silent, seemingly because everyone was now paying acute attention to the conversation between Emille and me.

“A flying rhinoceros beetle nest, you say? Um, let’s see here...” she said hesitantly. The adventurers weren’t the only ones worried by the presence of these particular monsters; Emille seemed pretty shaken up too. She mumbled a worried little “hmm.”

It seemed the flying rhinoceros beetles would be much more annoying to deal with than I had initially thought. “Yes. Well, what do you think? Can you guys do it?” I asked.

“Well, if it was just a handful of them, it wouldn’t be a problem, but destroying an entire *nest*...” She hesitated again. “I need to check with the guildmaster. Wait here for a moment while I go ask her.”

Emille straightened up and headed off to the guildmaster’s office.



A few moments later, Emille came back with Ney in tow.

“I apologize, Shiro, but we will not be able to take your commission,” the guildmaster told me.

I slumped at this news. “Is there really no way? I don’t mind paying a hefty sum to get this job done.”

“That’s not the issue,” she said, shaking her head. “Destroying a flying rhinoceros beetle nest and eradicating every last one of them is an incredibly big undertaking. We would need to send at least half of the adventurers on our books to the forest just for this one mission.”

“Half of your adventurers?” I said, dumbfounded by this statement. “Th-That would set me back quite a bit.”

“It would. But money’s not the main issue,” Ney said again. “We simply can’t

afford to undertake such a huge mission at the moment.”

The reason the Fairy’s Blessing guild had decided to set up a branch in Ninoritch was so that they could explore the Gigheena Forest and look for ruins from the Ancient Magic Civilization Era that were purported to be hidden away in there. In order to achieve this, this capital guild had sent a bunch of its best adventurers—the real cream of the crop, to borrow Raiya’s words—to the Ninoritch branch. Their main reasoning for this was, if they concentrated all of their best adventurers on this one specific task, they could get it done in no time. However, it had already been two months since the Ninoritch branch of the guild had been set up, and so far, they hadn’t found anything in the forest. Part of the reason for that was the Gigheena Forest was immense. The adventurers had spent the last two months simply mapping out the forest, and they weren’t even close to being done. And to top it off, no one knew quite how much they had managed to map so far. They might have only explored as little as ten percent of it. But according to Ney, the main branch contacted her every day to ask if they had found any of the rumored ruins and to pester her to hurry the hell up. Which wasn’t too surprising, as they *had* invested an awful lot of money in setting up this branch.

That wasn’t the only reason Ney didn’t feel like she could accept my request, though. Flying rhinoceros beetles were known to be rather dangerous monsters, though they weren’t usually viewed as a threat as they typically didn’t attack adventurers. The ones I’d run into while out with the Blue Flash crew were apparently an exception to that rule. At any rate, it was understandable that the guild wanted to avoid getting itself into needless battles, especially against such strong monsters.

“If a group of flying rhinoceros beetles had built their nest close to Ninoritch and started attacking the citizens or the livestock, we would have immediately sprung into action and destroyed it,” Ney explained. “But that doesn’t seem to be the case at the moment.” She paused and looked at me pensively. “If these monsters aren’t posing an immediate danger to Ninoritch, then am I right to assume that this request of yours is a personal one?”

“You are correct, yes.”

“Do you need flying rhinoceros beetle loot?” she asked after another short

pause. “We can sell you some, if that’s what you’re after.”

“No, I don’t need loot,” I said, shaking my head. “I need the flying rhinoceros beetle nest destroyed.”

“Then, I’m sorry,” Ney said, “but we cannot help you.”

“No way. Can’t you please reconsider? Please!” I pleaded, bowing deeply to Ney.

“Miss Guildmaster, please kill all the bad monsters! Please, please, please!” Aina begged, and she bowed her head too.

But Ney wasn’t budging. “You can ask as much as you like, but I still can’t take on your request.”

Just like earlier, the attention of all the adventurers in the hall was on me while my request was being rejected.

“Shiro, I am really thankful to you for always providing the guild with all of these incredible items of yours. If it were up to me personally, I would take on this job, but...” She sighed. “I’m the guildmaster, and due to our current circumstances, I cannot accept your request.”

“I understand...” I mumbled.

So what was I supposed to do now? I’d been totally convinced the guild would take on the job I was bringing to them, but it seemed as though I had been wrong. As the guild’s administrator, Ney had felt she had to refuse. The adventurers in the hall were all still staring at us, and I saw Raiya open his mouth to speak, but I silently signaled to him to prevent him from intervening. This was my battle. I couldn’t involve him in it.

I stood there for a moment, deep in thought. I still had three tricks up my sleeve, and one way or another, I had to find a way to convince her to take the job.

“Well, anyway, Shiro, I need to go back to my office now,” Ney excused herself, but I immediately stopped her in her tracks.

“Please wait a moment!”

All right. I was ready to try to change her mind. Time for my first trick.

“I have another suggestion,” I started. “How about we don’t treat this as a job request at all but as some sort of transaction?”

“A transaction?” she repeated, sounding somewhat dubious.

“Yes. The reason you won’t accept my request is because it’ll take too long, is that right? And the adventurers would have to spend a long time fighting the monsters in the forest, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Ney confirmed.

I placed a hand on a nearby chair and activated my Inventory skill in front of everyone. The chair disappeared right in front of their eyes. All of the adventurers in the hall stared at me, their eyes wide as saucers, while the Blue Flash crew all looked on with worried expressions on their faces.

“Shiro, was that...” Ney trailed off.

“The Inventory skill, yes,” I said with a nod. “Now to my offer: if you agree to help me, I will use my Inventory skill to support your adventurers in clearing out the forest ruins. To be precise, I will use my skill to help transport goods to and from the ruins. I’ve been told that exploring ruins can take several days—sometimes even more than a month—and during that time, your adventurers will need to have access to food, water, and potions, right?”

I glanced around at the adventurers in the hall, but none of them seemed to have any objections to what I’d just said.

“That’s where my skill comes in. I’ll use my Inventory skill to take all of those things to the adventurers in the ruins. Well, I’ll take them to the entrance of the ruins, at least. And I can bring back whatever they’ve found in the ruins on the return leg of the journey. What do you say? With this plan, even if you spend several days helping me destroy the flying rhinoceros beetle nest, you technically won’t lose any of your ruins exploration time, since my Inventory skill will spare your adventurers from making needless trips back to Ninoritch.”

Ney appeared to be deep in thought for a moment, but she ended up shaking her head. She placed a hand on the same chair I’d taken back out of my inventory, and it instantly vanished. “I’m sorry, Shiro. I might not have the Inventory skill like you, but I do have this,” she said as from up her sleeve, she

produced a small leather pouch with some kind of geometrical symbol drawn on it. “This is a magical item that grants the bearer the power to use Inventory magic. I was already planning on using this to help with our exploration of the ruins.”

Ah. Seems my first trick wasn’t going to help me convince her at all.

“This is actually an heirloom that’s been in my family for several generations. It has the storage capacity of roughly three horse carts,” she explained.

A collective “ooh!” echoed around the room at this, which showed just how impressive Ney’s item was. So my Inventory skill was a non-starter, huh? Well, I still had two other tricks up my sleeve. I was in the middle of debating which one I should try next, when a familiar-looking dwarf walked in through the main door.

“What’s all this? What’re ya doin’ here, kid? Got yerself into trouble?” he said to me.

“Eldos!” I exclaimed.

The hero had arrived.

Chapter Twenty: The Dwarf's Pride

"Well? What's all this ya been yelling 'bout flying rhinoceros beetles, kid? Just so ya know, I could hear ya from outside the drinking hall," Eldos grumbled.

"Oh, uh, sorry about that," I said sheepishly. "Well, you see, I really need someone to destroy their nest and get rid of them all."

"I'll do it," he said.

"Wait, for real?!" I asked, my eyes bulging.

"Sure."

"Mr. Eldos, you might be one of our best adventurers, but I will not allow you to take on unauthorized requests," Ney intervened, a frown marring her beautiful face and seeming every bit as puzzled as I was. "I'm the guildmaster and I have the final say on whether we accept a request or not."

But Eldos was having none of it. "Do ya mind kindly shuttin' up, girlie?" he said to her.

It was Ney's turn for her eyes to goggle. "Mr. Eldos, what are you—" she started, but the dwarf didn't let her finish.

"Kid, ain't ya forgetting somethin'?" he said, slapping me on the back repeatedly.

"Forgetting what?"

"Our li'l bet. Back when I drank that 'Spirytus'—or whatever that stuff was called—I made a bet with ya, remember? I told ya if ya managed to get me drunk, ya could ask me to do whatever ya want."

"Oh, yeah! I remember now!" I exclaimed. I wasn't in the habit of making bets, so I'd forgotten all about it. Besides, I thought he'd been joking and it was just one of those spur-of-the-moment things.

"Don't tell me ya forgot?" he said with a sigh. "I put my pride as a dwarf on the line to challenge that Spirytus of yers, and I lost. Ya get what I'm saying, kid?"

That night, we made a bet, and ya won. There ain't no goin' back on it now."

He sniffed before continuing. "Listen, I ain't fond of havin' unpaid debts hangin' over me. It's been sorta weighin' on my mind ever since, and I can't even relax and drink booze like I normally do! So, kid..."—he paused as he shot me a quick glance—"can I just do this for ya and clear my debt?"

"Eldos..." I said slowly. "Are you sure about this? Ney just said it'd be a huge undertaking, and—"

"Who do ya take me for, a rookie? I can deal with them flying rhinoceros beetles all by myself, no sweat. I don't need any help."

Whoa! Spoken like a true hero! I really couldn't let this opportunity pass me by. There was no way in hell I was gonna refuse. "Thank you so much, Eldos!" I said happily.

"Just leave this job to me, kid," the dwarf said, and he flashed me a cocky grin.

"Hey, man," I heard a male voice say, and realized the Blue Flash crew had come up to us while we were talking. "We're gonna tag along as well," Raiya said.

"Raiya..." I breathed, pleasantly surprised by this intervention. It seemed the four of them had been waiting for the perfect moment to jump into the conversation.

"Flying rhinoceros beetles are rather troublesome, but I'm sure with Mr. Eldos leading the way, we will be of some help on this mission," Rolf said with a nod and a serene smile on his face.

"Well, you heard Rolf," Raiya said. "We'll be joining you. Oh, and I'm not asking for permission. Even if you say no, we're still going."

"Now, just hold on a minute," Ney butted in, visibly displeased by the plans that were being made. "You might have forgotten, but your contracts clearly state you cannot take any requests that the guild hasn't approved. As one of the administrators of this guild, I will not simply stand by and watch as you wantonly break this agreement."

“Girlie, yer gettin’ somethin’ wrong here,” Eldos said.

“Oh? And what might I be getting ‘wrong’?” Ney asked.

“He’s right, GM,” Raiya said with a nod. “The old dwarf’s helping Shiro ‘cause of that bet they had, and we’re going along because Shiro’s our pal. We’re not treating this as a request. In fact, we don’t even plan on asking him to pay us.”

“If we’re not asking for compensation, then it can’t be considered a request,” Nesca added, as lethargic as always.

“Exactly. Isn’t that right, Emi?” Raiya called over to the bunny girl.

Emille took a massive book down from the shelf behind her and started flipping through the pages, seemingly searching for a specific bit of information.

After a while, she raised her head from the book. “You’re right,” she said with a nod. “You can’t go accepting requests if you intend to receive money or loot in exchange, but if you don’t, you’re not breaking the agreement. You guys are right.”

“There’s something more important than rewards,” Nesca said quietly. “And that’s friendship.”

“Shiro’s our comrade, after all, meow!” Kilpha piped up. “If one of our comrades needs something, of *course* we’ll help ‘em, meow!”

“Nesca, Kilpha...” I whispered as I felt my throat constrict a little. Hearing them say that had warmed the cockles of my heart and I damn well *almost* started crying. Almost!

Eldos let out a displeased grunt. “I don’t need a bunch of rookies gettin’ in my way. I can get rid of them beasties on my own.”

“Mr. Eldos, sir, please allow us to accompany you on this mission. As you say, when compared to you, we are but novice adventurers, but the four of us are very eager to learn from a mighty hero like yourself,” Rolf explained, in what I imagine was an attempt to butter up the dwarf.

It seemed to work because Eldos raised an eyebrow in response, seemingly impressed by the sentiment. “I like that attitude of yers. Very admirable. But that’s priests for ya. Well then...” He paused as he grabbed the battle-axe

strapped to his back and gave it a cursory swing. “Ye rookies better make sure ya watch closely as my trusty Seacal and I make mincemeat outta those beasties!”

Wait, “Seacal”? I was pretty sure I’d heard that name before. Now *where* did I know it from?

“Y’know, I got this battle-axe from the Immortal Witch,” Eldos continued, interrupting my train of thought. “With this bad boy, I’ll make quick work of those flyin’ beetles. If ya brats insist on taggin’ along, I guess I ain’t got no choice but to let ya come. Oh, hey, I’ve got an idea! How ’bout I let ya kiddies go steal the magic stone from the queen?” He erupted into a loud belly laugh, as if he’d just made the funniest joke ever.

Seacal, the Immortal Witch... Okay, I *had* to ask. “Um, Eldos...”

“Hm? What is it, kid?”

“It’s about that axe of yours, uh...”

“I ain’t sellin’ it, if that’s what yer askin’,” he warned me with a frown.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to buy it. I was just wondering, uh...” I said hesitantly. “Does it have the word ‘Justice’ engraved on its head?”

Eldos’s eyes instantly widened, indicating I’d guessed right.

“Of course it does,” I mumbled to no one in particular. “After all, grandma’s always been a big fan of that action-packed American show, *Real Justice*.” I raised my head to the heavens. Or well, the ceiling, technically.

“Thanks to Seacal, I can use the ‘Justice’ spell twice a day tops,” Eldos explained. “It was that spell that helped me defeat the Demon Lord and the Ancient Dragon, y’know. But how’d ya know ’bout it, kid?”

“Ah, it’s just...” I started, then lowered my voice. “Okay, don’t tell anyone this, all right?” I warned Eldos and the others. “The Immortal Witch is actually my grandmother.”

“Wh-What?!” Eldos gasped, seeming absolutely flabbergasted by this. “Are ya serious, kid?!”

“I only found out quite recently myself, but yes, it’s true,” I said with a nod.

“Huh. Nah, I don’t believe it. Ya merchants always do this thing where ya start spoutin’ nonsense for no damn reason,” he said gruffly. “Phew, that was close. Ya almost got me there, kid.” He glared at me as he ran a hand over his face. “If ya really want me to believe yer the Immortal Witch’s grandson, ya better gimme some proof.”

“Proof?” I said.

“Lemme think...” he said as he mulled over how I could prove my assertion. “Oh, I know. If the Immortal Witch really is yer grandma, then ya must know her true name,” he said.

“Her true name? Oh, you must mean her *actual* name, right?” I said.
“Arisugawa Mio. Right?”

As soon as I’d said her real name, Eldos’s eyes widened again, and he took a few steps back, such was his surprise. “W-Well, damn. Guess ya were tellin’ the truth. A lot of folks think her name is Alice Gawamio, but only a few of us know her real name: A-risu-gawa Mio. I always thought it was only me and the other Heroes she’d told her name to.” He paused for a few moments and stared at my face. “Now that ya mention it, ya do sorta look like the witch.”

“D-Do I?” I said.

“Sure do. In fact, the more I look at ya, the more I see it,” Eldos said. “Come to think of it, I’ve never asked yer name, kid. What should I be callin’ ya?”

“My name’s Shiro Amata,” I replied. “Grandma just calls me Shiro.”

“Shiro, huh?” he repeated. “Y’know, I’ve escaped the jaws of death many times thanks to that battle-axe yer grandma gave me. I’ve always wanted to pay ’er back for it, but I can’t seem to find her anywhere. But now I can kill two birds with one stone and pay off my debt to ya as well as my debt to yer grandma by helpin’ ya out. Ya ready to go, Shiro? Let’s go crush those damn bugs!”

“Hey, old man,” Raiya butted in. “Sorry to bother you while you two are having this little moment, but don’t forget that we’re coming along too.”

“Thank you so much, everyone,” I said. “Once we’ve gotten rid of those monsters, I’ll treat you all to some alcohol from my shop.”

As soon as these words had left my mouth, the other adventurers in the room suddenly started muttering among themselves.

“Hey, does that mean if we help him, we could get some more of that sweet, sweet alcohol of his?” one said.

“No reward, but tasty booze in exchange...” another added. “I mean, why not?”

“My tongue still vividly remembers the taste of the wine I drank that day...”

“What do you think, guys? We in?”

“I wanna go too!”

It seemed the mere mention of alcohol had been enough to grab their attention. I could even see some of them drooling. Well, it appeared the booze I’d served them at my little drinking festival had left even more of an impression on them than I’d anticipated. I decided this was the perfect moment to play my second trump card.

“Thank you so much for your interest, everyone. I actually have something to tell you all,” I stated, and the eyes of every adventurer in the room turned toward me. “It just so happens that while I was reorganizing my alcohol stock after the party...” —I paused for dramatic effect, then grinned— “I may or may not have stumbled across a bottle of fairy mead! What a coincidence, right? One might even call it a miracle!”

The effect was immediate.

“A-Are you *serious*?! You found a bottle of Fairy’s Blessing?!” a man exclaimed.

“Th-Th-The legendary alcohol?!” cried another.

“Wait, when was the last time a hume actually drank fairy mead?”

“Who knows. One thing’s for sure, though: it was sometime before you were born.”

“Hey, Mr. Merchant, let us help you out with those flying rhinoceros beetles!”

“Ah, wait!” someone else jumped in. “I wanna come too!”

“Good grief. Now that you’ve mentioned fairy mead, I guess I don’t have a choice,” said one of the more reluctant-sounding adventurers. “I’m coming too.”

The assembled adventurers were getting more and more agitated, and to my mind, this was further proof of just how successful my drinking festival had been. After all, they’d been so impressed by the alcohol I’d served them, they didn’t doubt me for one second when I told them I’d found some fairy mead lying about in my stock.

I was busy internally rejoicing when Ney raised her voice. “I won’t allow it! All of you already have a mission, and that mission is to find the ruins.”

I mean, I should have expected that she wasn’t going to just sit back and watch as I tried to bribe her adventurers into going on a potentially long and difficult mission deep in the forest.

“Besides,” she continued, “what proof do you have that Shiro *actually* has a bottle of fairy mead? He might just have found a bottle of regular mead!”

Well, she *was* the guildmaster, so it wasn’t all that surprising that she would try to put a stop to this. Being an administrator sure was tough, huh? No one here had ever tasted fairy mead before, so proving to them that the mead I’d “found” was the real deal was nothing short of impossible, and Ney was obviously aware of this fact. Hm, what to do, what to do...

As I racked my brain to figure out some way to convince the adventurers in the hall, I heard a little voice next to me say, “The mead Shiro found really is fairy mead!”

I turned my head to the side slightly and saw that Patty had flown out of Aina’s backpack and was hovering next to me. Well, it looked like my last trump card—my secret weapon, no less—had decided to show herself of her own accord in the middle of negotiations.

“Boss, why did you come out?” I asked her as she drifted over to me and plonked herself down on my shoulder. She just put her hands on her hips and glared at Ney by way of a reply.

“That’s a fairy...” someone mumbled in the crowd.

All the adventurers in the room had a similar reaction. Some of them simply stared at Patty in disbelief, their eyes wide as saucers, while others had their jaws on the floor. Everyone else just looked at each other and saw their own puzzled looks reflected back at them.

“I’m the one who made the mead Shiro found!” Patty declared. “I-It’s real! I promise!”

“Shiro, do you mind if I ask what exactly is going on here?” Ney said. “Why is a fairy...” She trailed off as her shock at this turn of events stole her voice.

“Let me introduce her to you all. This”—I pointed to the little fairy on my shoulder—“is my boss, Patty. She’s actually the one who wants the flying rhinoceros beetle nest gone.”

“She is? Shiro, explain yourself,” Ney said with a slightly suspicious look on her face.

“Okay, allow me to outline the situation. You see, the fairies have a settlement in the forest to the east of town, the Gigheena Forest. But a little while back, a group of flying rhinoceros beetles built their nest right next to this settlement, putting all of the fairies in danger, which is why Miss Patty Falulu here came to me—um, I mean, to *you* adventurers—to ask for your help.”

I saw that everyone in the room was listening intently, so I continued. “She only wants one thing,” I said, raising my index finger before pausing and turning to face Ney. “And that is to save the other fairies. That’s it. But I am only a mere peddler, so I don’t have the strength required to battle such dangerous monsters. But you guys—the jewels in the crown of the Fairy’s Blessing guild—you can help them. So what do you say? Won’t you listen to this little fairy’s one and only request?” I wrapped up my spiel by bowing to Ney. Down by my side, I immediately sensed Aina doing the same.

“Ney, please save the fairies! I’m begging you!” I pleaded.

“Please!” Aina cried. “Save Patty’s family!”

“So that’s what’s going on here, huh?” Ney muttered after a few moments.

“I-I’ll make fairy mead for everyone who takes on those flying rhinoceros beetles! F-For every single one of you! So please, help the fairies! Help my

family!” Patty begged, lowering her head just like Aina and I had.

I’d officially used all of my trump cards. We stayed in the same position for a good ten seconds before Ney let out a huge sigh.

“Good grief, Shiro. That was cruel of you. You could have told me the truth right away, you know, instead of making me look like the villain here.” Despite her words, her tone was tender. “Aren’t you aware that, as an Adventurers’ Guild, it is our duty to save anyone who’s in danger?” she said, sounding a little sullen.

“Huh? So...” I started, but trailed off as I raised my head.

Ney aimed a firm nod in my direction, then turned to address the room. “Adventurers, might I have your attention? I hereby use my authority as the guildmaster to order every single adventurer ranked bronze and above to prepare themselves for battle,” she announced. “We are going to exterminate all the flying rhinoceros beetles in the forest!”

So finally, after much negotiation, the Fairy’s Blessing guild accepted my request.

Chapter Twenty-One: To Battle

Things moved apace after that. The adventurers spent the rest of that day getting together all the equipment they'd need, and the next morning, we all departed from Ninoritch with Patty guiding us through the forest. About seventy percent of the guild's adventurers had assembled to go exterminate the flying rhinoceros beetles and destroy their nest, and to borrow Raiya's words, all of them were "the cream of the crop." Nesca told me that bringing this many adventurers on the mission was clearly overkill, and Raiya was in agreement, adding that they would make quick work of the nest. I really, really hoped they were right.

Ney was the one leading the expedition, which had come as a surprise to everyone because they'd clearly all assumed that Eldos would be filling that role. It was actually incredibly rare for the guildmaster of an Adventurers' Guild to actively participate in an extermination mission, and everyone had been totally stunned when Ney had declared she would be leading the way. When I'd raised my voice to say that I was also planning to tag along, they had been even more surprised. Ney, Eldos, and even the Blue Flash crew had all stared at me as if I'd sprouted a second head, their eyes silently asking me why the hell I wanted to come too.

"It was my idea," I had said with a shrug when met with their inquisitive gazes. "And I'm also Patty's underling. That's why I wanna come. And before you ask: yes, I know it's dangerous. But just so you are all aware, I'm coming, even if it means commissioning the guild to escort me there."

After hearing my explanation, they had begrudgingly agreed to let me tag along. Three days of trekking through the forest later, we finally reached our destination. We stopped right next to the waterfall that had almost spelled my early demise. The flying rhinoceros beetle nest was close.

"I-It's right there! That's their nest!" Patty said, pointing a tiny finger at a pile of rocks about four hundred meters away from the waterfall.

We all turned to look at the spot she was pointing at. There was a giant gap in the middle of the collection of rocks, and a not-insignificant number of flying rhinoceros beetles were zipping in and out of it. For a while, all of us just stood there in silence.

“That’s where the flying rhinoceros beetle nest is! And the other fairies are all hiding away in a cavern, but they can’t leave it because of those monsters. They can’t even go find food,” Patty explained, her face all scrunched up, but her words fell on deaf ears because the adventurers were still staring at the nest, completely dumbfounded. I was doing likewise.

“Raiya...” I said after a while.

“What is it?” he said.

“Those are...” I paused and pointed at the beetle nest. “Those are ruins, aren’t they?”

“You think so too? Well, damn. I thought I was going crazy for a second there,” he said.

Yup, that’s right. The “pile of rocks” the flying rhinoceros beetles had built their nest inside was clearly man-made, and there even seemed to be some sort of mural depicting the gods of this world carved into it. The “gap” had clearly been a gateway at some point, and it was blindingly obvious that it wasn’t a natural cavern.

“Th-There’s always been a weird cavern there,” Patty said. “The clan leader said some civilization built it a long, *long* time ago,” she said. “I think he called it an ‘edifice’ or something? Anyway, there’s a bunch of them in the forest, so why’d these monsters feel the need to build their nest in the one right next to *our* dwelling?”

Patty had just casually blurted out that there were more ruins like these in the forest, though most of the adventurers were still staring in shock at these particular ruins, so who’s to say how many of them even heard her?



The entrance to the nest—which had once served as the entrance to the ruins—was about three meters high and two meters wide. There were loads of flying

rhinoceros beetles buzzing in and out of the nest, and all the hustle and bustle put me in mind of an anthill or a beehive, just on a larger scale. We were presently about fifty meters away from the nest; according to the other adventurers, the monsters would start attacking us once we were less than ten meters away. A few of the flying beetles had already noticed our group and were staring at us intently.

“Shiro, Patty, could you two please stay here?” Ney said, though it wasn’t so much a question as it was an order. We were staying put, and there would be no argument about it.

“We will,” I reassured her. “The boss and I will stand in this exact spot and await your return.”

“Y-Yeah...” Patty stuttered her agreement. Being this close to the flying rhinoceros beetle nest was clearly making her nervous.

Kilpha seemed to notice too, and she giggled softly. “Meow-ha-ha. Don’t worry, Patty, meow. We’ll be protecting you and Shiro the whole time.”

“I know you guys will,” I said gratefully.

“Leave it to us, man,” Raiya piped up. “I mean, after all, we’re getting kinda used to protecting you by now.”

“Yup, yup! You needn’t worry about a thing, meow!” Kilpha added, punching her chest lightly.

Ney gave our little group a slight nod, then spun around and addressed the rest of the adventurers. “All right, everyone. We will now commence the flying rhinoceros beetle extermination mission.” She paused briefly as she drew her dual swords from their scabbards on either side of her hips, and used one of them to point at the monsters’ nest. “Everyone, charge!” she yelled. “Let’s rid the ruins of those monsters!”

And so, the battle began, though it only took the adventurers a handful of hours to completely exterminate the flying rhinoceros beetles and wreck their nest.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Clan Leader

A triumphant cry echoed around the Gigheena Forest as all of the adventurers raised their fists to the sky, a pile of now-dead flying rhinoceros beetles at their feet.

“Holy cow!” I exclaimed. “How many of them were there? A few hundred?”

“I heard someone say a few thousand,” Raiya said. “I can’t believe they managed to kill all of them without a single person dying. I’m telling you, dude, these Fairy’s Blessing adventurers are monsters. The four of us really need to step up our game.”

“I’m sure you guys can do it,” I assured him. “You guys have a lot of potential. In my unprofessional opinion, at least.”

“Well, hot damn. I can’t believe we got recognition from Mr. Hotshot Merchant himself!” Raiya said, gasping in an exaggerated manner. “What an honor!”

“Stop calling me that!” I said with a laugh.

Raiya and I had been casually chatting away as we watched the adventurers getting rid of the last remnants of the monsters’ nest, when all of a sudden, Patty slapped me on the cheek with her tiny hands.

“What is it, boss?”

“Is it over now, Shiro?” she asked, sounding both worried and hopeful at the same time.

I nodded and a reassuring smile spread across my face. “Yup, it’s over.”

“It’s over...” she mumbled. “It’s really over...” A huge sigh escaped her lips and an expression of intense relief appeared on her face.

“This is really good news, isn’t it, boss? The other fairies are safe now,” I said.

“Y-Yeah, they are...” she stuttered.

“Aren’t you gonna go tell them the flying rhinoceros beetles are dead?” I inquired. “You can even take the head of their queen with you and say to the other fairies, ‘Look! Their queen is dead!’ or something. They’re all still in that cavern, right?”

“Yeah. I-It’s just...” She trailed off as the words got stuck in her throat. It was so obvious that she wanted to go and tell the other fairies about what had happened—and no doubt, she would act all high and mighty like she always did while recounting the battle—but she’d been kicked out of the dwelling, meaning she was probably worried that, even if she did go and report to them that the monsters’ nest had been destroyed, they might still not take her back.

“I should—” she started, but a voice from behind us suddenly interrupted her. “Patty?!”

On hearing someone calling her name, Patty and I both turned around at the same time, with the Blue Flash crew doing the same a few moments after. An elderly male fairy was hovering in front of us some feet away.

“Goodness! It really *is* Patty!” he said. “What’s going on here?”

“C-Clan leader...” Patty gasped.

Clan leader? The one who’d kicked Patty out of the dwelling? He hadn’t come here alone, though.

It was my turn to gasp. “Holy crap! There are so many fairies!”

“Well, damn. Would you look at that...” Raiya mumbled in amazement.

Nesca’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “So many fairies...” she whispered.

“What an impressive sight,” Rolf agreed.

“They’re so small and cute, meow!” Kilpha squealed excitedly.

A bunch of half-hidden fairies were peeking out at us from behind the trees. And by a bunch, I mean a *lot* of fairies. They had probably ventured over this way after hearing the cry of victory that had gone up not long before. The fairies had been hiding in the cavern for a long time and getting increasingly worried about how they were going to survive their ordeal, when in the midst of their despair, they had heard the collective cry of triumph from the

adventurers, and seemingly decided to leave their hiding spot for a bit to find out what was going on. But instead of finding the thousands of flying rhinoceros beetles going in and out of their nest like they'd been expecting, they were met with a group of adventurers. It was no surprise that they'd gotten a little bit of a shock. Most of them were still hiding in the shadows cast by the trees, their little heads peeking out from behind the trunks every now and again to glance at us—though a few of them had emerged from their hiding spots once they saw the flying rhinoceros beetles were all gone.

“Patty, how have you ended up surrounded by so many humes?” the clan leader asked under the watchful gaze of everyone in the vicinity. “In fact, what are these humes even doing here in the first place? Why did they come all the way out here to destroy the flying rhinoceros beetle nest?”

His gaze was flitting between the pile of dead flying rhinoceros beetles on the ground and the swarm of adventurers going in and out of the ruins. I could see a hint of caution in his eyes.

“Patty, explain yourself,” the older fairy ordered after a few moments of silence had passed.

“Wh-Why do you even care?!” Patty snapped instead of giving the clan leader the information he had asked for. She wrapped her arms around her abdomen, probably instinctively. “You kicked me out of the dwelling, remember?” she continued. “I don’t have to listen to you anymore!”

“Patty...” the clan leader sighed. I could see a slight twinkle of sorrow in his eyes upon hearing her response.

“L-Look, the flying rhinoceros beetles are all gone! Even their queen is dead!” Patty told him. “You can go back to the dwelling now. You don’t have to hide away in that cavern anymore! Good for you, I guess.”

She spoke harshly, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears and her breathing was heavy. I gently cupped my hand around her small body and patted her gently to try and calm her down. She immediately hugged my hand and hid her scrunched-up face from the clan leader.

“Mr. Clan Leader, would it be all right with you if I explained what happened?” I asked the fairy.

He looked at me warily. “You, hume?”

“Yes, me. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Shiro Amata. Patty Falulu here”—I glanced at the little fairy on my shoulder—“asked us to get rid of this flying rhinoceros beetle nest.”

“Patty did that?” he said, sounding surprised.

“Yes, she did,” I replied, placing a lot of emphasis on each word to make a point.

“Explain what you mean by that,” he said after a short pause.

“Well, it’s all rather simple, actually,” I said with a shrug. “Patty told us these flying rhinoceros beetles had built their nest in the vicinity of your dwelling and that you were all in danger. That’s why she asked for our help.”

“What did you just say? She asked you to *help* us? Are you telling the truth?” he asked in a state of shock.

I could hear the other fairies whispering among themselves. Patty—the fairy they had bullied relentlessly for so many years and even kicked out of the dwelling—had come back to *save them*? It was no wonder they were having a hard time believing it.

“Yes indeedy,” I said. “Isn’t that right, boss?”

Patty hesitated a bit before resigning herself to confirming what I’d said with a nod of her little head. “Y-Yeah. I asked for this hume’s help,” she said, before correcting herself. “For Shiro’s help, I mean.”

The clan leader was at a total loss for words. “Hume...” he said after a few seconds.

“Who, me?” I said.

He nodded. “Yes, you. Why did you help Patty?”

“Well, that’s also quite simple,” I told him. “She saved my life. So my comrades and I decided to help her. Not because I felt I *had* to, but because I wanted to. In short, we wouldn’t have come all the way out here if it hadn’t been for her.”

Once again, the clan leader was silent for quite a while. After some time had passed, he finally spoke again. “I see. So Patty really was the one who saved us...” he said matter-of-factly.

“That’s technically what happened, yes,” I said with a nod. “The sole reason the flying rhinoceros beetles are no more is because Patty asked us for help.”

“To think we would be saved by the one fairy we always thought was cursed. The irony...” the clan leader said, his tone self-effacing.

“Cursed?” Nesca jumped in. She’d been quietly listening to our conversation up to this point, but it seemed that this particular word had piqued her curiosity, which wasn’t a surprise considering her bottomless thirst for knowledge. “What is he talking about, Shiro?” she inquired.

I was about to answer, but the bearer of the curse herself spoke up before I could. “He’s talking about this thing,” she said, pointing to her bare belly. “The pattern on my abdomen. That’s the curse. According to the legends, a fairy having this symbol on their body means a calamity will befall fairykind.”

“Fairies think this symbol is a *curse*?” Nesca asked, looking confused.

“Wait, do you know something about this symbol, Nesca?” I said.

“I do. The symbol on Patty’s stomach...” She paused briefly as she traced the symbol on Patty’s abdomen with her finger, which made the fairy squirm a little. Guess she must have been quite ticklish in her stomach region, huh? “In the Magicians’ Guild, we call this symbol a ‘seal,’” she started explaining. “Anyone born with this seal on their body is blessed with extraordinary magic abilities.”

Let me give you a quick rundown of Nesca’s lecture on the subject. This so-called “seal” could only be found on people who were born with an exceptional aptitude for magic. However, a lot of them had a hard time controlling their awesome power, and their magic tended to go haywire. That’s why most of them ended up having difficult lives. But that was a tale from a former age. While it was still fairly hard for any person to control the remarkable power that had been bestowed upon them, it wasn’t impossible if they learned the basics of magic. Nowadays, most people who exhibited these extraordinary abilities ended up becoming sorcerers—one of the highest ranks of magician—and they

were all able to use incredibly powerful magic super easily. These sorcerers were considered extremely rare and valuable in every single nation, and rulers didn't hesitate to shower these talented individuals with gold coins to get them to join their royal courts.

Now that I think about it, Patty said she had a hard time controlling her magic, but her power was impressive all the same, I thought to myself, remembering the time she'd almost destroyed a good chunk of the forest with a single spell.

"A lot of remote civilizations and certain races still misunderstand what seals are, and as a result, they fear them," Nesca continued. "But seals aren't something to be scared of. It's the opposite, in fact: they are a gift from the gods. They are proof that the bearer is exceptional."

The clan leader and the other fairies listened closely to Nesca's explanation, utterly dumbfounded by what they were hearing. With a few short sentences, she had single-handedly shattered their entire worldview.

"So..." the clan leader said, "the legend was wrong this whole time. We..." His voice failed him momentarily. "We were mistaken." His head dropped as he realized the gravity of what he had done. His expression was severe and his shoulders started trembling a little.

"I studied at the Magic Academy, so I know what falls under the 'basics' of magic. If you want, I can teach them to you, Patty," Nesca said to the fairy on my shoulder.

"Nesca..." Patty whispered, a surprised look on her face.

"I'm sure that if Patty learns how to control her magic properly, as a seal-bearer, she will be of great help to fairykind whenever it faces any future crises," Nesca added, flashing a smile at Patty.

The clan leader sighed a deep sigh, then bowed to the fairy on my shoulder. "Patty, I am sorry for everything you have had to go through up to now. Thank you so much for saving the dwelling. As clan leader..."—he hesitated for a beat—"and as your grandfather, I am incredibly sorry and thankful for everything you have done for us."



Patty didn't move or say a word for quite a while; she simply blinked over and over. She seemed to be having a hard time processing all of this new information. *So the clan leader is Patty's grandfather, huh?* I thought to myself.

"Patty, I'm so, so sorry," the clan leader reiterated.

"S-Stop apologizing, old man! B-Besides, if you hadn't kicked me out, I wouldn't have met Shiro, and he and the other humes wouldn't have come and saved the dwelling, r-right?" Patty said, her words tumbling out at high speed because she was so flustered. "D-Didn't it all work out in the end? Everything's fine now! You were right all along! You and the others..." She seemed to be crescendoing to something. "You and the others weren't in the wrong! No one was in the wrong!"

No one was in the wrong. That was what Patty believed, and her face seemed to be shining as bright as the sun as those words left her mouth.

"Patty," the old fairy said solemnly. "As clan leader, I hereby invite you to please rejoin the dwelling."

And with that, Patty was officially allowed to return to the fairies' dwelling.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Patty Falulu

“Patty...” Aina said to the little fairy. “Are you really going home?”

Patty shrugged. “Grandpa—I mean, the clan leader told me I could go back to the dwelling, so...”

Once the battle with the flying rhinoceros beetles was over, the Blue Flash crew, Patty, and I had all headed back to Ninoritch together. Patty had decided to come back with us instead of heading directly to the dwelling because she wanted to say goodbye to Aina first.

“I’m going with you,” the little girl announced resolutely. “I wanna stay with you, Patty!”

“You can’t, Aina,” Stella chided her daughter. “Think of the trouble that would cause Patty.”

“But I wanna stay with her!” Aina bawled, tears streaming down her face.

Stella seemed at a loss as to how to deal with her daughter’s sudden temper tantrum. Patty had told the two of them the night before that she was planning to go back to the fairies’ dwelling, and while Stella and Aina clearly hadn’t been expecting this, they’d still decided to drop by my store the next day—along with the Blue Flash crew—to see her off. But when it came Aina’s turn to say goodbye to Patty, she’d simply burst into tears, unable to speak, and you saw what happened after that. Poor Aina was heartbroken, and kept repeating over and over that she didn’t want the little fairy to go.

“Are you sure about this, boss?” I quietly asked Patty when I saw the troubled expression on her face.

“Yes, I-I am. You humes have such short lives. What’s the point of me staying here with you? You’ll all end up dying and leaving me alone, anyway!” Patty said with a laugh, making it sound like she was joking, but there was no hiding the sadness in her eyes. The gaping hole left in her heart by the loss of her only friend—Karen’s great-great-grandfather—would probably never fully heal. “B-

Besides,” she continued, “I only came to this town to look for *him*.”

But even though she was acting tough, I immediately noticed the way she was looking at the still-crying Aina. It was almost as if the little fairy was about to burst into tears herself.

“Is that so?” I said.

Patty nodded. “Yup, it is.”

“So you’re really leaving, then, huh?”

“I guess I should thank you for all the help you’ve given me up to now, Shiro,” she said.

I shook my head. “Oh, don’t worry about that. Besides, you saved my life. I should be the one thanking you.”

“I-I guess, yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Well, it seemed like she’d made up her mind.

“Aina isn’t gonna stop bawling while I’m still here, is she? I guess I should probably head back to the dwell—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Patty was interrupted by the loud creak of the door to the shop opening. The person who walked through it hadn’t even bothered to knock.

An out-of-breath Karen quickly scanned the room. “Oh, th-thank goodness, you’re still...”—she paused briefly as she gasped for air—“you’re still here.”

“K-Karen? What are you doing here?” I asked, surprised to see her.

She was panting so hard, she couldn’t answer immediately, and she raised a hand to gesture to me to give her a moment. It took a good minute or so for her breathing to go back to normal.

“Sorry about that,” she said once she’d regained the ability to talk. “I was looking through my great-great-grandfather’s belongings to try to find something with his name on it so I could tell Patty what it was, and I stumbled on this,” she said, showing us an envelope.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“According to my great-grandfather’s will, his father wrote this letter before he died. The only thing written on the envelope is: ‘To my dearest friend.’”

“Wait, could that mean...” I trailed off and glanced at Patty, who was staring at the letter in Karen’s hands. Even Aina lifted her head out of her hands to look at Patty, then the letter, then back at Patty again.

“He...” Patty started. “He wrote this?”

Karen nodded. “Yes. It wasn’t meant for my family’s eyes, so the seal hasn’t been broken yet. His ‘closest friend’ must mean he wrote it to you, Patty. What do you think? Should I open it?”

“Y-Yeah! Open it!” the little fairy blurted out, nodding vigorously.

“All right then,” said Karen as she opened the envelope.

To my dearest friend,

Hey there. It’s been a while.

A lot of time has passed since that day when we promised each other we would meet up again. The seasons changed and years went by, and to be quite honest with you, the simple act of holding a pen is a bit of a challenge for me now. You were always nagging me that my arms were too thin. Well, they’re even thinner now. I wonder if you would make fun of me if you could see me right now, like you used to back then. Probably, but then again, you’re so kindhearted, you might actually be too busy worrying about how thin I’ve gotten. I really wish I could be teased by you again. I can barely walk now, let alone run, but I still dream of tearing around the forest with you, like we used to.

Do you still have that pendant I made for you? You know the one I’m talking about, right? The necklace I made with that gem you gave me that one time. If I remember correctly, you said the necklace was “a token of our friendship.” I actually almost gave mine to my son, but I changed my mind at the last minute, because like you said, that pendant is proof of our friendship. I just don’t think it would be right for me to give it to someone else, even if that person is my own son. I feel a bit sorry for him, but in the end, I decided to keep it. In fact, I’m

going to put it in the envelope along with this letter. Hopefully, it will reach you one day. I wonder whether you will get this letter. Will there be a day, many years from now, when it reaches you? I hope it does. Actually, I know it will. We're friends, after all. I'm sure this letter will find you.

You know, I met an elf by chance a few years back. He told me that fairies actually have a very long life expectancy—much, much longer than us humes. I guess you're no exception. You're probably still as full of energy as you were back then. Still laughing brightly like the sun. I hope you're smiling a lot. You know, I never told you this, but I really did love your smile. Whenever I saw it, I couldn't help breaking out into a huge grin myself, even if I was exhausted or on the verge of starvation.

As pioneers in a remote region, finding food was always a struggle. I could only watch as my comrades died of starvation one after another, and to be honest with you, I was sure I didn't have all that long left myself. But then, I went into the forest one day to try and find something to eat, and that's when I met you. You laughed at my frankly not-very-great skills with a bow, then took pity on me and killed a jackalope for me. To this day, I can still vividly remember how that jackalope meat tasted.

In order for me to never forget the taste and how I'd felt on that day, I decided to make jackalope skewers the village's—Oh, wait, I should call it a "town" now, shouldn't I? Anyway, I decided to make jackalope skewers the specialty of Ninoritch, the town I founded. If you ever drop by, you should have some, okay? Though you are quite a picky eater, so I can already hear you complaining about how "disgusting" they are.

A lot has happened since the last time I saw you. I started cultivating the fields, built a few houses... And I met a woman whom I fell in love with. I've had kids and even grandkids. If I dare say so myself, I've had a pretty fulfilling life. But recently, I've been thinking about you a lot—the fairy I met in the forest. The fairy who shines so bright, she even puts the sun to shame. The beautiful fairy who "cuts through destiny." Patty Falulu.

Surprised? You didn't expect me to know your name, did you? If that just took you by surprise, then I've won this round. We used to compete a lot, you and I. And no matter how much I tried, I would always lose to you. But this time, I've

won.

You're probably wondering how I know your name, right? Well, remember that elf I told you about a few lines back? I asked him to teach me the language of the fairies. In the fairy language, "destiny" is "Patty," and "cut through" is "Falulu." Did I get it right?

Actually, I got the elf's seal of approval on it, so I know I'm right. Patty Falulu. What a beautiful name. I keep repeating it to myself as I sit here, writing this letter. Patty, my dearest friend. The nicest person I've ever met. She who cut through my destiny and brought me happiness.

Oh, wait! I haven't told you my name yet! I'm Eren. Eren Sankareka. Nice to meet you, Patty Falulu. And thank you for being a part of my life.

Your friend,

Eren Sankareka

Final Chapter: She Who Cuts through Destiny

“...and thank you for being a part of my life. Your friend, Eren Sankareka.’ That’s all of it.”

By the time Karen had finished reading out the letter, her voice was quavering. She wasn’t the only one who had gotten emotional, though: the Blue Flash crew, Stella, Aina, Patty, and myself were in a similar state. We were pretty much all on the verge of tears.

“It seems you really were a great help to my great-great-grandfather, Patty,” Karen said softly.

The little fairy was bawling her eyes out. After finally receiving a letter from “him”—the man she’d been trying to track down for such a long time—she couldn’t stop the tears from flowing.

“So his name was Eren, huh?” she said before following it with a little giggle. “And he knew my name this whole time? N-Not bad, Eren.”

A sob seized her by the throat as her legs gave out and she fell to her knees on my shoulder. “He was my—Eren was my only friend and I was his only friend. But... But...” She raised her head and smiled brightly as the tears continued to stream down her cheeks. “He met someone he loved. A-And he was surrounded by his kids, and even had grandkids...”

Karen gave a slight nod.

“He...” Patty started, hiccuping between sobs. “He lived a happy life. I’m glad. I’m so, so glad. G-Good for you, Eren. Eren... I’m so glad, Eren...”

And it was clear that she was genuinely happy for him. Even though she must have been heartbroken at his passing so long ago, she was still celebrating the fact that her friend had lived a fulfilling life.

“Boss...” I said quietly.

She shot me an inquisitive look through her tears. “What is it?”

“We humes don’t live as long as you do, it’s true,” I said. “But time doesn’t matter when it comes to friendship and memories. Eren is still your friend in your heart, and that’ll always be true, won’t it?”

“I-Isn’t that...” she said, sniffing. “Isn’t that obvious?”

“Then I’d like you to keep Aina and me in your heart forever too,” I continued. “Even if it’s in a small corner of it. That’s totally fine by me.”

“Aina and you?” she said.

I nodded. “Yup, Aina and me. Here, take a look at this,” I said as I took a photo out of my pocket. It was the picture Patty, Aina, and I had taken on the second floor of my store a few days prior. All three of us were smiling and making double peace signs.



“Anyone looking at this would think the two of you are really good friends, right?” I said, but Patty didn’t answer. I brought one of my fingers up to her face and softly dabbed at the tears that had collected in the outer corner of her eye. “Boss, I know you and I have a boss-underling relationship, but it’s different between you and Aina, right? You’re friends. I’d even go as far as calling you two best buddies.”

I paused as I waited for her reaction, but she remained silent. “You’re always saying how Eren is your only friend, but that’s just not true. Well, it might’ve been true a few months ago. But now...”

I paused again as I scanned the faces of everyone in the room: Aina, Stella, Raiya, Nesca, Kilpha, Rolf, and lastly, Karen.

“Every single one of us in this room considers you their friend. Isn’t that right, Aina?” I said, turning to the little girl.

“Y-Yeah! I’m your friend, Patty! We’re best, uh...”—she paused as she tried to remember the word—“What was it again? Ah, right! Best buddies!” She nodded vigorously, and I noticed her breathing had become a bit ragged with emotion.

Tears were once again welling up in Patty’s eyes.

“Hey, c’mon now. What’re you doin’, looking all sad?” Raiya jumped in. “He’s right, Li’l Miss Fairy. You and the four of us: we’re all pals!”

Kilpha nodded. “We’re so lucky we have a fairy for a friend, meow!”

“I have heard that you are supposed to be able to ‘cut through destiny,’ Miss Fairy, ma’am. If it is possible, I would be honored to support you in your endeavors,” Rolf said.

“You heard them, Patty,” Stella said with a nod and a gentle smile on her face. “Besides, you don’t want to go making Aina cry again, do you?”

While no one had really put into words exactly what they were wanting Patty to do, the message was pretty obvious.

“Patty, I know how you’re feeling right now,” Nesca said, her voice as lethargic as ever.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” the fairy snapped.

Nesca took a deep breath and her expression turned serious. “The lifespan of a fairy is long. Because of that, you will always outlive any hume friends you make.”

Patty didn’t say anything to this.

“I have elven blood coursing through my veins,” Nesca continued. “And while I might only be a half-elf, I’m still likely to live much, much longer than any hume.” I heard Raiya’s breath catch in his throat as she said this. “Even so, I love Raiya. And I’m not afraid of these feelings. I will always cherish our time together. Every second I spend by his side will be forever engraved on my heart. I’m not scared. I know that, one day, I will have to say goodbye to Raiya. But I won’t ever stop loving him. I’ve already resolved myself to that.”

She paused again as she took Raiya’s hand in hers and gave it a tight squeeze, which he reciprocated.

“So what are you going to do, Patty?” Nesca asked the fairy. “Will you stay afraid of the passing of time and lock yourself away in a tiny world so you won’t ever have to feel this pain again? Or would you rather spend your time with people you love and who love you back, even if it’s only for a short while?”

Patty glanced at Eren’s letter, then closed her eyes. When she opened them again, there was a glint of determination in them.

“I’m not *afraid*! And you know what? I’ve decided I won’t be going back to the dwelling just yet,” she declared, then she flew from my shoulder up to my head, where she drew herself up to her full height and gazed out at everyone, looking all high and mighty. I was pretty sure her reason for relocating to my head was so she could look down on Nesca. My little boss really didn’t like it when someone else had the last word.

“Are you sure, boss?” I asked.

“Grandpa—I mean, th-the clan leader might have told me to come back to the dwelling, but he didn’t specify *when*. And besides, time passes differently for fairies than it does for humes. So I’ve decided I will only go back when you’re six feet under, Shiro.”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m about to die,” I said huffily.

But Patty ignored me and turned to Nesca instead. “A-Also, Nesca, you promised me you’d teach me how to control my magic so I can use super strong spells and protect the other f-fairies, right? So I guess I *can’t* go back to the dwelling just yet, can I?”

“So does this mean you’re staying, Patty?” Aina asked, her voice full of hope. “You’re not going home?”

The fairy flew from my head to Aina’s shoulder and started gently petting the little girl’s hair. “Yup. Besides, it’s not as if I can just leave a little crybaby like you all alone, is it? Guess I’ll have to stick around for a little while longer. Well, u-until Shiro’s dead, anyway!”

“I already said I’m not planning on dying anytime soon!” I objected.

A huge grin broke out across Aina’s face. “Patty!” she exclaimed happily as she squeezed the little fairy in her arms.

“Whoa! Hey! D-Don’t just go hugging me all of a sudden!” Patty protested.

It was such a sweet sight, the rest of us couldn’t help laughing at it and slapping each other on the shoulders.

Epilogue

Two months had passed in the blink of an eye and the day of the harvest festival was finally upon us. Various booths were scattered around the marketplace, while food stalls lined the town square and the streets teemed with tourists. I had never seen the little town so animated. It seemed like it was Aina's first time seeing so many people in Ninoritch too, and she spent the whole day fidgeting and flitting about happily as she took in all the sights and sounds of the busy streets.

The sun had just sunk below the horizon and night was drawing in. There were no street lamps in Ninoritch, which meant the town would usually be pitch-black once the sun went down. But not tonight. Lanterns had been placed all along the way, casting a gentle glow over the otherwise dark town. Adults and children alike were dancing to the music and singing along with their arms draped around each other's shoulders. And you might be asking: what about me? Well...

"We don't have many lots left now, everyone! Next up, we have this: a bottle of the strongest alcohol in the world. It's so strong, it even managed to topple a certain hero! Ladies and gentlemen, our next item is a bottle of Spirytus, a.k.a. the 'Hero Slayer'!"

Cheers and whistles went up from the crowd. A couple of months back, I'd told Karen I would help her out with this festival, and I'd decided to organize a *super special* event to liven the place up a bit.

"All righty, everyone. Starting us off at one silver coin! Three! Five here! Ten! Thirteen, sir! Fifteen!"

The arms of several tourists-turned-auction-goers shot up one after another, bringing up the price of the bottle of alcohol. Yup, that's right: the *super special* event I'd come up with was an alcohol auction.

I'd bought a bunch of alcohol in Japan, set up a stage in the town square, and started selling it all off auction-style. The crowd mostly consisted of *rich* booze-

loving adventurers, *rich* nobles who'd come here incognito, and *rich* merchants who'd heard about the alcohol I was selling and were interested in trying it for themselves. Needless to say, the auction was a huge hit. The alcohol I'd brought was selling like hotcakes, and for much, *much* more than what I'd initially bought it for. The giant pile of silver and gold coins beside me just kept on growing. In fact, I had made so much money in one single day that—if I'd wanted to—I could've organized another five drinking festivals identical to the one I'd held a couple of months back. But yeah, I was really making bank today.

"Okay, everyone. The auction is coming to an end. This is the last item of the night. Can you guess what it might be? Let's see..." I said, laying it on thick. "Have you ever heard of a certain *legendary* alcohol? Any guesses, anyone?"

A loud "oooh" went up from the crowd.

"I'm sure you've all heard of the mead that's so delicious, only those who have been granted a fairy's blessing can get their hands on it. That's right, everyone! Our last item of the day is a bottle of fairy mead!"

A cloud of smoke billowed up, and Karen—who'd been waiting in the wings—appeared with a bottle in her hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here it is!" I announced. "The legendary alcohol that's been given to us today by a fairy who has a very special connection with the town of Ninoritch! Can all of you see the bottle our beautiful mayor is holding? That's right, everyone! It's the fabled fairy mead!"

Karen raised the bottle of fairy mead up over her head so that everyone could get a good look at it and cheers erupted from the crowd once more. The label on the bottle was a photo of Patty throwing double peace signs, with the words "I brewed this with all my heart!" written underneath.

"Can you all see the label on the bottle? It's a picture of Patty Falulu, the fairy who made this fairy mead," I explained. "Hey, I have an idea! How about we bring her up on stage? Everyone, please give the brewer of this bottle of fairy mead, Patty Falulu, a big round of applause!"

The auction-goers started clapping as a little fairy floated down from above. She hovered next to me and bowed elegantly to the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the brewer of this fairy mead and tourism ambassador for Ninoritch: Patty Falulu!”

“N-Nice to meet you all!” a red-faced Patty stuttered, though she was barely audible over the thunderous applause. Her silver hair fluttered in the breeze and her wings were glowing. The seal on her abdomen was fully on show and she was wearing the pendant Eren had given her around her neck. She didn’t need to hide her true self anymore.

“All righty, everyone. Let’s start the bidding for our final item, shall we?” I said, eliciting more cheers from the crowd. “A bottle of legendary fairy mead. Starting us off at one gold coin! Three! Six! Nine! Twelve! What do you guys have to say about this, huh? Seventeen!”

People were going absolutely crazy, putting in bigger and bigger bids for the bottle of fairy mead. Patty had decided that the profits from the sale of the fairy mead would go to the town of Ninoritch itself, because she had felt she wanted to do something for the town her dear friend Eren had founded, and this had been the idea she had come up with. She didn’t really understand the concept of money, though, so she had no idea how big the donation she was making actually was. On the other hand, Karen—the recipient of the donation—was watching the proceedings nervously, her beautiful face growing paler and paler as each new bid came in. She’d definitely never seen a sum as huge as this before.

“Oh! I have 30 gold coins here! 30 gold coins, going once—Wait, I have 34 gold coins over there! Oh! 50 gold coins!”

The auction ended with a bang.

“Hot damn. That auction was a huge success!” I said, sighing contentedly. The auction had been over for a little while by this point, but the festival was still in full swing and Karen and I were walking the streets, with Patty perched on my shoulder. It seemed Karen had calmed down a bit since the auction and she had some color back in her cheeks. I couldn’t help teasing her about it. “Still, I’ve never seen you looking like *that* before,” I said with a laugh.

“W-Well, it’s not like I could help it,” she said defensively. “Anyone would have the same reaction when faced with that huge amount of money.”

I chuckled again. “It’ll do wonders for the economy of Ninoritch, which is great.”

“It is,” she agreed with a nod. “And it’s all thanks to you. Thank you, Shiro.”

“Oh, c’mon. I didn’t do anything,” I said. “I just saw an opportunity and went for it, that’s all. Besides, boss here was the one who whipped up the fairy mead.”

“I know. I’m incredibly grateful to you too, Patty,” Karen said, addressing the little fairy sitting on my shoulder.

Patty’s face immediately went red. “D-Don’t worry about it,” she stuttered. “Besides, you’re his—you’re Eren’s kid’s kid’s kid. So you really don’t have to worry about it. I-It’s no big deal, really.”

“Aw, so close, boss!” I teased her. “She’s actually Eren’s kid’s kid’s *kid’s* kid.”

“Oh, sh-shush! Who even cares about minor details like that? Well, other than Nesca, obviously,” she said, pulling a face.

Ever since Patty had decided to stay in Ninoritch, she’d been in a much better mood. For a moment, I got a bit lost in my thoughts, but Patty suddenly pulled me out of my reverie.

“Oh! I actually had something I wanted to ask the two of you,” she said.

“Who, me?” Karen and I replied at the same time, tilting our heads to one side in perfect synchronization.

“Yeah, you,” Patty said with a nod. “Okay, I have a request.” She paused and fixed us with an incredibly serious look. “Could you make a baby?”

Karen and I both froze, and it took me a good few seconds to reboot.

“Wh-Wh-What the hell are you *saying*, boss?! Is that a joke?!” I asked in horror.

“No, it isn’t! I’m serious!” the little fairy pouted.

“W-Wait a second, Patty,” Karen intervened. “Shiro and I aren’t actually in a relation—”

“So you won’t make a baby?” Patty interrupted her. “Stella said there’s this

thing called re... Uh, I think it was called ‘reincarnation.’ She said humes could be reborn. So if you two make a baby, it could maybe turn out to be Eren reincarnated, right?” she said, explaining her train of thought to us with an incredibly smug look on her face. The look in her eye told me she was dead serious about this.

“Boss...” I started haltingly. “For humes to, uh, make a baby, we first have to go through a few, um...” —I searched for the right word— “let’s call them ‘ceremonies.’”

“Shiro’s right,” Karen jumped in. “Listen, Patty. A man and a woman can only make a baby after they’ve gone through several *challenges* and, uh...”

“Y-Yeah,” I said with a nod. “You understand, right, Patty? Making a baby is a huge *commitment*, and—”

Karen and I were trying our hardest to explain it to her, but Patty was having none of it. “Shut up!” she yelled at the top of her tiny lungs. “So you won’t listen to me? This is an order from your boss, Shiro! Make a baby now!”

“Hey now, boss, that’s an abuse of power.”

I was busy debating what I should say to try to convince Patty to back off when a little voice called out to me from the other side of the town square.

“Mister Shiro!”

Great timing, Aina, my little guardian angel!

“Oh, Aina!” I called back as I practically ran over to her in an attempt to escape Patty.

“Mister Shiro, is the auction over?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yup, it is. How’s the photo booth doing?”

I glanced over the little girl’s shoulder to look at the booth Aina and her mom were running. Stella immediately spotted me and gave me a little wave. She had a big smile on her face.

“We’ve had lots of customers!” the little girl said excitedly. “We even ran out of the stuff for the printer!”

"I see your photo booth has been a huge success too, then. Good job!" I praised her, and she responded with an adorable giggle. "You too, Stella," I called over to the little girl's mother.

"I haven't done anything," she replied. "It's been all Aina."

For the past two months, Aina had been hard at work learning how to take pictures. It wasn't long before she was even better at it than me.

"Mister Shiro, can mama and I run the photo booth at the festival?" she had asked me one day.

Photos are a way for us to remember special moments in our lives and keep them with us forever. Aina had wanted to run the photo booth so that she could give everyone in Ninoritch a way to remember the day. At first, I'd planned on making a bundle of money with my camera at the harvest festival, but Aina's words changed my mind. I decided that each photo would only cost a single copper coin, which was such an extremely low price, even children would be able to purchase one. And that was how the photo booth we'd set up in one corner of the town square had become one of the main attractions of the festival. From what Aina was telling me, the line had been incredibly long all day, and she and Stella had barely had time to catch their breath between photos.

"Mr. Shiro, do you have a moment?" Stella asked as I patted Aina on the head for doing such a good job.

"What is it?"

"We ran out of the stuff for the printer, but the camera still works. So..." She paused and looked at Aina, Patty, and Karen in turn before her gaze rested on me again. "How about we all take a picture together?"

In memory of the day, huh? Everyone seemed very enthusiastic about the idea.

"Okay, everyone! Get in the shot!" I said as I positioned the camera on the tripod to point at the little group, making sure that all four of them were in the frame. "Karen, a little more to the right. Oh, my right, I mean. Your left. Yeah, that's it. Don't move now, okay?"

“Mister Shiro, hurry up and get over here!” Aina urged me.

“Shiro, you’re going in the middle,” Patty declared.

“Let’s do double peace signs, Mr. Shiro,” Stella suggested.

I set the timer, and just as I was about to join the rest of our merry little band for the photo, I heard someone say my name from behind me.

“Oh, is that Shiro I see?”

I turned around and saw a beautiful woman wearing a black robe staring at me.



“Um...” I said. “Who are you?” I’d never seen her before in my life.

The woman let out a loud sigh as if she was disappointed by my response.
“Don’t you recognize me?”

I studied her face for a while, but it was no good. I really had no clue who she was. “I’m sorry. I really don’t remember you,” I said. “Might I ask your name?”

The words she uttered next made my jaw hit the floor.

“I’m your grandma, you silly goose.”

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the second volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back To My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiroyuki Shimotsuki.

The first volume of this series was released during the state of emergency when COVID first struck, but so many of you decided to purchase it despite the tough circumstances we all found ourselves in, and this series got off to a very good start. So this is all thanks to you and your continued support of *Peddler in Another World!* This volume focuses on Shiro's relationships with the other characters, in particular with Patty, who is a new addition to the series.

Now, I announced in the afterword of the first volume that this series was getting a manga adaptation. Well, the first chapter was released last month (*applause*)! It's currently being published on the "Comic Fire" website run by Hobby Japan Co. and it is being drawn by Shizuku Akechi-sensei, whose illustrations are beautiful. You should definitely go check it out! Shiro looks super cool, Aina is adorable, and most importantly of all, only in the manga can you actually get a visual of Shiro's grandma throwing her double peace signs!

And now, on to the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, once again, thank you for the beautiful illustrations for this volume. I've actually made the drawing of Patty you sent me my laptop background.

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, the first chapter of the manga was amazing! I'm looking forward to the next one!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for the valuable help you gave me this time as well.

To my family, my friends, and my dogs, thank you for your support.

To my author friends, thank you for taking time out of your day to give me advice for this series.

And the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading

up to this point!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to an association that helps children in Japan. By providing them with financial and educational support, I hope I can help give them the life every child deserves. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to giving them that life. I think it would be nice if these children became light novel fans when they grow up.

All righty, then. See you all in the next volume!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



Patty Falulu

A girl from the "phantom tribe," the fairies. She saves Shiro from drowning in the river.

"What's wrong?
You never heard of fairies before?"

"A fairy?
Wait, you mean like...
a fairy fairy?"





Ney Mirage

The guildmaster of the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy's Blessing, a big-time Adventurers' Guild.

“What’s going on here?”

The back door to the drinking hall was flung open and crashed against the wall.

Emille hadn’t expected her boss to suddenly show up like this, and in a panic, she dove under the table.











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 2

by Takashi Iwasaki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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