

Author

Hiiro Shimotsuki

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Takashi Iwasaki

vol. **6**

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for your
purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

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

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Summary of the Previous Volume

A couple of weeks back, I was minding my own business when all of a sudden, Suama's mother, the Immortal Dragon—nicknamed Dramom—strolled into my shop in Ninoritch and asked me for help feeding her daughter. To make matters worse, Celes the demon soon joined the party, announcing that she was my slave henceforth and thus it was her duty to stay by my side. *Seriously, can't a guy catch a break?*

In the middle of all this chaos, I received a letter from my good friend and guildmaster of the Eternal Promise merchant guild, Zidan, imploring me to join him in the royal capital. I obviously couldn't ignore my friend's plea for help, so I made my way over there with my two new comrades plus Aina, Patty, and Suama in tow.

A lot happened in the capital. First, I rescued a bratty young noble named Shess, and not long after that, I was invited up to the royal palace by no less than the first queen consort herself. She asked me to procure a dress for her daughter, the princess, and I naturally accepted the assignment. So imagine my surprise when I found out the princess in question was none other than Shess!

But that wasn't even the most shocking part, because whom do you think the second queen consort had invited to the capital to procure a dress for her own daughter? It was Bart, aka the merchant who had poured water over me back in Mazela. On the subject of the second queen consort, when she saw things weren't going the way she had hoped, she abducted Shess and we had to battle members of an underground guild in order to save her from the evil queen's clutches.

After this rather heroic episode that would've impressed even a veteran adventurer, I made my way back home again, and on my arrival, I headed over to the guild to see how my friends had been in my absence. But as soon as I walked in, I could tell that the mood in the guildhall was a lot tenser than usual. According to Raiya, this was due to a set of ruins they had recently discovered in

the forest, for they were no ordinary ruins. Raiya informed me, “It is said that if you enter these particular ruins, you can encounter the dead.”

Chapter One: An Unsettled Atmosphere in the Guild

“You can encounter the dead?” I said, repeating his words back to him to make sure I’d heard him correctly.

Raiya nodded, a somber look on his face. “Yep.” It didn’t seem like he was joking.

“You mean, like, the *actual* dead? Not just zombies and wraiths?” I asked.

“Oh, you know about those?” Raiya said, sounding surprised. “Well, someone’s been boning up on their monsters. I’m impressed.”

I shrugged. “Rolf and Nesca took it upon themselves to teach me about all the monsters out there in the big wide world. They said it wouldn’t hurt for me to remember at least a few of them, seeing as how most of my customers are adventurers.”

“Yeah, that sounds just like them,” he said with a snort of laughter.

Since I didn’t know an awful lot about this other world—scratch that, I knew virtually nothing—I often asked Nesca and Rolf to teach me more about it, from the religions prevalent here to the history of the continent as a whole, and more specifically, the kingdom’s neighboring nations. They seemed to think I needed to learn about monsters too, and under their tutelage, I could now say with confidence that I was more well-versed in monsters than any first-time adventurer. Though of course, they probably still knew things I didn’t, such as super famous folktales and legends, since those were the kinds of things I didn’t ask Nesca about, and she most definitely assumed I already knew them.

“We had dinner together a few weeks ago and they spent the entire time lecturing me on the lives of goblins and their habits. I didn’t even ask! But well, at least I can now safely say that I totally *hate* goblins, even though I’ve never met one,” I said.

“Dude. You’re friends with a fairy, a demon, and a dragon, and you’re telling me you’ve never seen a *goblin* before? How is that even possible?” Raiya

replied. “Seriously, there are clown acts that are less ridiculous than your life! Or is this one of the perks of being the grandson of a legendary witch? Did you get blessed with supernatural luck while you were still in the crib?”

I chuckled. “Just checking, but that’s a compliment, right?”

“Course it is. Being lucky is super important for both adventurers and peddlers alike.” He paused, then shook his head as he was hit by a sudden realization. “Wait, we’ve veered completely off topic, haven’t we?” He scratched his head and gazed in the direction of the drinking hall. “Let’s go grab that table, man,” he said, jutting his chin toward the one he meant.

We ordered some drinks and sat down at the vacant table. A couple of minutes later, a waitress came over with our order: an ice-cold cola in a glass bottle for me, and Raiya’s current drink of choice, sweet potato shochu, a type of alcoholic spirit I’d brought over from Japan.

“You didn’t want any booze, man?” Raiya asked me, eyeing my decidedly nonalcoholic choice of drink.

I shook my head. “I’m gonna go see Karen after this to let her know I’m back from the royal capital, so it’s probably best I stay sober.”

“Makes sense,” Raiya said with a knowing nod.

It was still early in the afternoon, meaning most people were still hard at work, and Karen was probably neck-deep in tasks. I couldn’t just waltz into her office slightly tipsy.

“But don’t mind me. Drink to your heart’s content.”

“Don’t worry, that’s what I planned to do,” Raiya said. “All right! Bottoms up!”

“Cheers!”

He clinked his tankard against my glass bottle and we both took a good swig of our drinks.

“So can you tell me some more about these mysterious ruins where you can ‘encounter the dead’?” I asked.

“Sure. Like I said before, we’re not talking about the undead here. No zombies or wraiths or anything like that. In fact, the guys and gals who have been to

these ruins have said they didn't see a single undead creature there."

I couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief at this. As someone who found horror movies terrifying, I was very glad that no zombies would be making an appearance in Raiya's story.

"Hm, where should I start? So you see, basically, one of the guild's adventuring parties headed out into the forest, and then..."

Taking occasional sips of his shochu, Raiya told me everything that had happened in relation to these mysterious ruins. While I was away in the capital, the Fairy's Blessing guild's adventurers had continued to explore the large forest east of Ninoritch—or more specifically, the ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era that were scattered all around the forest. One day, an adventuring party had set out to explore a set of ruins that hadn't been thoroughly scoured yet, and the most mind-boggling thing happened while they were there: one of them was reunited with his dead lover.

There was an underground dungeon in these ruins, which served to attract a lot of adventurers, because dungeons usually equaled treasure. However, this particular dungeon was absolutely packed with tough monsters, and despite spending days down there at a time, no party had managed to find any treasure whatsoever. Most adventurers had given up on the place and headed off to other sets of ruins in the hopes of having more luck elsewhere, but the aforementioned adventuring party stuck to their task, and after days spent roaming the dungeon, overcoming a number of life-threatening situations and a ton of bad luck, they reached the lowest level at last. Yet to their bewilderment, there was no sign of any treasure anywhere.

"So they didn't find any gold or jewels, but they *did* stumble across the guy's long-dead lover. Is that what you're telling me?" I asked.

Raiya nodded. "They said there was a fountain down there, and it was the only thing in the whole final room."

"A fountain? Inside a dungeon?" I said in disbelief.

"Yup. A giant fountain in the middle of this huge, otherwise empty room."

A fountain in a dungeon? Like the kind you'd usually find in the middle of big

parks? Or was it more like a “Fountain of Restoration” type of thing where it’s basically just a pool of water? You know, the type you get in RPGs. As a non-adventurer, it was a bit difficult for me to picture exactly what Raiya was talking about.

“Anyway, the important bit is what happened once they found this fountain,” Raiya continued.

He slammed down his now empty tankard and leaned across the table toward me. His cheeks had a slight rosy hue to them and he wasn’t looking as tense as before. Perhaps he had enjoyed his drink so much, it had helped him to relax a little.



“Seeing as how the only thing on the last level of this dungeon was that fountain, the adventurers hoped they’d find a piece of treasure hiding in the water,” he said.

“I would probably have assumed the same thing in their shoes,” I remarked.

“Right? They even said the water was crystal clear, so anyone would naturally assume that there must be some kind of treasure in there *somewhere*. Anyway, one of the guys stepped into the water to look for this potential treasure, when all of a sudden, the water started glowing, and a few seconds later, the guy’s dead lover was standing in the fountain with him.”

“Could it have been a monster that had changed its appearance using magic? Or just some sort of illusion spell in general?” I asked.

“You’ve really done your homework, haven’t you?” Raiya said with a chuckle.

Nesca had told me that, while it was rare, certain monsters had the ability to change their appearance, so my first instinct was to wonder if this was an explanation for what had emerged out of the fountain. But Raiya shook his head.

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

It seemed I was wrong on this occasion.

“After all, if it had been a monster, it would’ve attacked him. But the girl just stared at him without moving an inch.”

“So it didn’t even try to attack him?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Then maybe it took on the appearance of his dead lover to lure him in closer so it could drag him to the bottom of the fountain?” I suggested, trying really hard to remember all the things Nesca and Rolf had taught me.

But Raiya shook his head again. “Doesn’t seem like that was its intention either. The adventurer kept on calling out the girl’s name while the rest of his party held him back so that he wouldn’t get too close.”

“And what was the dead girl’s reaction?” I queried.

“None whatsoever,” Raiya said. “She didn’t so much as flinch. But then, a giant monster suddenly appeared from the back of the room.”

“Wh-What kind of monster?”

Raiya leaned in even closer, then brought his hands up in front of him and wiggled his fingers to make what he was about to say seem more spooky. “You ready for this, man?” he asked me in a hushed voice. “It was a hydra.”

“A hydra?! Like a *hydra* hydra?” I gasped.

“Yup!” Raiya confirmed. “And they said it was *huge*! Much bigger than any hydra ever seen before.”

A hydra was basically a giant snake with a bunch of heads that was somewhat similar to the Yamata-no-Orochi, the eight-headed, eight-tailed serpent found in Japanese mythology. Not only was a hydra incredibly powerful, but even if you did manage to cut off one of its heads, it could grow a new one in its place in a matter of seconds.

“It had been arduous work clearing the dungeon, even for gold-ranked adventurers like these guys, meaning they were all exhausted by this point. Then, just when they thought it was finally over, boom! A giant hydra appears out of nowhere!” Raiya said. “There was no way they were going to win that fight, so they fled—which wasn’t all that easy since they had to drag their partymate who kept on yelling the dead girl’s name and refused to budge.”

Luckily, the adventurers managed to make it back to Ninoritch and immediately headed to the guild to report everything they had seen in the dungeon, from the fountain that seemingly had the power to revive the dead to the giant hydra. If they had been a lower-ranked party, no one would’ve believed their story, but every single one of them was gold-ranked, so no one doubted their claims for a second. Rumors about the mysterious ruins spread like wildfire among the rest of the adventurers.

“A spring that revives the dead without you needing to give it anything in exchange? Impossible! Saints and high priests have to use an outrageous amount of mana to perform a resurrection ritual, and even then, they can only accomplish such miracles if the physical body is still relatively intact,” remarked one.

“But the Ancient Magic Civilization Era is considered the golden age of humankind. Surely it’s not so unbelievable that they figured out an easier way to revive the dead?” countered another.

“There *are* stories along those lines, but there’s no way they’re true!”

“I’m pretty sure this ‘dead lover’ the guy saw was just an illusion created by the hydra.”

“So it was all just a trap?”

“Or maybe his lover was alive all along.”

“I’m voting for illusion magic too!”

And so on and so forth. According to Raiya, pretty much every single adventurer was speculating on the true nature of the fountain.

“Well, that explains why the mood’s so different in here today,” I said.

“Exactly. Everyone’s obsessed with that fountain. And what adventurer wouldn’t be? I’m sure it’s got a lot of them thinking.”

“Thinking?” I queried.

“Yeah, thinking.” Raiya paused, then let out a heavy sigh. “Being an adventurer means being confronted by death a lot. You might be drinking with a fellow adventurer one night, only to find out he lost his life on a quest the day after.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I remained silent.

“And it’s not just adventurers either. Everyone’s bound to lose at least one or two people they care about at some point. Take Rolf, for example. He...” But Raiya stopped himself there. He scratched his head, called the waitress over, and ordered another sweet potato shochu. “Forget what I just said,” he mumbled, an awkward look on his face.

I hummed, deep in thought. “A fountain that can revive the dead, huh?” I mused aloud. “What do you make of it? Do you think it’s real or just some sort of trap?”

“No idea. Oh, but apparently, the adventurers who saw this fountain found a

grimoire in the dungeon. If someone manages to decipher it, I guess we'll find out if it's the real deal or not."

"A grimoire?"

"Yeah. But it's written in an ancient language, so the sub-guildmaster has gathered together every single adventurer who can read it to try and decipher it."

That explained why the seat next to Raiya's was empty. Under normal circumstances, Nesca would be sitting beside him, but she must've been whisked away by the sub-guildmaster to help translate the grimoire.

"What do *you* think, man? Do you believe this fountain can really revive the dead?" Raiya asked me.

I hummed again as I mulled over the question. A fountain that could revive the dead. If such a thing really did exist, it would be incredible. Nothing short of a miracle, in fact. My thoughts immediately turned to Aina and her mother, Stella. When Aina was very little, her father had been enlisted into the army and had never returned, leaving the poor girl without a father.

"I want it to be real," I concluded.

"You *want* it to be real, huh?"

"Of course."

If it means Aina can see her father again...

"Everyone wishes for a miracle when they lose someone dear to them," I explained.

Raiya closed his eyes. "Ain't that the truth," he muttered.



"Anyway, we still don't know what the deal is with that dungeon, so for now..." Raiya said before trailing off and bringing a finger up to his lips to make a "shh" sound, indicating that I should keep it all under my hat.

I nodded and mirrored the gesture. To be honest, I had no intention of telling anyone about this anyway, because it'd just cause absolute chaos for no reason.

“Oh, by the way,” Raiya said, seeming to suddenly perk up. “D’ya know what’s been causing the *most* trouble for the other adventurers recently?”

The atmosphere around the table had gone a bit gloomy with all of that serious talk, so Raiya had probably thought it best to change the topic, even forcing himself to sound more cheerful. He really was a good egg.

“Something causing trouble for the adventurers? Go on, enlighten me,” I said.

“When the Silver Moon became a branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild, we got a sudden influx of adventurers into Ninoritch, right? There were so many of us, all of the inns filled up in no time.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that,” I remarked. “A bunch of my customers were complaining about that a while back.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Like, two months, I think? But I know Karen’s been working on building more houses and inns, so the problem should resolve itself soon enough, right?”

As soon as Ninoritch’s former Adventurers’ Guild, the Silver Moon, became part of the Fairy’s Blessing guild, Karen had started making the necessary arrangements for more houses and inns to be built. By my reckoning, these buildings should have been almost completed by now.

“Well, it hasn’t resolved itself. At all. In fact, it’s getting worse,” Raiya replied.

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. A bunch of new adventurers showed up while you were over in the royal capital. Plus, a bunch of *other* folk...” He shot me a glance as he said these last words, then shook his head and muttered, “But that’s a story for another day.”

I couldn’t help wondering what the meaning behind that look was, but I decided now wasn’t the time to ask about it.

“It seems rumors about the ruins in the Gigheena Forest have reached the ears of adventurers in other nations too.”

According to Raiya, adventurers from all over the continent had started arriving in Ninoritch. Unlike modern Japan, there was no internet or phones in

this world, which meant news traveled slowly, but it seemed that other countries had finally gotten wind of the wealth of ruins in the Gigheena Forest. Not only did this mean that more adventurers than ever had started coming to Ninoritch, there was also an influx of weapons merchants as well as doctors. This made plenty of sense to me: adventurers had been lured to the town in the hopes of finding treasure in the ruins, causing demand for equipment and potions to shoot up drastically, which in turn had brought in merchants and doctors who spied an opportunity to grow their businesses. But while Ninoritch's population growth was largely a good thing, the town's current housing market simply couldn't cope with the demand. More and more adventurers were requesting houses to be built since all of the inns were full up, but there was a limit to the number of houses that could be constructed at any one time, and that's even before you considered that it wasn't exactly an instant process.

"It's getting more and more expensive to stay in an inn too," Raiya continued. "Most rookie adventurers can't afford to rent a room nowadays, and a lot of them are being forced to sleep outdoors."

"That's rough," I said.

"Sure is. If only there was a *superrich* merchant around here who could get another inn or two built," Raiya said with a dramatic sigh, shooting several glances at me as he said this.

I chuckled. "I wish I could help, but building and running inns requires an awful lot of manpower. I can't *quite* do it all myself, you know."

"That so? Well, I suppose running inns for adventurers does require you to have a *bit* of physical strength," Raiya noted, before pausing for effect and shooting me a teasing look. "With those noodle arms of yours, I doubt you'd be able to break up a bar brawl," he said, throwing in an exaggerated sigh for good measure.

Just at that moment, the door opened and Ney the guildmaster strode into the drinking hall. "Well, well. I see you're back, Shiro," she remarked when she noticed my presence. She glanced around the room to make sure no one was up to no good before making her way over to our table.

“Good afternoon, Ney. Yeah, I got back a couple of hours ago.”

“I’ve been anxiously awaiting your return,” she told me. “Could I perhaps join you for a drink?”

“Of course,” I said, before turning to Raiya. “What do you say, Raiya? Do you mind?”

“Nope, fine by me.”

“Then, it’s settled. Come have a seat, Ney,” I said, pulling out the chair next to me.

“Well then. Please allow me to intrude for a moment,” Ney replied with a smile, sitting down on the chair I’d pulled out for her.

I could see she was wearing some light makeup that didn’t totally hide the dark circles under her eyes, which suggested she must’ve been really tired. I wondered what had been keeping her awake. Was it the grimoire the adventurers had found in the dungeon or the housing crisis that was causing so much trouble in town? Or perhaps it was a combination of the two?

“So how was the royal capital, Shiro?” she asked. “I heard the head of the merchant guild you belong to invited you personally to join him there.”

“Yeah. He wanted to talk to me about one of my items.”

“Well, it must’ve been quite an impressive item to catch the attention of the guildmaster himself. Though I can’t say I’m surprised,” she said with a smile.

“It’s really not as big a deal as you’re making it out to be,” I said, chuckling. “Though a lot of things happened in the royal capital, and some of them gave me quite the headache.”

“Is that so?” Ney remarked. “Well, in your absence, a lot of things happened here too.”

“Oh, really?” I said. “Might I ask what kind of ‘things’ in particular?”

“Of course. Though naturally, I only know the stuff that’s related to my guild.”

She proceeded to basically repeat everything Raiya had just told me with a few added details sprinkled in. She had asked the main branch of the Fairy’s

Blessing guild to forbid anyone from transferring to Ninoritch from another branch, which they had agreed to enforce. Unfortunately, more and more adventurers from other guilds as well as from other countries were looking to relocate to Ninoritch, which had caused the huge strain on housing that Raiya and I had been discussing moments before. Ney told me she was much more concerned with that particular issue at the present time than the dungeon where the dead could supposedly be revived. Though there was one other thing she talked about that Raiya hadn't mentioned.

"It hasn't just been adventurers knocking on our door over these past few weeks, though," she said.

"Really?"

"Yes. To be completely honest with you, I don't really know what to do anymore." She sighed and rested her chin on her hand.

Being a guildmaster sure wasn't a walk in the park, huh? I hummed and started wondering what kind of people other than adventurers might have business with the guild. My first thought was clients. After all, the guild's quest board was always covered in requests to gather medicinal herbs and kill monsters. But I quickly realized that this line of thinking made no sense. I mean, why would a guild be worried about having more clients? No, there was only one other possibility.

"Merchants?" I asked.

Raiya was the one who answered. "Bingo. The place is swarming with merchants looking to snap up the pieces of treasure we've found in the ruins."

Ney nodded. "Of course, it's not *all* the merchants in the area, but..." She trailed off and shot me a glance much like the one Raiya had cast my way earlier.

I *really* wanted to ask what the issue was, but I decided to be patient and temper my curiosity for the time being.

"Dealing with them all takes up a significant amount of my time," Ney continued. "While I'm glad there are people interested in the items we have found in the ruins, they all try to barter us down to get them for as cheap as

they can. It's frankly exhausting."

Laughter erupted from Raiya. "Why are you surprised, GM? I mean, they're merchants. Of *course* they're gonna haggle on the prices, even if it's just to get a deduction of one measly copper coin. Well, Shiro doesn't, but he's a bit of an anomaly in the peddling fraternity."

"I'm aware of that," Ney replied. "However, I definitely do not appreciate having to spend most of my time dealing with it."

Many of the pieces of treasure the adventurers had found in the ruins were either magical or enchanted, and Ney had to be present whenever someone wanted to buy one. Naturally, a lot of merchants were interested in these rare items, so this meant a huge chunk of Ney's time was spent overseeing the sales. On top of that, the influx of merchants in Ninoritch hadn't helped at all with the current lack of housing.

"Shiro, if I remember correctly, you and Karen are quite close, yes?" Ney asked.

"Sure. I mean, we're friends, anyway. Nothing more, nothing less," I said.

Raiya treated me to a look of pity. "Must be painful, having to admit it."

"Shut up, you. We can't all be winning at life," I grumbled.

"What do you mean by that?" Raiya asked, confused.

But I decided to ignore him. "Sorry about that, Ney. Raiya couldn't stop himself from butting into our conversation," I said, glaring at him. "Please continue."

"I was wondering if I could perhaps ask you for a favor," she said.

"What kind of favor are we talking?" I asked.

"I have written a request for more housing," Ney explained. "Could you please take it to her?"

"I mean, sure, I don't mind. But why don't you ask the main branch of the Fairy's Blessing for more funds to build lodgings exclusively for adventurers? You did that before, right?"

She sighed. “I wish I could, but unfortunately, our guild is now forbidden from running too many inns and lodgings.”

“Oh, really?” I asked in some surprise.

“Yes. In the past, a town complained that having the guild running their own inn was stealing potential customers away from the inhabitants, and ever since, the powers that be have decided that each branch can’t run more than two inns at a time.”

To be honest, this wasn’t all that surprising to me. After all, the main reason the Fairy’s Blessing had become the top guild in the kingdom was because they always made sure to take into account the concerns and requests of the people.

“I see. Yeah, it’s important to have good relations with the residents of the towns the guild has branches in.”

“Precisely. I’m glad you understand,” Ney said. “So would you mind giving this to the mayor for me?” she reiterated as she produced an envelope from her pocket.

“Sure thing. In fact, I’ll take it over there right now.”

“Thank you kindly,” she said.

“We’re counting on you, man!” Raiya chimed in.

With Ney’s letter safely tucked away in my pocket, I headed out of the guildhall and made my way over to the town hall.

Chapter Two: Visitors from Faraway Lands

As I was making my way to the town hall, I suddenly heard someone calling out my name from behind me.

“Hey, Shiro!”

“Mister Shiro!”

I turned and saw Aina and Patty running up to me.

“What are you doing out here, Shiro?” the fairy asked, the wings on her back fluttering furiously as she hovered in front of me. “Weren’t you going to the guild?”

“Already been,” I replied. “What about you two? Didn’t you say you were heading home?”

As soon as we’d arrived back in Ninoritch, everyone had gone their separate ways. Celes had said she wanted to go home for a bit before setting off into the forest where there was a teleport gate that was connected to the demon island, while Dramom had also headed off into the forest, saying she was worried that we might have spoiled Suama a little too much and it was time to teach her how to hunt. Aina was supposed to have gone home with Patty, who was freeloading at her place, so I was surprised to find the two of them out here.

“We’re gonna go clean the shop!” Aina said. “We were gone for a long time, so it’s probably all dusty.”

She took two bandannas out of her backpack and tied the largest one around her head, then gave the smaller one to Patty, who promptly put it on and puffed out her little chest to show her determination.

They really wanted to clean the shop *now*? Aina surely must have wanted to spend some time with her mother after being away from her for so long, yet here she was, prioritizing her job. She really was a model employee. Meanwhile, I, the actual owner of the shop, hadn’t even set foot in there since we got back to Ninoritch. I felt a sudden pang of guilt.

“Aren’t you tired, though? We only just got back! You should take it easy for the rest of the day,” I said in an attempt to gently convince the pair to go home.

“Why would we be tired?” the little girl said. “We rode on Miss Dramom’s back the whole way!”

“Yeah, Aina’s right. I’m not tired at all!” Patty agreed.

The two of them stared at me with wide, uncomprehending eyes, as if saying, “What’s travel fatigue?” *Ah, to be young. Or maybe kids in this world are just built different? Either way, as someone nearing his thirties, I’m jealous.*

“Where are you off to now, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked.

“I’m going to see Karen.”

“Karen, huh? How come?” Patty asked, floating over to my shoulder before plonking herself down with a little “Hup!” as for some reason, Patty had deemed my shoulder her go-to landing pad and resting spot.

“I’m going to tell her we’re back. Oh, and I also have to give her my thanks.”

“Your thanks?” Patty queried, her head tilted to one side.

“Yeah. It was all thanks to her letter that we managed to get into the royal capital at all, so I’m very grateful to her for that,” I explained.

Patty nodded. “Oh, I see. Yeah, I was hiding in Aina’s backpack the whole time we were at the city gate. My heart was beating like crazy!”

“Mine too!” Aina piped up.

“When Celes tried to bribe that guard with her red magic crystals, I thought we were done for!” the fairy moaned.

“Same here!” the little girl agreed. “I literally felt my blood run cold.”

I still wasn’t over the trauma of seeing Celes attempting to bribe a guard in the royal capital with rare crystals. I mean, seriously, why’d she have to ask *Emille* of all people for advice on how to blend in with humes? Poor Patty and Aina must have been terrified that the guard would inspect the little girl’s backpack and discover we were trying to smuggle a fairy into the city.

“Shiro, Celes is your underling, so you have to punish her, okay?” Patty told

me.

“No way,” I said firmly. “Anything but that.”

“Y-You have to!” she insisted, her hands flapping wildly. “If she sees she can just walk all over you, she’s gonna think she can do the same to me! So you *have* to do something about it!” The little fairy really didn’t want her authority as the “big boss” undermined.

“But Celes is super scary when she gets angry,” I protested.

“Huh? No way! Miss Celes is really kind!” Aina chimed in.

“You think so?” I said skeptically.

“Yeah!” Aina said. “She’s always giving me fruit!”

“Really? She’s never given me any,” I muttered.

“Shiro!” Patty interjected. “This is exactly what I mean. That there is proof she doesn’t respect you! As the boss, you sometimes have to assert your authority!”

“But I don’t wanna,” I whined.

The town hall and my store were in the same direction, so the three of us chatted as we made our way to our separate destinations, with Patty still perched on my shoulder and Aina trotting happily along beside me. When we reached the marketplace, I couldn’t help noticing a bunch of adventurers I’d never seen before, and some were even staring at us—or more specifically, at Patty—with their jaws agape. Not that I could blame them. After all, it wasn’t every day you saw a fairy just casually floating around town. I would even go as far as to say that getting used to Patty’s presence had become something of a rite of passage for any newcomer to Ninoritch. As such, the three of us crossed the marketplace under the befuddled gaze of these new adventurers. *Raiya was right*, I thought. *There really are a lot more adventurers here than there were before.*

“There are quite a lot of people out here today, aren’t there?” I commented.

“Mama said there are loads of new adventurers in town!” Aina piped up.

The marketplace was markedly more animated than the first time I’d come to

this world.

“There weren’t this many people here when we left for the capital,” Patty said, her brow furrowed.

“Apparently, a sizable number of adventurers from neighboring nations have taken an interest in the ruins in the forest, so they’ve all come here,” I told the little fairy.

“‘Neighboring nations’? What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“Well, Ninoritch is in a nation called the ‘Giruam Kingdom,’ right? But there are actually plenty of *other* nations too,” I explained. “And a lot of the adventurers from those other nations have decided to come here to explore the ruins in the forest.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yeah. After all, Ninoritch is the closest town to the Gigheena Forest, making it the perfect place to use as a base of operations.”

I didn’t really know why, but Patty started smiling from ear to ear when she heard that. She looked like she was trying to keep her emotions in check, but she was so happy, she couldn’t stop it from showing on her face.

“So many people like the town that Eren made,” she murmured.

On hearing this, Aina and I glanced at each other in surprise. Patty was referring to Eren Sankareka, Karen’s great-great-grandfather and the man who had founded Ninoritch after coming to this region as a pioneer, though perhaps more importantly, he had been the fairy’s best friend. She was genuinely happy to see his town thriving like this.

“If he could’ve seen this, I’m sure Eren would’ve been really pleased,” she said with a little chuckle as she gazed around the marketplace.

Her expression had grown incredibly soft. She must have been missing her friend a lot. I had a sudden urge to tell her about the dungeon Raiya and I had been talking about earlier. What would her reaction be on hearing that she could see Eren again?

No, Shiro, I chastised myself. Abandon that line of thought this instant. After

all, this was Patty we were talking about. If she found out about that dungeon, she would be making a beeline for it without a second's hesitation, even if it meant fighting off thousands of monsters by herself. Besides, I still had no idea what had actually transpired in that dungeon. Perhaps it really was a miracle. Or perhaps it was just some sort of elaborate trap. Either way, there was no point in telling Patty about it right now, because it'd only confuse her as well as Aina. I decided to keep the existence of the dungeon a secret from the two of them for the time being.

“Everyone’s bound to lose at least one or two people they care about at some point.”

For some reason, Raiya’s words from earlier floated up again in the back of my mind.



When we reached the middle of the marketplace, it was time for us to go our separate ways.

“All righty, then. I’m gonna head to the—”

I was about to finish my sentence with the words “town hall,” but I was interrupted by a middle-aged man I’d never seen before, who had sidled up to me.

“Oh my! Is that a *fairy* on your shoulder?” he asked me.

Judging by his appearance, he was most likely a merchant, and a traveling one at that, if the huge bag he was carrying was any indication.

“Oh! Oh, wow! I can hardly believe my eyes! It really is a fairy! I’d heard rumors that there was a fairy living among the people of Ninoritch, but I didn’t think they were actually *true*. This is amazing!” the traveling merchant(?) exclaimed.

Everyone in Ninoritch knew Patty, but to the rest of the world, fairies were still viewed as mythical creatures.

“And you seem quite familiar with her,” the man observed, turning to address me. “I assume that must mean you are Mr. Shiro!”

I nodded. "I am, but, um..." I paused. "Who are you exactly?"

"Y-Yeah! Who the hell are you?" Patty squeaked from her spot on my shoulder. She sounded a little panicked, which wasn't all that surprising, because despite her tough-girl attitude, the little fairy was actually really shy.

"Oh, my apologies. The name's Dahl. I'm a traveling merchant," he said. "I've actually come all the way from the Republic of Saumasur in the south just to meet you! I've heard so much about you." He brought a hand up to his chest and stared at me with wide, sparkling eyes, almost as if he couldn't really believe he was finally meeting me.

This wasn't the first time a merchant had turned up in Ninoritch specifically to trade with me, though in the past, they had all come from elsewhere in the Giruam Kingdom. I had to say, I was rather impressed that not only had this guy crossed the border from his own country into the Giruam Kingdom, but he had even traveled all the way to Ninoritch in the middle of nowhere just to meet me.

"From the south?" I said. "Must've been quite a journey. But I'm sorry to tell you that I would much rather you direct any business dealings to the Eternal Promise, the merchant guild I belong to, if that's at all possible." I paused and put on my best business smile. "You can buy all of my wares through them. As a rule of thumb, I usually avoid carrying out any direct transactions with other business owners. So if it's not too much trouble, could I please ask you to go through my guild if you're interested in my wares?"

"Oh, yes, I know all that!" the man said. "The Eternal Promise was actually my first stop. However, I studied their catalog quite thoroughly and they didn't have the particular item I was looking for."

I sold pretty much every single one of my most popular wares through the Eternal Promise, including matches, shampoo sets, and even the vitamin supplements that were marketed as the cure to the Decaying Disease. Despite this, he hadn't managed to find the specific item he was looking for in the catalog. I glanced across at Patty on my shoulder, and out of the corner of my eye, I spied Aina doing the same. She must have come to the same conclusion as me. Something that wasn't in the Eternal Promise catalog, but was

interesting enough to catch the attention of a traveling merchant from another country...

“I’m talking about fairy mead!” Dahl said. “I know you have some in your possession. That fairy on your shoulder is further proof of that!”

Yup, just as I’d thought. He wanted fairy mead.

“Could you please sell some to me, Mr. Shiro?” he asked, his excitement audible. “I have lots of clients who are very interested in tasting it. Just name your price!”

He was speaking *very* loudly by this point, and of course, the result was inevitable.

“Did that guy just say ‘Mr. Shiro’?” I heard someone say. “Where is he? I want to meet him!”

“Wait, ‘fairy mead’?! So the rumors were *true*?” another cried out.

“Where’s Mr. Shiro?”

“Does that mean he’s here somewhere?!”

Merchants all around the marketplace had started yelling and looking around for me. A quick glance at the crowd told me that around half of the people were from the Giruam Kingdom, while the other half were foreigners.

“Look!” one of the merchants exclaimed as he pointed at me. “Black hair, black eyes! No doubt about it, that’s Mr. Shiro!”

What happened next was absolutely insane. All of the merchants in the marketplace—and by that, I mean *every single one of them*—charged toward us, and in an instant, we found ourselves completely surrounded.

“Mr. Shiro, please listen to what I have to say!”

“Is it true you carry fairy mead—Wait, is that a *fairy* on your shoulder?!”

“I heard you made a dress out of star fragments for Princess Shessfelis!”

“There’s an item I really, *really* want! Please let me barter with you for it!”

“I’ve come all the way here to buy that magic item that lets you paint a picture of whatever you’re looking at in one second flat!”

All of them were talking over each other, yelling things like “Me first!” and “No, me!” and the like in an attempt to convince me to sell my wares to them. I had only just come back from the royal capital, so to be immediately confronted with *this*... Well, actually, it was a bit refreshing in a way. I’d never been this popular in my whole life. Still, things were quickly getting out of hand.

“Mis...Shiro...I...can’t...breathe,” Aina wheezed. The poor thing was getting squished by all the middle-aged men who were crowding around us.

“S-Stop pushing! Hey, don’t touch me!” Patty protested loudly.

“P-Please give us some room!” I yelled above the noise. “And you’re blocking the path!”

Patty and I tried really hard to convince the men to move back a bit, but it was like talking to a brick wall. *If Dramom or Celes were here, this would’ve turned into a bloodbath real fast*, I thought, shuddering with dread. Raiya had said to me earlier that merchants needed to be lucky, and I couldn’t help thinking that these guys must have been feeling pretty fortunate right at that moment. Unable to take the overwhelming attention any longer, I hoisted Aina aloft and started pushing my way through the human traffic jam.

“Sorry, but I, uh... I have... I have plans, so I need to go!” I shouted.

“Move out of the way!” Patty yelled. “You’re hurting Aina! *Move!* I-I won’t hesitate to use my magic! I’ll do it, you hear?”

The merchants kept trying to grab me like zombies out of a horror movie, and I don’t know how we did it, but we managed to make it out of there largely unscathed.

Chapter Three: Karen's Troubles

Having successfully escaped the merchant-slash-zombie horde, I headed straight for the town hall.

"We made it, boss," I said when we got there, letting out a long sigh of relief.

"Yeah," she uttered. "Thank goodness. That was scary." The poor thing was shaking like a leaf on my shoulder.

"Sorry, Aina. I kinda brought you with me to the town hall."

"It's fine!" the little girl replied.

I carefully lowered her to the ground with a little "Upsy-daisy!" as my limbs throbbed in protest. Aina didn't weigh an awful lot, but sprinting while carrying her had still taken its toll on my body.

"Judging by what we just went through in the marketplace, there's bound to be a bunch of merchants milling around in front of my shop, waiting for me," I said. "So let's leave cleaning up for another day, okay?"

"Okay..." the little girl murmured, dejectedly removing her bandanna.

"Shiro!" Patty exclaimed. "Those guys were just merchants, right? How were they so scary?! Th-There were so *many* of them! It was like we'd been set upon by those darn flying rhinoceros beetles again!"

"I still can't quite believe what happened back there," I said. "Speaking of which, are you all right, Aina?"

"I got kinda squished, so it did hurt a bit," the little girl admitted.

My eyes grew wide in alarm. "What?! Are you hurt somewhere?"

"Nope!" she said cheerily. "Once you carried me out of there, I was fine."

"That's good to hear. Those merchants sure were a creepy bunch, weren't they? They were acting like talking to me was a matter of life and death!" I said.

"I was about to use my magic on them!" Patty added.

“Thanks for holding back, boss. We’re in a bit of a pickle, though,” I said thoughtfully. “I probably won’t be able to open the shop for a while. Not with all those merchants loitering around near it.”

The merchants we had encountered in the marketplace had come all the way to Ninoritch just to buy stuff from me. If I opened the store, I was in no doubt that they would swarm inside practically as soon as the main door was unlocked. I had never imagined something like this would happen while I was away.

“Well, it is what it is. No point dwelling on it now,” I muttered to myself as I walked into the town hall.

I greeted the receptionist and said I was there to see Karen, whereupon she immediately ushered me in the direction of her office. I knocked and pushed the door open as soon as I heard a response from within.

“Shiro! You’re back!” Karen exclaimed, a smile breaking out on her face. She always had such a dignified air that seeing her smile so genuinely like this made my heart skip a beat. I was really happy to see her, perhaps because I’d been out of town for so long.

“Yup, I’ve returned, Karen.”

“Welcome back. Same to you, Aina and Patty. How was the royal capital?”

Patty puffed out her little chest in a self-important manner. “It was all right. *Just* all right.”

“I made a friend in the royal capital!” Aina piped up.

“Did you now? I’m glad you both had fun there. The royal capital is the biggest city in the kingdom after all. Ninoritch really pales in comparison.”

“B-But I like Ninoritch a lot more!” Patty said hurriedly. “It feels much, um...”—she searched for the right word—“...cozier than the royal capital.”

Karen, Aina, and I couldn’t help chuckling at her reaction.

“Wh-What’s so funny?” the little fairy retorted, her hands on her hips.

“Oh, I was just thinking that you *really* like Ninoritch, don’t you, boss?” I said.

“O-Of course I do! Eren’s the one who founded this town, s-so it’s only natural I’d like it here!” she pouted.

She got to her feet and—still standing on my shoulder—proceeded to slap my cheek repeatedly with her little hands. Seeing her all worked up like this was just so funny and downright cute, I couldn’t help another chuckle escaping my lips.

“And you, Aina and Karen!” the fairy hollered. “When are you going to stop laughing?!”

“Sorry, Patty,” the little girl said between giggles.

“Sorry, sorry. Your words just made me very happy. I can tell you really like this town. And my great-great-grandfather too. I couldn’t help myself,” Karen explained.

“I-Is that so? In that case, I forgive you.”

“Thank you, Patty. Thank you for the love you have for this town,” Karen said, her eyes filled with warmth. “Well then. Please take a seat, Shiro, Aina. I’ll brew some tea.”

She gestured toward the sofa and got to her feet.

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself,” I said quickly. “I only came by to say hi.”

“Don’t be so frosty,” she teased. “Besides, I was about to take a little break anyway.”

“But...” I started.

“Patty, please tell him to stay. I even have some nice snacks today, and I can’t eat them all by myself. If you don’t stay for tea, they’ll end up going to waste,” Karen said with an exaggerated sigh.

As soon as the word “snacks” was mentioned, I saw Patty’s eyes start to gleam and I even heard Aina gulp loudly next to me.

“Shiro! Listen to Karen. It’s only polite to stay for tea. Besides, she said she’d give us snacks!” Patty said, slapping my cheek even harder than last time. The second she had heard the word “snacks,” she had been instantly won over. My boss sure was easily swayed.

“Won’t we just be getting in the way of your work, though?” I said to Karen.

“Of course not. I’m actually glad you’re here to take my mind off things. I mean, look at this mountain range of documents,” she said, gesturing to her desk which was piled high with paper.

“Wow, there are so many letters,” Aina breathed in amazement.

“Those piles are taller than *me*!” Patty exclaimed.

There were seven piles of documents on Karen’s desk, and they really did look a bit like a mountain range. This was a very good visual representation of just how tough it was being the mayor of a town.

“Invoices, petitions, proposals, demands...” Karen reeled off. “And that’s not even the half of it. All of Ninoritch’s problems land on my desk eventually, one way or another. I understand it’s my responsibility to handle them all, but I’m sure they can keep until I’ve had a cup of tea. Don’t you agree?”

“I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but wouldn’t it make sense to hire someone to help you take care of it all?” I suggested.

“Another proposal, huh? Please put it down in writing and hand it to the receptionist. Though you might have to wait a *little* while for an answer, because as you can see, I’m drowning in paper here.”

Karen let out a long, *long* sigh. So that was her way of saying she didn’t even have the time to look for an assistant, huh? Karen was a very bright woman, and like most bright people, she must have thought she could do everything herself. Unfortunately, the consequences of that belief were the seven very tall piles of documents on her desk.

“Anyway, I actually wanted to ask for your help with something, so the least I can do is offer you some tea,” Karen said.

Well, once she had said that, I couldn’t exactly turn around and leave, could I?

“All right then. We’ll trouble you for a bit, if you really don’t mind,” I said, taking a seat on the sofa.

“You can stay as long as you like,” Karen assured me. “I’ll get started on that tea.”

She took out a plastic water bottle and poured the contents into a kettle that she then placed on a portable burner to heat up. Before I'd opened my shop, staff members had been responsible for brewing tea for guests, but Karen tended to do it herself these days. She claimed it was not only faster, it also took some work off the town hall staff's plates. Remember my observation earlier? Karen seriously liked to do *everything* herself. In fact, if we hadn't shown up, I was positive she would have spent the whole day working without taking a single break. Perhaps staying for tea wasn't such a bad idea after all, because it might prevent Karen from completely ruining her health.

"The only thing I look forward to at the moment is drinking the tea you sell in your store," Karen said as she steeped some of the tea bags I had brought over from Japan in the hot water. "All right, it's done."

She set three teacups down on the table, plus a basket that was absolutely brimming with cookies of all kinds, then took a seat on the sofa opposite. Patty flew down from her perch on my shoulder and grabbed her teacup, before blowing on the steaming hot liquid to cool it down. Beside me, Aina did the exact same thing, and I couldn't help thinking that the two of them could have been sisters if Patty weren't thirty centimeters tall.

"So then, you three, how was your first time in the royal capital?" Karen asked us.

Patty was the one who answered. "There were *so many* humes there! But I had to hide in Aina's backpack the whole time, so I didn't get to see a whole lot of the city."

"I see. That's a bit of a shame," Karen sympathized.

"B-But it was still fun!" the little fairy added quickly. "Aina and I even made a friend! Her name is Shess."

"Oh, yes. You did mention that you'd made a friend, didn't you, Aina?"

"Yeah, we did! Ain't that right?" Patty said, nudging the little girl.

"Yup. Shess and I became very good friends. Best friends, even!"

I decided against telling Karen about the whole situation with the second queen consort, and let Aina talk about her new friend instead (we kept Shess's

true identity a secret, of course). I mentioned in passing that the Eternal Promise would soon be opening up a branch in the royal capital, but I didn't go into *how* we'd gotten the authorization to do so. Other than that, I mostly talked about trivial things, like how the food was better here in Ninoritch than what they had in the royal capital, and how surprised I'd been at the way they treated non-humes there. The three of us sat answering Karen's questions about our trip for a bit with the occasional joke about some of the stuff that had happened there, while we all sipped and enjoyed our tea.



"Oh, by the way, I swung by the Fairy's Blessing before coming over here," I said once the conversation had died down.

The moment the words "Fairy's Blessing" left my mouth, Karen's whole body seemed to jolt, and her expression stiffened. She probably knew what I was about to say and was already dreading it, but ever the master of her emotions, she swiftly regained her composure and schooled her face back into her usual stoic mask.

"Oh, did you?" she said in a neutral tone of voice.

"Yeah. Ney wanted me to give you this," I said, producing the envelope from my pocket.

"Let me guess," Karen ventured, a wry smile dancing across her lips. "She's requesting more accommodation in the town."

"Bingo," I said. "From what I've been told, it seems like there's been a sudden influx of adventurers while I was away, and all of the inns are fully booked for the foreseeable future."

Karen sighed. "Yes, unfortunately, that's true."

"Oh, but Ney isn't blaming you for the lack of housing or anything!" I quickly clarified, waving my hands around. "I mean, no one could've anticipated that adventurers from all over the continent would show up in Ninoritch at the same time. And that's even without mentioning the swarm of merchants that's descended on the town."

"You don't need to say it, Shiro. It's my poor planning that's put us in this

situation.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. Even Ney didn’t think things would turn out like this. I mean, if anything’s to blame, it’s that dratted Ancient Magic Civilization Era for leaving all those ruins lying about in the Gigheena Forest!” I joked in an attempt to lighten the mood a little.

But Karen didn’t react. She simply stared at me for a few seconds like she was about to say something, but ended up shaking her head and thinking better of it, just like Raiya and Ney had done earlier. At the time, I hadn’t understood why they were looking at me like that, but since then, it had become much clearer to me what these looks meant. In so many words, the lack of lodgings in Ninoritch wasn’t *exclusively* down to adventurers turning up to check out the nearby ruins.

“Seriously, though, it’s partially my fault the situation’s gotten so dire, isn’t it?” I asked, testing out my theory.

Karen’s eyes widened slightly. So I was right on the money, huh?

“Why do you say that?” she asked, a hint of surprise in her voice.

“I was cornered by a mob of merchants on my way over here,” I replied. “And they were all pleading with me to do business with them.”

“They wouldn’t listen to Mister Shiro at all, so we had to run away!” Aina chimed in.

“That must have been quite a scary experience,” Karen remarked before sighing again. “So you came across *them*, did you?”

“Yep. And I hope I never have to see them again. It was absolutely *terrifying*,” I said, acting extra dramatic for effect.

This time, my attempt at levity achieved its goal and drew a soft chuckle from Karen. “If they got a reaction like that out of you, a fellow merchant, I think our town might actually be doomed.”

I was glad to see she was still able to joke about it. “Those merchants looked like they had money to burn, so I guess it’s no wonder the inns hiked up their prices. They probably saw all those well-dressed merchants and thought, ‘Why

not charge a small fortune?’ not taking into account that doing so would mean most adventurers wouldn’t be able to afford to stay there,” I said, thinking back on what Raiya had told me earlier.

Ninoritch operated on the free market principle, meaning merchants and innkeepers could raise their prices as they pleased. I understood the innkeepers’ reasoning behind the price hike (after all, who’d say no to easy money?) but I still felt bad for the adventurers, who had really drawn the short straw in this whole situation, particularly those who were just starting out and didn’t have a ton of savings.

Earlier in the marketplace, a good thirty or so merchants had swarmed around me, but I had this nagging feeling that they were just the tip of the iceberg. Some of them had likely traveled here in caravans with bodyguards they’d hired for protection on the way, and it went without saying that those guards required lodgings too. Just visualizing the sheer number of rooms that were now likely occupied by people who had traveled here for the sole purpose of meeting *me* left me feeling somewhat weak in the knees.

“Precisely,” Karen said. “At first, it was just adventurers and merchants looking to buy whatever loot was found in those ruins, but then peddlers wanting to do business with you started coming out of the woodwork. This chain reaction set off a major lodging crisis, and well, you summarized what happened next quite well.”

“On the plus side, it means Ninoritch has become an attractive place for merchants and adventurers,” I said pragmatically.

“And normally, that would have me rejoicing. But given the current situation...” she said wistfully before trailing off.

“Try looking at it this way: right now, things might not be ideal, but once we’ve tackled this whole lodging issue, tax revenues will soar, and there will be more activity in this town than ever before.”

Karen remained silent for a moment as she contemplated what I’d said, then exhaled. “Yes, I suppose you’re right there.”

Yet despite her reluctantly accepting my prediction, a shadow of concern still haunted her features. I sensed there was more to this issue than she was letting

on.

“Of course, if this were our only problem, simply building more housing would eventually solve the issue. Yet...” She trailed off again.

“What other issues are there? Oh, wait. Is it that Ninoritch lacks the manpower to be able to actually run more inns and lodging houses? Is that it?” I asked.

“Well, yes, that’s part of it...” Karen paused momentarily, then continued. “Shiro, do you remember what I said earlier? I’d like to ask your opinion on something.”

I nodded. “Oh, right. You did mention something,” I said. “Shoot.”

“Well, something totally beyond expectations has happened and I’m stumped on how to deal with it. It’s somewhat related to our housing problem too, so it seems a good time to broach the subject. Will you help me with it?”

“I’ll do my best, though I’m not sure how much help I’ll be,” I said as I sat up a little straighter, ready to listen intently to what she had to say.

“Karen! I-I’m here too!” Patty suddenly piped up, jumping up and down on the sofa beside me.

Aina quickly raised her hand and exclaimed, “I-I can help too!”

The two of them had crumbs around their mouths from all the cookies they’d eaten while Karen and I were discussing the housing crisis in Ninoritch, a topic that was of very little interest to childish minds like theirs. But the instant they heard Karen needed help, they’d volunteered to pitch in.

A smile spread across Karen’s face. “Oh, that’s right. You two are here too.”

“Aina and I might not understand all that difficult stuff you were just talking about, but we can still listen to your problems!” Patty assured her. Aina agreed with an enthusiastic nod, her little fists clenched and her face a picture of seriousness.

“Thank you, you three,” Karen said. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” I reassured her.

“We wanna help!” Aina chirruped.

“We wouldn’t have offered if we didn’t,” Patty said curtly.

Our replies caused Karen’s smile to widen, and she cleared her throat in preparation for sharing the source of her concern with us.

Chapter Four: The Major Challenge Facing Ninoritch

“I haven’t told the townsfolk about this yet, but the earl of the region, Lord Bashure, has requested that we take in some refugees,” Karen explained.

“Refugees?” I repeated, my eyes widening slightly. “Has there been some kind of disaster in the kingdom?”

Karen shook her head. “They’re foreign refugees, hailing from the nation of Hyord to the north.”

“Oh, I see. That’s quite sudden,” I remarked.

“You said it,” Karen agreed. “Under normal circumstances, we wouldn’t take in foreign refugees, but I’m led to believe the situation is rather dire.”

Karen told us that a horde of insanely powerful monsters had taken up residence in the southeastern part of Hyord and had been attacking towns and villages left and right, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. The number of casualties was through the roof and roughly one-fifth of the country’s entire territory had been left in utter ruins after the monsters had swept through, the damage so severe that rebuilding the affected areas could well be an impossible task for several years to come. Fortunately, some of the citizens of these flattened places had survived the rampage, but with all of the nation’s efforts and budget focused squarely on trying to stop the monsters, there wasn’t enough money to also look after these refugees. In a last-ditch effort to do something for the displaced, the King of Hyord had reached out to his close friend, Lord Bashure, the earl of this region, who had in turn conveyed the urgent request to the King of Giruam. The king had subsequently granted permission to open the nation’s arms to roughly three thousand refugees from Hyord, and Lord Bashure had meticulously divided these evacuees up into smaller groups and allocated a specific number for each town and village to shelter. In the case of Ninoritch, this number was around two hundred.

“T-Two hundred...” Aina breathed in shock.

Karen nodded. “We need to provide them with food and shelter at the very least, and ideally, jobs too. It’s going to set us back a lot. As such, I simply can’t afford to spend the entirety of the town’s budget on the construction of some new inns.”

“I understand,” I said.

If this were a corporate setting, Karen’s role in this would be something akin to a middle manager. As the mayor, she had full authority over Ninoritch, but she still had to respond to those even higher up the chain—in this case, Lord Bashure—and couldn’t refuse their demands.

She sighed, the weight of the situation evident in her eyes. “I can’t believe this is all happening right before the meteor festival. I’m telling you, Shiro, I’m at my wits’ end.”

“The meteor festival?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

Karen appeared surprised by my lack of knowledge on the subject. “You don’t know about it?”

“Fraid not,” I admitted sheepishly before turning to Patty. “You ever heard of it, boss?”

“How would I know about it?” she squeaked in response. “What about you, Aina?”

The little girl nodded. “I have.”

“Really? Could you fill us in, Aina?” I asked.

“Sure! It’s a night where there are lots and lots of shooting stars in the sky. My mama said she’s really looking forward to it!” the little girl told us excitedly.

“Shooting stars, huh?” I mused. “So, like, a meteor shower?”

“Yup!”

“That’s exactly it,” Karen said.

According to the two of them, there was a big meteor shower once every two hundred years, and the next one was just around the corner. Anticipation for it was high across the country. No, scratch that: across the *continent*.

“In this region, we call the meteor shower the ‘Tears of the Sky.’ I was planning to go all out on decorations for the town as well as organizing lots of exciting things to do, but I suppose that won’t happen now,” Karen sighed.

“Hey, at least you got the news *before* you started getting everything ready for the festival, so that’s good,” I said, trying to offer some consolation.

Karen treated me to a feeble smile. “You always see the bright side, don’t you?”

So, two hundred refugees, huh? Ninoritch might have been doing extremely well financially compared to previous years, but that was still a lot of people to feed, clothe, and shelter. The town simply didn’t have the kinds of funds needed to take care of so many people. I could see why building more inns was currently right at the bottom of Karen’s to-do list. Though after giving it some more thought, it seemed to me that every issue Ninoritch was facing at present boiled down to one thing: the town’s lack of funds.

That gave me an idea. “Karen...” I started.

“No,” she said firmly, promptly rejecting my proposal without even waiting to hear it.

“I haven’t even said anything yet!” I protested.

“I know you, Shiro. You were going to offer me money.”

“Busted,” I grumbled.

“I’m grateful for the offer. Truly. But this is my town. I have to deal with this issue myself.”

“Then, how about a loan? I’ll lend you as much as I can, totally interest-free,” I offered.

“No to that too. Relying on you might offer a temporary way out of this problem, but it won’t fix the fundamental issues at hand.”

I fell silent, unable to argue the point she was making.

“Like I said, I have to solve this problem myself. While I haven’t managed to come up with a satisfactory solution yet, one thing’s for sure: I don’t want your money. I will, however, pick your brain, if you don’t mind.”

“So you need a way to earn enough funds to feed, clothe, and shelter two hundred refugees, huh?” I said, reiterating the conundrum. “That’s no small task.”

“Lord Bashure has assured me that we will be exempted from taxes for the next three years as compensation,” Karen told me.

“So he’s essentially suggesting you take the money you would usually set aside for taxes and reallocate it toward supporting the refugees,” I summarized.

“Exactly.”

“Well, that sounds a *little* more reasonable. But is it actually feasible?” I mused.

“If I had a definitive answer to that question, do you really think we’d be having this conversation right now?” Karen remarked.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right there,” I admitted.

As Karen had said at the start of this discussion, this situation really was totally beyond expectations. I crossed my arms and pondered the issue, but Patty interrupted my thoughts by tugging on my sleeve.

“Shiro...” she started.

“Hm? What is it, boss?”

“What are these ‘ref-yoo-jees’ you two have been going on about? Are they some sort of tribe?” It seemed the little fairy had never heard the word before.

I tried to simplify it for her. “Put simply, refugees are people who have had to leave their homes to escape something bad.”

Patty hummed, deep in thought. “And this refugee tribe is coming to Ninoritch? Is that it?”

“Yup, that’s right,” I confirmed. “There’s gonna be about two hundred of them.”

“Two hundred? H-How many is that?”

“Well, let’s see...” I said. “Let’s say one finger represents one person. If you count all ten fingers and ten toes, that’s twenty people. Now multiply that by

ten.”

“B-By *ten*?!” she exclaimed. “Wow, that’s a lot!”

“Isn’t it just?”

Karen sighed at length at the exchange between Patty and me. “One hundred, I could’ve just about coped with, but *two* hundred...”

“Miss Karen...” Aina said, her little brow knitted in worry.

“I keep complaining, don’t I?” Karen noted with a self-deprecating smile. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d be doing the same if I were in your position,” I quickly reassured her. “It is what it is.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I do.”

“‘It is what it is,’ huh?” she mused. “Out of all the phrases in the world, that’s the phrase I hate the most.”

Aina and I exchanged uncertain glances, not knowing quite how to respond to Karen’s remark. She really did seem to be at her wits’ end. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t come up with an idea that would solve her problems, and whatever decision she did eventually make, she knew someone would be left suffering if the town didn’t find more funds.

I was disappointed I couldn’t be of any help to her, and I couldn’t even begin to imagine how *she* must have been feeling with so much pressure on her shoulders. It really did seem like this was an unsolvable problem, and I could tell from her glum expression that Karen had come to the same conclusion.

But then, with an excited grin splashed across her face, Patty perked up and broke the silence. “So this ‘refugee tribe’ is really coming here? That means there’ll be even *more* people in Ninoritch, right? And the town’s gonna get even bigger, right? That’s amazing! I’m sure Eren would’ve been really happy to hear that!” she exclaimed.

These words made Karen and I abruptly raise our heads and exchange a look. Eren and his fellow pioneers had trekked to the middle of nowhere to establish

a new town, and that process had involved uprooting trees, clearing the land, building houses, and tilling the soil to create fields. Thanks to their unceasing efforts, the pioneer settlement soon became a village, and then a town, even though they had started out with virtually nothing.

“You’re right, Patty,” Karen said, letting out a little chuckle.

My lips also curled upward into a smile. “Yeah. You have a point, boss.”

Karen and I exchanged glances again, and in her eyes, I could see a renewed sense of determination.

“Compared to the challenges my great-great-grandfather and his cohort faced, this is nothing more than a bump in the road. What would my predecessors be thinking if they saw me like this? They’d laugh at me for sure. I will find a solution to this problem. I *have* to.”

Of course, this didn’t mean the problem was magically solved, but Patty’s words had rekindled the fire in Karen’s heart.

“Okay, let’s try to get a proper handle on the situation,” I said. “After all, I still don’t know exactly what was in Lord Bashure’s letter.”

“I can tell you if you want,” Karen suggested.

“That’d be perfect. All righty...” I cleared my throat, took out my smartphone, and opened the note-taking app. “Did Lord Bashure happen to mention the kinds of jobs these refugees were qualified for?” I asked.

“No, he didn’t. But Lord Bashure still seems to think Ninoritch’s main source of income is from our agriculture, so he suggested marking out some new fields for them to work in.”

While it was true Ninoritch’s farming industry was doing great, it wasn’t bringing in anywhere near the kinds of profits the adventurers were. It sounded as though Lord Bashure could use an update on the situation.

“Did he give you any kind of information at all? Like, the gender ratio or the general age range of the refugees?” I probed.

Karen closed her eyes. “He did mention that over half of them would be children,” she said slowly.

Aina, Patty, and I were left momentarily speechless by this revelation.

“I’m only guessing, but it’s probably safe to assume that if those children are being sent here, it’s because the bigger towns didn’t want them,” Karen said.

“What do you mean, they didn’t *want* them?! Th-They’re *kids*!” Patty exclaimed indignantly.

“Please let’s keep our voices down, Patty,” Karen said, gently admonishing the fairy. “Anyway, the fact they’re children *is* the problem. For the most part, children—especially the very young ones—can’t work. But they still have to eat, right? So it’s somewhat understandable if other towns can’t afford to take them in.”

“But that’s...” Patty said, her little shoulders slumping. “That’s so heartless! They’re just little kids.”

Aina, on the other hand, seemed to disagree with Karen’s assumption. “I don’t think that’s why Lord Bashure is sending them here,” she said. “I think he’s doing it because he trusts you more than the other mayors.”

“What gives you that idea, Aina?” Karen asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

The little girl tried to explain her reasoning. “Well, you see, you’re *really* nice, Miss Karen, so Lord Bashure must’ve thought you’d be able to take care of those children better than anyone else!”

Karen blinked a few times, clearly taken aback by Aina’s words.

“I see. You might be onto something there, Aina,” I said to the little girl before nodding. “Yeah, I think you’re right.” I paused and turned to Karen. “Lord Bashure must have chosen to send these children here because he believes in you. He believes he can entrust them to you, and they’ll be happy here. Isn’t that right, Aina?”

The little girl nodded vigorously. “Yeah! You know, Miss Karen, when mama and I came to Ninoritch, we were really scared.”

“Aina...” Karen breathed.

“But when we found out how nice you were, we were really happy,” Aina said with a smile. “Mama even said she was glad she chose this town.”

Karen didn't respond to this, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She quickly wiped them away, but I'd already noticed. I had the good grace not to say anything, though, since I didn't want to embarrass her.

"You hear that, Karen?" I said with a broad grin. "I'm sure Lord Bashure must be thinking the same thing as Aina, and that's why he plans to entrust these children to you. I'd even go as far as to say you're the *only* one he can trust with this matter."

"Why are you two flattering me so much all of a sudden?" she said, eyeing us suspiciously. "But you're right. I have to do my best for those children. After all, I am the descendant of Ninoritch's founder, Eren Sankareka." She punctuated her sentence with a smile that was brimming with resolve.



With Karen now in better spirits, it was time to devise a plan to somehow take in the refugees without bankrupting the town. I crossed my arms again and let out a pensive "Hmmm" as I made a mental list of all the issues we needed to tackle, ranked them in order of most to least urgent, then swapped a couple around until finally reaching a conclusion.

"All right. I think I have an idea," I declared.

"Mister Shiro?" Aina said, her head tilted to one side.

"You do?" Patty squeaked.

"Yup. I'd even venture to say that it's our *only* solution."

"Mind telling us what it is?" Karen said.

I nodded, a confident smile on my face. "Sure thing."

The three of them regarded me intently, their anticipation of what I was about to say next palpable. Aina and Patty had even clenched their tiny fists, clearly unable to contain their excitement.

"We'll build some inns," I announced.

Karen looked at me as if I'd grown a second head. "Shiro..." she said slowly. "We don't have the funds for that."

I nodded. "I know. But that's fine. We can always get some more money."

"And how do you suggest we do that? By levying additional taxes?"

"Listen to what I have to say and all will become clear," I said simply.

She paused briefly, then said, "Fine."

I raised my index finger and continued. "There are three reasons why I believe building some new inns would be in our best interests. The first is quite simple: this is the opportunity of a lifetime. We currently face a situation where the demand for accommodation far exceeds what we can offer. As a merchant, I can't stand idly by and let all that potential income just slip away. However, as you stated earlier, Karen, Ninoritch currently lacks the manpower to run new inns."

I paused and raised a second finger. "This brings me to the second reason: the refugees need jobs. Working at an inn isn't the easiest job in the world, granted, but it takes a lot less of a toll on the body than plowing fields, especially if you have to go clearing a whole new plot of land before you can even get to that stage."

"So basically, your point is even the children would be able to work in these inns. Is that right?" Karen asked.

"Precisely! We could use part of the inns to house the refugees, which would cost us a lot less money than if we had to build inns *and* separate lodging houses."

"Makes sense," Karen reflected, nodding. "Most tasks at an inn can certainly be handled by children. We'll need to find someone qualified to man the reception desk, but that shouldn't be too difficult."

"Of course, a few inns by themselves won't create enough jobs for all of the refugees who are coming here. Plus, we'll need to take extra care over how much we pay them for their work. We don't want anyone—refugees or citizens of Ninoritch—to feel underpaid."

I paused again and extended a third finger. "The last reason is also pretty straightforward. The town needs money, and building some new inns will bring in more of it. By adding the profits generated by these new inns to those from

existing ones, we should have enough money to provide all the refugees with their basic needs.”

Karen pondered my suggestion for a moment. “That makes a lot of sense. I actually think it’s a very good idea and I’d be in favor of it if it wasn’t for the small matter of the town simply not having the funds to inject into building some new inns.”

“I actually have a solution for that too. Want me to tell you?” I said with an enigmatic smile.

“Stop beating around the bush and just tell us,” Karen replied.

“Of course. Oh, but first...” I turned to the little fairy beside me. “Boss.”

“H-Huh? What is it?”

She’d been in the process of reaching a hand out toward the basket filled with cookies, but her arm stopped instantly when I turned to address her.

“I’m actually gonna need your help with this plan. Would that be all right with you?” I asked.

“You need *my* help?” she asked incredulously, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Yup.”

“F-Fine. It’s for the sake of Eren’s town, after all, so I’ll do everything in my power to help!” she assured me, beating her chest as if to say, “Bring it on!”

“Thanks, boss,” I said. “I knew I could count on you.” I turned to Aina next. “I’m probably gonna need your help too, Aina, but the kind of stuff I’ll be asking of you might be a bit annoying. What do you say? You can say no, of course.”

The little girl shook her head eagerly. “No, I’ll help!” she said with her fists clenched as her breathing quickened due to her excitement.

“Thanks, Aina,” I said. “All righty. Now we’ve gotten that out of the way...”

I proceeded to outline my idea and explained the roles each of them would need to play.

“Okay, just leave it to me!” Patty said confidently, though Aina just stared at

me wide-eyed.

Karen looked anxious. “W-Will that really work?” she asked me.

“I’m sure it’ll go swimmingly,” I assured her.

“But what do *you* get out of it?”

I grinned. “Oh, something very, *very* valuable: the satisfaction of helping you solve your problems.”

Karen just stared at me in disbelief.

“I’m kidding,” I teased. “Don’t worry. I already have an idea on how to make a tidy little profit for myself out of it.”

She seemed a little relieved to hear this. “That’s good,” she said. “All right, Shiro, I’m going to trust you on this. Let’s go with your plan.”

So with that, I had successfully persuaded Karen to give my idea a try.

Chapter Five: Everyone, Lend Me Your Strength!

Three days after my little chat with Karen and Aina, I found myself standing in the middle of the guild's drinking hall on a makeshift stage I'd built out of wooden boxes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for joining me here this evening!" I said, raising my voice so that everyone could hear me. I surveyed the crowd in front of me. "First of all, allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Shiro Amata, a merchant here in Ninoritch."

Like always, the place was packed, but on this particular day, the tables weren't filled with adventurers.

"Mr. Shiro! You said you would negotiate with me if I came to the guildhall. So what are all of these other merchants doing here?" griped Dahl, the merchant who had accosted me in the marketplace a few days prior. His intervention opened the floodgates to a chorus of protests.

"Mr. Shiro! I thought you wanted to discuss business with me?"

"What? No, he's here to barter with *me*!"

"Why did you invite all these other merchants here?"

"Ah, I know! He's planning to hold an auction right here and now!"

"An auction? Heh. Fine by me. We at the Crimson Dawn Merchant Association have enough money to buy up your whole stock!"

"I'll do whatever it takes to get my hands on that dress made of star fragments!"

Yup, that's right: I'd gotten all of the merchants who'd come to Ninoritch to negotiate with me to gather in the guild's drinking hall. And how had I managed that? Well, it was quite simple, actually. I'd spent most of the past three days strolling around town, waiting to be set upon by merchants, and whenever I was, I told them things like "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

When are you available? Would you be willing to meet me over at the Fairy's Blessing guild?" or "I have a special proposal for you, but I can't share the details of it here with all these prying eyes around. Could we meet up at the guildhall in three days' time?" And they'd all bought it, hook, line, and sinker.

Naturally, I'd asked Ney in advance if I could use the guild's drinking hall for this purpose, and she had graciously agreed. I'd also instructed Aina to tell any merchants who dropped by the shop about this evening's meeting at the guildhall. Still, I hadn't anticipated such a huge turnout, and a quick glance around the room told me there were at least a hundred merchants in attendance. I also spotted a couple of rich merchants who were in town to buy treasure from the guild among the crowd, probably curious what was going on.

One irate merchant raised his voice at this juncture. "You told us you'd negotiate with us if we came here this evening! What the hell is going on?"

Ah, you see, that's where you're wrong, buddy. I'd never once uttered the word "negotiate," merely alluded to having "something" to discuss or suggested I had a "special proposal" to put to them. It was their eagerness to engage in business talks with me that had led them to subconsciously twist my words into what they wanted to hear.

"Please calm down, everyone," I said, attempting to soothe the rising tensions in the room. "First of all, I would like to clarify something with you. You all came to Ninoritch in search of making a profit, correct?"

"Well, why else would we be here? We're merchants!" Dahl scowled, clearly dissatisfied with the turn the evening had taken.

But I didn't let his foul attitude deter me and continued with a cheerful smile plastered across my face. "Good. It seems we're all on the same page. You see, I have a proposal that promises to make substantial profits for every single one of you."

I paused and waited to see their reaction to this. Sure enough, as soon as the word "profits" was uttered, they visibly relaxed a little. They still eyed me with suspicion, but at least they seemed willing to hear me out.

Knowing I only had one shot at this, I drew myself up to my full height and puffed out my chest. "I am personally no fan of idle chitchat, so let's get straight

down to business,” I declared. “My proposition is a straightforward one: I want all of you to invest in this town.”

This was the plan I had come up with to solve Ninoritch’s money crisis. I would get the merchants to inject funds into the town. The room fell silent for a good ten seconds, before...

“*Wh-What* did you just say?”

“You want us to do *what*?!”

“I came here to discuss business, not invest in some remote backwater town!”

“And you dare to call yourself a *merchant*?!”

Well, that hadn’t gone down well. Not that I was overly surprised. These guys had come here thinking they would get to discuss business with me, and here I was, telling them to give me money to invest in the town. If someone had pulled a stunt like this in Japan or if it were broadcast on TV or whatever, it would’ve undoubtedly sparked a huge online controversy.

“Everyone, please calm down and listen to what I have to say first. If you invest in this town, I will use the funds to—” I said, starting to explain my idea, but Dahl interrupted me.

“How do you expect us to stay calm after what you just said?!” he yelled furiously, sending his chair flying backward as he stood up and started striding toward me.

“You are welcome to all go home if you don’t like what you’re hearing,” Ney interjected, appearing out of the shadows.

She positioned herself in front of me and treated Dahl to a stern glare, which made him instantly go pale. She wasn’t the guildmaster just for show, that’s for sure. Her air of authority was impressive.

“Now, return to your seat or leave town. Either is fine by me,” she said with a cold smile.

Unable to formulate any kind of response to this, Dahl headed back to his seat with his tail between his legs. Fortunately, it seemed Ney’s intervention had

discouraged any of the other merchants from similarly getting up to protest. They still grumbled and complained among themselves, but at least no one else got to their feet. This was my chance.

I cleared my throat loudly and put on my best business smile. “Now, if you’ll just allow me to explain, once I’ve shared my proposal, I promise to entertain one-on-one negotiations with anyone who’s interested.”

These words worked like magic. The merchants instantly stopped grumbling, and despite still looking displeased, they seemed at least willing to listen to my explanation, even if it was just so they could negotiate with me later on.

“But before I proceed, allow me to introduce the beautiful lady up here with me. This is Miss Ney Mirage, the guildmaster of the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy’s Blessing Adventurers’ Guild.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” Ney said, bowing elegantly to the crowd.

“‘Is Ninoritch a town worth investing in?’ I bet that’s what you’re all probably thinking right now,” I said. “Well, I can certainly make a case for it, but I believe it would be more compelling for Miss Ney, the head of a branch of the kingdom’s biggest Adventurers’ Guild, to explain to you what *exactly* makes Ninoritch such an attractive town. Miss Ney, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you, Shiro.”

I took a step back and allowed Ney—who had gone back over by the wall after convincing Dahl to sit down again—to take center stage.

“As several of you will already be aware, Ninoritch has been growing at an impressive rate over the past year. I will now give you a comprehensive rundown of the reasons behind this growth and attempt to give you some idea of how valuable a town Ninoritch has become.”

Ney began by talking about the discovery of several sets of ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era in the Gigheena Forest and the far-reaching implications that had had on Ninoritch, including the establishment of a branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild in the town, the subsequent influx of adventurers from all across the continent, and the eye-opening value of the pieces of treasure and magical artifacts recovered, which were fetching outrageous

prices in the big cities. Judging from the surprised expressions on several of the faces in the crowd, it seemed quite a few of them hadn't known about the ruins, especially the merchants who had come from abroad.

"Well, that's all from me," Ney said, concluding her spiel and stepping out of the way to allow me to take center stage once more.

"Thank you very much, Miss Ney," I said, then turned to address the crowd again. "So as you can see, Ninoritch is a town with a big future. Next, I'd like to introduce you to another person who will tell you more about the town."

I gave a signal to Aina, who was standing over in one corner of the drinking hall. She nodded and started closing all the shutters until the room was in semidarkness.

"I'm done, Mister Shiro!" she called out.

"Thank you, Aina. All righty. Click!" I said, mimicking the sound of turning on the battery-powered projector I'd brought with me for the occasion. "Okay, everyone, can I have your attention please?"

I gestured to the wall behind me at the same time as I tapped the screen on my cell phone. A couple of seconds later, a video started playing on the white sheet I'd hung up to act as a projector screen.

"You can start now, Karen," came the sound of my own voice from somewhere off-screen on the recording.

Up on the screen, Karen's face went as red as a tomato. "Hm? O-Oh, right," she stammered, before clearing her throat to compose herself and adopting a more serious expression. "It is very nice to meet you all. I am Karen Sankareka, the mayor of Ninoritch. I would like to tell you all about the town's many positive aspects and its future prospects, as well as provide a detailed breakdown of how we plan to use your investments for the betterment of our town. First of all..."



Exclamations of awe filled the room as the merchants watched the video Karen and I had recorded a couple of days before.

“Th-That’s...” one gasped, “magic!”

“Impossible!” another blurted out. “I thought communication magic involved complicated, lengthy incantations.”

“She’s an absolute bombshell,” a third noted.

“What’s that shiny box? Is it some sort of magic item?” a merchant wondered aloud, pointing to my projector.

“I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“This Mr. Shiro is even more impressive than I thought.”

“She’s so beautiful. I’m in love.”

None of them were actually listening to Karen’s video message, though I hadn’t really expected them to. After all, if I’d *truly* wanted their attention fully focused on what she was saying, I could’ve just gotten Karen to deliver her speech in person. No, this whole setup was just another excuse for me to wow them with more Japanese tech so that they’d want to do business with me even more than they already did, which would motivate them to accept my demands. In short, my goal wasn’t for the merchants to realize the value of investing in Ninoritch, but to demonstrate how beneficial it could be for them to build up good relations with me.

“Well, that’s all from me,” the on-screen Karen announced. “It would mean a lot to us if you would consider investing in our town.”

The room fell silent. The merchants had been so amazed by the projector, they were at a complete loss for words.

“As Karen just explained, we plan to use the money to invest in the town’s infrastructure. We need to build inns, plus lodgings for the many adventurers who are here...” I said. “And that’s not all. Everyone always says there’s very little in the way of entertainment when you’re this far out in the countryside, and they’re not wrong. So to remedy this, I’ve come up with an idea.” I paused for about ten seconds to really build the suspense. “We’ll build a casino!”

“A casino?” all of the merchants said in unison.

That’s right: a casino. An adult playground filled with greed. And the perfect new business venture for me.

“What’s a ‘casino,’ Mr. Shiro?” Dahl called out.

I’d asked my adventurer friends and Ney—who was of noble stock—if casinos were a thing in this world, and according to them, they weren’t. People did gamble, though. Card games involving coins were a popular feature of noble gatherings, while adventurers frequently had wagers among themselves. It was entirely plausible that there were a few illegal gambling dens hidden away in the larger cities, but officially speaking, there were no authorized establishments dedicated solely to gambling.

“I’m sure you all like gambling, right?” I said. “After all, what is running a business if not taking constant gambles? Well, a casino is a place where gambling *is* the business.”

I proceeded to lay out the broad idea behind casinos, explaining how you bought chips to gamble with in different games, and that when you won, you earned even more chips, but when you lost, you had to give some away. It was all very basic information, but the merchants stared at me intently, hanging on my every word.

“I plan to stock the casino with rare items so that when you cash in your chips at the end of the day, you can either turn them back into regular coins or exchange them for an item. I’m talking rare types of alcohol, plus treasure and equipment adventurers have recovered from the ruins. I might even throw in some of my more, let’s say, *exclusive* products.”

The merchants let out a collective cry of excitement.

“D-Does that mean I’ll finally be able to buy that dress made of star fragments?” one of the merchants piped up.

“Clothes are a little complicated. It wouldn’t be practical for me to have every size available. But I could always make it so you can exchange your chips for the fabric that was used to make the dress,” I suggested.

“That’s a great idea!” the merchant replied, and he started tearing up as if

overcome with emotion.

Another merchant instantly fired another question at me. “What about fairy mead? Will we be able to get fairy mead at this ‘casino’?”

“Of course!” I assured him.

“And what about that magic item that makes a picture of whatever’s in front of you in one second flat?” another one asked.

“Cameras? Well, they’re a bit hard to use...” I said hesitantly. “But it sounds like you really, *really* want one, so I’ll add them to the list!”

“Thank you so much!” the merchant replied. “May you be blessed by the god of business!”

Regular cameras were obviously a nonstarter, but there were some Polaroid cameras that didn’t require batteries, only film, and I could even sell them as a bundle. Requests kept flying in and I added a bunch of items to my mental list of future casino prizes. It was quite impressive how much the atmosphere in the room had changed from earlier. While Ney and Karen’s speeches had undoubtedly had their impact, my casino proposition had been the *real* game changer. After all, these merchants weren’t stupid. They immediately understood that if it was possible to exchange casino chips for rare items, they’d be able to get their hands on these items even if I refused to negotiate personally with them.

“I’m also thinking of opening an auction hall where we can sell all the pieces of treasure the adventurers recover from the ruins,” I said.

“Oooh!” came the collective response from the crowd.

“So to reiterate, that’s a casino and an auction house we intend to build here. These will undoubtedly attract visitors to the town from far and wide, and I’m confident that it’s only a matter of time before Ninoritch becomes the kingdom’s number one tourist destination,” I said. “But what do you all think? Adventurers will continue to flock here for the ruins, as will rich merchants like yourselves. The more visitors we welcome in, the richer the town’s offerings and opportunities become. And in turn, we’ll attract an even *greater* influx of visitors. Ninoritch is about to enter a long period of growth.”

“Let’s say we *did* invest in this town...” a merchant interjected. “Would we earn a certain percentage of the profits that the town makes?”

“You betcha!” I assured him.

“And how much were you wanting us to invest?” another merchant asked.

My plan’s working! “I was thinking a minimum of five gold coins per person,” I replied.

The merchant nodded. “But won’t we have to visit Ninoritch regularly to receive our dividends? That’s rather inconvenient.”

“What if I told you that you’d be able to get your money pretty much wherever you liked?” I said with a grin. “Thanks to Miss Ney, you’d be able to ask for your money at any branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild. You’d need to contact them in advance, of course, but as long as you have the bond with you, you’d be able to claim your dividends almost anywhere in the kingdom, be it in a city, a town, or even a village.”

The merchants started muttering among themselves again. I could tell that some of them were interested in the proposition that had been put to them. I saw my chance. It was time for the coup de grâce!

“Oh, just one last thing!” I called out to draw the crowd’s attention once more.

I paused for a moment, then raised my eyes toward the ceiling. Patty—who had been hiding behind a beam up there the whole time—nodded and flew down to join me on the stage.

“Patty the fairy has a very *special* thank-you gift for our most generous investors!”

In her hands, the little fairy was clutching a half-size bottle filled with a shimmering liquid. The label on it was a photo of her throwing double peace signs with the words “Fairy Mead” written in bold letters underneath. The merchants’ reaction to this announcement sure was something.

“Is that f-f-f-f-fairy mead?!”

“Did you say fairy mead?!”

“Please sell it to me! I’m begging you!”

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing! I came all the way here to buy fairy mead and I’m *finally* getting to see some with my own eyes!”

Their eyes sparkled with desire as they stared at the small bottle in Patty’s hands.

“L-Listen up! If you, uh…”—Patty searched for the word she had heard used—“‘Invest,’ was it? If you invest in Ninoritch, I’ll give you a bottle of the fairy mead I brewed!”

A chorus of cheers rose from the excited crowd. A significant portion of the merchants had journeyed all the way to Ninoritch for the sole purpose of acquiring fairy mead, and they couldn’t hide their joy.

“Anyone who invests 20 gold coins will receive a half-size bottle of fairy mead. And if you choose to invest 30 gold coins, you’ll receive a full-size bottle!” I declared.

“Oooh!”

“And last but not least, I will add all investors to my very special ‘merchant friends’ list. Just say the word and I’ll negotiate with you all you want!” I announced.

“Ooooooh!”

The merchants were over the moon at this news and couldn’t stop themselves from cheering out loud. It was almost like we were at an idol concert or something.

“We only have a few bottles of fairy mead available, so it’s first come, first serv—*oof!*”

I didn’t even get time to finish my sentence before the merchants swarmed me. This time, Ney didn’t even attempt to stop them. She simply looked across at me and smirked as a wave of enthusiastic merchants crashed down on me.

“I’ll invest, Mr. Shiro!”

“Me too! Put me down for 20 gold coins!”

“I’ll invest 30!”

“Then, I’ll put in 40 and get two half-bottles!”

“I’ll give you 50! Will that be enough to get the dress made of star fragments?”

As I battled to come up for air, I noticed it wasn’t just merchants crowding around me.

“You don’t have to be a merchant to invest in this town, right? Us adventurers can chip in too, yeah?”

“Aside from booze, there’s nothing to spend your money on in this crappy little town, so I’m gonna invest too.”

“Yeah, me too! Hurry up and hand over that fairy mead!”

“I got a pile of money from my last expedition to the ruins, so I’m in too!”

“You *have* to build this casino or whatever it’s called, okay?”

It seemed my offer had been so tempting, it had even attracted a number of adventurers.

Once the commotion had died down somewhat, I went on to explain how the dividends would be distributed, the kinds of profits they could all expect, the scheduling of these payouts, and the expected years for the return on their investment. But even after hearing all of the fine print, as it were, not a single person chose to withdraw their investment.

And so, just like I had promised Karen I would, I managed to secure a hefty sum of money to invest in the town without a single copper coin coming out of my own pocket.

Chapter Six: Asking Teacher

Once all of the merchants had departed, Patty and I made our way over to the town hall to tell Karen the good news. If you're wondering where Aina was at this point, she had gone home early since the sun was about to set. She had worked really hard these past three days, so I'd ordered her to go and get some rest.

"Look at this mountain of gold coins, Karen!" I said as I emptied the contents of my bag on the table in Karen's office, the coins clinking off one another as they tumbled out.

A gasp escaped Karen's lips. "I-I don't believe my eyes! Is this all from the merchants?" she asked.

"Yup. Well, nearly all," I corrected myself. "A few adventurers pitched in too."

"And you got *all* this in just one day? I must be dreaming."

"You're not," I said with a grin. "They're real all right. I actually had to turn down the last few people as things were starting to get a bit *too* overwhelming. Right, boss?"

"Yup!" Patty confirmed with a nod. "It was scary! The merchants and adventurers were all yelling over each other, begging Shiro to let them give him more money."

Karen nodded absentmindedly, her eyes still fixed on the huge pile of coins. "H-How many gold coins did you get in the end?" she asked.

"Exactly 3,000," I replied.

Karen's reaction was instant. "3,000..." she repeated, her eyes as wide as they could go, in huge contrast to her usual calm and collected demeanor. Not that I blamed her, since 3,000 gold coins was roughly 30 billion yen. It was the kind of sum very few people ever laid eyes on. Well, unless they were nobles or highly successful merchants, at least.

"I'm *assuming* it'll be enough to build some inns and lodgings for the refugees," I said, a proud grin plastered across my face.

But Karen was frozen in place, silently gawking at the pile of coins.

"Uh, Karen? Hello?" I said, but still no answer was forthcoming.

Patty must have started feeling a little concerned for Karen because she flew over to her, landed on her shoulder, and slapped her on the cheek a few times. When Karen still didn't react, the little fairy turned to me with a horrified look on her face. "Sh-Shiro! Karen's *dead!*"

"Wait, really?" I said, playing along and pretending to be shocked.

"No, I'm *not!*" Karen protested, her brain seeming to finally reboot.

Good. I thought we were about to lose her there. "You sure you're okay?" I asked her.

"Yes. I just lost my composure for a moment," she replied, scratching her cheek in embarrassment, her face as red as a tomato. She quickly pulled herself together, and regarded me and Patty with a serious look on her face. "Thank you, both of you. Thanks to you, I don't have to worry about the town's finances for the time being."

"Oh, c'mon. There's no need to thank us," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Shiro's right!" Patty squeaked. "We're friends, aren't we? Friends look out for each other!"

"But..." Karen started to protest, but I quickly interrupted her.

"I mean it. You really don't need to thank us. Besides, I did it for my own personal gain," I said with a grin, rubbing my thumb and forefingers together in the universal sign for money.

I was trying to make myself look super greedy, but Karen simply chuckled. "You're far too nice, Shiro. But if you insist, I won't try to thank you again," she said, capitulating. "Anyway, now that we have enough money to build some inns and houses, I need to find workers and architects who will take on these projects. Oh, and we need materials too. The refugees will be here in two months, so we don't have a lot of time."

“That’s gonna be tough,” I agreed. “Having the funds is one thing, but without the necessary resources and workforce, it won’t be of much use. I’ve heard that all of Ninoritch’s craftsmen are snowed under with work for the next year, so I can’t see any of them being able to help. I guess we’ll have to hire folk from other towns.”

Karen nodded. “Exactly.”

“And we’re gonna need a lot of people too...” I mused. “Looking for workers and architects in Mazela might be our best bet.”

Karen nodded again. “There are closer towns to Ninoritch, but they probably won’t be able to lend us the kind of manpower we need, so your suggestion makes the most sense. The only problem is Mazela is quite far from here, so that means waiting even longer to start on construction.”

“You have a point.”

Mazela was a six-day carriage ride from Ninoritch. If Dramom were here, we could have made the trip in less than an hour, but unfortunately, she was busy teaching Suama how to hunt in the forest and I had no idea when she would be back. Actually, now that I thought about it, dragons were like fairies in that they perceived time in a significantly different way to humes, meaning there was a chance she might not return before I died of old age. All in all, it was probably in our best interest to schedule a trip to Mazela as soon as possible, even though it wouldn’t exactly be the definition of a fun time.

“Shiro?” Patty said suddenly to grab my attention. She had crossed her little arms in front of her chest and was seemingly deep in thought, her brow furrowed.

“What is it, boss?” I asked.

“You need to build houses for these refugees, right?”

“Yup. What of it?”

“Th-Then, I have an idea!” the little fairy exclaimed, waving her arms around excitedly. “Can’t you just make them using magic? I’m always seeing mages at the guild making walls sprout out of the ground. Can’t we make the houses that way?”

“Walls sprout out of the ground...” I muttered, trying to figure out what she was talking about. “*Oh!* You mean the Stone Wall spell?”

As its name suggested, Stone Wall was a spell that caused a large wall to burst up out of the ground. From what Nesca had told me, it was primarily a defensive spell.

“Yeah, that thing! If you make a bunch of walls and connect them all together, wouldn’t that make a house?” Patty asked.

I hummed thoughtfully. “So you’re suggesting we get mages to magic up four stone walls that can then be used as the foundations of a house? Is that right?”

“Yeah! What do you think?” the little fairy asked me excitedly. “It’s a good idea, isn’t it?”

I was quiet for a couple of seconds before saying, “Boss...”

Her face fell. “Wh-What? You don’t think it’ll work?”

I quickly waved my hands in front of me. “I didn’t say that! It’s just, I can’t use magic, remember? So I genuinely have no idea if it would work or not.”

“Oh. I-I guess you have a point,” Patty admitted.

“Yup. So I was thinking...”

I paused and took out my cell phone to check the time. Six o’clock. People in this world rose with the sun and went to bed shortly after sunset, which meant that for most, it was almost time for dinner.

“Why don’t we go and ask your teacher?” I suggested.

Patty’s face instantly lit up. “Oh, yeah! Nesca will know!”

“Exactly what I was thinking. She’s probably over at the guild with the rest of the Blue Flash crew right now. All righty then.” I stood up and turned to address Karen. “Patty and I are gonna go pop by the guild real quick.”

She nodded. “Go right ahead. I really hope Nesca says Patty’s idea could work.”

“Me too.”

We said goodbye to her and headed back over to the guildhall. For some

reason, my life these past few days had been nothing but a succession of round trips between the town hall and the guild.



As I'd suspected, the Blue Flash crew were presently in the middle of eating dinner in the guild's drinking hall. I knew Nesca had been busy deciphering the grimoire another band of adventurers had found in that weird dungeon, but it seemed as though she was at least allowed time off from her arduous task to eat dinner. She looked totally exhausted, to the point where she was swaying from side to side and Raiya was having to support her with his shoulder, since it seemed the back of her chair wasn't enough to stop her from toppling over. I'd never seen her looking so completely drained before. *Maybe I should come back another day...*

I was just about to turn around and head back out again, when in her usual self-absorbed way, Patty cried out, "Ah, there she is! Nesca!" and made a beeline for the Blue Flash crew's table.

Struggling to keep her eyelids from shutting, Nesca gave the little fairy an incredulous look when she heard her name. "Patty?" she murmured.

It took the other three at the table a couple more seconds to notice Patty's presence.

"Nesca, Nesca! I have a question for you. Can you—" the little fairy began enthusiastically, but then stopped midsentence. "Huh? Are you tired? You look tired." She hovered in front of Nesca with a worried look on her face. "A-Are you okay, Nesca? You look like you're about to drop dead!" she said.

"I'm fine," Nesca replied.

"You're fine?" Raiya queried, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "What the heck are you saying, you dummy? If I wasn't here to prop you up, you'd be sprawled out on the floor!"

"Raiya's right, meow!" Kilpha chimed in. "I know the sub-guildmaster asked you to help out with the grimoire, but you've been pushing yourself way too hard lately, meow."

Nesca puffed out her cheeks in annoyance while her friends continued to

chide her.

“Miss Nesca, ma’am, you *know* that Mr. Raiya and Miss Kilpha are right,” Rolf said, dealing the finishing blow. “Please take better care of yourself.”

“I’m just a little sleep-deprived, that’s all. It’s really no big deal. Leave me alone,” Nesca pouted.

She wasn’t usually so snappy, but it sounded like she hadn’t been sleeping enough, so it was no surprise that she was in a worse mood than usual because of that. Judging by the dark bags under her eyes, she probably hadn’t managed to get a proper night’s sleep in a few days. Still, the way it was going, the atmosphere around the table could turn sour at any second, all because Patty had blundered in. And if that happened, well, we wouldn’t be able to put questions to Nesca on the stuff we had come here to ask her about. I had to intervene.

“Heya, everyone,” I called out, raising a hand in greeting as I walked toward their table.

“Oh, you’re here too, man?” Raiya said.

All Nesca could muster was a quiet, “Shiro.”

“Hey, Nesca, did you know sweets are the best thing to eat when you’re tired? They say it’s nourishment for the brain too. And it just so happens that I’ve brought some chocolate cookies with me today,” I said, producing a box from my pocket.

“Chocolate...” Nesca murmured as she took the cookies from me, her eyes instantly lighting up at the sight of her favorite treat.

She seemed in a better mood already. Nesca couldn’t resist chocolate, and in fact, the only things that actually managed to put a smile on the taciturn mage’s face were her boyfriend, Raiya, and a box full of chocolaty goodness.

“May Patty and I join you guys? We haven’t had dinner yet,” I said.

“Dude, we’re pals. You don’t need to ask. Just park your keister,” Raiya replied.

Kilpha excitedly patted the chair beside her. “Shiro, come sit next to me,

meow!”

“Thanks, Kilpha,” I said, taking a seat. “All righty. What should we order, boss?”

“Hm, lemme think...”

The little fairy landed on my shoulder, and we picked out a few dishes and drinks to order before calling over a waitress. Once our order had been placed, we turned back to the Blue Flash crew. Raiya was sipping some booze, Kilpha was sinking her teeth into some sort of fish dish, and Rolf was meticulously cutting up a plate of vegetables with a knife and fork. Nesca was still having trouble keeping herself upright, but she looked much happier than before as she bit into the cookie in her hand, her eyes positively gleaming.

“Dude, *please* can you tell her to take it easy?” Raiya said, gesturing to Nesca.

“I told you, I’m not overdoing it,” she grumbled.

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

Raiya sighed and shook his head in exasperation. “Why don’t you ever listen when it comes to your health?”

Nesca’s friends were all concerned about her health, but she was having none of it.

“Raiya’s just trying to look out for you, Nesca,” I said.

“Well, he doesn’t need to,” she retorted, as laconic as ever.

“Oh, come on. Wouldn’t *you* be worried if Raiya went days without sleeping? I mean, you’re his girlfriend, right? It’s only natural you would,” I said, trying to reason with her.

Raiya got all flustered at this, his face turning red and his eyes practically bulging out of their sockets. “H-Hey now! Why are you—”

“Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it?” I said, interrupting him.

Meanwhile, Nesca—who had turned the same shade of red as her boyfriend—just sat there and seemed to consider my words. “Fine,” she said after a few

moments. “I’ll get some rest today.”

I’d successfully gotten her to see sense. As soon as they heard this response, everyone around the table let out a big sigh of relief, and I couldn’t help feeling all warm and fuzzy inside, because it was truly heartwarming to see just how deeply these friends all cared for one another.

“Speaking of, how’s it going with the grimoire? Made any progress?” I asked nonchalantly. I figured if she was almost done, Patty and I could probably put our query to her in the near future without it being a real hassle for her.

“It’s not...”—*munch munch*—“...going all that well...”—*munch munch*—“The only thing we really know...”—*munch munch*—“...is the name of the author,” Nesca replied while stuffing her face with cookies.

“You’ve managed to decipher the name of the author?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

She nodded. I noticed she’d polished off the cookies I’d given her, so I swiftly produced another box from my pocket and handed it to her.

“Chocolate...” she murmured breathlessly. A second later, she had torn it open and resumed eating. It seemed her brain needed all the sugar it could get.

“Hey, you know who the legendary alchemist Nathew is, right, man?” Raiya asked me.

My response was instant. “Nope, never heard of the guy.”

The Blue Flash crew almost fell off their chairs at this. It seemed like this Nathew character was a real big deal here.

“People call him the ‘Father of Alchemy.’ I’m not super familiar with his work either, but he was basically some sort of hotshot alchemist. You know how the whole point of alchemy is to turn stone into gold, yeah? Well, this guy managed to turn stone into orichalcum and adamantium,” Raiya explained.

Orichalcum and adamantium were ultra-super-mega-rare metals in this other world, and from what I’d been told previously, there was hardly any of either left anywhere on the planet.

“That’s impressive,” I remarked. “Wait, you said ‘was.’ Does that mean he’s

dead?”

“Yup. Nathew lived during the Ancient Magic Civilization Era. The only reason we even know about him is ‘cause of documents adventurers have found in the ruins, plus the occasional reference mentioning him in the tales of the high elves. High elves basically live forever, you see, so a few of them were around when he was.”

“I see,” I said.

“You still with me? Good,” Raiya said. “Well, Nesca and the others have figured out that this grimoire...”

“...was written by the legendary alchemist, Nathew. Right?” I said, finishing his sentence.

Raiya snapped his fingers. “Bingo.”

This discovery had apparently caused quite a stir among the adventurers. Why, you may ask? Well, for the simple reason that, according to a number of ancient documents, Nathew had reportedly figured out a way to revive the dead, and since no one knew how to do that nowadays, it was considered a lost technique. Needless to say, it had also suddenly lent a lot more credence to the idea that there was a dungeon out there that could revive the dead.

“The grimoire is practically priceless,” Nesca added as she set down the empty cookie box. “I don’t even care about the sub-guildmaster’s orders anymore. As a mage and a former student of the Magic Academy, I just want to read it for myself.”

Her eyes were brimming with determination as she said this, but in contrast, Raiya was clutching his head, seemingly at his wits’ end. All *he* really wanted was for Nesca to get some much-needed rest.

“How long do you think it’s gonna take to translate it?” I asked.

“Yeah, how long, meow?” Kilpha chimed in.

But Nesca silently shook her head. She probably had no idea either.

“Mr. Shiro, sir, Miss Kilpha, ma’am,” Rolf interjected, intending to kindly explain the issue to us. “Reading texts from the Ancient Magic Civilization Era is

an extremely time-consuming endeavor. Normally, these kinds of texts would be entrusted to specialists in ancient languages, but even then, it would take them a significant amount of time, due to differences in interpretation.”

“Is that so?” I reflected. “And no one at the guild knows this ancient language?”

“What are you even saying, man? Of course not. There’s not a single person on the entire *continent* who understands that ancient language perfectly,” Raiya explained.

“Wow. Is it really that complicated?” I said.

“Well, duh. Not everyone can be a legendary witch like a certain *someone’s* grandmo—hey, wait a minute.” Raiya suddenly cut himself off midsentence and fixed his gaze on me. After a brief pause, he leaned over the table—I was sitting across from him—and said, “Hey, man.”

“Yeah?”

“Can’t your grandma... Can’t the Immortal Witch read that ancient language?” he inquired.

That was admittedly a possibility I hadn’t considered. After all, I didn’t have the slightest clue how old grandma really was, so for all I knew, this “ancient” language could even have been her mother tongue. Unfortunately, grandma had gone on a trip to Izu a couple of days ago, and while I had given her a smartphone as a gift before she left, grandma was terrible with technology and writing horizontally instead of vertically—which was the traditional way of writing Japanese—so I wasn’t sure if she would even be able to use it.

“I’m not really sure,” I said. “I’ll ask her the next time I see her.”

“Thanks, man. If we don’t find some way to decipher this grimoire before long...” He paused and sighed at length. “I’m scared Nesca’s gonna collapse from exhaustion.”

I was about to reply when Patty started tugging at my clothing. “Hey, Shiro?”

“What is it, boss?”

“What have you two been talking about all this time?”

For a split second, Raiya and I didn't say a word, though Raiya's expression screamed "Oh, crap!" and I was fairly sure I didn't look any less guilty. He had asked me to keep this whole dungeon business a secret from everyone in town for the time being, and here we were, discussing it all like there was no one else around. Good thing Patty had deemed our conversation "too complicated" and hadn't really been paying attention. Well, up until this moment, at least. We needed to find some way to distract her and *fast*. Raiya and I exchanged glances, then nodded at each other.

"O-Oh, Patty, that reminds me, didn't you say you had something you wanted to ask Nesca?" Raiya said.

Nice save, Raiya!

Patty instantly perked up. "Oh, I almost forgot! Hey, Nesca. You know that spell that goes, like, '*Bam!*' from the ground?"

Nesca tilted her head to one side in confusion.

"You *know*. The one that goes *bam!*" Patty insisted.

But Nesca still looked baffled—perhaps due to her sleep deprivation or maybe because of Patty's less-than-precise description—and I could almost see the question mark floating above her head. To save her sanity, I decided to step in and explain everything to her and the other three: the situation with the refugees, the fact the town needed to urgently build enough lodgings to house two hundred people, and Patty's idea of constructing the walls of these buildings by using the Stone Wall spell to cut down on labor and costs. I also made sure I slipped her some more boxes of chocolate whenever I noticed she was having a hard time following the conversation due to how tired she was.

"So what do you think?" I asked when I'd explained it all.

"I understand what you're suggesting," she said with a nod.

"D-Do you think it's possible?" Patty chimed in. "Can we build houses by using the Stone Wall spell?"

Nesca nodded. "Theoretically. Of the four main magic types, earth magic is a bit of an odd one, because the more mana you pour into a spell, the longer whatever you create with it sticks around. And thanks to that seal on your

abdomen, you have more mana than even some of the world's most powerful mages, which means—”

“S-Stop!” Patty screeched. “That’s too complicated! Explain it in a way I can understand!”

“Fine,” Nesca said, then tried again. “With the amount of mana you have, Patty, you can probably create walls that will last for years.”

“So I could make houses for the refugees?”

Nesca nodded.

Patty’s face instantly lit up. “Nesca! T-Teach me how to use Stone Wall! Please!”

“I don’t mind teaching you, but I’m busy with the grimoire right now.”

“I-It won’t take long! You really can’t?” the little fairy said, looking at Nesca with puppy-dog eyes.

“The sub-guildmaster handpicked me for the job. I can’t just stop halfway,” Nesca explained.

But I had an idea. “Hey, Nesca,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Let’s say you had Ney’s permission to take a break from translating the grimoire...” I suggested. “Could you help Patty then?”

“Sure,” Nesca replied. “As long as the guildmaster’s okay with it.”

“Right. I’ll go ask her, then. Be right back!” I announced as I stood up, then walked off in the direction of Ney’s office.

Ten minutes later, I returned to the table again. “Sorry for the wait.”

Raiya whistled, sounding impressed.

“Damn, man, that was fast. How’d things go with the GM?” he asked on behalf of Nesca, who was in a doze now that her stomach was full and her worries had momentarily been chased away, thanks to the delicious chocolate cookies I had given her.

“She said it was fine,” I replied. “Ney knows just how acute the lodging crisis is in Ninoritch right now, so that’s probably why she’s on board with the idea. Oh, and she also said the guild would pay Nesca extra for teaching the spell to Patty.”

“Gotcha. The GM really does think stuff through, doesn’t she?” Raiya remarked.

I looked over at Nesca. “Is that okay with you, Nesca? Do you mind taking a break from decoding that grimoire and helping Patty with her magic?”

“I don’t mind,” she replied drowsily. She could barely keep her eyes open.

Chapter Seven: The Ruckus

A few minutes later, Raiya got to his feet. “Okey dokey. Me and Nesca are gonna turn in for the night. C’mon, Nesca, up you get,” he said, holding out his hand toward her.

“Okay...” she mumbled, letting her boyfriend pull her upright. She’d clearly reached her limit and was about to crash. We bid them goodbye and the pair set off back to the inn they were staying at. This prompted Kilpha and Rolf to rise from their seats as well.

“We should be heading back too, meow!”

“Indeed. Good evening, Mr. Shiro, sir.”

And with that, they also left. Patty and I stayed for a little while longer to finish up our meals, but the second the little fairy had swallowed down her last bite, she hopped off my shoulder and declared, “I’m going back to Aina’s now. Say hi to Karen for me the next time you see her!”

She seemed excited as she zipped away. I figured she must have been really looking forward to Nesca training her and was so eager for the next day to arrive that she wanted to jump into bed quickly so it would come sooner.

“All righty. Guess I should head back too,” I said to no one in particular as I stood up.

I’d spent the past few days running all over Ninoritch and was very much looking forward to a good night’s sleep. However, that prospect suddenly seemed a long way off when a booming male voice reverberated all around the guildhall.

“What do ya mean ya don’t have any red magic crystals?!” the man roared. “Now listen ’ere, girlie. We traveled all the way from the Kingdom of Bazam ’cause we ’eard ya had some, and now yer tellin’ us ya ran out?!”

“Yeah!” I heard several other men yelling in unison.

The voices seemed to be coming from the reception area, and when I poked my head around the corner to take a look, I saw a group of nine rather short, stout men with long beards standing in front of the reception desk. They were dwarves, one of this world's most common races.

"Do ya 'ave any *idea* how much we struggled to get 'ere?!" the dwarf at the front of the group barked at the receptionist, drawing yet more indignant shouts of agreement from his comrades.

Any guesses who was standing behind the reception desk?

"O-Of course not. How *could* I know that?"

Yup, that's right. It was Emille. She must have been feeling quite overwhelmed by the constant shouting from the dwarves because her usually perky ears were drooping and she looked glum. Everyone in the guildhall was staring at the group of dwarves, but not a single adventurer had felt the need to lift a finger to help Emille. In that moment, I realized this kind of scene was probably a daily occurrence here and just went to show how unpopular the bunny girl was among the guild's adventurers.

"So what are we supposed to do, huh, dimwit?!" the dwarf growled, slamming his fist down on the desk.

Emille had been trying to act tough, but she couldn't help squeaking in fear at the sudden loud noise.

"Guess I'm gonna have to step in, aren't I?" I muttered with a sigh.

I gave myself a quick mental pep talk, then went and stood between Emille and the shouting dwarf.

"Now, now, gentlemen. I don't know what this is all about, but would you mind keeping your voices down, please?" I said, trying to sound as polite as possible.

"M-Mister!" Emille exclaimed in relief, her face lighting up.

Brawls were practically a daily ritual here at the guild, and if another adventurer dared to intervene in one, they often swiftly found themselves on the end of a punch to the face from one or sometimes both of the feuding

parties. But when it was a civilian like me attempting to mediate these kinds of scuffles, the squabbling people would sometimes listen. As Kilpha had oh-so-kindly put it once, “You’re so skinny, you might actually keel over after a single punch, meow!” Back in Japan, I’d be described as having a fairly average build, but in this world, I was basically seen as being as brittle as a twig. The silver lining to this was that no one ever dared to hit me for fear of finding themselves up on a murder charge.

“What the hell do *you* want?” the dwarf leader said, glaring at me. Though just like I’d thought, he didn’t swing a fist at me.

“Oh, I’m just a merchant,” I replied. “I couldn’t help noticing you seemed a little worked up. Could you please tell me what happened?”

“Wah, mister,” Emille whined as she climbed over the reception desk and clung onto my arm. She pointed to the group of dwarves. “These rotten dwarves have been *bullying* me! I keep *telling* them we don’t have any red magic crystals, but they keep *insisting* I sell them some!”

“What the heck, girlie? Where was that bravado earlier, huh?!” the dwarf leader spat. “Are ya pickin’ a fight with us?”

“You dimwits are the ones looking for a fight!” Emille retorted. “I’ll have you know that all it’ll take is one scream from me to have thousands of gold-rank adventurers rushing here to protect me! You guys are dead meat! They’re gonna mess you up real bad, then tomorrow, they’ll feed you to goblins!”

“Bring it on, girlie!” the dwarf leader bellowed. “Let’s take this outside!”

Still clinging tightly to my arm, Emille pulled down her lower eyelid and stuck her tongue out at the dwarves like a brat. No one with an ounce of self-respect would contort their face in such a grotesque manner, but, well, this was Emille. “Mnyah! I’m currently working, *unlike* a certain group of stinking dwarves who don’t understand the word ‘No’ when someone says it to them. I don’t have time for you. Go on, shoo! Shoo! Get the hell out of here!”

I couldn’t help being impressed by how low she was willing to stoop just to win an argument, as well as her uncanny talent for getting on people’s nerves, though at the same time, I was starting to fear for our lives, because these dwarves were clearly running out of patience. Though to be fair, it didn’t look

like they'd had a whole lot to begin with.

"That's it! Yer dead, girlye!" the dwarf leader roared as he dropped into a fighting stance.

Emille let out an exaggerated shrill cry. "Save me, mister!"

"Huh? No way! You've brought this on yourself, Emille. H-Hey! Stop trying to use me as a hume shield!" I protested as she shrunk away behind me.

"Mister, hurry up and call over that woman with the huge knockers. *You* know the one. She has black-and-white hair and she stomped all of our gold adventurers. Tell her to kill these stinking dwarves! In two days, you guys'll be nothing more than goblin doo-doo!"

"Black-and-white..." I repeated in bemusement before finally catching on. "Oh! You mean Celes?"

"Yeah, her! The psycho bitch with the huge knockers," Emille confirmed. "Hurry up and call her over here!"

"She's not here," I said matter-of-factly. "She went back to the demon island."

Emille stood there open-mouthed for a moment, before shrieking, "Ex-cuse me?! I-I wasn't told about that! I had no idea!"

The dwarf leader grabbed his hammer and raised it above his head, ready to strike. "If yer gonna protect this girlye, I'm gonna 'ave to kill ya too, kid!" he told me.

Uh-oh. This is bad. "Please just hold on a minute!" I said quickly. "I'm just—"

"Mister here is my fiancé!" Emille said, cutting me off. "He's so brave and courageous, he'd even go and fight the demon king with his bare fists to protect me! So if you wanna kill anyone, you have to go through him, you hear?"

"Is that so? Pretty gutsy of ya, kid. I respect a man who's willin' to go to great lengths to protect his woman," the dwarf leader said. "Well, I hope yer ready. Take this!"

He was just about to swing his hammer down toward me, when all of a sudden, someone punched him in the face.

“What the *hell* do ye think yer doin’, ye cretin?!”

The dwarf leader let out a shriek of pain as he was sent flying across the room into the back wall, where his motionless body slid to the ground. I looked to where the blow had come from and saw that my mysterious knight in shining armor was none other than...

“E-Eldos!” I exclaimed.

Eldos was one of the Fairy’s Blessing’s most influential and strongest adventurers who inspired everyone around him, as well as being a man so impressive that even Ney often deferred to him. He was a seasoned warrior, and one of the revered Sixteen Heroes.

“Ye okay, Shiro?” he asked me.

“I think so, though if you’d gotten here one second later, I probably would’ve had my skull caved in. You saved my life. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I should be apologizin’ to ya, really,” he replied.

“Huh?”

I was about to ask him what he meant when he spun around to address the group of dwarves. “You morons!” he yelled at them, the intensity of his rage-filled eyes so fierce that the dwarves could only cower in fear under his gaze. “What the *hell* are ye doin’ in Ninoritch?”

The dwarf who had tried to attack me was the one to answer this as he slowly got to his feet. “What the heck are ya sayin’? Y-Yer the one who...” He paused to cough up some blood. “Yer the one who told us to come ’ere, big bro.”

“What did ye just say?! I never did!” Eldos bellowed, his tone a mixture of anger and confusion.

“O-Oh, ya didn’t, huh? Then what’s this?” the dwarf leader said, producing a letter from his pocket. “Ye wrote, ‘If ya know of any blacksmith who wants to work with red magic crystals, send ’em to Ninoritch.’ So we came!”

“But why?!” Eldos retorted.

“Cause we wanna work with them damn red magic crystals!”

“You absolute *moron!*” Eldos roared as he punched the dwarf leader in the face again. This time, though, he didn’t get up, because he was out cold.

“Um, Eldos?” I said to draw his attention.

“What is it, Shiro?”

“That dwarf just called you ‘big bro,’ right? Does that mean...” I said tentatively before trailing off.

Eldos made a face as if he’d just swallowed something bitter. “That’s right. These cretins are me younger brothers.”

“Seriously?!” I exclaimed, unable to hide my surprise. So wait, these guys were Eldos’s *brothers*?

Emille, on the other hand, had spied an opportunity. “Mr. Eldos, your brothers were so *rude* to me!” she whined. “It was awful! I was *sooo* scared! Their words really hurt me too!”

“Sorry ’bout that, receptionist girlie. Don’t ye worry, though. I’m gonna give ’em a real good talkin’ to later. Can ye forgive ’em for their attitude?” Eldos said.

“Forgive them? No way in hell am I forgiving them just like that! What about my mental trauma? I don’t think it will ever go away. Well, not unless you give me a handful of gold coins here and now.”

A frown formed on Eldos’s face.

I couldn’t believe Emille’s shamelessness. After all, Eldos was one of the Sixteen Heroes, for Pete’s sake! It was in that moment that I realized that Emille was perhaps tougher than any of the guild’s adventurers.

“C’mon, pay up! Give me my—mmh!”

I quickly slapped a hand over Emille’s mouth to stop her from making things worse for herself.

“What are you doing, mister?!” she said, prying my hand away from her mouth. “I know you like me, but that’s no reason to suddenly be all over me like—hey, let me go! Ah! Unless you’re finally taking me to a dark room somewhere?”

“Why don’t you get back to work, Emille?” I said, a fake smile plastered on my face, before muttering in a low voice, “If you don’t get your butt back behind that counter right now, I’m going to tell Ney.”

She gasped. “Mister, you *moron*!” she shrieked as she reluctantly made her way back behind the reception desk. “Mister, you *moron*!” she repeated for good measure.



Eldos’s younger brother—the one he’d just sent flying across the room—introduced himself to us as Baledos. He was the family’s second-born, with Eldos the eldest and eight more brothers younger than them. Ten sons. If we were in modern-day Japan, there definitely would have been some kind of TV show about their family.

Once everyone had calmed down, Eldos turned to me and bowed his head. “Sorry for the trouble my stone-brained brothers jus’ caused ye, Shiro.”

I quickly waved my hands in front of me. “Oh, no need to apologize. I’m fine.”

Eldos raised his head, then whipped it around to glare at his brothers. “And ye idiots! What’re ye waitin’ for? Apologize to Shiro!”

“Sorry, kid,” Baledos grumbled.

“Louder, ye rascal!”

“Sorry!” Baledos said, much louder this time, and he bowed his head like Eldos had done. The other eight dwarves followed suit, apologizing in unison. It was clear that none of them dared to challenge Eldos’s authority.

“It’s all good,” I said. “I mean, I *did* fear for my life for a second there, but everything turned out fine in the end, so don’t sweat it. More importantly, why were you arguing with Emille?”

Eldos fielded this question for his brothers. “Remember them red magic crystals that demon lass gave us? Well...”

Here’s what happened according to Eldos: as an apology for injuring those who had tried to stop her from entering Dramom’s lair, Celes had given all the guild’s adventurers a large number of red magic crystals (this later came to be

known as the “Apologems Incident”). Red magic crystals were incredibly rare and working with them was every blacksmith’s dream, so Eldos had sent a letter to his brothers back home, informing them about the crystals and telling them to relay the message to the town’s blacksmiths. But his brothers had thought, “Hey, we’re blacksmiths too!” So instead of telling the others about the crystals, they’d decided to come to Ninoritch themselves in order to hoard all of them.

“I didn’t mean for all of ye to come here,” Eldos chastised his brothers, glaring at them. “And what ’bout the family business?”

Baledos guffawed. “We gots Pops and his bro to look after the workshop, and foisted all the smithin’ and upholsterin’ on ’em. We want them red magic crystals!”

“Yeah! Yeah!” the other eight brothers yelled in agreement.

“Ye numbskulls!” Eldos roared, dishing out knuckle sandwiches to his brothers. “First, all of ye wanted to become architects, then carpenters, then upholsterers...” he said with a hint of exasperation. “And I thought ye had finally settled down when ye took over Pops’s smithy. But now yer tellin’ me ye have already *abandoned* that idea?”

“We only asked Pops to look after it while we’re outta town!” Baledos protested. “And he agreed too! Even said he could run it better’n us. Anyway, who cares ’bout that? Big bro, where’s them crystals at?” His eyes burned with determination as he said this. It seemed he *really* wanted to get his hands on some crystals.

Eldos merely shook his head. “There ain’t none left.”

“*Wh-What?! Whaddya mean?*” Baledos asked, his eyes wide with shock.

I heard Emille snickering behind me. “All the adventurers sold those crystals they got from that psycho bitch with the huge knockers.”

“No way...” Baledos breathed. “So you mean there ain’t even a single one left?”

“I reckoned some folk mighta stashed a few away, but nah. Everyone sold their share.” Eldos sighed.

“What ’bout you, big bro? Ya got some too, didn’t ya?” Baledos asked.

“Oh, puh-lease. Eldos was the first to sell his share so he could go buy booze at the drinking hall!” Emille chimed in. “He nearly emptied out their entire stock that day.”

“Then, why’d we come all the way out ’ere?” Baledos lamented as he slumped to the ground, unable to deal with the shock of this news.

Emille chuckled again, relishing the sight of Baledos’s hopes being shattered, especially after the trouble he had given her.

“Baledos, wasn’t it?” I said, addressing the sullen dwarf.

“Whaddya want, kid?” Baledos grunted.

“Eldos said that you and your brothers used to work as architects and carpenters. Is that true?” I asked him.

The reply, however, came from Eldos. “These dolts had no inclination to take over the family business. They like makin’ things, though, so they’ve been dabblin’ in all sorts: buildin’ homes, creatin’ an irrigation system in our town...” he said, then shrugged. “But they always leave things half-done.”

“Hey, c’mon, big bro! That ain’t true!” Baledos refuted. “We ain’t ever skimped on our craft! Everythin’ we make is always top-notch.”

Eldos humphed. “Compared to what Pops can do, yer work’s second-rate at best.”

“What did ya just say?!”

I decided to intervene before fists started flying again. “So you know how to build houses, then?”

“Who do ya take us for?” came the reply. “Of course we do! We can throw houses up in our sleep, kid.”

“How about inns? Can you build those?” I asked.

“Is this some kinda test or somethin’, kid?” Baledos retorted tetchily. “Who d’ya think oversaw the construction of Gemarck Castle, huh? Me, that’s who!”

I was impressed by this. “Wow, you built a *castle*?”

“Aye, that I did!”

How very interesting. Something told me we might not need to wait weeks to bring workers into Ninoritch after all...

“You guys said you wanted red magic crystals, right? Well, the adventurers might not have any left, but I know for a fact that the mayor of this town sure does,” I said.

“R-Really?! Then, what’re ya waitin’ for, kid? Go get us some! Right this instant!” Baledos urged me.

“Now, hold on a minute. Red magic crystals are rare and expensive. I can’t hand them over to you for free just because you ask for them, you know.”

“Well, what do ya want in exchange?”

That was the exact response I was hoping for. “Well, we’re planning to build some more houses and a few inns in the town, but we’re a little short of workers at the moment...” I began.

Baledos nodded. “Go on, lad.”

“And sooooo,” I said, elongating the word as far as it would go, “if you’re willing to help out with that, I *could* convince the mayor to let go of a few red magic crystals.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yup, really. I’m a merchant, you see. Once I make a deal with someone, I *never* go back on my word. So what do you say?”

Baledos and his brothers—who shall be known as “Team Dwarf” from here on out—grinned at me.

“Bring it on, kid,” Baledos said.

“Yeah, bring it on!” the rest of Team Dwarf echoed.

And just like that, I’d managed to secure the services of a team of extremely competent workers.

Chapter Eight: Patty's Training and Dramom's Return

From the following day onward, things started moving apace in Ninoritch. First, Patty started her magic training with Nesca, who sprang into action after a good fourteen-hour sleep and immediately got down to business teaching Patty how to cast the Stone Wall spell. But as enthusiastic as Patty was about learning, following instructions wasn't her strong suit, so I could only hope that Nesca wasn't tearing her hair out teaching her.

Meanwhile, Baledos and the rest of Team Dwarf had started construction on the houses. I was so glad they'd agreed to take on the job, because not only did it mean we didn't have to wait for workers to get here from Mazela to get construction underway, but Baledos and his brothers turned out to be extremely competent builders. The first step was to get timber for the houses, so we hired adventurers to go into the forest, fell some trees, then transport the wood back to town. Once that was done, one of Eldos's brothers—who was an alchemist—used his magic to dry out the wood, then processed it under the amazed gazes of the other dwarves, before they all expertly fashioned the timber into planks, beams, and various items of furniture like tables and chairs. Dwarves sure were amazing.

So in summary, Patty was off doing her magic training, the adventurers were out in the forest cutting down trees, and Team Dwarf was crafting the materials needed for the construction of the houses. But what was I doing, you might ask? Well...

“Oooh, we can fit so many inns in here!”

I had gone to check out the spot where we were planning to erect the inns. After talking it over with Karen, we had decided the best place to build them would be right on the edge of the forest to the south of the town. Of course, we hadn't actually started building yet, so there wasn't really all that much to see at the moment. It was basically just a large, empty plot of land, covered in

weeds. Speaking of the weeds, Baledos had told me that they would get in the way so we'd need to hire someone to get rid of them. I'd told him "No problem" at the time, but on seeing just how abundant they were, I was starting to get a little worried about where exactly we were going to find enough people to do the task. The entire area was so *green*, it seemed like clearing it would take forever.

"Well, I'll cross that bridge later," I muttered to myself, then focused back on what lay before me.

In a couple of months, this place would no longer be an empty field, but a bustling street with inns lined up in rows on either side. That thought was exhilarating, because it felt a bit like I was playing a city-building game.

"The inn that's gonna house the casino needs to be smack-dab in the center of the street so it stands out the most," I mused aloud. "*And* it will have to be more expensive than the others, so it has that high-class feel. Ah, I have so many ideas for it already!"

That'd look really cool, right? Just picture it: a mega-resort with a casino and an auction house inside, nestled amid inns that are kinder to the pocket. There was very little in the way of distractions in Ninoritch after all, and while tensions among the adventurers had eased to an extent since I'd started supplying the guild's drinking hall with alcohol brought over from Japan, the highest-ranked adventurers still had more money than they knew what to do with. So if a casino suddenly appeared in front of them, I was in no doubt that they'd pour absolute fortunes into it. And guess whose pockets those nice shiny coins would end up in?

I couldn't help a chuckle escaping my lips, but I quickly pulled myself together. "Get a grip, Shiro. You came here to survey the land."

I quickly wiped away the drool that had started seeping from the corners of my mouth and chased all gold coin-related thoughts out of my mind.

"There'll be a lot of people staying here, so we'll need enough drinking water for everyone."

Most of the townsfolk in Ninoritch got their water from the nearby river, but this part of town was quite far away from it, so making the round trip every day

could end up being rather tiring.

“In that case, we’ll probably have to dig a well,” I concluded as I strolled absentmindedly around the plot.

“Oh, is that you, master?” said a voice behind me.

Turning around, I saw Dramom emerging from the forest with little Suama toddling along beside her. It appeared their hunting lessons were over.

“Pa-pa!” the little dragon girl squealed, running up to me.

I spread my arms wide and she leaped into them. “Welcome back, Suama,” I said.

“Ai!”

I raised my head. “And welcome back, Dramom.”

“Master, it may only have been a few days since I departed, but I am deeply sorry for leaving your side,” Dramom said, bowing her head.

So she still hadn’t dropped that whole “master” shtick, huh?

“There’s no need to be so formal, Dramom,” I chided her. “Just say, ‘I’m back.’ I promise you that’s enough.”

“If that is your command...” She paused, looking a little awkward, then finally said, “I’m back.”

“Welcome back.”

Her lips curled ever so slightly upward at the corners.

“Pa-pa, wook! Wook!” Suama babbled in my arms.

“Hm?” I said. “What is it, Suama?”

“Wook! Wook!”

She held up what she was holding in her hands, which looked like a bunny plushie. Or so I’d thought. On closer inspection, I realized it wasn’t a plushie at all, but a *real* horned rabbit. And not only that, but there was a gaping wound in its throat, as if someone had taken a big bite out of it. So yeah, it was a very dead horned rabbit. I hadn’t been expecting this and almost screamed in horror

at the sight of it, but caught myself at the last minute. Suama looked really proud of herself, which suggested she was the one who'd caught the rabbit.

"Did good, pa-pa?" she asked, beaming at me.

I waited a few seconds before answering so I could calm myself down, then looked her straight in the eye (in part, because I was trying my hardest to keep the dead horned rabbit out of my eyeline) and set her down on the ground. "V- Very good, Suama. Very impressive. Did you catch that?"

She nodded excitedly. "Ai!"

It had been five days since Dramom had taken the little dragon girl off into the forest to learn how to hunt. This was most likely the prey from her first successful solo hunt.

"My daughter wishes to offer you the prey from her first successful solo hunt," Dramom explained, confirming my suspicions.

"What? You want me to have it?" I asked Suama, taken aback.

"Ai!"

"Well, thank you very much, Suama," I said, beaming at the little girl. "Should we have it for dinner tonight? We can all eat it together. It'll be yummier that way, don't you think?"

"Ai!"

Having gotten Suama's approval, I stowed the horned rabbit away in my inventory for later. The cooks over at the guild's drinking hall could probably whip up a delicious meal from it.

"Master, what are you doing so far out of town? And by yourself, no less," Dramom asked. She must have found it strange that I had wandered so close to the forest alone.

"We're going to be building some inns here," I explained.

"Inns?" she queried, then realization struck. "Oh! Like the place we stayed at in the capital?"

"Precisely. Inns are basically places where humes stay when they're on their

travels,” I explained. “We’re gonna be building a bunch of them here, so I came to survey the area, but...” I looked down at the weeds and sighed. “There’s still so much to do before we can even start building.”

“Is that so?” Dramom asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “We need to get rid of all these weeds and somehow find a way to get water over here. But yanking these weeds out of the ground one by one is gonna take absolutely ages, and digging a well sounds like a huge undertaking.”

Not only would weeding this entire plot take forever, it would also be backbreaking work, meaning it’d be hard to simply *find* people in good enough shape to actually do it.

I stood racking my brain for a more efficient way to get rid of the weeds, until Dramom interjected. “Master, you desire these weeds gone, yes?”

“Yeah. But there’s just so many of them. And getting rid of them will be hard work, so...”

“Please allow me to take care of it.”

Dramom’s body started to glow, and a second later, a huge dragon was standing in front of me. I let out an incredulous “Huh?” as I gazed up at her.

“Please look after my daughter for a few minutes,” the dragon said, then opened her maw wide to show the flames that were beginning to form inside her mouth.

“Huh?” I repeated ineloquently.

WHOOOOOSH! A moment later, those flames started shooting out of her mouth, and she turned her head left and right to effectively burn all of the weeds to a crisp. If anyone had seen her at that moment, they would probably have thought the town was under attack.

“Huh?” I said for the third time.

“Mama sho cool!” Suama squealed, wriggling around in my arms as she watched her mother breathing fire over the field.

“Was that satisfactory, master?” Dramom asked as she turned back toward

me. The contrast between her calm demeanor and the scorched landscape behind her was really something. “I have removed all of the weeds,” she stated.

“Th-Thank you?” I stammered, still not fully recovered from the shock.

“You said you also needed a well to be dug, correct?”

She leaned forward, placed the side of her head on the ground (presumably because that was where her ear was), and closed her eyes.

“There,” she murmured to herself after a few seconds, her eyes shooting open again. She raised her head and opened her maw for a second time, and just like before, flames formed in her mouth.

WHOOSH! Once again, she started breathing fire at the ground, though this time, she was focusing the flames on one particular spot rather than spreading them across a wide area, making it look more like a pillar of fire.

“It is done,” she declared after a few seconds of fire-breathing.

“Wh-What is? You scaring the people of Ninoritch out of their wits?”

I could hear a few people screaming in horror in the background, with their most likely next step being to run around alerting everyone that a dragon was attacking the town.

“Master, please give it a minute,” she said, ignoring my question.

I focused my gaze on the giant hole in the ground that her flames had bored. The hole was so deep, I couldn’t even see to the bottom. *Are wells really supposed to be that deep?* I asked myself, staring down into the blackness. I was so confused, it felt like my brain was having a hard time keeping up with the situation, but after a couple of seconds, a rumble could be heard from the bottom of the hole, which got louder and louder until...

“Whoa!”

With great force, a torrent of liquid surged upward out of the hole.

“Oh, wow! It wo—”

I was about to say, “It worked!” but I was interrupted by some of the water splashing on my face.

“Eep, that’s hot!” I cried. “Huh? Hold on, why is it *hot*?!”

The water shooting up out of the hole wasn’t drinking water at all. It was in fact hot spring water.

“A hot spring?” I mumbled to myself.

Dramom had tried to dig a well, but it appeared she had actually dug a hot spring instead. I glanced over at her, but she quickly whipped her face away from me, seemingly confirming that she hadn’t intended for things to turn out this way.



As I strolled back through town, I was inundated with a barrage of questions from the residents: Why was there a dragon on the outskirts of town? Had I summoned the dragon? And so on and so forth. Of course, I couldn’t tell them the truth, so I had to get a bit creative.

“A dragon suddenly appeared out of nowhere, then flew off!” I fibbed.

Unsurprisingly, no one believed me. That was fine, though, because I’d had a little conversation with Team Dwarf earlier and knew exactly how to get myself out of this situation.

“More importantly, we’ve found a hot spring and we plan to use it to build a bathhouse!” I announced.

That worked like magic. The crowd’s anger instantly dissipated and they all started clapping and shouting their praise for the dragon for this discovery. And so, with the weeds taken care of—plus the added bonus of the discovery of a hot spring—and the lumber secured and being processed, the only thing left to do before we could get started on building the inns was for Patty to learn how to cast Stone Wall. With that in mind, I decided to head over to the guild’s magic training grounds to check on her progress.



“Shiro,” Nesca said by way of greeting when I got there.

Patty was in the middle of the training grounds with a frantic look on her face as she recited an incantation. As I’d predicted, she seemed to be struggling to

learn the spell.

“Hey, Nesca. How’s it going?” I asked, gesturing toward Patty.

“I’ve taught her the spell. She just needs to practice now.”

“I see. Thanks, Nesca. I’ll stay with the boss while she’s training, so you can head back to the guild if you like. I’m sure Raiya’s missing you,” I teased.

“Okay. I’m counting on you, Shiro,” Nesca said as she departed, leaving Patty and me alone in the training grounds.

“Oh, Shiro! I didn’t see you there,” the little fairy said, finally noticing me.

“Yeah, I just got here,” I explained.

Patty hummed. “H-Hey, Shiro. I’m gonna train all night.”

She wants to pull an all-nighter to learn this spell as soon as possible, huh? That’s very cool of you, boss! Of course, most mages wouldn’t be able to train all night long, because they’d run out of mana way before the sun rose again, but Patty was different in that she had a “seal,” which meant her mana pool was pretty much bottomless. She could train for as long as she wished—or at least, until she was too tired to keep going—and on this particular day, she seemed determined to spend all night working on her magic. I probably wasn’t going to be able to convince her otherwise even if I tried, so I simply shrugged at the suggestion.

“Sure, boss. But I’m gonna stay with you the entire time,” I told her. “And today’s the only day you’re allowed to push yourself so hard, you hear?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to stay,” the little fairy said.

“Compared to how hard you’re working, just staying here with you is nothing,” I pointed out. “Besides, won’t you get hungry if you stay up all night? I can fix up dinner for you at least.”

“S-Suit yourself,” she said, then added, “Thanks, Shiro.”

“I told you, it’s nothing.”

The little fairy seemed to hesitate momentarily, before asking, “Could you do something for me, then?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Can you go tell Aina and Stella that I won’t be home tonight? If I don’t let them know, they’ll wait up all night for me.”

“Sure thing, boss,” I replied. “I’ll go pass the message on right away.”

“Th-Thanks, Shiro!”

“There’s no need to thank me, boss,” I said with a grin before spinning on my heels and heading out of the training grounds.

Looking back over my shoulder, I saw that Patty had gone back to reciting the incantation with a serious look on her face. She was working so, so hard for a town that wasn’t even her birthplace. My little boss sure was the coolest.

Chapter Nine: Reminiscences

“Oh, I see. So Patty won’t be home tonight,” Stella said once I’d told her the news while standing on her doorstep.

It was around eight in the evening by this point, and Aina the early bird was already fast asleep.

“Aina was waiting for her to come home, but she drifted off,” Stella explained, a fond smile lighting up her face.

I chuckled. “She must’ve been a bit lonely, huh? After all, the two of them are always together.”

“She was,” Stella confirmed with a nod. “So Peace is keeping her company tonight.”

Peace was a little black kitten who served as grandma’s familiar. It seemed Aina had decided to snuggle up with him since Patty hadn’t come home. *I get you, Aina. Having a warm, fluffy pet to hug at night always helps me to sleep better too.*

“Mr. Shiro, I’m going to prepare some dinner for Patty. Would you mind taking it to her?” Stella asked.

“Are you sure?” I said. “I was just about to go fix up something for her myself.”

An embarrassed chuckle escaped Stella’s lips. “I’d assumed she was eating with us tonight, so I ended up making too much food for just Aina and me.”

“I see. In that case, you’re right: she’d better accept her responsibility and eat every last crumb!”

“Come in and have a seat while I get everything ready.”

Stella ushered me into the living room and I sat down at the dining table complete with four chairs that I’d given to them when they moved into the house.

“I’m going to heat up the food now,” Stella announced from the kitchen a couple of meters away, before turning on the stove and placing a pot full of meat stew over the fire.

On seeing the delicious-looking stew, my stomach let out an embarrassing growl, and I instantly turned beet red. “S-Sorry about that.”

“Oh, gosh. Are you hungry? Would you like some?” Stella offered.

“Well, if you don’t mind. I actually haven’t eaten dinner yet either. I’m *starving*.”

After all, I’d spent all of my time that day dealing with the commotion Dramom had caused by turning into a dragon in town, which had relegated eating dinner to the very bottom of my list of priorities. All I’d really had time to eat was one of those meal replacement bars I’d bought at the convenience store back in Japan. I suddenly recalled the horned rabbit Suama had given me and made a mental note to give it to the guild’s cooks the following day so they could prepare it for us.

“It’ll be ready in a few minutes,” Stella said.

“Take as much time as you need.”

Stella started humming quietly as she stirred the stew. Through her door, which was open a crack, I could see Aina sound asleep in her bedroom.

“Aina’s gotten a little taller recently, hasn’t she?” I commented absentmindedly.

“You noticed that too?” Stella asked me.

She couldn’t turn around because she was too busy reheating the stew, but I could tell from her tone that she was smiling to herself. For a mother, seeing her child growing up must truly be a happy experience.

“Ever since you hired her to work in your shop, she’s been able to eat a lot more than before. It must be why she’s been growing up so fast these past few months. She’s gained some weight recently too.”

“Now that you mention it, she does look a little rounder than when I first met her. Though I mean that in the best possible way, of course.”

Stella nodded. “She’s heavier to carry now, but she still keeps pestering me for piggyback rides...” She sighed.

That came as a bit of a shock. “Really? She’s been asking for piggyback rides?”

Stella mumbled a quiet “Ah...” as if she hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “Oh, whoops. She begged me to keep that a secret from you. Please don’t tell her I said that. She’ll be really mad at me.”

I couldn’t help chuckling at this. “I’ll pretend you never told me.”

Stella must have been somewhat amused by my response, for she giggled softly. A comfortable silence enveloped us for a little while, with the only sound in the room coming from the wooden spoon stirring the stew.

“I wish...” Stella mumbled quietly. “I wish *he* could have seen her grow up too.”

“Stella...”

“Sorry, Mr. Shiro. It’s just...” She paused. “You remind me so much of him,” she said, her voice trembling softly as if she’d been hesitating to mention it. She paused again for a few more moments before saying, “Mr. Shiro?”

“Yes?” I said.

“Could I talk to you for a little bit? About him, I mean.”

“Of course you can. I’m all ears.”

“Thank you, Mr. Shiro. In that case, I’ll tell you more about him.”

She took the pot off the heat, grabbed a large plate, and filled it with stew right to the edge, then set it down in front of me along with a spoon.

“This might be a bit boring, so feel free to eat up while I’m babbling on,” she said as she took a seat opposite me. “Mr. Shiro, do you know about the meteor festival?”

I nodded. “Yeah, Aina told me about it a couple of days ago. It’s a night where everyone gathers together to watch a whole load of shooting stars streak across the sky, right?”

“Since Aina had to tell you about it, I take it that means it doesn’t exist where

you come from?”

“Well, we *do* have shooting stars, but we don’t have a specific festival where everyone comes out and watches them together, no.”

“I see.”

“Karen told me this event is also called the Tears of the Sky,” I recalled. “She said it only happens once every two hundred years. I wonder what it’ll be like. It’s exciting, isn’t it?”

Stella chuckled. “Yes, very much so. Aina and I are both looking forward to it.”

“I can see why.”

She grinned at me and closed her eyes. “He...” she started softly. “He was also looking forward to the Tears of the Sky.”

I didn’t know how to answer that, so I remained silent.

“He kept going on about how excited he was to see those shooting stars, and how glad he was to have been born in a century where he could witness them,” she continued. “He was always asking me what kind of wish the three of us should make.”

She opened her eyes and gazed at the sleeping Aina in the other room.

“Aina was very little at the time, so she probably doesn’t remember any of it, but the day he first told her about the meteor festival, she refused to go to bed and kept saying, ‘Meteor festival! Meteor festival!’ over and over again.”

“She’s been looking forward to it for a good number of years, huh?” I said softly.

“She has. So have I. And...” She paused again. “So did he. Out of everyone, he was the most excited about it.”

Once again, I decided it was best to stay silent.

“Mr. Shiro, did you know that shooting stars apparently carry the souls of the dead and return them to the earth so that they can be reborn in the future?” Stella said.

“So the souls of the departed ascend to the heavens, then return to the earth

with the shooting stars, huh?" I said.

"That was beautiful. You're something of a poet, aren't you, Mr. Shiro?" Stella said, chuckling. "They say that countless shooting stars will dart across the sky during the Tears of the Sky. We send lanterns up into the sky when it's over, so the stars don't feel lonely after seeing so many of their friends leaving them."

"That must be a beautiful sight," I remarked.

"Oh, it's *definitely* going to be beautiful!" Stella affirmed. Her breathing had gotten a little erratic, just like Aina's did whenever she got excited. "I'm currently making lanterns that Aina and I can launch into the sky after the festival. After all, we have to thank the stars for returning him to us."

Tears started to well up in her eyes.

"At least, I hope he'll come back. If he does..." She hesitated. "If he does, will he be reincarnated? What kind of person will he be in his next life?"

She brought a finger up to her eyes and wiped away the tears that had gathered there, but they were so numerous, a couple still managed to tumble down her cheeks.

"I don't mind if he's a different person," she mumbled quietly. "All I want... All I want is to see him one last time."

My heart ached as she said these words.

Chapter Ten: Real-Life City Building

Patty trained relentlessly under Nesca's guidance and her spell-casting improved with each passing day, until on the tenth day, her efforts finally bore fruit.

"Watch this, Shiro!" she urged, before groaning in a way that suggested she was trying to draw up every bit of mana she had in her body. "Stone Wall!" she yelled.

A large stone partition approximately four meters high, three meters wide and thirty centimeters thick instantly shot up out of the compacted soil in the middle of the guild's magic training grounds.

"What do you think? Good, right? Right?" the little fairy asked excitedly.

"That was *amazing*, boss!" I replied. "That wall's perfect, isn't it?" I said to Nesca, who was standing beside me.

She nodded. "Yes, it's very good. You've mastered the spell in an impressively short amount of time."

Yay! You got the Nesca seal of approval, Patty!

"See all the things I can do when I put in some serious effort?" Patty gloated, her little chest swelling with pride.

I walked over to the wall and tested its firmness by banging my fist against it a couple of times. "It really is impressive. It seems so sturdy," I remarked. "We can definitely build houses with this, right?"

"To be honest with you, I never thought it would turn out quite that good," Nesca said, lightly fingering the wall before giving it a good hard whack with her staff. "Even most court magicians aren't able to make a wall *this* sturdy."

On hearing Nesca's effusive praise, Patty's face lit up.

"Well, my job here is done. I'm leaving her in your hands now, Shiro," Nesca said, then she headed off back to the guildhall, most likely to resume her work

on translating the mysterious grimoire the adventurers had recovered from those ruins.

“What are you waiting for, Shiro? Let’s go build these houses for the refugees!” the little fairy urged.

“You’ve just pulled a series of all-nighters to master that spell. Aren’t you tired at all?” I asked her.

“Me? Tired? Pfft! That was *nothing*!”

The endorphins of finally mastering the spell and receiving praise from her teacher, coupled with the excitement of being able to use her powers in service of Eren’s town, had made her forget all about the fatigue she was clearly feeling. The bags under her eyes were so dark, I was afraid she might pass out at any moment, but she still insisted on building the houses right that very minute.

I couldn’t bring myself to rain on her parade when she was in such a good mood, so I acquiesced and nodded gently. “Sure thing, boss. Let’s start work on the houses for the refugees. But we’ll only build one for the time being, okay? That should be enough to give us an idea of what we’re working with.”

The little fairy tilted her head to one side in confusion. “Just one? But I can make more!”

“I’m sure you can. But for now, we should stick with one so we can ask Baledos and the others what they think about it. Then, once we’ve taken their opinions into account, we can make even better houses starting tomorrow. After all, we want the refugees to have the best houses possible to live in, don’t we?”

“O-Oh, yeah, you have a point!” Patty conceded. “Fine, let’s start with one.”

I didn’t want to crush her spirits entirely, but that didn’t mean I was about to let her work herself to the point of sheer exhaustion either, so I’d come up with that excuse to ensure she would take it easy for the time being.

“Hurry up, Shiro!”

“Yes, yes, coming.”

“Stella says you should only say ‘yes’ once when you’re told to do something!” the little fairy chided me.

And so, the two of us headed over to the southern part of town where Patty could test her newly acquired house-building skills.



Thanks to the chainsaws I’d brought over from Japan, the lumbering was going really smoothly. The adventurers—*especially* the warriors—seemed to greatly approve of their new tools, felling tree after tree in record time, and I’d even overheard one of them tell another adventurer, “If you agree to help that merchant called Shiro over there, he’ll give you this magic sword that makes a noise like the cry of a monster. It’s an amazing weapon! It can cut through trees like they’re *nothing*!”

Thanks to these rumors, more and more people had shown up, begging me to hire them. Of course, I wasn’t about to refuse the help so I’d immediately popped back to Japan to buy a few more chainsaws. Listening to a few of the conversations when I came back, it seemed a few of the adventurers were planning on forming a party of chainsaw wielders for their next expedition into the forest. *Maybe I should get them some hockey masks too, to complete the slasher movie look*, I mused.

The guild’s mages and alchemists dried and processed the lumber, while Team Dwarf sawed it up into planks. By this time, the workers from Mazela I had asked Zidan to send to Ninoritch had arrived and we could finally start building the inns and other large-scale buildings I had in mind. It was now Patty’s time to shine with her newly acquired—or more accurately, newly *mastered*—Stone Wall spell.

“Hey, Patty! Need a wall ‘ere!” Baledos called over.

“Stone Wall!” the little fairy chanted.

“Now, one ‘ere!”

“Stone Wall!”

“Then, three over ‘ere!”

“Stone Wall! Stone Wall! Stone Wall!”

Patty conjured wall after wall under Baledos’s direction, sometimes making four in one go and forming a room out of them, sometimes only causing three to sprout up from the ground for a more “open plan” feel, and sometimes elongating the walls to make larger houses that were more family-sized. With all of the Stone Walls she had been casting, her control of the spell had gotten even better, and a few weeks into the construction effort, she could even create walls with holes in them that could serve as windows. Though now that I thought about it, that didn’t make a whole lot of sense. After all, Stone Wall was a defensive spell, so why would having *more* control over it mean you could fill them with *holes*? It was a trait of questionable usage, to say the least, but hey, it was great for building houses, so I wasn’t about to complain.

And that was how the process continued: Patty created outside walls according to Baledos’s instructions, conjured up some internal walls to create the rooms, and then, once the house was all ready, the artisans got to work on the interior. Houses were popping up one after another, and it wasn’t long before it was time to start on the inns. We discovered that we could use Patty’s Stone Wall spell to create drainage and irrigation channels, and this allowed us to build a fully functional bathhouse. Aina and Karen—who had jumped at the chance to sample Mazela’s bathhouses during our trip there—were beside themselves with excitement, claiming they’d be taking baths in it every day. Then it was soon time to tackle the high-class mega-inn of my dreams, which would hopefully become the town’s future main attraction.

“Boss, are you ready?”

“I was born ready! Stooone Waaall!” the little fairy yelled as walls taller than any she had made before sprung up out of the ground under the watchful gaze of Baledos, who was the self-appointed site foreman.

At first, we had planned on making it a five-story building, but after a few tweaks, we’d settled on seven. When finished, it would be the tallest building in Ninoritch by quite some margin. Patty built everything with her magic, from the foundations and the interior walls to the floor and even the stairs, while Baledos took charge of the design of the interior. As for me, I stood on the sidelines, drool seeping out of the corners of my mouth as I daydreamed about

the pile of gold coins it would make. Karen even graced us with her presence occasionally, whenever she wasn't too busy with work.

And at last, exactly one month after construction had begun, the houses for the refugees, the public bathhouse, and my new (hopefully successful) business endeavor in the form of the mega-inn of my dreams—with a casino, an auction hall, and a large, luxurious bathroom inside—were all complete and ready to serve their respective purposes.

“Let's go!” Patty and I yelled into the clear skies above Ninoritch.

Chapter Eleven: The Arrivals

The days and weeks flew by and it was soon time to welcome the refugees to Ninoritch. Stella and I were waiting at the entrance to the town for their arrival.

“Look, Mr. Shiro. They’re here.”

I nodded. “Yep, looks like.”

A line of covered wagons was slowly making its way toward the little town, seemingly driven by armored guards. Knights, perhaps? I couldn’t help but be impressed by the consideration Lord Bashure, the earl of the region, was showing to these refugees. After all, they weren’t his citizens—they weren’t even from the same nation—yet he had provided them with an armed retinue, most likely formed of his own soldiers.

“Mama, do I look weird?” Aina asked as she fussed over her appearance.

“Not at all. You look adorable, Aina,” Stella replied, treating her to a soft smile which drew an excited giggle from the little girl.

From what Lord Bashure had told Karen in his letter, a lot of the refugees who were being sent to Ninoritch were children. These poor kids had been forced to leave behind their entire lives and move to a completely unknown town in a nation that wasn’t even theirs. We figured they must be terrified, so we’d brought Aina along to welcome them in the hopes that seeing another child would help to reassure them, even if only slightly. While we were at it, we had also asked Stella to join us to guide the refugees a little based on her own experiences of moving to another nation alone with a child and little more than the clothes on their backs. I had been incredibly nervous about this moment at first, but having Stella and Aina by my side to welcome the refugees had helped to ease some of my worries.

Over the past two months, we had done everything we could to prepare for this day. Patty and Team Dwarf had built the houses and the inns, and Karen had organized many, *many* information sessions to let the townsfolk know

about the situation surrounding the upcoming arrival of the refugees, because after all, the town would be welcoming two hundred people all in one go. Sure, most of these would be children, but Karen still wanted to prevent any potential trouble from arising. As such, whenever she wasn't busy with her work duties, no matter what time of day that was, she had organized meeting after meeting. Thanks to that—or perhaps *because* the citizens of Ninoritch were descended from pioneers themselves—public opinion was very much in favor of welcoming these refugees into the town. It turned out that living life in the slow lane out in the countryside made people kinder overall. Then again, adventurers had been steadily moving into the town over the past few months, so what was a couple hundred more people on top?

I was suddenly dragged out of my musings back to reality when the lead wagon stopped right in front of us.

“Heya, Shiro! It’s been a while,” said a dashing young knight with blond hair and blue eyes.

“Oh! It’s Mister Duane!” Aina exclaimed beside me.

“Yep, that’s me,” he confirmed. “Remember me, Shiro? Duane Lestard.”

Of course I remembered him. He was the man who had escorted us to Mazela. It had been a good three months since I’d last seen him.

“Whoa, Duane! It’s been such a long time! How are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m doing good. Thanks for asking. You seem to be doing well too. That’s great.” He hopped down from the wagon and we shook hands.

“I’m surprised to see knights driving the wagons,” I said.

“That was my idea. I figured the refugees would feel more at ease if we accompanied them, so I suggested it to Lord Bashure and he approved,” Duane explained, punctuating his sentence with a little wink.

He hadn’t changed one bit. He was a gentleman through and through, and if I were a woman, I would probably have been swooning by this point in the conversation.

“By the way, Shiro, do you know where Miss Sankareka is?” Duane asked.

“Karen’s over in the town square. She’s waiting for the refugees there.”

“I see. Thanks. Well, we’ll walk from here, I guess,” he said before turning around and gesturing to the other knights, who nodded and opened the covers on their wagons. “We’ve arrived, everyone!” Duane announced. “You can come out now.”

One by one and with the knights helping them down, the refugees alighted from the wagons.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina gasped in shock beside me as she took in the scene in front of her.

She was speechless and so was I. We’d already known that a good chunk of the refugees would be children, but I hadn’t thought they’d be *quite* so young. Most of them were clearly under ten and many seemed even younger than Aina. As we watched them descend from the wagons, I noticed a young boy patting another, much smaller child on the back and telling him that everything was going to be fine. It seemed the few children who were over ten were acting as the leaders of the group, looking after and reassuring the younger ones, who clung to them in fear and apprehension.

“Shiro, we’re entrusting these children to you. They’ve lost everything: parents, siblings, friends, homes, and even their hometown. I trust you’ll be kind to them,” Duane said to me, a serious look on his face.

“Don’t worry. That has been Karen’s intention all along, and mine too. We’ve spent the last two months doing everything we can to ensure these children will feel welcome here. Karen’s pushed herself so hard, she’s even lost weight,” I said.

“Thank you. Lord Bashure knew you two would do everything you could for these children. That’s why he entrusted them to you.”

Well, well. It seemed Aina’s theory had been right all along.

“Why are you smiling?” Duane said.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I replied, shaking my head. “Well, anyway, I’m gonna take these children over to the town square, so—”

“E-Excuse me!” a little voice piped up, interrupting me.

I turned and saw a girl of about twelve looking up at me. “Who, me?” I said, rather ineloquently.

She nodded firmly. I noticed there were two little kids standing on either side of her—one boy, one girl, both around four or five years old. A glance at their faces was enough to tell me they were all siblings.

“U-Um, my lord!” the older girl started.

“‘My lord’?” I repeated, slightly taken aback by being addressed like this.

But the girl ignored my confusion and continued. “My lord! P-Please accept this offering!” she said, holding out her hands to reveal a red pendant on a chain resting across her palms.

“Uh, what’s going on?” I asked in total bewilderment at the situation.

But again, the girl paid no attention to my bafflement, instead dropping to her knees and holding the pendant out toward me. “This pendant belonged to my mother,” she said in a trembling voice. “I-I’ve heard it’s very valuable. It looks like you’re someone important in this town, my lord, s-so...” She paused and looked up at me with big, imploring eyes. “So I’m giving it to you, and in exchange...” She hesitated momentarily, but her resolve quickly solidified again. “In exchange, please look after my brother and sister!”

I was so taken aback, I had no idea what to say.

“They’re too young to work,” she explained. “But I’ll work hard enough for all three of us, I promise! I’ll work really, *really* hard! I don’t even need to sleep!”

This girl must have come to the conclusion that I was an important figure in Ninoritch after seeing me chatting away to Duane.

“That’s your mother’s pendant, you said?” I queried.

“Y-Yes! It’s...” She paused and corrected herself. “I’ve been told it’s very valuable.”

I nodded. “It is,” I said softly.

Her face lit up. “So does that mean you’ll—” she started, but I wasn’t finished.

“After all, it’s a memento of your mother,” I interrupted her. “You shouldn’t give a valuable treasure like this to anyone else, you hear?”

“Wh-What?” It was the girl’s turn to be confused.

I chuckled and gently patted her on the head. “You don’t need to worry about your brother and sister. Or yourself, for that matter. You’ll be well looked after here. I promise.”

“He’s right,” Stella chimed in, flashing the girl a warm smile. “I’m a mother too, you see, and believe me when I say that your mom wouldn’t want you to part with that pendant. She would want you to keep it close to your heart.”

The girl’s eyes shimmered with tears as she struggled to speak. “B-But we lost everything, and—”

“No, you didn’t,” Stella interrupted her gently.

“Huh?” the girl said breathlessly, her teary gaze fixed on the older woman.

“Can you tell me your name?” Stella said.

The girl seemed to hesitate for a few moments. “It’s Nina.”

“That’s a pretty name. Did your mom choose it?”

“No, my dad.”

“Ah, I see.”

The girl nodded, causing a couple of tears to tumble from her eyes.

Stella gently wrapped her arms around the girl. “You haven’t lost everything, Nina. The love of your parents and the moments you shared will always be with you. Not to mention, you still have the pendant your mother left to you. So don’t ever say you’ve lost everything, okay?”

The dam broke, and the tears Nina had been holding back spilled from her eyes as sobs racked her body.

“There, there,” Stella said, comforting her by rubbing her back. “It was very scary, I know. But you’re safe now. Everyone in this town is super nice, I promise.”

“R-Really?” Nina asked.

“Really. My daughter and I moved here from another country too, and the people have been nothing but kind to us,” Stella confirmed.

“But...” Nina sniffled. “I don’t have any money. How am I supposed to feed my brother and sister?”

“No need to worry about that, Nina!” Aina piped up in a voice loud enough that everyone could hear her. “Mister Shiro and Miss Karen have built houses for everyone! And they’ll give you food too!” Her chest was rising and falling rapidly and her breathing had become erratic. “They have jobs lined up for you too! Easy jobs that even kids can do! And there are people here who’ll gladly look after the really little children while you work!”

All of the children looked at her in utter bewilderment. Still, her words seemed to have sparked something in them, since the faintest glimmer of hope had appeared in their eyes. Just then, a man—one of the adult refugees—made his way through the crowd toward us.

“Hey, girlie, are there jobs for us too?” the man asked.

Just one look at him was enough to understand why he had asked that question, for he only had one arm. A little over half of the refugees were children, while the remaining few, for the most part, were either elderly or had suffered severe injuries.

“So?” the man pressed. “Do you have work for a guy like me who’s only got one arm?”

“Uh...” Aina said, hesitating.

The man clearly wasn’t expecting Aina to say yes to his question. He was simply being cynical, perhaps as a result of losing a limb. Judging by the looks on all of their faces, the other adult refugees were in a similar state. They had all lost hope.

I decided this was a good moment to step in. “We do, in fact,” I replied confidently.

The man spat on the ground. “How would *you* know? You’re not the one who’s lost an arm,” he growled, glaring at me. “Do you expect me to swing a hoe with only one hand?”

“Well, of course not,” I replied. “I expect you to swing a hoe with *both* hands.”

The man’s glare intensified. “Can you even hear yourself right now? What the hell are you thinking?”

“Don’t worry, I know *exactly* what I’m saying.” I paused and produced a two-liter plastic bottle filled with a transparent liquid from my inventory. “But first, I’d like all of you to drink some of this.”

“What the hell is *that*?” the man muttered. “Poison? Do you plan on killing all of us so you don’t have to deal with us staying in your town? Is that it?”

“Of course not. What kind of monster do you take me for?” I said. “This bottle contains a healing potion of sorts. I was just thinking how tired you must all be after such a long trip. This will help you get some of your strength back.”

I twisted the lid off the plastic bottle and poured some of its contents into a paper cup I’d prepared in advance.

“Here. Please have some,” I offered, handing the cup to the man, but he simply glared at it in silence. “Oh, c’mon, you don’t *actually* think I’m trying to poison you, do you? Are you scared or something?”

“O-Of course not! I ain’t scared of nothing! I’ll drink it up, all right!” the man said before downing it in one go.

The effect was instantaneous.

“H-Huh? What the hell’s going on?” the man said as he felt his body changing, and a second later, a new arm had sprouted to replace his severed limb.

“Impossible! Is that a Full Potion? No, wait. An elixir?!” Duane gasped, his gaze darting from the man’s regrown arm to me and back again. “Shiro, what *is* that?”

I chuckled. “I just said, didn’t I? It’s a healing potion. More or less.”

To make this so-called “healing potion,” I’d diluted some of Dramom’s saliva in water, knowing that her bodily fluids had the ability to heal any ailment, no matter how serious. The refugees had fled to Ninoritch after their town was attacked by monsters, so in anticipation that some would arrive here injured, I’d asked Dramom to help me prepare this special concoction.

“K-Kid, what did you...” the man started but his voice gave out midsentence, as he was still too stunned to form coherent sentences.

“See? Now you *can* swing a hoe. And with both hands! Unless you don’t want to, that is. We have a lot of other jobs available. We’ll have an explanatory meeting about all that when things have settled a bit, so rest assured, you’ll know everything there is to know shortly.”

“Thank you, kid,” the man said. “And sorry for my behavior just now.” He grabbed his newly regrown arm and hung his head as tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Well, you all saw the effects of the potion,” I said to the other refugees. “If any of you are injured or unwell, just let me know and I’ll gladly give you some of it too. It’ll make you better in no time!”

Thanks to Dramom’s saliva, the refugees were soon free of all illnesses and injuries.



“Nice to meet you, everyone. My name is Karen and I’m the mayor of this town.”

After everyone had taken a swig of the “healing potion,” we ushered the refugees toward the town square, where Karen was due to deliver a speech to a crowd made up of newcomers and residents of the town alike. All of the refugees—adults and children alike—gawked at their surroundings, but as soon as Karen started talking, all eyes were on her.

“This town is quite far from other towns and the trip here must have been exhausting, but I’m here to tell you that your struggles are over. You’re safe here, I promise,” Karen said to the crowd from the raised platform she was standing on. “A new life in a new country. I can only imagine how daunting that must feel. But rest assured, everything is going to be fine. We have already prepared accommodation and jobs for all of you, and we plan to hand out 20 silver Giruam coins to each and every one of you so that you can get by until you start working.”

I heard a few people gasp at this information, which wasn’t a huge surprise

because most of the refugees had come to Ninoritch with nothing but the clothes on their backs, so knowing they were going to receive money to get them settled in must have been a huge weight off their shoulders.

“Most of you have probably lost someone very dear to you due to the situation in Hyord, and I am very sorry about that. I know things might seem desperate, but hope remains. The Tears of the Sky meteor festival is almost upon us. On that day, the souls of your loved ones will return to the earth with the shooting stars.”

Karen paused and surveyed the audience’s reaction to this. I noticed quite a few of them were teary-eyed, which wasn’t too surprising because the meteor festival was a special day for a lot of people, after all. Oh, by the way, if the wording Karen just used sounds familiar at all, it’s because Stella had liked my wording so much when we chatted about it that she’d suggested Karen use it in her speech. Not gonna lie, I was tickled pink by the compliment.

“I hereby invite you all to join us in waiting for the day of the meteor festival, when we will celebrate the souls of our loved ones returning to us together.”

Those words seemed to really move some of the refugees, and they started weeping. In fact, a wave of emotion tore through the crowd like an epidemic and it wasn’t long before all of the children and most of the adults had tears streaming down their faces.

“Lastly, allow me to greet you on behalf of all of the citizens in this town. Welcome to Ninoritch,” Karen said, concluding her speech.

Claps and cheers arose from the townsfolk.

Chapter Twelve: Opening Day

A few days passed. The refugees were settling in and most of them had already started their new jobs. But this day was a very special day.

“Sorry for the wait, everyone! I know you’ve all been waiting impatiently for this day to come,” I announced.

It was time at last for Ninoritch’s new attractions to open all at once: the inns, the public bathhouse, and last but not least...

“I hereby declare Ninoritch’s first-ever casino open for business!”



The entire top floor of the high-end inn at the center of this newly built part of town was dedicated to the casino. The whole place had a luxurious feel to it, thanks to Team Dwarf's craftsmanship and the ideas contributed by my little sisters, Shiori and Saori, who had suggested installing large windows all around so you could gaze out and enjoy the scenery, no matter what time of day it was. I personally found the sun setting behind the mountains at the end of the day particularly mesmerizing. We'd also bought a bunch of well-known sculptures—or well, replicas—that we had arranged around the place to give an even classier air to the casino.

I had a bunch of adventurers lined up in front of me, eager to find out what this casino thing was all about.

"Okay, let me explain the rules of the casino to you," I said. "First of all, you'll need these things called chips, which you can buy inside the casino. Then..."

Ninoritch was a town with very little in the way of entertainment, and while I had managed to temporarily stem the adventurers' boredom by selling alcohol and sweets from Japan over at the guild's drinking hall, most of them were already itching for new things to spend their money on. I'd overheard them complaining more and more about how the town was as dull as dishwater whenever I swung by the guild, so needless to say, they all had incredibly high expectations for my newest business endeavor.

"Anyway, that's the gist of it. Additionally, for the first three days of business, entry to the casino is free *and* I've made the exchange rate for chips three times cheaper! Yes, *three* times! So I definitely recommend using this opportunity to try your hand at gambling, even if you're not really that interested in it, because who knows? You might actually enjoy it!"

A chorus of cheers erupted from the assembled adventurers.

"And that's not all! Drinks and food are on the house for the first three days too! I've made sure to stock the place with snacks like burgers and chicken nuggets for your convenience, and there's plenty of booze too."

More cheers went up. I was starting to enjoy myself with this impromptu call and response.

“Oh, but take care, you hear? If any of my very, *veeery* scary bouncers catch you enjoying all the free food and drinks without taking part in any of the games, they’ll throw you out without any hesitation.”

This drew a few amused chuckles from the crowd.

“All righty, everyone. I hereby invite all of you to Ninoritch’s first-ever casino! Please enjoy yourselves to your hearts’ content!” I said as I swung open the large double doors.

With one final cheer, the adventurers made a beeline for the exchange counters with their silver coins in hand. I even spotted a few exchanging gold coins for chips. The casino offered all sorts of activities, from card games like baccarat, poker, and blackjack to dice games like sic bo and macao. And of course, who could forget the most iconic of all casino games, roulette? I’d shown a toy roulette wheel to Baledos and his brothers, and they had managed to create several full-sized replicas in just three days. Speaking of which, the cards we were using were also custom-made; Shiori had designed them and I’d sent them to a specialized manufacturer to print them off for us. I was actually really excited about them. Sure, I’d had to spend around a hundred thousand yen on a new laptop for Shiori, plus some art software so she could design them, but I didn’t regret it in the slightest. I *totally* didn’t, okay? *It’s all right, Shiro*, I told myself. *The past is in the past.*

Anyway, back to the casino. To fill the roles of the dealers, I’d hired some of the adult refugees as well as workers that my good friend, Zidan, the Eternal Promise’s guildmaster, had recommended to me. Rule books were placed on every game table and I’d trained my staff so that they knew it all by heart, since they’d be the ones teaching the customers how to play.

“I’m still not sure I get the rules of this game, but I’ll bet five chips on it!” I heard one adventurer announce at one of the game tables.

“In that case, I’ll put down ten!”

“We just gotta predict the outcome of the dice roll, right? Piece of cake! I’m betting twenty chips!”

Adventurers were rumored to be quite free with their money, yet a lot of them had amassed a substantial fortune due to the lack of entertainment

available in town. They would probably end up spending an awful lot in this casino. Thirty percent of the profits—after deducting the wages of the staff and the cost of the prizes, naturally—would go to the town, and everything else would end up in the pocket of yours truly. I’d injected a substantial amount of funds into this project, so I was really, *really* hoping it wouldn’t turn out to be a flop.

“Whoa, I won! I won!”

“Damn it, I lost! One more time!”

“Ten chips on twenty! This time, I won’t lose!”

Who was I kidding? Judging by the crowd’s reaction, there was no way it could be anything but a resounding success.



On the floor below, Emille’s voice echoed around the large auction hall. “Our next item is a dazzling piece: a magic sword recovered from the depths of a set of ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era!”

A collective murmur of appreciation rippled through the crowd.

“This sword is enchanted with fire magic,” Emille said, continuing her pitch. “Whatever the blade touches becomes engulfed in searing flames. This, ladies and gents, is a rare gem for sure. I daresay that most of you will never lay eyes on a treasure like this again! Renowned knights and even nobles would fight each other to get their mitts on this weapon. Wanna shine in combat but you don’t have the skills? Well, this baby’s your golden ticket to glory! So who’s interested? The bidding starts at 20 gold coins!”

“22 here!”

“25!”

“I bid 30 gold coins!”

“Then I’ll bid 32!”

I’d appointed Emille as the auctioneer for one simple reason: she was *extremely* good at messing with people’s heads, perhaps due to her innate talent for provoking people. Even sly old merchants were no match for her.

“I’ve got 40 gold coins over there! Do I hear 42? No? Aw, c’mon. Don’t tell me your wallets are empty *already*. I mean, there’s no way that’s true, right? Oh, unless all you’ve got left now is copper coins? But why would you come to an auction hall if you’re so poor?” she drawled as if bored.

“Tch! That brat...” grumbled one bidder. “Fine, 42!”

“43!”

Bids had been flying in left and right all evening long, with extremely few items going for less than one gold coin. This was because most of the attendees were rich merchants who were very, *very* susceptible to Emille’s provocations, and she basically had them all wrapped around her finger, ensuring that most of the items ended up selling for way more than their real value. Just like the casino on the floor above, the auction hall was a resounding success. At present, the plan was to host one auction every five days, which would work out to a total of six a month. At the end of each auction, we would release a catalog detailing everything that would be up for grabs in the next one, so that all the merchants would feel compelled to stay in Ninoritch lest they miss out on some rare items. As for the money side of things, the plan was for ten percent of the profits from the auctions to go into a town fund, while another ten percent would go to the Fairy’s Blessing for authenticating all of the lots. Everything else would end up in the pockets of the adventurers who had put the items up for auction.

With the auction hall now up and running, the merchants would hopefully stop harassing Ney at the guild, which meant she would finally be able to focus her full attention toward her duties without worrying about constant interference.



The fifth, fourth, third, and second floors of the mega-inn were dedicated exclusively to guest rooms, while the first floor was where you would find the reception desk, the restaurant, and the large bath. But that wasn’t all, because there was also a basement.

“Why did I become an adventurer, you ask? Well, that’s easy: all you need is a sword and you can reach the top of the world!”

Raiya's face was being projected onto a large screen, his voice resonating around the room. Chairs had been arranged in a semicircle in front of the screen, with each row slightly raised compared to the one in front of it so that it resembled a staircase of sorts.

"Being an adventurer means risking death on every quest," Raiya continued up on the screen. "But someone's gotta help out folk who are in trouble, right? That's the kind of person I wanna become."

Murmurs of awe ran through the audience.

I'm sure you've all figured out what's going on in this scene by now. I'd reused the screen and projector I'd bought previously to turn the basement of the inn into a makeshift movie theater, with everything being powered by a high-capacity portable generator, and the audience was composed of Ninoritch natives for the most part. The casino and auction hall were great additions, for sure, but since they were geared toward adventurers and merchants respectively, I'd realized there was still a shortage of entertainment for the masses. At first, I'd planned to turn the basement of the inn into a regular theater, but when I realized how long it would take to find actors and musicians to perform in it—especially since I had no connections of that kind—I'd decided to shelve that idea for the time being. Instead, I'd tried to think of something the adventurers could be involved with and had come up with the idea of shooting some amateur movies.

The movie that was showing on opening night was titled: *The Blue Flash Party vs. the Murder Grizzly*. A couple of weeks back, I'd asked the Blue Flash crew to strap action cameras to themselves and continue with their quests like normal. Then afterward, I'd interviewed each of them, before sending all of the footage to Shiori for editing and to Saori to do the narration. And just like that, I had made a documentary about the dangerous lives of adventurers in Ninoritch.

Up on the screen, Nesca was firing off powerful magic attacks, then Kilpha came in and pierced the murder grizzly's eyes with her daggers, while Raiya and Rolf attacked the beast from both sides with their own weapons. On my first quest into the forest with the Blue Flash crew, we'd also had the misfortune of stumbling across a murder grizzly. At the time, the foursome was nowhere near strong enough to take on that caliber of monster, and Raiya had been ready to

sacrifice himself to give us enough time to run away. But months later, defeating murder grizzlies was a walk in the park for the gang. *You go, guys and gals!* I cheered inwardly. *If they keep this up, they're gonna be gold-rank adventurers in no time!*

“Wow! They really did it! They killed that murder grizzly!” a man in the audience exclaimed once the beast was dead.

“I can’t believe they managed to defeat such a huge monster with only the four of them...” someone else remarked.

“That Kilpha girl’s really cute, ain’t she?”

I even spotted a woman swooning happily. “Oh, Raiya is so *dreamy!*” she declared.

Most of Ninoritch’s citizens had never actually seen any monsters with their own two eyes, and to them, the combat scenes like the one they had just watched were thrilling. This movie was also proving quite popular with some of the lower-ranked adventurers, because it allowed them to learn things from their more accomplished counterparts. It was a full house on the first night, with a number of people even standing at the back to watch the movie, and there was no doubt in my mind that there wouldn’t be a drop in the number of spectators for a good while.

With the night drawing to an end, I could safely say that all three of Ninoritch’s new attractions had been a huge success.

Chapter Thirteen: The Dwarves' Payment

Thanks to the hard work of Patty and Team Dwarf, Ninoritch now boasted plenty of newly built houses, inns, and even a public bathhouse. With so much new competition in town, existing businesses had to lower their prices to where they had been before the start of the housing crisis.

The Fairy's Blessing adventurers in Ninoritch were the cream of the crop and a lot of them had plenty of coins to spare. Up to this point, they'd been staying in regular inns, but on seeing my new mega-inn that was so much fancier than the ones in the royal capital and came complete with a casino, an auction hall, a movie theater, and a public bath, most of the adventurers ranked silver and above took rooms there instead, leaving the more middle-of-the-road options to lower-ranked adventurers, while the rookies checked into the cheapest ones available. Thanks to that, the housing crisis was solved at last. Well, at least for the time being.

"There are still lots of ruins as yet unexplored in the forest, so the main branch will likely send even more adventurers to Ninoritch soon enough," Ney had told me when we were discussing it one time. It seemed the steady stream of adventurers coming to Ninoritch hadn't reached its end yet.

And it wasn't just adventurers. I was in no doubt that more merchants would be making their way to Ninoritch sooner rather than later, lured here by the rare items they could win at the casino—including the very much in-demand fairy mead—as well as all the rare pieces of treasure from the Ancient Magic Civilization Era being auctioned off at the auction hall. The adventurers and the merchants were completely hooked on these two new facilities, with most visiting the casino daily to trade their gold coins for chips, while the richest among them competed over the rare items in the auction. It was only a matter of time before rumors of the casino and auction hall spread across the continent and captured the interest of both local and foreign merchants, who would no doubt flock to the town to check them out for themselves. Nesca even suggested they might catch the attention of nobles and royals. People

were always making fun of Ninoritch for being out in the middle of nowhere, but there was a possibility it could soon become the kingdom's top tourist destination. Yup, I had a feeling we were definitely going to need to start building even more inns in the near future.

The refugee children from Hyord were a huge help too. I couldn't help but be moved by the strength these kids showed. After all, they had lost everything, yet here they were, all diligently performing their new tasks at the inns and the public bathhouse even though these types of jobs were unfamiliar to them. Hell, some of the children had never worked a day in their lives before, which made their contributions all the more impressive. As for the smaller children who weren't yet old enough to work, Stella had taken it upon herself to teach them all how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic, meaning that in a few years' time, these kids would undoubtedly be valuable assets to the town. The children never complained and tried their utmost to do their new jobs to the best of their abilities, because to them, what mattered was the future. They wanted a future in which they could all live together. I resolved to do everything I could to help these kids live the life they deserved. Oh, on a side note, I'd been told that Duane and a few of the other knights would be sticking around in Ninoritch for a while to watch over the refugee children and send regular reports about their lives here to Lord Bashure.

So with Ninoritch's issues temporarily taken care of, Patty and I could finally take a well-earned breather. Well, almost. We still had to pay Team Dwarf for their hard work. So early one morning, Patty, Aina, and I headed over to Karen's house to collect the red magic crystals I had promised them.

"Ah, there you are. I've been waiting for you," Karen said by way of greeting when she opened the door.

Thanks to the commerce treaty between Ninoritch and Celes's tribe, the devils, there was no shortage of red magic crystals in the town, and after discussing it, Karen had agreed to part with some of her crystals to give to Team Dwarf as payment for their hard work. Unlike the adventurers, Karen was a very prudent woman, and she had kept a stash of red magic crystals to one side, just in case. *That's Karen for you. There's a reason why she's the mayor.*

"The red magic crystals are down in the basement," she said, taking us to a

room at the back of her house. There was a door there that she unlocked with a key, and behind that door lay a stairway that led down to the basement. “This way,” she said.

We started feeling our way down the stairs, with Karen at the head of our little group, holding a lantern in her hand. Patty perched on my shoulder as I descended, and Aina brought up the rear.

“Mister Shiro...” the little girl said hesitantly. “Can I hold your hand?” She must have been scared of how dark the stairs were.

“Of course you can. Hold on tight now, you hear?” I said as I held my hand out toward her.

She grabbed it with both of hers. “Thank you, Mister Shiro!”

Judging by how tight her grip was, she must have been pretty scared.

I carried on following Karen down the stairs, making sure not to go too fast, so that Aina wouldn’t lose her footing. A few seconds later, we had reached the bottom of the staircase and Karen hung the lantern up in the middle of the room, before heading off to light some candlesticks that were placed in all four corners of the room. Once they were lit, we could finally see in front of our noses. I overheard Aina let out a relieved sigh.

“Whoa, you’ve got so many things down here,” I remarked as I looked around the room.

Karen’s basement was much bigger than I had been anticipating—probably a whopping fifty tatami mats, or eighty square meters. As someone who’d only ever known the kind of tiny houses you get in Japan, I was very, very jealous.

“This house has been passed down from generation to generation,” Karen explained. “The main building has been renovated a couple of times, but the basement is exactly the same as it was when it was first built. And with each generation that passes, the amount of *stuff* that just ends up in the basement keeps on growing and growing.” She shrugged and sighed, but quickly pulled herself together and headed over to a corner, gesturing for us to follow her. “Here they are,” she announced. She opened a wooden crate, and we saw that it was filled to the brim with red magic crystals. “How many did you want to

give the dwarves?”

“Well, about that...” I paused and glanced across at Aina. The little girl nodded and the two of us held up all the fingers on our hands. Twenty crystals. That was what we were suggesting.

“Are you sure that will be enough?” Karen asked in some surprise. “I thought they would ask for a lot more.”

I chuckled. “Our perception just got a little bit distorted, because we’re so used to seeing those crystals. But to a regular person, even one already seems like a lot.”

Karen hummed. “Is that so?”

“Yup. Besides, I’ve already discussed it with Baledos and we concluded that twenty was a fair amount.”

“I see.” she paused momentarily before giving voice to her thoughts. “I’m thinking of giving them twenty-five. Do you mind taking it to them?”

“Not at all. I’ll say you threw in the extra five crystals as a freebie.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

There were several reasons why Karen was choosing to give Team Dwarf five extra crystals, and some of these were: 1) to thank them for their outstanding work, and 2) to clearly convey our goodwill toward them. Of course, this was partly out of self-interest, because after all, if the town could maintain a good relationship with the dwarves, they’d probably help us out in the future if we ever needed them. And these five crystals would undoubtedly go a long way toward fostering such a positive relationship with them. It proved once again that Karen wasn’t the mayor just for show. Besides, I was sure Team Dwarf would be ecstatic to receive more red magic crystals than what we had already agreed on.

“I’ll hold on to these and give ’em to Baledos and the others later,” I said as I counted twenty-five crystals out of the crate, which barely made a dent in Karen’s stock. Each one was about the size of my fist, so I stashed them away in my inventory for the time being.

“Shiro, do you think Baledos and his crew would agree to help us again in the future in exchange for more crystals?” Karen asked.

“I believe they would, yes.”

“In all truthfulness, I’d love to have them working in my town again. But Ninoritch is so remote and I can’t see them sticking around long-term,” she said.

“I don’t see why not. After all, it’s not like they’re gonna find these red magic crystals somewhere else,” I pointed out.

Red magic crystals were rare, and while they weren’t quite as sought-after as mithril due to how difficult they were to work with, they were still considered extremely valuable. Any skilled blacksmith or alchemist would definitely give some serious thought to staying in a town where they had a steady supply of red magic crystals. Or at least that was what Eldos claimed.

“Besides, Baledos and his brothers left their town and their business just to get their hands on these crystals,” I continued. “So if they knew we were willing to give them more crystals in the future, I’m sure they’d settle down here without any hesitation.”

“Mister Shiro, I heard Mister Baledos say they were planning to build a wo— what was it? A work-chop? They said they wanted to build one here!” Aina chimed in.

“A work-chop?” I said, repeating the word with a confused look until all of a sudden, realization dawned. “Oh! You mean a *workshop*!”

“What’s that?” Patty asked, tilting her head to one side like she always did whenever she didn’t understand a word.

“It’s a building used for metalworking and crafting,” I explained. “Baledos and his brothers want to build one in Ninoritch.”

“I see. Well, I really hope they’ll choose to stay here,” Karen said, a relieved smile curling the corners of her lips upward.



“There’s so much stuff in your house!” Patty marveled as she zipped around

Karen's basement. "What's this thing? What do you use it for?" she asked, poking at the mystery item.

Aina and I were equally amazed, both of us looking around the room with wide eyes. Karen's basement was a real treasure trove with random items seemingly filling every nook and cranny, from weird wooden puppets and mysterious-looking instruments to old cloaks and even what looked like farm tools.

"Like I said, I inherited this basement from my forebears. To be honest with you, it all just looks like junk to me. But, well, I guess a lot of it must have been important to them, so I can't bring myself to throw any of it out," Karen said, a troubled look passing across her face.

I nodded in sympathy. It wasn't an easy situation to be in, for sure.

"Hey, Shiro. What's a 'forebear'?" Patty asked me.

"It's the same as an ancestor," I explained.

"A-Ancestor?!" the little fairy squeaked, her eyes bulging out of their sockets. "S-So wait, does that mean Eren's things are in here too?!"

Karen chuckled. "They are. This is where I found his pendant and the letter he wrote to you." She pointed to one corner of the room. "Everything my great-great-grandfather left behind is on that bookcase over there."

The bookcase in question was made of wood and was supporting several boxes of varying sizes, as well as a few books.

"C-Can I take a look? I want to see what Eren left behind," Patty pleaded timidly.

"Of course you can. Go right ahead. Explore to your heart's content," Karen said. "In fact, I believe my great-great-grandfather would be even happier if you as his friend went through his belongings rather than me. While I might be his descendant, I didn't have the privilege of knowing him personally. And besides..." She paused and scratched her cheek bashfully. "I actually brought you down here so you could look through his things."

Come to think of it, the basement was surprisingly dust-free and the air down

here wasn't stale in the slightest. I couldn't even see a single cobweb. *Karen must have cleaned the place up before we got here, huh?*

"It must've been tough cleaning this entire basement by yourself," I remarked.

She smiled knowingly and said, "Oh, but I didn't do it alone."

"You didn't?"

"No. Aina helped me."

I turned to the little girl in surprise. "Oh, did you now, Aina?"

She nodded excitedly and giggled, a huge grin plastered across her face. "Miss Karen and I wanted to surprise Patty!"

"Really? Well, you surprised me too. Maybe even more than you surprised Patty," I said, chuckling.

"There were so many cobwebs and big bugs down here, though! It was very scary," Aina said, grabbing my hand as she remembered the creepy crawlies that had been lying in wait for her in the basement.

So that's why she squeezed my hand so hard when we were coming down the stairs. She must've been scared that she would come across more insects. To be fair, I couldn't blame her for her reaction. I mean, even as an adult, if I saw a cockroach or something nasty like that, I'd probably scream like a little girl and run away as fast as my legs could carry me.

"Aina's really good at cleaning. I was so surprised," Karen said. "She was a huge help."

"Miss Karen?" the little girl piped up.

"Yes?"

"Next time, call me *before* it gets that messy, okay?"

"I-I will. Thank you." Karen's face was all red and I was pretty sure it wasn't solely the fault of the candlelight flickering across it.

"Still, I can't believe the two of you managed to clean up this whole place by yourselves," I said, impressed.

All of Karen's predecessors' belongings had been meticulously arranged in what I could only assume was generational order. Karen had gone to all that trouble just so Patty could go through Eren's belongings. Actually, taking a closer look at it, it was kind of obvious that the bookcase holding all of Eren's things was new, implying that she had bought it specifically for this moment.

"Karen... Aina... Th-Thank you!" Patty exclaimed before zipping over to the bookcase and running her tiny hands over all the items on it.

"Th-That's the breastplate Eren used to wear all the time!" she marveled. "Hm? What's in this box? Ah! These are his earrings!"

"Patty, will you take a look at this?" Karen said, taking a book from the bookcase. The cover was worn, which just proved how long the book had been down here.

"What's that dirty old thing?" Patty asked, her little face scrunching up in mild disgust.

"Don't call it 'dirty,'" Karen chided her. "This book contains the history of Ninoritch."

Patty tilted her head to one side, not comprehending.

"It'll be faster if I just show you. Go on, open it," Karen said as she placed the book down flat on the top of the bookcase.

"I can't read the hume language, though," the little fairy pointed out.

"That's fine," Karen said simply. "Come on, open it."

"Why do you want me to open this darn book so bad?" Patty grumbled as she landed on the bookcase and started leafing through the book with a perplexed look on her face. "Hey, Aina. What does this say?" she asked the little girl.

"It says..."

The book was simply a record of everything that had happened in Ninoritch—i.e. on such and such a day, this and that happened, this person died, this baby was born, so on and so forth—and all of the events dated back to when Ninoritch was still a village. In fact, it might not even have been big enough to count as a proper village yet. Patty turned the pages with a blank expression on

her face as she listened to Aina reading what was on them, occasionally grunting a few unimpressed hums in response to what she was hearing. But as she reached the middle of the book, the little fairy's hand suddenly stopped and her eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Boss? What's it say?" I asked, trying to get a peek at the book.

"Is that..." Aina said hesitantly, "a drawing of you, Patty?"

A drawing of a fairy with big eyes occupied one corner of the page, her mouth wide open and her arms flung sideways.

"Wh-What does it say, Aina? Tell me!" Patty insisted.

"A-Ah, um..." Aina hadn't been expecting such a forceful reaction from the little fairy and was slightly taken aback by it.

I decided to step in and take over on reading duties. "I'll read it out to you, boss."

"Please do!" she said.

"Let's see... 'Month of the Snowflakes, seventh day. Theobald's child has been born. Ninoritch's population is now thirty.'"

"Th-That's it?" Patty asked.

"Yup, that's all it says." I pointed to the doodle in the corner of the page. "The only other thing on the page is this drawing."

Patty stared at the drawing in silence for a couple of seconds before saying, "Hey, Shiro."

"Yes, boss?"

"Do you think..." she started, her eyes riveted on the doodle. "Do you think that drawing's supposed to be of me?"

As a matter of fact, I did. Not only did the fairy in the drawing look just like her, but the aura of the doodled creature screamed "Patty."

"I do, yeah," I said.

"I agree," Aina piped up. "I think it's you too!"

“I see...” Patty murmured. She resumed leafing through the book in silence. The same drawing appeared on several of the other pages as well.

“Month of the Crimson Sky, twentieth day. Arvo’s child has been born. Ninoritch’s population has now reached fifty.”

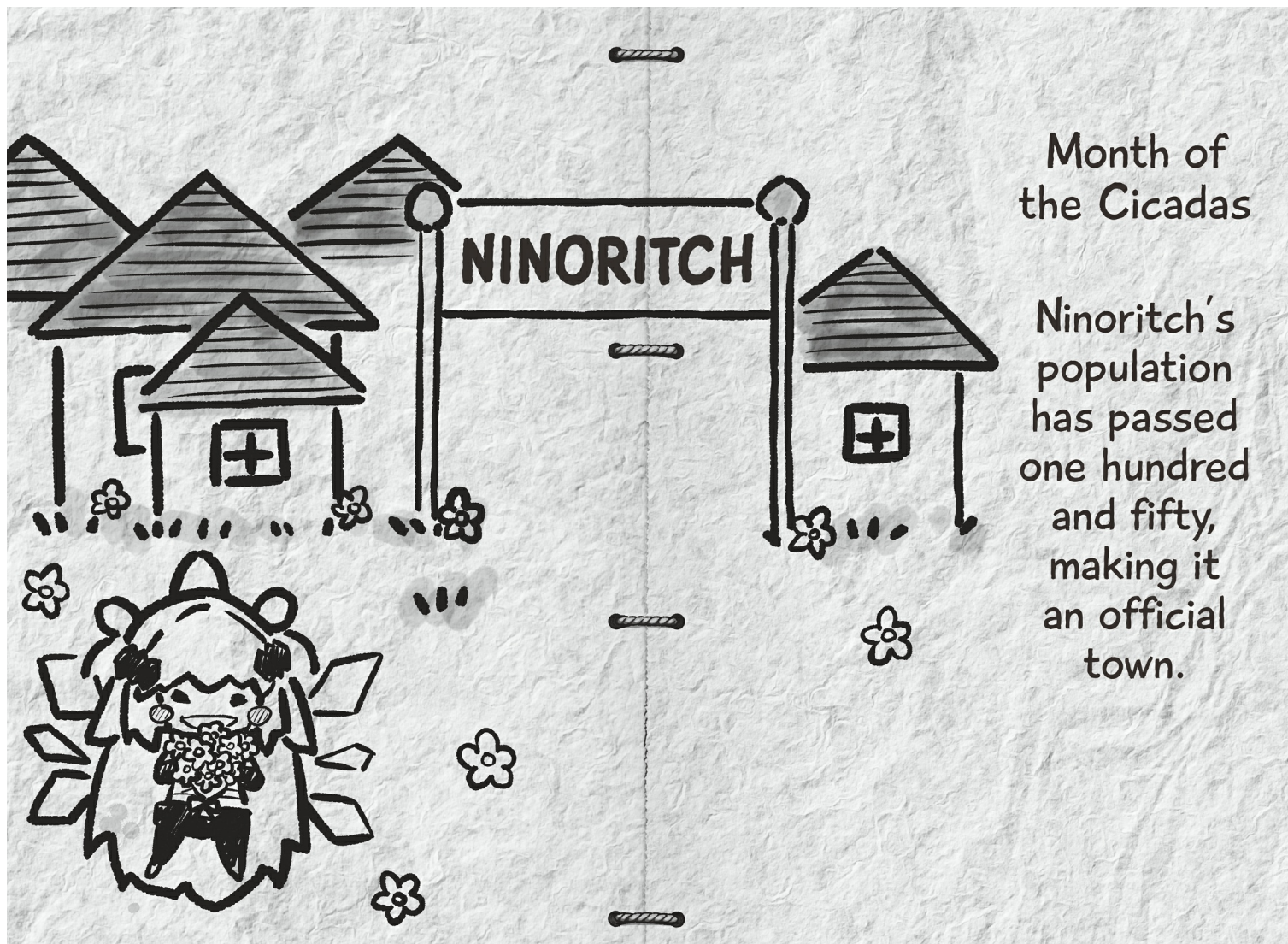
Just like the first one, the little fairy in the corner of this page had her arms spread wide and her mouth open in surprise.

“Month of the Dancing Wind, seventeenth day. Gismand and Lola have moved in. Ninoritch’s population has now reached seventy.”

On this page, the fairy had both hands covering her mouth, and the quality of the drawings was getting noticeably better and better as we went along. I continued reading out the text. The number of residents in Ninoritch fluctuated with each page, sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing, yet when viewed as a whole, there was definitely a gradual—*very* gradual—upward trend.

“Month of the Cicadas. Ninoritch’s population has passed one hundred and fifty, making it an official town.”

This particular page had been written when Ninoritch had earned the title of being a town. The fairy on this page was holding a bunch of flowers, almost as if she was celebrating Ninoritch’s growth.



Month of
the Cicadas

Ninoritch's
population
has passed
one hundred
and fifty,
making it
an official
town.

Tears instantly started streaming down Patty's face. She traced the drawing with her tiny finger. "Eren..." she whispered. "He waited for me all this time."

"Patty..." Aina said quietly.

"Yet, I..." she sniffed. "I..." She couldn't get her sentence out before she broke down sobbing and fell to her knees.

Aina hurriedly held out her hand so that the little fairy wouldn't slip off the book and fall to the ground, then gently drew her friend toward her and cradled her to her chest.

"Don't cry, Patty," she said, trying to console her.

But Patty's sobs wouldn't stop. She cried and cried and cried, completely oblivious to our presence.

"I believe my great-great-grandfather wanted you to see his town," Karen said softly.

"Karen?" I said in a quizzical tone of voice.

"I'm a mayor too, so I understand how he must have felt. You helped him out so much throughout his life, and he wanted to show you the thing he was the most proud of: Ninoritch, the town he built up from scratch."

"So *that's* why he drew her looking surprised on so many of the pages," I noted.

"Most likely, yes," Karen agreed.

A smile broke out on Patty's face, her eyes flicking between Karen and the drawing of herself in Eren's book. Then, after a few seconds of silence, she refound her voice. "You know something? I still dream of Eren to this day," she confessed.

Patty's Dream

I still dream of Eren to this day, and in my dreams, I'm zooming through the trees in the forest as fast as I can, always heading for the same spot. When I finally reach it, Eren is standing there.

"I've been waiting for you, Miss Fairy," is how he always greets me, a beaming smile on his face.

Whenever I see that smile and hear that voice, I always feel a wave of relief wash over me. *He's alive!* I always think. *It was all just a bad dream! Eren's alive!*

And I always reply with the same thing: "Sorry for making you wait, hume!"

Yup, that's right. I call him "hume," just like I used to. It's weird, isn't it? In real life, I haven't referred to him as "hume" since I learned his name, but in my dreams, I always do.

Hm? You wanna know what Eren and I get up to in these dreams? Well, isn't that obvious? Eren's always been a weakling, so I train him! We play tag, climb trees... I always tell him there's fruit right at the top to motivate him to climb higher, tee hee. But he always ends up wailing and moaning by the halfway point. Like I say, he's a *huge* weakling!

Anyway, after our training session, we always hunt together. Well, by that, I mean he runs after a jackalope with a bow and arrow and tries to hit it, while I sit on a branch and laugh my butt off at his pathetic attempts. And then...

And then, I wake up. I wake up and remember Eren isn't here anymore. And my chest hurts. It hurts a lot, and I always cry a little.

Chapter Fourteen: Our Secret

“It hurts a lot, and I always cry a little,” Patty said, concluding her story. Wrapped in Aina’s arms, tears streamed down the little fairy’s face and she hurriedly tried to wipe them away. “Damn, my tears...” she sobbed. “They’re not stopping. They’re not...”

But no matter how much she rubbed her face, the tears refused to stop coming. They dripped onto Aina’s clothes, making the fabric wet.

“Boss...” I whispered. I’d never seen Patty cry so much before. She was usually as bright as the sun, but when she thought of her dear old friend, she couldn’t stop the tears from coming.

Patty had never had the chance to say goodbye to him. The last thing she had said to him before he’d disappeared from her life was that she would tell him her real name the next time they saw each other. But that day never came. Neither of them were able to tell each other their names before being separated forever. Eren had only learned Patty’s name long after the fact, and Patty had only learned his name four months back. So it was no wonder that she was frustrated and had regrets. Eren must have felt the same way. Just like Patty was doing at this very moment, he must have cried his eyes out and blamed himself for not telling her his name sooner. I simply looked at Patty, unable to find any words to offer that might help to comfort her.

“Patty,” Aina called out to the little fairy softly.

“What is it, Aina?” Patty mumbled with a hiccup.

“You know, I dream of my papa too sometimes,” the little girl said. “In my dreams, he’s always trying to go off somewhere. I ask him to take me with him, but he says no.”

“Aina...” the little fairy breathed.

“So in the house mama and I used to live in, I wait for him to come home. I wait and I wait, but he never returns.” Tears had started rolling down the little

girl's cheeks, but she didn't let that deter her. "And then, I wake up. I've never told mama, but every time I dream of papa, I cry a little in my room. So Patty..." Aina paused and brought her arms up in front of her face so that she could look the little fairy in the eye. "Next time, let's have a little cry together, yeah?" she said with a little smile.

Aina hadn't told Patty that she should "power through" or just to "stop crying." No, she had offered to cry with her and share their personal pain and sadness with each other. After all, Aina had been through it too. She had also lost someone dear to her.

"You..." Patty started. "You won't tell Stella that I've been crying, will you?"

"Nope, I won't," Aina confirmed. "But if I cry, you can't tell her either. Let's keep our crying a secret from mama, okay?"

The little fairy nodded. "I won't tell her."

"Thank you, Patty," the little girl said.

"No, I'm the one who should be thanking you, Aina."

The two of them smiled at each other, their faces wet with tears. I felt a sudden pang of guilt in my chest, because I knew there was a set of ruins out in the forest that could supposedly revive the dead, yet despite the fact they had both lost someone very dear to them, I had chosen to keep it a secret from them. Well, I couldn't stay silent any longer.

"Hey, boss. I need to tell you something. In the Gigheena Forest, there's this set of ruins where..."

I recounted everything Raiya had told me, from the fountain on the bottom level of these ruins that supposedly had the power to revive the dead to the grimoire Nesca and the others were presently engaged in translating. Raiya had warned me not to tell anyone, but I couldn't keep all of it a secret from them any longer.

"Ruins that can bring the dead back to life?" Aina whispered in shock.

By contrast, Patty was unable to contain herself. "Shiro! I-I'm going to the guild right now!"

“Bo—” I started, but it was too late to try and stop her because she had taken flight and zoomed back up the stairs the second her words had left her mouth. “Wait, boss!” I called after her in vain. “Ah, dang. Aina, I’m going after her, okay?”

“O-Okay,” the little girl replied.

“Karen, look after Aina for me!”

“I’ll take care of her,” she said, nodding.

I sprinted as fast as I could after the little fairy, but I didn’t manage to catch up to Patty before she made it to the guild.

Chapter Fifteen: Nathew's Ruins

Totally out of breath, I pushed open the main doors of the guild just in time to see Patty bombarding Nesca with questions.

"Nesca! I-Is it true there's a dungeon that can bring the dead back to life?" the fairy babbled. "Where is it? Tell me now!"

The whole Blue Flash crew was there. Raiya scratched his head with a confused look on his face as he watched Patty interrogate his girlfriend.

"Did Shiro tell you about that?" Nesca asked Patty, as calm as ever.

"He did!" the fairy replied.

"I see."

"I'm sorry, Nesca," I said quickly as I approached the group with my head lowered. I had promised to keep the dungeon a secret, but I'd broken my word. "She just looked so sad, I couldn't keep it a secret any longer..."

But Nesca simply shook her head. "I don't mind."

I hadn't been expecting that response. "Huh? You don't? You *should* mind, though, right? You can even slap me in the face if you want. I'm okay with that."

"I'd been debating telling Patty myself recently, so no, I don't mind," Nesca explained.

Nesca was Patty's teacher and she had seen the little fairy pulling countless all-nighters to master the Stone Wall spell for the sake of the town that her best friend had founded, therefore it came as no surprise that Nesca had started thinking that Patty should know about the existence of the dungeon too.

"Besides, rumors about the ruins have already started spreading around town," Nesca added.

"Huh? Really?" I said.

"You've been busy building all those inns and that casino, so it's no wonder

you hadn't heard, meow," Kilpha piped up.

"It would appear that someone affiliated with this guild has carelessly mentioned the ruins to a number of the other townsfolk," Rolf explained.

"This isn't the only place to get a drink in town, after all," Raiya said with a shrug. "One of the adventurers here must've gotten drunk in some tavern and spilled the beans."

So rumors about the dungeon had already started spreading, huh? Though thankfully, it appeared that none of the civilians had gotten it into their heads to try to clear the dungeon on their own. After all, there were monsters in and around it, and that fact had probably been enough to deter anyone from rushing over there. The furthest anyone had gone was to make inquiries at the guild about the dungeon's existence.

"I see," I said.

"Yup. But we still don't know anything about the dungeon, so it's not like we can even answer their questions," Raiya summed up.

This caught Patty's attention. "What do you mean you don't know anything about the dungeon? It revives the dead, doesn't it?"

"We don't yet know if it really *does*. Like I said, right now, we know pretty much nothing about it," Raiya said, his shoulders drooping.

"Oh, by the way," I piped up, suddenly remembering something. "How's deciphering the grimoire going?"

I shouldn't have asked. The second those words left my mouth, Nesca's expression turned dark. *I take it that means it's not going terribly well*, I thought.

"So it's still gonna take a while, huh?" I said.

"That wouldn't be a problem," Nesca grumbled. "But there are some people who aren't happy about the speed of our progress."

She glanced toward one corner of the guildhall. I followed her gaze and saw an adventuring party arguing with Ney about who-knows-what. From this far away, I could only make out fragments of their conversation, like, "The

Academy would..." and "...should take it to the royal capital's scholars." It sounded as if they wanted to go to the royal capital, but Ney wouldn't let them for some reason.

"Those guys are the ones who retrieved the grimoire," Raiya told me in hushed tones.

"The ones who..." I started, then something clicked in my head. "Oh! So you mean *they're* the gold-ranked party that made it to the bottom of that dungeon?"

"Yup. They're known as the White Wolf's Fangs. They're really good."

"Why are they arguing with Ney?"

"Well, that's because..." Raiya paused and glanced at Nesca.

She nodded. "They've decided we're not being efficient enough in translating the grimoire and want to take it to the Magic Academy in the royal capital."

It had been a good two months since the White Wolf's Fangs had discovered the grimoire in the ruins, and it seemed they'd gotten tired of waiting for the guild to decipher it and wanted to take it to more "efficient" scholars instead. However, Ney was refusing to let them do that, because the grimoire had been written by Nathew, the father of alchemy himself, and it would be a total catastrophe if it ended up in the wrong hands. It was this difference of opinion that had given birth to the situation at hand.

"It's my fault the deciphering of the tome is going so slowly. I lack the necessary knowledge to translate it more efficiently," Nesca said.

"Please do not talk yourself down like that, Miss Nesca, ma'am," Rolf interjected. "Scholars who have spent their entire lives studying the ancient tongue have trouble translating even short texts. Yet here you are, attempting to decipher an entire grimoire. It would come as no surprise to me if it took you a year or two to translate it fully."

"Ugh, seriously? A year or two?" Raiya repeated. Even he hadn't realized it would likely take *that* long.

"What the White Wolf's Fangs fail to understand is that Miss Nesca has a

much better understanding of the ancient tongue than most scholars,” Rolf continued. “Who knows how long it would take for the Academy to decipher the grimoire?”

“Then, why doesn’t Nesca just work on the grimoire alone, meow?” Kilpha asked, her head tilted to one side in confusion.

“Psst, Kilpha,” I whispered to her.

“What is it, Shiro, meow?”

“If Nesca were to decipher the grimoire alone, it’d mean you wouldn’t be able to go adventuring with her for the next year or two,” I explained.

“Meow! I don’t want that! The White Wolf’s Fangs should just take it to the royal capital, then. Right, Raiya?”

Raiya nodded in agreement. “They should. It’d stop Nesca from pushing herself to her limits again too. Still, two years without having her in the party...” He frowned. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Two years isn’t *that* long,” Patty chimed in.

“Yeah, but remember, boss, fairies live much longer than humes. Two years is a lot for us.”

“I’m not pushing myself to my limits,” Nesca harrumphed. “I’d just hoped I could help translate and read the book in full.” She sounded really frustrated.

Then, out of the blue, Rolf bowed to her. “Thank you, Miss Nesca, ma’am.”

“Rolf?” she blurted out, seemingly taken aback.

“I am cognizant that it is for my sake that you have been working so hard to decipher the tome,” Rolf said.

“Th-That’s not true!” Nesca refuted quickly. “I’m simply curious what’s written in the legendary alchemist’s grimoire. It’s purely out of academic interest.” Her eyes darted left and right, making it obvious that she had been found out.

“You need not hide your intentions any longer,” Rolf reassured her.

“Rolf, what do you mean by that?” I said.

“I once lost several comrades of mine while battling monsters,” he explained. I was speechless.

“I managed to escape by the skin of my teeth and was rescued by Mr. Raiya,” Rolf continued. “But the rest of my party...” He paused sadly. “They were all slaughtered.”

“That’s...” I didn’t quite know how to finish that sentence.

“Ever since, a day has not gone by without my thoughts turning to them.”

On reflection, Raiya *had* mentioned something to do with Rolf, hadn’t he? “*And it’s not just adventurers either. Everyone’s bound to lose at least one or two people they care about at some point. Take Rolf, for example. He... Forget what I just said.*” So Rolf was the reason Nesca was so determined to find out what was written in the grimoire. It had been for her friend’s sake all along.

“I would give anything to see them one last time,” Rolf said, his voice tinged with sadness.

“You have someone you miss too, Rolf?” Patty chimed in. “In that case, you guys *can’t* let those adventurers take that ‘grimoire’—or whatever it’s called—to the capital!”

She had gotten herself so worked up, her breathing had started to get a little erratic. Patty was always extremely straightforward about everything, and while I personally found it an admirable trait, it did also mean she had a hard time reading the room.

“We cannot simply insist on keeping the grimoire for such selfish reasons, though, Miss Patty—” Rolf tried to reason with her, but the little fairy interrupted him.

“Shush! You just said you’d give *anything* to see your friends one last time, right?”

“I did,” he admitted. “But...”

“Then, you gotta be serious about it! You might have a chance of seeing them again. Do you really want to let it slip away?”

Rolf was totally taken aback by Patty’s forcefulness, and I noted it was

actually quite a rare sight to see him so flustered.

Patty then turned her attention to Nesca. “And you, Nesca! You said you wanted to read that book in full, didn’t you?”

“I do, but...” she replied.

“Ah, stop it with all the ‘buts’ already!” the frustrated fairy yelled. “I’m asking you if you want to or not!”

Nesca looked surprised for a moment, but she quickly pulled herself together. “Yes, I want to finish reading that book. I want to decipher it all so that Rolf—” She paused and shook her head, then corrected herself. “So that my *dear friend* might have a chance to see his fallen friends again.”

“Then, march over to those White Wolf’s something-or-other people and tell them you don’t want them to take the book to the royal capital! We gotta per...per...” She paused and thought about what she was trying to say. “What was it again?”

“Persuade them?” I suggested tentatively.

“Yeah, that’s it! We gotta *persuade* them to give us the grimoire!”



She didn't give Nesca or Rolf a chance to reply before zipping off in the direction of Ney, who was still arguing with the White Wolf's Fangs crew. The little fairy ignored their conversation altogether and hovered right in front of them.

"Hey, you! Don't take the grimoire to the capital!" she said, getting straight to the point.

Ney and the adventuring party were so taken aback by Patty's intervention that they all stopped arguing and turned to look at the little fairy instead.

"The fairy..." said a man with white hair, who I presumed was the leader of the party. "It's Patty, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm Patty," she retorted. "But who cares about that? I'm telling you to hand that grimoire over to—"

"Uh, *boss*," I interrupted pointedly, smoothly slipping in between her and the white-haired young man. "I think you've gotten your point across, so let's calm down a bit, shall we?"

"Wh-What are you *doing*, Shiro? Move! You're in the way!" Patty squeaked behind me.

"Now, now, boss. Let me take care of this, okay?"

I understood how passionate she was about this whole thing, but what we needed to do right at this minute was *negotiate*. Unfortunately, passion could either be a very powerful weapon or it could end up being an unbreakable shackle when it came to negotiating, so I decided it was probably for the best if I stepped in and did the talking. And if I subsequently saw that I wasn't getting anywhere with these guys, I'd let Patty take over, like in a tag team match.

While we admittedly weren't in a particularly advantageous position, our chances of winning these guys over were a little better than slim to none. After all, I was the grandson of the Immortal Witch, and it was possible she could decipher the grimoire. And even if she couldn't, maybe Patty's grandpa could. If I played this right, I could probably convince the White Wolf's Fangs to stay in Ninoritch for a little while longer. Unfortunately, grandma was in Izu at that moment in time, but I hoped I could at least cross paths with her before she

went gallivanting off to wherever for her next trip.

“Shiro,” Ney said, sounding surprised. It was an understandable reaction considering I’d just butted in on her conversation.

“Oh, hello, Ney,” I said, greeting her. “I’d like to talk to the White Wolf’s Fangs for a bit if I may.”

Ney’s gaze shifted from me to the overly excited fairy behind me, then back again. “Fine,” she said after a few seconds, taking a step back and nodding her assent.

I thanked her and turned to the White Wolf’s Fangs again. The white-haired young man was glaring at me.

“Hey, shopkeep,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, but we have nothing to talk about.”

“If you could please just grant me a little bit of your time...” I pleaded with him.

“Listen, we love your shop, and your items have saved our hides more times than I can count,” the man admitted. “But we don’t have time for chitchat right now, ’cause we have to get *this* to the Magic Academy and fast.”

From his bag, he produced a book that had a beige cover with decorative embellishments intricately drawn on it. I noticed it was glowing slightly. A preservation charm, perhaps?

“*To You Who Dreams of a Miracle*, huh?” I said, reading the title aloud. “How very romantic.”

The second these words left my mouth, utter bedlam broke out around the room as all the adventurers who had been watching on from afar started chatting loudly to each other. The white-haired young man’s jaw hit the floor, his eyes wide. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen anyone look quite that surprised before.

“Y-You... How... You...” he stammered, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly like a goldfish’s.

He shook his head to clear the fog of confusion from it, then took a deep

breath and grabbed my shoulders to steady himself. Though he probably also did it so I couldn't run away.

"You can read it?" he asked.

"Huh?" I said, thoroughly confused.

"You can read the text that's written on the cover of this book?" he asked again, giving the book in his hand a little slap.

Realization dawned. The book he was holding—that I'd just read out the title of—was none other than the grimoire that had been retrieved from the ruins.

"I-I can read the title, yes," I said tentatively.

The white-haired young man stared at me in bewilderment for a couple of seconds before thrusting the book toward me. "Try reading the rest," he said, a deadly serious look in his eye.

"Um..."

Seeing me hesitate, Ney stepped in. "Shiro, please. Give it a try."

"Please, Shiro," said Nesca, who had suddenly appeared next to me.

I took the book from the young man's hands and started flicking through the pages.

"S-So? Can you read it?" Patty asked me nervously.

I could. I quickly glanced down at the ring on my left hand. It was the one grandma had given me that allowed me to speak the language of this world as well as read and write in it, but I had never expected it to also work for the ancient tongue. *Grandma, your items are way too OP!*

"Can you read it, Shiro?" Nesca pressed.

I nodded. "Yeah, I can."

Once again, all of the adventurers in the room started muttering among themselves.

"Could you please tell me what the book says? I'll pay you whatever you ask! I'm begging you!" the white-haired young man pleaded. He went on to tell me that he wanted to understand what the book said in the hopes that it might

allow him to converse with his dead lover again. I could tell how desperate he was just by the expression on his face.

“Shiro, please do this for us,” Nesca said.

“Please, man,” Raiya added.

“Please, Shiro, meow!” Kilpha chimed in.

And last but not least, Rolf pleaded with me too. “Mr. Shiro, sir, I beg of you, please tell us what the book says.”

My friends in the Blue Flash crew were all counting on me. I *had* to do it for them.

I took off my jacket and flung it to one side, loosened my necktie, and rolled up my sleeves. “Okay, are you guys ready to pull an all-nighter with me?”

As soon as these words left my mouth, loud cheers went up from the Blue Flash crew and the White Wolf’s Fangs—no, scratch that, from *every* single adventurer in the hall.

“Raiya, bring me all the pens and sheets of paper you can find,” I said.

“You got it, man!”

“Nesca and Rolf, I will read the book out loud, so I’m counting on the two of you to take turns to write down what I read out.”

“Okay.”

“Understood, Mr. Shiro, sir.”

“What about me? What should I do, meow?” Kilpha asked.

“You can cheer me on,” I said.

“Leave it to me, meow!”

With that, I started translating the grimoire, and true to her word, Kilpha cheered me on the whole time.

Chapter Sixteen: The Secret of the Ruins

It took me a solid eight hours to read the whole book aloud. I had been fully prepared to spend all night on it, but it turned out that roughly a third of the pages were explanatory diagrams, so it didn't take me nearly as long as I'd thought it would.

"I can hardly believe it..." Ney breathed in shock. "That grimoire really did belong to Nathew."

There had been plenty of rumors about relics belonging to Nathew for a long time, but this was the first time there had been definitive proof of the existence of one. This probably explained why so many people had gathered around when I'd started reading the book. Both Nesca and Rolf—plus some of the guild staff—had been taking notes, which had caught the eye of pretty much every mage and alchemist that passed by, who naturally joined the growing crowd, and before I'd realized it, I was surrounded by dozens of adventurers hanging on to my every word.

"Dude, I know you've just spent hours reading that book, but I don't get it. What *are* those ruins exactly? And why'd Nathew create that dungeon in the first place?" Raiya asked me, acting as the spokesperson for the adventurers, who were all staring at me with such intensity that I could almost feel their collective gaze boring a hole into my skull.

"Well, to put it simply, those ruins really can revive the dead," I said calmly.

The room fell silent. The grimoire listed all of the steps required to correctly perform the "Revival of the Deceased" spell. No, "ritual" was probably a better word for it.

"But the ritual has some extremely strict conditions," I noted.

The mysterious fount on the bottom level of the dungeon—referred to as the 'altar' in the grimoire—had been created by Nathew himself, and was filled with a man-made liquid life force. This liquid life force could read the thoughts of

anyone who came into contact with it, and would search their memories for the dead person or people they cared about the most before turning into them. However, this was only the first step in the ritual. According to Nathew's grimoire, all the fount could do was replicate their bodies, meaning they were nothing more than empty husks and would remain that way unless inhabited by a soul, which was the hardest part of the ritual.

"According to the grimoire, on nights when the stars return to the earth, the gateway to the realm of the dead opens, and a miracle comes to anyone who is in contact with the fount," I explained.

"On nights when the..." Rolf repeated. "Mr. Shiro, sir, is the grimoire referring to the Tears of the Sky?"

"Most likely, yeah."

The Tears of the Sky. The night when the souls of the deceased return to the earth on the shooting stars. So it wasn't just a legend after all. According to Nathew's grimoire, on these nights, you really could summon the soul of your loved one. And the key to it all was the fount in Nathew's dungeon.

"Shopkeep, does that mean we have to make it all the way to the lowest tier of the dungeon *before* the Tears of the Sky?" asked the white-haired young man from the White Wolf's Fangs.

I nodded, before adding, "Or at least, that's what the grimoire says."

"Damn," he said through gritted teeth. He knew firsthand just how difficult it was to get to the bottom level of the dungeon.

"Hey, Nesca. When's the meteor festival again, meow?" Kilpha asked.

"The first stars should start falling in less than a week," Nesca replied.

"Meow? But that's so soon!"

"The meteor shower lasts for several nights, which gives us a little more time," Nesca said.

"Miss Nesca, ma'am, how long do you believe we have before it will be too late?" Rolf asked her.

Nesca paused for a few seconds. "Ten days. If we can get to the bottom of the

dungeon before those ten days are up, we should just about make it in time.”

Ten days, huh?

“Then we’d better get going right away,” the white-haired young man groaned, then he turned to me and bowed. “Shopkeep, I beg you, please come with us to the dungeon.”

His companions did likewise behind him.

“Uh, me?” I asked rather ineloquently.

“Yeah, you. There’s a bunch of stuff written in the ancient tongue on stone tablets and on the walls down there in the dungeon—or rather, in Nathew’s ruins. They must all be related to the ritual, so we’ll need your help reading them.”

He had a point. It seemed obvious that you’d need to be able to read the stuff written on those tablets to be able to perform the ritual.

“I know you’re rich and don’t need the money,” the young man continued. “But we’re gold-rank adventurers, so if you ever need help with *anything*, you can come to us. We’ll do everything in our power—”

“Sure, I’ll come with you,” I said, cutting him off midsentence.

“...to help you. Wait, what did you say?”

“I said: sure, I’ll come with you,” I repeated.

“R-Really? Are you sure?” the man said, taken aback. “This dungeon is full of monsters, you realize. And there are lots of traps too. Not to mention—”

“Perhaps you *shouldn’t* be saying that to the guy you just invited to said dungeon,” I said, interrupting him again.

“B-But...”

My quick, definitive reply must have taken the White Wolf’s Fangs crew aback, for they all seemed to be in a bit of a panic.

“Besides, I was planning on asking you guys to take me with you all along,” I added as I glanced across at Patty, who was standing on my shoulder with her arms crossed. “You see, my boss here really, *really* wants to visit those ruins.

Ain't that right, boss?"

"Y-Yeah! I have to go there and talk to Eren! Even if you hadn't asked Shiro to go with you, we would've gone there anyway, just the two of us!" the little fairy declared, sounding extremely determined.

"Uh, that's not a good idea boss," I interjected quickly.

"Why not?" the fairy asked.

"Didn't you hear what he just said? *Traps!*" I replied, laying it on thick. "It'd be way too dangerous for just the two of us. The White Wolf's Fangs have already been to the bottom level of the dungeon before, so we could ask for no better guides if we want to make it to the fount in one piece."

The white-haired man looked on the verge of tears. "Shopkeep..." he mumbled. "Thank you so, so much. We really owe you one. Oh, I'm the leader of the White Wolf's Fangs, by the way. The name's Zephyrus, but you can call me Zephyr."

"I'm Shiro Amata and I'm a merchant, but I'm guessing you knew that already. And this is my boss, Patty Falulu," I said, gesturing to the fairy on my shoulder. "Please call me Shiro."

"And you can call me Patty!"

"It's a pleasure to finally get to know both of you, Shiro and Patty," Zephyr said.

While the two of us were shaking hands, Raiya came over and stood next to me to join in with the conversation. "Yo, White Wolves. How long did it take you to reach the bottom level of this dungeon?" he asked Zephyr.

The white-haired man eyed him with suspicion. "And who the hell are you?"

"I'm Raiya from the Blue Flash party. Though unlike you guys, we're only silver-rank."

"Blue Flash..." Zephyr muttered before there was a glint of realization in his eyes. "Oh, right. I know you guys."

"You didn't answer my question, man," Raiya said. "How long did it take you last time?"

“Seventeen days.”

“Seventeen days, huh? And how long do you reckon it’ll take you a second time around?”

Zephyr’s brow furrowed. “We’ll make it before the ten days are up, even if it costs me my life.”

Raiya nodded thoughtfully. “And let’s say you took a silver-rank party with you...” he said. “Would that help you to get through the dungeon faster?”

“A silver...” Another glint of realization. “Oh. You guys are planning on tagging along? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Well, you probably don’t know this, but we in the Blue Flash adventuring party are Shiro’s *official* bodyguards,” Raiya boasted. “Right, man?”

“Is that so?” Zephyr asked me, though he was still eyeing Raiya with suspicion.

I nodded. “They are. Besides, they have someone they want to see again down there too, same as my boss.”

“I see.” Zephyr turned to Raiya and held out his hand. “I’m the leader of the White Wolf’s Fangs, Zephyr.”

“And I’m Raiya from Blue Flash.”

The pair exchanged a handshake to signal that they were ready to cooperate with each other for the sake of achieving their combined goal. But Ney chose that moment to rain on their parade.

“Now wait just a minute, you two. Shiro isn’t an adventurer,” she reminded them, her heels click-clacking on the floor as she walked toward us. “As guildmaster, I cannot allow him to go with you.”

“Sorry, GM, but we aren’t taking no for an answer this time,” Raiya replied defiantly.

Under normal circumstances, Rolf would be the one who stepped in to mediate a dispute between these two, but this time, he carried on watching from the sidelines. He must have considered being reunited with his lost comrades more important than respecting the rules for once.

“I won’t allow it,” Ney insisted. “Shiro is a *merchant*. He’s never been inside a dungeon before, and you’re suggesting taking him to one of the most dangerous dungeons around? And to the bottom level of it, no less!”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said we’d protect him,” Raiya said. “We’re ready to lay down our lives to keep him safe.”

“Guildmaster, I’m begging you,” Zephyr jumped in. “We need him to perform the ritual. Please let him come with us.”

The Blue Flash crew and the White Wolf’s Fangs had contributed a lot to the guild’s overall mission of exploring the newly discovered ruins, giving them both a reputation of being highly reliable even compared to the other adventuring parties. But Ney was the guildmaster and she had the last word on everything, whatever the situation. And judging by the look on her face, it seemed her last word was going to be a big, fat “no.”

I decided I should step in. “Ney, could you *please* allow me to go? Actually, scratch that. I don’t need you to specifically say you’ll allow it. All I need is for you to turn a blind eye to me going with these guys to the dungeon. Please!”

“Shiro...” Ney said, taken aback by my resolve to go.

“This might be my boss’s only chance to see her friend again,” I explained. “And I owe her so much. Hell, I wouldn’t even be alive now if it hadn’t been for her.”

“Shiro, you...” Patty started, but she interrupted herself, her voice trembling.

“So *please*, Ney,” I pleaded again. “Boss, Zephyr, and Rolf all want to be reunited with the people they have lost. And I can help them! I can make a miracle happen for them. So I’m begging you, please let me go to this dungeon!” I brought my hands together in supplication and bowed my head to Ney.

She didn’t reply immediately, but instead brought a hand up to her chin as she pondered whether or not she should allow me to go.

“Let him go, girlie.”

All of a sudden, a familiar voice spoke out behind us. It was Eldos.

“The lad’s sayin’ he wants to go. It’d be really insultin’ if ye stopped him, don’t ye think? Imagine takin’ away someone’s booze after they’ve said they wanna drink it. It’s the same as that.” Eldos paused and gave me a big old slap on the back. “Tell you what, I’ll tag along too, Shiro.”

“Huh? Really?” I said, blinking in surprise.

Raiya had a similar reaction. “Wait, you’re coming with us, Eldos?”

“What’s this? Ye kids don’t want me taggin’ along? D’ye think I’m gonna slow ye down or somethin’?” Eldos huffed.

“That’s not it. It’s just... Right, guys?” Raiya said, turning to his comrades.

The other members of the Blue Flash crew and the White Wolf’s Fangs party nodded in unison, and I couldn’t help but be impressed by how amazingly coordinated they were. They were in perfect sync.

“You do realize there’s no reward for taking me to the dungeon, though, right, Eldos?” I pointed out.

“Who the hell do ya take me for, Shiro?” Eldos grumbled. “I’m an *adventurer*. Those White Wolf’s Fangs kids said there was a hydra much bigger than any they’d ever seen hidin’ away in that dungeon. Plus, last time, ye kids got to fight a demon while I had to stay put and protect the town. I won’t let an opportunity like that slip by me again. *I’m* gonna be the one who cuts off that hydra’s head, just ye watch.” He emphasized this declaration with a forceful swing of his battle-ax.

“Even if you cut off one of its heads, it’ll still regrow,” Nesca pointed out.

“Don’t quibble over details, half-elf,” Eldos huffed. “It was a *metaphor*. Though, now that you mention it, maybe I shouldn’t go killin’ that hydra *too* fast. After all, the more heads it grows, the more scales and fangs I can get my hands on, right? I could sell ’em for a pretty penny or get my numskull brothers to forge some armor outta ’em. Either way, it sounds like I’ll be makin’ enough coin to drown myself in Shiro’s finest booze for a good while to come.”

Eldos glanced in the direction of the adventurers who were watching the scene from afar.

“Guildmaster,” Nesca said, turning to Ney. “The reputation of the Fairy’s Blessing can only benefit from us clearing Nathew’s ruins. Not to mention, it’ll improve the guild’s standing abroad too. Plus, the names of the adventurers who clear the dungeon will go down in history.” Like Eldos, she punctuated her sentence by throwing a glance in the direction of the other adventurers in the room.

And why were they doing this? Well, what’s the easiest way to motivate an adventurer? Promise them money and fame. That was exactly what Eldos and Nesca were doing and it was seemingly working, because all the other adventurers in the room had started muttering among themselves.

“I pretty much ran out of coins after spending ’em all in the casino,” I heard one adventurer say to his friends.

“You too? I used to have seven gold coins in my pocket, but now, I’ve only got five coppers left...”

“So the more hydra scales and fangs we get, the more money we can make, right?”

“We’ll make back all the money we lost at the casino in no time!”

Others were less interested in the money side of things and more coaxed by the fame they would get from clearing the dungeon.

“I once told my parents my name would be known all across the kingdom...” a female adventurer said.

“I might even be able to secure a position in government.”

“If I become famous, do you think I’ll finally be able to bag myself a boyfriend?”

“And will I get a wife?”

All of a sudden, everyone in the room seemed really motivated to charge into that dungeon. I had to strike while the iron was hot.

“I understand that you’re worried about me, Ney. But more than anything in the world, I want my boss to be happy,” I declared.

“Shiro...” Ney and Patty said almost at the same time.

“I can help to make a *miracle* come true. Don’t you want to see that? Don’t you want to see what lies at the very bottom of Nathew’s ruins? We’d be the first to ever witness it!” I paused and raised my voice as I turned to the other adventurers. “Don’t *you guys* wanna see that?”

“I do!”

“Me too!”

“Witnessing miracles is why we became adventurers!”

“I’ve got someone I want to bring back to life too!”

Ney stared at length at the adventurers before letting out a protracted sigh. “Fine,” she said, relenting.

“Thank you, Ney!” I said, beaming at her.

“However!” she added pointedly. “I am coming along too. We can’t have you getting injured. Or worse.”

I heard Eldos snort beside me. “Just admit it. Ye wanna see Nathew’s ruins for yerself too, don’t ye, girlie?”

“Well, Mr. Eldos, while I might be the youngest guildmaster in the Fairy’s Blessing guild as a whole, I was still an adventurer like you once. I don’t mind being a bit reckless just this once if it means I get to witness a miracle.”

Ney’s words were the trigger the other adventurers in the room needed.

“Let me tag along too!” one man called out. “I have to apologize to my dead mother!”

“We of the Black Judgment will accompany you.”

“In that case, we’ll come too! We’re called the Whirlwind, by the way.”

“I wanna tag along too!”

One after another, all the adventurers in the room volunteered to accompany us to the ruins. I figured that with these numbers, we might just stand a chance of getting to the bottom of that monster-infested dungeon in time.

But just at that moment, the door was flung open and two familiar figures entered the guildhall.

“E-Excuse me!”

It was Stella, and Aina was trotting along by her side.

“U-Um...” Stella started as she peered around the guildhall. “I have a request to make of all of you!”

She approached our group and bowed her head.

“I have heard there is a dungeon that can revive the dead. I beg you, please take my daughter with you!”

Stella’s request had come so out of the blue, we were all taken aback by it, and I was already anticipating a torrent of protests from the other adventurers to the idea.

Intermission

On that day, one of Aina's favoritest people in the whole wide world told her there was a dungeon that could revive the dead. When she heard this, her first thought was that she *had* to take her mama there. But where was this dungeon? She was going to ask Shiro, but he'd left before she could. She decided to wait for him to return, but the hours ticked by and there was still no sign of him.

"Come on, Aina. I'll take you home," Karen offered, holding her hand out toward the little girl.

The sun was already starting to set, so Aina nodded and went home with Karen. She didn't say a word the whole way, because all she could think about was her mama. And her papa.

"Aina, be a good girl until I get back, okay?"

Many years had passed since her papa had gone off to war. Aina was already eight going on nine, and though she hadn't told anyone, she was scared of turning nine. Her papa had gone off to war when she was four, meaning the moment she turned nine, she would have spent more than half of her life without her papa around. In other words, she'd have spent more time *without* him than *with* him. Aina always found herself praying that she could go back to those happy days she'd had with her mama and papa, and that she could see her papa again.

"Mama..."

But she also knew her mama wanted to see him, probably even more than she did. Occasionally, Aina would wake up in the middle of the night and hear her mama crying. On some nights, the twin moons shone brightly in the sky, while on others, rain poured down outside. But sometimes, she could hear crickets chirping outside in the stifling summer heat, and it was on these nights that her mama wept, because memories of her husband came flooding back to her. Aina wanted nothing more than for her mama to be able to see her papa

again, so when she got home, she told her mama everything.

“Mama, there’s a dungeon in the forest where you might get to see papa again!”

But after listening to Aina’s story, her mama’s response was, “I’ll make sure you see your father, Aina.”

She took Aina by the hand and the two of them hurried over to the Adventurers’ Guild.

“I have heard there is a dungeon that can revive the dead. I beg you, please take my daughter with you!” her mama said to Shiro and all the adventurers present.

Aina wanted her mama to see her papa again, but her mama had asked if they could take *her* to the dungeon instead.

Chapter Seventeen: A Mother's Request

"I have heard there is a dungeon that can revive the dead. I beg you, please take my daughter with you!" Stella pleaded.

Aina looked up at me from her mother's side, seemingly on the verge of tears.



“I’m sorry, Mister Shiro, I told mama everything,” she mumbled, her eyes watering. “I just wanted her to see my papa again.”

She explained to me how after Patty and I left Karen’s house, she had decided to stay with Karen to wait for us to come back, but with dusk approaching and no sign of Patty and me, Karen had taken her home. Stella had greeted her with a smile, which caused Aina to feel a pang of sadness in her heart. It was at that point that the gears had started turning in the little girl’s head. All these years, Stella had been waiting for her husband to return to her, but if she went to this dungeon that could revive the dead, she could perhaps be reunited with him.

“Mama, there’s a dungeon in the forest where you might get to see papa again!” she had said to her mother, before going on to tell her *everything*. All the little girl wanted was for her beloved mother to see the man she loved again.

As it turned out, the rumors about this dungeon had already reached Stella’s ears, and once she heard that I had been the one to tell Aina about it, she knew the rumors must be true. It was then that she had decided she would do everything in her power so that Aina could see her father again. Like mother, like daughter, huh? So with her newfound resolve, Stella had brought her daughter to the Adventurers’ Guild and pleaded with us to take the little girl with us to the dungeon. She was determined for Aina to see her father again, no matter what the cost.

“Hey, Aina’s mom. Cool it, will ya?” Raiya said. “We get where you’re coming from. You want your daughter to see her dad again. That’s not so unreasonable. In fact, I’d even go so far as to say that’s a perfectly normal response to have in this situation.”

Stella nodded, her wide, imploring eyes fixed on Raiya.

“But I’m afraid we can’t take her with us,” he concluded.

“Please, I’m begging you. I’ll—” Stella started but Raiya gently interrupted her.

“Just hear me out, okay? This dungeon that can revive the dead, Nathew’s ruins... It’s a very dangerous place. Even as adventurers, we’re risking our lives

just setting foot in there.”

Stella looked down at the floor, unsure how to reply to this.

“So you have to understand that we can’t—no, scratch that. I’m gonna be one hundred percent real with you here, okay?” Raiya paused and scratched his head, then took a deep breath and continued with a serious look on his face. “Listen carefully, Aina’s mom. Only a total *moron* would take a child into a dungeon. They’re not exactly *kid-friendly* places, if you catch my drift. If Aina’s attacked by a monster, she dies. If she falls into a trap, she dies. And I mean instantly. Even Rolf won’t be able to do anything about it.”

Stella stared at Raiya in silence.

“Now, what if one of us manages to throw ourselves in the way and saves her by taking the hit? That person is the one who ends up dying instead. And you see, the thing is, Aina’s a kind girl, and if someone were to die protecting her, she’d blame herself for the rest of her life.”

Stella’s breath caught in her throat as an expression of horror appeared on her face. She clearly hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“I won’t let her have to bear something that heavy until the day she dies. I just won’t,” Raiya said resolutely. “So let me say it one more time: dungeons are dangerous. You already lost your husband. You don’t want to lose your daughter too, do you?”

The other adventurers nodded in agreement. After all, they already had enough on their plates trying to make sure *I* didn’t buy the farm on this expedition, so they really didn’t need the added responsibility of babysitting a child.

“We understand your feelings, ma’am,” Ney chimed in. “However, as the guildmaster and as Aina’s friend, I cannot allow her to set foot inside that dungeon.”

“Is there...” Stella said, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Is there really no way to convince you? I can still...” She sniffled. “I can still remember him. I have so many memories of him. As much as I truly want to see him again, I can at least find some comfort in the time we spent together. But Aina was only four

when he left. She doesn't remember *anything* about her dad."

"Mama..." the little girl whispered.

"Please, *please* take her with you. I'll do whatever I can to repay you, even if that means spending the rest of my life working to make up for it. Please just let my little girl see..."

Her sentence was probably supposed to end "...see her dad again," but Stella broke down sobbing before she could make it that far. I felt a pang of guilt in my chest seeing her cry like this, but I knew it wasn't my place to speak. After all, I was utterly powerless in this situation. Even if I wanted to be Aina's protector, there was no way I'd be able to keep her safe from harm.

"H-Hey! Stella's asked so many times now. Can't you just make the effort for her?" Patty chimed in.

"Patty, you can't let your personal feelings influence your decisions," Nesca chided her. "What Raiya has been saying might sound cruel, but it's all to keep Aina safe."

"B-But this might be the only chance Aina will get to see her pa again!" the little fairy protested.

"Patty, no means no, meow," Kilpha interjected.

"Th-Then, how about this? I'll kill all the monsters with my magic, so you guys can just concentrate on protecting Aina," Patty suggested. "There! Now she can come!"

"Miss Patty, ma'am, I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but using large-scale spells inside this particular dungeon is inadvisable," Rolf explained patiently. "It might cause the ceiling to cave in, which would make forward progress nigh on impossible."

Patty made an irritated noise and started stamping her little feet on my shoulder. I understood just how frustrated she was with the whole situation. Painfully so.

"Well, if you understand—" Nesca started, but she was interrupted by a voice from over by the main door.

“Hmph. What a joke. You prattle on about clearing out dungeons, yet you say you cannot even protect a single child in one?”

As one, the whole room turned to find out the source of the voice, and there stood a tall bombshell of a woman.

“I pity you all. Being that weak must make things very difficult.”

“Celes!” I exclaimed.

Yup, that’s right. The woman standing in the doorway was none other than Celes, who’d left for her hometown two months back and whom I hadn’t seen since.

“I came here looking for you, Shiro, when I stumbled across this pitiful display. You all deign to call yourselves warriors? Pathetic,” Celes said as she made her way toward us.

Some of the assembled adventurers glared at her, disapproval writ large on their faces, while others simply seemed puzzled, clearly wondering who this strange woman was. I suspected the first group were all adventurers who had clashed with Celes in the forest a couple of months back, when we were trying to reunite Suama with her mother. I was sure they must’ve still been feeling frustrated about how effortlessly she had defeated them.

“What kind of warrior ignores a mother’s plea for help?” Celes said, continuing to provoke the adventurers, whose glares intensified. But Celes paid them no heed. Instead, she walked over to Aina and placed a hand on her shoulder. “If you weaklings refuse to do it, then I will. I will protect Aina, so you may take her with you,” she said without a hint of hesitation.

“Miss Celes...” Aina gasped.

“There is no need to look so surprised. I will protect both you and Shiro,” Celes said before pausing and letting a derisive chuckle escape her lips as she glanced around at the adventurers. “And you can bet I will do a far better job of it than these spineless so-called ‘warriors’ ever could.”

“Hey, what’s *your* deal? You...” Raiya said, stepping forward and confronting the demon. His shoulders were shaking, but his eyes burned with intensity. I was impressed he was able to talk back to Celes, considering the crushing

defeat she had inflicted on him last time.

Celes turned to him, an unimpressed look on her face. “Hm? You look like you have something you want to say to me.”

“Hell yes I do! I’ll have you know that it’s *our* job to protect Shiro!” Raiya exclaimed.

“No, I shall be the one protecting master,” a second feminine voice calmly interjected. The voice seemed to have come from the drinking hall, and when I turned around to see who it was, I predictably found Dramom sitting at a table in one corner of the drinking hall.

“I cannot entrust your safety to that barbarian of a demon or to one of these puny adventurers, master,” she said.

“Dramom? You’ve been here all along?” I asked in some surprise.

She nodded. “You seemed very busy reading through that grimoire, and I did not dare to interrupt you, so I decided to have dinner with my daughter while we waited for you to finish.”

Suama’s head poked out from behind the mountain of dishes stacked up on the table. She was munching away at her food with a fork in her hand and sauce all over her face. Dramom gently wiped her daughter’s face clean with a napkin before getting up and walking over to us.

“I am less than thrilled at the idea of going to a filthy, crumbling dungeon, but if that is your wish, then...” She paused as she dropped to one knee in front of me. “I shall accompany you, master.”

First the adventurers, then a devil, and now the Immortal Dragon. That hydra didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving this fight. In fact, even I found it a *tad* overkill.

“This does not concern you, Immortal Dragon,” Celes scowled.

“Oh, *please*, devil. The only thing you are good for is throwing a punch,” Dramom snapped back. “You would never be able to protect master from danger even before Aina comes into it.”

She straightened up, turned to Stella—who was still on her knees, sobbing—

and held a hand out toward her.

“Aina’s mother. As someone with a daughter of my own, I was deeply moved by your words,” Dramom said, her voice gentle and reassuring.

“You’re...” Stella managed to utter between sobs. “You’re Suama’s mother, right?”

“The two of us have met before, but I did not find an opportunity to introduce myself. I am Dramom, Master Shiro’s servant. Now, come, let us get you back on your feet.”

“A-All right,” Stella said, taking the proffered hand and standing up.

“Earlier, you said you did not mind if you did not see your husband again, and that all you really wanted was for Aina to see him. Is this true?” Dramom asked.

Wiping away tears, Stella nodded feebly. “Yes.”

“With my power, I could take both you and your daughter to see your husband,” Dramom said. She was testing her resolve. I could tell.

But Stella wouldn’t let herself be swayed by Dramom’s proposal and simply shook her head. “I already have more than enough memories of him. Besides...” She took a short breath, a sad smile curling her lips. “If I tagged along, I might end up encroaching on Aina’s time with her father.”

Dramom nodded, a satisfied look on her face. “I can see you are serious about this. On my honor, I promise I will protect your daughter every step of the way and bring her safely back to the surface once it is done. In exchange...” Dramom paused and turned to her daughter. “Suama, come over here.”

“Ai!” The little dragon girl toddled up to her mom, who picked her up and turned back to Stella.

“Please look after my daughter in my absence,” Dramom said.

Stella blinked in surprise but readily agreed to these terms. “Of course. I’ll make sure she’s well taken care of while you’re away.”

“I will leave her in your care, then.”

Well, it looked like it was now official: both Celes and Dramom would be

accompanying us to Nathew's ruins.

"Thanks, you two," I said.

"There is no need to thank me. I have already told you that I am your slave," Celes replied.

"For once, I agree with the demon," Dramom said. "All you need do is give the order and I will follow you to the farthest corners of this world."

"Still, thank you. I'm really glad you two volunteered to accompany us. Because now..." —I turned to Ney before continuing—"it means Aina can tag along, right? Celes and Dramom said they'd protect her, so it shouldn't be an issue anymore."

"That's..." Ney was seemingly at a loss for words. She was one of the adventurers who had taken on Celes before, and it went without saying that she hadn't stood a chance against the demon. And even if she hadn't experienced firsthand just how strong Celes was, she also knew about Suama's true nature, because, well, it didn't take a genius to put two and two together and figure out that the woman claiming to be Suama's mother was the Immortal Dragon.

Ney sighed. "Fine, I'll allow it. Aina can tag along. You hear that, everyone?" she said, addressing the assembled adventurers before pointing at Celes. "And if anyone has any complaints about my decision, you can challenge this woman to a little mock battle. If you win, I'll reconsider."

Ney's lips curled upward into a mischievous smile and Celes grinned back. Eight brave challengers had a go at defeating Celes, but they were all comprehensively beaten. Needless to say, no one else dared to complain after witnessing this overwhelming display of power. It also served as the perfect opportunity for Dramom to showcase her own abilities healing the bruised and battered adventurers, which earned her plenty of amazed gazes.

"Everyone who wishes to participate in the expedition, go prepare. We leave at sunset," Ney announced.

"Yes, ma'am!" the adventurers replied, fists raised in the air.

Meanwhile, I'd sneakily wandered over to Stella. "Psst, Stella."

“Mr. Shiro?” she said quizzically.

“Listen *veeery* closely to what I’m about to say, ’kay? When we leave, you’re going to...” I lowered my voice and whispered my plan to her.

She seemed a bit confused by it initially, but she eventually nodded. “A-All right. I’ll do as you say.”

Two hours later, everyone minus Stella and Suama departed for the ruins.

Chapter Eighteen: Dungeon Diving

With everyone raring to go, it was time for us to clear out Nathew's dungeon and get to the bottom level. Ney gave out the orders with Eldos acting as her right-hand man, and we all followed the White Wolf's Fangs into the dungeon. There were a few other gold-rank parties, as well as several silver-rank ones—including my buddies in Blue Flash—and even a couple of crystal-rank ones. They all had the same goal: to be the ones to clear this legendary dungeon so their names would go down in history. All of them were the cream of the crop of the Fairy's Blessing guild, and they dove fearlessly into the dungeon without a second's hesitation, as if they were trying to communicate to everyone else that they weren't scared of any hydra or any other monster that might be lurking in there. I was pretty sure the last time the guild had organized such a large-scale operation was when we took Suama back to her mother, battling Celes in the process. And speak of the devil...

"I thought monsters in this dungeon were supposed to be strong! These ones are nothing special!" Celes cackled.

Celes was having the time of her life, bashing monster skulls left and right and striding off way ahead of us, as if she was planning to kill everything that dwelt in the dungeon by herself. The place was swarming with lizard-type monsters, but Celes didn't even pause as she effortlessly plowed through their ranks, using her claws to rip them to shreds before tossing the dead bodies aside, then rinse and repeat as necessary, occasionally taking a chomp out of her fallen foes as she progressed onward. You probably don't need me to tell you that Ney and the other adventurers were quite put off by this display. In fact, the only person who seemed to enjoy the spectacle was Eldos, who was guffawing at Celes's antics so much, he had to clutch his stomach.

Her methods might have been a bit barbaric, but on the upside, it allowed us to make insanely fast progress through the dungeon. We only had ten days to reach the bottom level *and* kill the hydra or else we would miss our window of opportunity and would have come all the way here for nothing. I was actually

pretty grateful for Celes's eagerness and watched in amazement as, with her bare hands, she tore through a group of golems that had suddenly appeared at a three-way intersection farther down the hallway. She was basically a one-woman army. However, this was a dungeon, which meant monsters weren't the only threat.

“Are there really no monsters worth my time in this dungeon? Ha ha ha—aaaaah!”

All of a sudden, there was a click and Celes vanished, her voice fading. Seriously, one second, she was there, and the next, she wasn't.



CLICK

Turning to Raiya next to me, I whispered, “Did Celes just fall into a trap?”

“Sounds like it,” he replied with a shrug.

“She’s an idiot for not being more careful. We’re in a dungeon, meow!” Kilpha piped up.

Aina, on the other hand, looked quite worried. “Miss Celes...” she said sadly.

“We’ll rescue her later,” Nesca said. “Right now, we need to deal with the rest of these golems.”

“Mr. Shiro, Miss Aina, please stay behind me,” Rolf told us.

So that’s what the adventurers did, and once the last golem had fallen, we heard panting from the hole Celes had fallen into. Sure enough, a few seconds later, her head popped out of it. It would appear she had managed to climb back up all by herself.

“What an unseemly display,” I heard Dramom say with a chuckle.

Celes pouted for the rest of the journey to the bottom level.



The expedition was going nice and smoothly. Celes had seemingly learned her lesson and left the responsibility of leading our sizable group in the hands of Kilpha and the other scouts. All of them were extremely efficient, and they were able to spot and disarm traps at an incredible speed. Whenever any monsters appeared, they would fall back and let Celes deal with them before retaking their positions in the vanguard once more. I played a pretty important part here too—if I do say so myself—as my ability to read the ancient text on the walls and various sculptures allowed us to disarm some of the more advanced traps, as well as opening certain doors.

So far, no one had gotten injured. Though that wasn’t to say the journey was easy—quite the opposite, in fact. Two days, then three, then four passed since entering the dungeon, and we barely got any rest in that time. Hell, the most we managed to sleep in one go was three hours. It was a grueling trek, and I hadn’t hit such high levels of fatigue since my corporate slave days. Poor Aina was having an even harder time, and I occasionally caught sight of her little face

scrunching up as if she was on the verge of tears as we made our way down through the mazelike dungeon. However, she didn't complain once, nor did she ask to borrow anyone's hand or arms, but instead made a point of walking all on her own. I saw her clench her little fists to psych herself up and copied her. *C'mon, Shiro! You used to be the star of your university's wrestling club! You're not about to let yourself lose to an eight-year-old girl, are you?*

On the sixth day, we at last reached the lowest level of the dungeon. It had taken the White Wolf's Fangs seventeen days to reach this point, but we had accomplished the same feat in less than half the time, largely thanks to Celes and her fighting prowess. Now there was just one thing left to do.

SLITHER.

We had to defeat the colossal hydra that was coiled around itself in the middle of the room.

"So this is the lowest floor, huh?" I said as I peered through the entrance to the room, being careful to stay hidden from the hydra.

Just as Zephyr and his party had said, the bottom level of the dungeon was ridiculously huge. At first glance, it seemed to be roughly the size of the Tokyo Dome, one of Japan's largest stadiums. Light shone down from the domed ceiling, while the walls were made of some sort of mysterious material I'd never seen before. In fact, I couldn't even tell if it was stone or some kind of metal. Eldos seemed to find the walls pretty interesting too, and he inspected them closely.

"Ah," I uttered.

All of a sudden, the hydra raised its heads, and I saw that two of them were staring straight at us. It started slithering in our direction, so we quickly retreated back to the stairway, where we decided to take a longish break to prepare for the last battle. After nearly six hours of preparation, we were ready to take on the hydra.

"Hey, demon girlie," Eldos called out to Celes before pointing his battle-ax at the hydra. "This bad boy's ours, ye hear? Don't even *think* about tryin' to land a finger on 'im."

The other adventurers all nodded in agreement, as if to say they would be the ones to defeat the final boss, and they didn't need any help from Celes.

"Okay, get ready, everyone! Let's take that hydra down!" Ney commanded.

"Yeah!" the adventurers cheered in agreement.

"Follow me, kids!" Eldos roared as he ran toward the hydra, the other adventurers following close behind him.

"We, the Black Judgment, will kill the hydra!"

"Get out of our way! This is our prey! Ours! The Whirlwind's!"

"Is that so? Well, I'll have you know they don't call me Kevin the Mountain Cutter for nothing!"

"As the son of a knight, I, Hind, will deal the final blow!"

You might be wondering why all of the adventurers were yelling out their monikers as well as their party's name. Well, there was a fairly good reason for that.

"Hi! My name's Jean. I come from the town of Bowsen in the west of the kingdom! I'll do my best today!"

"Hey, don't go hogging the spotlight! Hello, everyone! I'm Mary, a crystal-rank adventurer from the royal capital! I'm twenty-two and *single*!"

"Who's hogging the spotlight now, huh? We, the Red Promise, will be the ones to finish off the hydra! I'm Gort, the party's leader, and just as a heads up, we're all looking for wives."

All of them were looking straight at me as they introduced themselves—or well, more specifically, they were looking straight at the camera I was holding. Some even gave a little wave.

I'd offered to film the fight with the hydra as a way of firing the adventurers up, though I was also planning to play it at my movie theater. I mean, come on, they were about to fight what was probably one of the largest—if not the actual largest—hydras in the world in a dungeon built by the most renowned alchemist in the entire history of this world, and there wasn't a person in the world who didn't want to see that! This movie was sure to be a huge hit. Hell, I

was starting to think maybe I should have expanded my empire and built movie theaters in the royal capital and the other big cities! And inevitably, the adventurers who starred in the film would all be lauded as heroes! I had told them all of that and more, and it had definitely done the job of firing them up.

“It managed to survive an attack from me, the Mountain Cutter? Good. I wasn’t expecting any less from the largest hydra in history.”

“This monster’s a tough cookie. But we, the Black Judgment, won’t give in so easily!”

“We, the Whirlwind, have *seven* secret weapons! What do you say to that, huh?!”

The unfortunate downside to my idea was the fact that most of the adventurers were more interested in showing off for the camera than they were in actually focusing on the fight, but oh well. At least the Blue Flash crew and the White Wolf’s Fangs were fighting seriously, as were Eldos and Ney, unsurprisingly.

“Master, would you like me to take care of that hydra for you, perhaps?” Dramom offered. It looked like she was starting to get a bit bored due to how long the fight was taking.

“Please don’t,” I said. “They can do it.”

“Understood. I will keep on guarding you and Aina, then.”

The reason I was able to film the fight without any trouble was because Dramom had placed a barrier around Aina and me to protect us from collateral damage.

Meanwhile, Celes—who had already been forbidden from participating in the fight—was in a sulk. “Ridiculous,” she huffed, but despite her sullen attitude, she still made sure to protect us from danger, and even punched one of the hydra’s heads when it got a bit too close to Aina for comfort.

The fight continued for a really long time, with the hydra regenerating its heads many, *many* times throughout the course of the battle, but at last, just as my camera was about to run out of battery, the hydra’s body fell to the ground with a loud thud and cheers erupted from the adventurers.

Of course, most of them were looking at the camera in that moment.

Chapter Nineteen: Hoping for a Miracle

The adventurers got to work on dismembering the hydra and I tossed the loot into my inventory under the shocked gazes of my companions who couldn't believe I could fit everything in there. To be fair, even I was a tad surprised it was able to hold it all.

With our biggest obstacle now dissected and stowed away in my inventory, I let my eyes wander around the room. "So this is what a dungeon looks like inside, huh?"

Just as the White Wolf's Fangs had said, there was indeed a large fount in the middle of the room.

"And I suppose this is the mysterious fount Nathew was talking about," I said, making my way over to the middle of the room to inspect it. It looked just like any regular pool of water, if a little more crystal clear than most, but according to Nathew's book, this wasn't regular water at all. It was liquid life force.

"Shiro, is that water going to turn into Eren's body?" Patty asked from her perch on my head.

"It would appear so," I replied. "First, we have to find the switch in order to start the ritual, though."

"I-I know," Patty said, anxiously gulping down her saliva.

"All righty then," I murmured before taking a deep breath and calling over to the adventurers. "Hey, everyone. There should be some sort of switch or device that'll let us proceed with the ritual somewhere in here. Let's start looking for it!"

"Right!" they replied as one before scattering around the room to search for the mysterious device. Nathew had said in his grimoire that there were no traps in this room, so we didn't need to be as careful as we had been while exploring the upper levels.

As a side note, Aina wasn't helping us with the search because she was

currently in dreamland, her head resting on Celes's lap. The poor thing hadn't slept very well the night before, and now that the adventurers had defeated the hydra, she had finally calmed down enough to catch some z's. Celes had a surprisingly tender look on her face as she let the little girl snooze on her lap, the demon occasionally running her fingers through the girl's hair to reassure her. Aina was always claiming that Celes was much kinder than we all made her out to be, and seeing how gentle and caring she was with the little girl as she slept, it was hard to argue otherwise. It appeared that she *was* kind after all. But only to Aina.

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I resumed looking for the switch that would start the ritual. Then, after roughly half a day of searching, Kilpha called me over excitedly.

"Meow? Shiro! I found it, meow! This *must* be it, meow!"



Some sort of rectangular magical apparatus was set up in one corner of the large room, and it had several stone tablets embedded in it, their surfaces inscribed with text written in the ancient tongue. To perform the resurrection ritual, you needed to press all of the tablets in a specific order.

"And that should be the last one," I said, pressing the tablet that had the word "star" engraved on it.

The tablet sank down into the apparatus with a clunk and a man in a mage's robe suddenly appeared in the middle of the room, floating above the fount.

"Congratulations for making it this far," he said.

The hood of his robe covered his whole face, so I couldn't actually tell what he looked like, and on further inspection, I found that his entire body was slightly translucent, which made me realize that this wasn't a real person after all, but some sort of projection.

"My name is Nathew," the man continued. "I used the secrets of alchemy to perform a miracle that surpasses even the feats of the gods."

The adventurers all started muttering to themselves with confused expressions on their faces. It was obvious that they couldn't understand him.

“Hey, man. Who’s the floating dude?” Raiya asked me. “And what’s he saying?”

I didn’t reply. I simply brought a finger up to my lips to tell him to keep quiet. *Sorry, Raiya, but I’m trying to focus on what Nathew’s saying right now.*

The other adventurers noticed I was able to understand the man and the chatter abruptly stopped as all of them stared at me in total silence.

“If you can hear me, it means that you—or perhaps, all of you—have fulfilled the conditions for the ritual.”

“You—or perhaps, all of you,” huh? Judging by those words, it was clear “Nathew” wasn’t talking to us in real time. This was a prerecorded message.

“The fact that you have activated the altar can only mean one thing: just like me before you, there is someone you wish to see again. Well, you may rejoice, for the ritual is almost complete.” The translucent Nathew pointed to the fount directly beneath him before continuing. “Think of the person you wish to see again, then touch the water of the fount. The moment you do, the gateway to the realm of the dead will open and you will see them again. However...” Nathew paused for a second to let the weight of his words sink in. “It will only be temporary. I have spent many years perfecting this ritual and I have come to the conclusion that there is no way the souls of the departed can stay in this world forever.”

His tone was noticeably full of regret. “An hour. Sometimes, only thirty minutes. After that, their souls will return to the realm of the dead.” Nathew paused again and looked up at the ceiling. Aboveground, hundreds of shooting stars must have been lighting up the night sky by this point. “I am sure you must be thinking that this amount of time is much too short. However, it should be long enough for you to tell them how you feel.”

Nathew pulled back his hood to reveal the face of an elderly man underneath. A sad smile formed on his lips.

“Unfortunately, the stars won’t be gracing me with their presence in this lifetime, so I will never get to see this miracle for myself. However, I wish for you to witness it. May you encounter the final miracle that you’ve been longing for, however brief it may be. And so, to whoever you are, I truly hope you will

be reunited with the one you love.”

And with that, Nathew’s projection promptly disappeared. A few seconds later, weird geometrical symbols suddenly appeared all over the walls and the fount started glimmering.

“H-Hey, Shiro. What did that old man say?” Patty asked.

“Boss, that ‘old man’ was the man who made these ruins: the great alchemist known as Nathew. Well, anyway, basically...”

I recounted what Nathew had said to Patty and the adventurers, who hung on to my every word. When I told them the resurrected souls would only be able to stay in this world for an hour or less, their faces fell. No one said a word, but I could tell how sad and frustrated they were at this news. They had gone through so much trouble to get here, yet they could only spend an extremely short moment with their lost loved ones.

“So I’ll only get to be with Tina for a little bit,” Zephyr murmured.

He then stood in front of me and held out his hand. “Thank you for coming all this way with us, Shiro. I can’t believe we actually made it in time.”

I accepted his offer of a handshake and said, “We would never have made it if you guys hadn’t been here to guide us.”

“No, no, it’s all thanks to you that we’re even getting to witness this ‘miracle,’ as Nathew called it.” Zephyr paused, his gaze shifting to the fount. “Well then. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna go see my girlfriend now.”

“Sure. Oh, but one thing before you go over there,” I said, stopping him in his tracks.

“And what’s that?”

“If you’re gonna kiss her, let me know beforehand, so I can close my eyes in time. You know, on account of me not having a girlfriend,” I joked.

At first, Zephyr looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face, but when he finally understood I was joking, he broke out into a grin. “Don’t be silly. I have way too many things to tell her instead of wasting time trying to kiss her.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I replied.

“Well then, I’m off.”

“Yup. See ya.”

As soon as Zephyr walked off, Rolf came over to find me. “Mr. Shiro, sir, I can never thank you enough for what you have done.”

I chuckled. “Rolf, we made it down here because we all worked together as a team. I haven’t done anything special. Now, go already. The fount’s right there.”

“I am forever indebted to you,” Rolf said sincerely.

I rolled my eyes at this. “We’re friends, Rolf. You don’t owe me a thing. C’mon, go say hi to your friends,” I said as I gently pushed him toward the fount.

One after another, the adventurers joined Zephyr and Rolf in front of the fount as they all waited for a miracle.

Chapter Twenty: The Miracle on a Night of Shooting Stars

It was then that the miracle happened.

All of the adventurers standing in front of the fount were reunited with the people they had lost. Some cried, while the others laughed.

“Mister Shiro?” Aina piped up to grab my attention.

I hummed in response and turned to the little girl.

“They can all finally say goodbye to the people they love,” she said quietly, her eyes firmly fixed on the fount.

“Yeah, they can. They don’t have a lot of time with them, but it’s enough to say goodbye to them properly.”

The fount could only bring the dead back for a short amount of time. It was a fleeting miracle.

Zephyr hugged a beautiful young woman, while on the other side of the fount, Rolf was crying his eyes out as he chatted to a group of four men and women—his deceased friends. I was happy they had finally gotten to see the people they had lost.

“It’s my turn next,” the little girl said, her voice quivering.

I took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. She squeezed back.

“It is, isn’t it? But before you go over there, I have a question for you, Aina.”

I paused and crouched until I was down at her eye level. She hummed quizzically.

“You wanted Stella to see your father again too, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’re such a kind girl, Aina,” I said softly.

“But mama said I should come see him.” The little girl hung her head. “And I do want to see my papa, it’s just...” She paused. “I saw mama cry. She cried a lot because she really missed him.”

Poor thing felt really guilty about being the only one out of her and her mother who would get to see her father again. Good thing I knew *exactly* how to fix the problem.

“Hey, don’t look so down, Aina,” I said gently. “Listen, what if...” I paused and waited for her reaction.

She raised her head slightly and looked at me with a questioning look in her eyes. “What if what?”

“What if your mom were here right now?” I asked her. “Would you give me a big smile then?”

The little girl blinked at me uncomprehendingly and let out a little, “Huh?”

A grin danced across my lips. “C’mere.”

I headed back over to the stairs with the little girl in tow, then glanced left and right to make sure no one was around, and was relieved to find the coast was clear. In fact, not even Patty was looking at us, because her attention was firmly on the miraculous fount.

“Aina, you must keep what I’m about to do a secret between us, okay?” I said, putting a finger up in front of my mouth to emphasize the point.

“Huh? I-I mean, okay!” she replied.

“Good girl. Now just hold on a minute, okay? I’m gonna bring Stella here.”

I gave the girl a quick pat on the head, then summoned the portal to grandma’s home behind me.

“Huh? Wait, Mister Shiro, that’s...” The little girl stared at the portal, her eyes wide as saucers.

Aina had already been on the other side of that portal once, back during that whole situation with Suama and Celes. What had she called grandma’s house again? The “land of the witches,” wasn’t it?

“Yup. That door leads to a place very far away from here: the land of the witches. You’ve been there before, right?”

Back at the Fairy’s Blessing guild, I had told Stella that Shiori and Saori would take her to grandma’s house and that she had to wait for me there. Thankfully, the twins had been more than willing to help, and my plan now that we were on the bottom level of the dungeon was to pick Stella up so she could see her husband with Aina.

Yup, that’s right. I’d planned on bringing Stella and Aina here all along. Well, at first, I’d wanted both of them to wait at grandma’s house until the dungeon was cleared of danger, but because of how things had turned out over at the guild—namely, Celes declaring she would protect Aina all the way to the lowest floor of this dungeon—the little girl had ended up tagging along with us instead.

“You can bring my mama here?” The little girl gasped in shock. It seemed she had guessed correctly that Stella was waiting on the other side of the portal.

“Yup. I’m actually gonna go pick her up right now.”

“O-Okay. Please, Mister Shiro, bring my mama here!”

I flashed her a confident grin. “I will. All righty. I’ll be right back!”

I slid open the closet door with gusto and was just about to step into the room that had grandma’s memorial altar in it when my eyes landed on the sight of grandma herself sitting at the low table.

“Oh, Shiro,” she said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Huh? Grandma?” I blurted out.

“What took you so long, bro? We’ve been waiting for you for *days!*” grumbled Saori, who had been lying on the tatami floor in her school uniform before springing to her feet on my arrival.

Stella, meanwhile, was sitting opposite grandma at the low table. “Mr. Shiro,” she said, greeting me with a smile. Beside her, Suama was stuffing her face with sweets. As she had promised Dramom, Stella had been looking after the little dragon girl ever since we left town.

“Well, now that Shiro’s here, let’s go, shall we?” grandma said, making her

way over to the closet. I moved out of the way and she walked through the portal in the clothes she only wore around the house.

“Go ahead, Miss Stella,” Saori said, gesturing to the closet door.

Stella nodded nervously. “A-All right,” she said before following grandma’s lead.

“Suama, be careful not to hit your head, okay?” Saori said to the little dragon girl as she led her by the hand through the portal.

“Ai!”

Both Aina and I just stood there in shock as we watched them come out of the portal one by one, but the little girl quickly came to her senses and ran to her mother before throwing herself in her arms.

“Mama!”

“Aina!”

I gave them both a couple of seconds to enjoy their reunion before saying, “Isn’t this great, Aina? Now both of you get to see your dad.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Mister Shiro.”

“You’re most welcome. You know what to do to summon your dad, right?”

The little girl nodded. “Yeah.”

“Mr. Shiro...” Stella began, a worried look on her face. “Am I really allowed to be here? I promised Miss Dramom I would...” She trailed off and glanced at Suama.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll tell Dramom everything,” I assured her. “Besides, Aina would’ve felt extremely guilty if she had been the only one to get to see your husband one last time. Right, Aina?”

The little girl nodded again, then peered up at her mother. “Mama, hurry up. Let’s go see papa!”

The two of them looked each other square in the eye and tears started pooling in Stella’s eyes.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Shiro,” she said. “Well then...” She paused and took

her daughter's hand. "Aina and I are off to see my husband now."

"I don't quite know what the appropriate response is in this situation, but uh..." I said. "Make sure you tell him everything that's been on your mind for these past few years, okay?"

Stella nodded. "I will."

"Mama, come on! It's this way!" Aina urged her, tugging her hand.

I watched on as the two of them went over to the fount. I really hoped they would get to say a proper goodbye to Aina's father this time.

Grandma's voice suddenly dragged me out of my thoughts. "You did good, Shiro," she said, looking at me with pride in her eyes.

"I didn't do anything. We only made it here in time thanks to Celes and Dramom. Oh, and the adventurers, of course," I replied.

"Don't say that. Look at everything you've managed to do," she said, gesturing to the fount and the people crowded around the edge of it. "You should be really proud of yourself."

I waved my hands around in front of me. "Like I said, I *really* didn't do anything worthy of praise. I'm not 'really proud' of myself because I haven't done anything I should be really proud of."

"Oh, is that so?" grandma said, an amused look on her face.

"Yes, it is."

"My darling grandson sure is humble, ain't he?" she remarked with a chuckle. "Still..." She looked fondly around the large room until her eyes landed on the fount and lingered on the people encircling it and the temporarily resurrected souls in the water. "So this is the miracle Nathew wished for, huh? It's quite impressive, I'll give him that. I can't believe that boy managed to do all of this by himself."

"Huh? Wait, grandma. You knew Nathew?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Every woman has her secrets."

"I'm sure you have *way* more than the average woman does," I said, my

hands flailing around expressively once more.

Grandma paid me no heed and allowed an excited yet slightly melancholic smile to curl her lips upward. “Well, I do believe we should share Nathew’s miracle with everyone else,” she said before using her magic to change into her witch’s robe, her trusty Melkipson—her magic sword—suddenly appearing in her hand. She brandished it in front of her and murmured an “All righty” as a magic circle appeared at the point of the sword. A buzzing sound could be heard, and a moment later, a large hole opened up in the air.

“Hi, grandma! Oh, bro-bro’s there too! Hi, bro-bro!”

I was shocked to see Shiori waving at us from the other side of this new portal. A quick glance was all it took to tell me she was standing in the middle of Ninoritch’s town square with the refugees from Hyord behind her. I had no idea how grandma had done it, but it appeared she had managed to connect the dungeon to the town.

“Shiori, come here and bring everyone with you,” grandma said to my little sister, who responded with a nod.

“Okay, everyone! This way, please,” Shiori called out, guiding the refugees into the dungeon.

I guessed she must have told them about the ruins and the purpose they served, and they all headed down to the fount—although most of them looked somewhat confused about the course of events. I watched them all line up in front of the water before turning to grandma. “Grandma, that was seriously *amazing!*” I exclaimed.

“Hm? What was?”

“You brought all of the refugees here!” I said excitedly, though a sudden realization changed my mood in an instant. “Jeez, if I’d known you could do that, I would’ve asked you for help *weeks* ago,” I said sullenly.

Grandma burst out laughing. “What are you saying, Shiro? I only managed to get here because you made it all the way down to the bottom level of this dungeon. Besides...” She paused and shifted her gaze to the refugees. I did likewise.

I quickly spotted Nina, the young girl who had tried to give me her pendant the day the refugees arrived in Ninoritch. She was standing in front of a couple that I assumed were her parents and wailing loudly.

“If you hadn’t done what you did, none of these people would ever have experienced this miracle,” grandma said softly.

“Grandma...”

“It’s all thanks to you that they have been reunited with their loved ones, Shiro.” She punctuated her sentence by giving me a pat on the back.

That night, in Nathew’s ruins, hundreds of miracles happened, with everyone getting to spend a last moment with people they had lost. Amid the laughter and tears of the adventurers and the refugees, grandma flashed me a smile and said, “Shiro, I’m proud of you.”



It was almost time to head off home again, but I noticed that a certain someone hadn’t had their turn at the fount yet.

“Boss?” I said, approaching the little fairy hovering a few meters away from the fount.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to go see Eren?” I asked her.

She stayed silent, her eyes absolutely riveted on the clear water of the fount.

“Isn’t that why you came all the way down here?” I continued, though she didn’t reply this time either.

She had witnessed hundreds of miracles happening and then disappearing right in front of her eyes. Yet, when it came to be her turn, all the little fairy could do was stare at the fount without saying a word.

“I...” she started.

“Yeah?” I said, trying to encourage her to air what was on her mind.

“I’m scared of seeing him.”

“Oh, really?”

She nodded. "It's weird, isn't it? All I have to do is touch the water and I get to see him again. But..." She paused. "Look, m-my hands are shaking."

I took her quivering little hands in mine and said, "Everything's gonna be all right, boss."

"Shiro..."

"Look, boss. You're you, right?"

Her little brow furrowed. "Wh-What do you mean by that? That makes no sense at all!"

I chuckled. "You're right. My bad. Let me try again. Boss, you *always* keep your word, right?"

"O-Of course I do!" she said a little indignantly. "I *am* your boss, after all."

She shook away my hand and placed her little fists on her hips with an air of self-importance.

"Yup, that's my boss." I paused, then looked the fairy square in the eyes. "You promised Eren you'd see him again, didn't you?"

A surprised little gasp escaped her lips.

"And because you *always* keep your word, you *have* to go see him right now, don't you?" I pressed her.

The little fairy closed her eyes and softly stroked the pendant that was dangling down from her neck—the matching pendant that Eren had made for her. After doing this for a few seconds, she opened her eyes again, and I could see that they were now glinting with determination.

"Thank you, Shiro," she said, flashing me a smile as bright as the sun.

I shrugged. "I was only doing my job as your underling."

"I'm gonna go summon him now, okay?"

"Sure thing. Good luck."

"Thanks!" she said before flying over to the fount.

One more miracle was set to happen today. One beautiful, yet fleeting

miracle.

Final Chapter: The Promise

After waving a temporary goodbye to Shiro, Patty made her way down to the fount, where she took a deep breath as she stared at the glimmering water beneath her. She was going to talk to her best friend again. Even though she had come all the way to these ruins just for this very purpose, she still couldn't believe it was actually happening. Up until this moment, she had thought the only time she would ever see him again was in her dreams. Her heart was thumping hard in her chest in a mix of apprehension and anticipation. All she had to do was touch the water and he would appear, but her hands were shaking so much, she couldn't even do something as simple as that. *I can't let him see me like this!*

Patty closed her eyes and tried to picture her dear friend's face. But then, out of the blue, she heard his voice in her head. He was calling out to her.

"Miss Fairy..."

She suddenly really, *really* wanted to see him. "Eren, I'm going to summon you now, okay?" Patty said, mustering up all of her courage and holding out a hand toward the water, but she stopped herself at the last second.

She quickly shook her head and absolutely *slammed* her hand down into the water before deciding to plunge her entire body into the fount. A soft, warm light instantly appeared in front of her. She didn't know why exactly, but as soon as she saw that light, a wave of nostalgia washed over her. She stared at the light for several minutes until her lungs were all out of oxygen and she realized she had to get out of the water before she drowned. But just as she was starting to flail her little arms around to propel herself up to the surface, she felt a hand gently scoop her out of the water. She gasped for air and tried to wipe the water off her face with her equally soaked hands before finally raising her head.

"A-Ah..." she stammered. "I-It's you..."

There he was, standing right in front of her. He was in the same hunting outfit

he had been wearing the day they first met, and the pendant that was the twin of the one he had given to Patty dangled from his neck. His hair and eyes were just as blue as she remembered, like a beautiful cloudless sky. Her dear friend, the one person she had been wishing she could see again for so, so long was right there, lifting her up in his outstretched palms.

Their eyes met and a soft, tender smile danced across his lips. "It's been a while, Miss Fairy," he said, his voice the same as it was in her memories.

Patty suddenly felt an awful lot of things all at once, including the prickling of tears in her eyes. She could tell she was about to start crying, though she was still sopping wet, so perhaps he wouldn't notice if she let a tear or two escape and roll down her cheeks? But she quickly chased this notion away and gritted her teeth. *I'm not gonna cry in front of him.*

Instead, she placed her fists on her hips to make her seem a lot more confident than she was and said, "You're telling me! Long time no see, hume!"

She had called him "hume" again, just like before. As if nothing had changed.

"Thank you for summoning me, Miss Fairy. I never thought I'd get to see you again," he said.

"A-And whose fault is that, huh?" Patty squeaked. "You just went and died without telling me anything!"

"Aw, that's not very nice," he replied. "I'm a hume, remember? We don't live as long as fairies do."

"You should have told me that!" she chided him. "I didn't even know you were dead until a few months ago! S-So I've been looking for you all this time!"

"Really? You were looking for me?" he said, blinking in surprise.

"I-It was really hard! I even got Shiro and Aina to help me, but I *still* couldn't find you. It was a real struggle!" Patty huffed, glaring at him.

His lips curled upward into an awkward smile. "I'm sorry, Miss Fairy."

"W-Well, you look like you've learned your lesson, so I'll forgive you," Patty said, then after a moment's hesitation, she added, "And it's not like I was *totally* blameless either. I said I'd 'see you later,' but I didn't come to look for you

before you..." She trailed off.

He chuckled softly. "I waited for you for a really long time."

"I-I told you, that's on me—" the little fairy started, but Eren interrupted her.

"And you finally came," he said. "I thought you were never going to, but you did."

Patty was speechless.

"You have honored your promise. Thank you, Miss Fairy."

His gaze was as tender as ever. Patty had always loved the way he would look at her. It had been her anchor back when all of the other fairies were actively avoiding her, and it was all thanks to him and his kind eyes that she had managed to endure the relentless mockery from her peers.

She couldn't hold the tears back anymore and they started rolling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry it took me so long to find you, huh," she mumbled.

He shook his head. "Don't apologize. After all, you found me in the end, didn't you? You know, my only regret in life was that I never got to see you one last time. But now that you have summoned me on this night where shooting stars streak across the sky, I have no more regrets."

Her eyes still firmly fixed on his sky-blue ones, Patty quietly said, "I-I read your letter."

His face instantly lit up. "Oh, really? So you found it, then?"

Patty nodded excitedly. "Y-Yeah! Your grandkid's grandkid, Karen, gave it to me."

"I see. I'm so glad you got it in the end," he said, then a sudden realization struck him. "Wait, did you just say my grandkid's *grandkid* gave it to you?"

"Yeah! Karen! She's..."

Patty proceeded to tell him all about how Karen had found the letter and he smiled throughout, clearly glad that Patty had read his letter. After that, the two of them chatted for a little bit, reminiscing about the time they had spent together in the forest, recounting some of the major events that had happened

in each other's lives since their last meeting, about Ninoritch, and so on. They had so much to tell each other. But unfortunately, this miracle couldn't last forever.

"A-Ah, hume! Your body is..." the little fairy gasped as she saw his body start to flicker.

"It looks like it's nearly time for me to go," he said, a sad smile on his face. "What a shame. I wanted to talk to you some more."

"I-I'll come back!" the little fairy assured him. "On the next night where there's loads of shooting stars, I'll summon you again!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Fairy, but I can only come here once."

As soon as she heard these words, Patty felt her world crumble, and she found it nigh-on impossible to see anything in front of her. "No way..." she murmured.

By contrast, he still had a smile on his face. "Hey, Miss Fairy."

Patty hummed dejectedly.

"I'm going to be reincarnated soon," he said.

"You... You are?" the little fairy stammered.

"Yes." He paused and looked Patty square in the eyes. "Will you be my friend again in my next life?"

Patty's mouth fell open. She didn't know how to reply to that.

"You know, you've come to find me twice already: on our first meeting and tonight," he reminded her. "So next time, *I'll* be the one seeking *you* out, okay?"

"You will?" Patty mumbled.

He nodded confidently. "I will. Wherever I am reborn, I'll find my way to Ninoritch and to you." His eyes sparkled as he said it. "After all, Ninoritch is the town I founded, and..." He paused as a gentle smile curled his lips. "You and I spent so much time in the forest east of the town. 'Alone together,' remember? So this time, I'll be the one who comes to find you. That's our new promise, okay?"

Patty's tears wouldn't stop flowing. "It's... It's a promise!" she hiccuped.

"It is."

"You have to come!"

"I will."

The light emanating from his body was getting brighter and brighter. The miracle was almost over.

Wiping away her tears, the little fairy said, "Speaking of promises, remember the last one we made?"

"What promise was that?" he asked, sounding confused.

Patty put her hands on her hips and tried to make herself look as tall as she could. "I'm Patty! Patty Falulu!" she declared in a self-important tone.

He looked surprised for a split second, but the smile quickly reestablished itself on his face. "And I'm Eren. Eren Sankareka."

"See you later, Eren!"

"Yeah. See you soon, Patty."

At practically the same moment that these words left his mouth, Eren's body turned back into water and the resulting splash of him returning to the fount echoed around the room.

Patty closed her eyes and mumbled, "We'll see each other again. That's a promise."

That wasn't happening anytime soon, of course, but Patty knew she would be reunited with her best friend again someday.

And with that, the miracle had come to an end.

Epilogue

Returning to Ninoritch from Nathew’s ruins ended up being super easy, because all we had to do was walk through the portal grandma had created and poof! There we were! It was about two in the morning when we wandered out of the ruins, and looking up, we saw countless shooting stars streaking across the night sky, each one carrying a soul—or so the legends said. For the rest of that night, we all stood watching the Tears of the Sky meteor shower together.

When the sun rose, everyone headed home. For once, Patty came back to the shop with me, likely out of consideration for Stella and Aina. As soon as we made it to the break room, the two of us passed out on the sofa.



The following day was the final day of the Tears of the Sky phenomenon, meaning it was almost time for us to launch the lanterns into the sky.

“Do you all have your lanterns ready?” Karen called out from the stage we’d set up in the plaza in front of my mega-inn, the town’s new hot spot.

There were over a thousand of us in attendance and we all had lanterns, even Celes and Dramom, though I figured their involvement was more out of curiosity over this strange hume ritual than anything else.

“All right, I hereby invite all of you—whether you’ve lived in this town for a long time or you’ve only just arrived—to release your lanterns into the sky,” Karen declared before striking a match.

The lanterns were made out of thin paper and there was a small bit of solid fuel in the lower part which, once lit, would allow them to rise into the sky, kind of like a hot air balloon.

Karen brought the match close to the solid fuel at the bottom of her lantern and said, “Light your lanterns, everyone.”

This was the cue for everyone to do the same thing, and soon, all the lanterns had started to glow. It would be a few minutes before they had expanded

enough to float on the breeze, however, so everyone stared in anticipation at their respective lanterns, eager to see them take flight.

“Shiro, ya gotta light our lanterns already!” Patty urged from her spot on my shoulder, her eyes glinting with excitement. “If you don’t hurry up, I’ll light ’em with a fireball!”

I had no idea what she and Eren had talked about the previous day in Nathew’s ruins, but judging by her bright smile, it appeared she was satisfied with how their conversation had concluded.

The little fairy suddenly seemed to spot something in the distance, and she started slapping me on the cheek with her tiny hands. “Hey, Shiro!”

“Hm? What is it, boss?”

“Look! Aina and Stella are over there and they haven’t lit their lanterns either,” she said with a frown, pointing in Aina and Stella’s direction.

She was right. The mother and daughter hadn’t lit their lanterns either and were in fact just staring at them in silence.

“You’re right. Maybe they forgot to bring matches with them. I’ll go check on them.”

Patty nodded. “Yeah. Let’s go over to them, Shiro!”

“Yes, yes, okay, okay.”

The two of us made our way over to where Stella and Aina were.

“Hey, Aina...” I’d started calling out to the little girl in a cheerful voice, but as I got closer, I noticed she and Stella had sad looks on their faces.

The pair had been like this ever since we returned to Ninoritch the previous night. I was worried about them, of course, but they had just said goodbye to Aina’s father for the final time, so I’d decided to give them some space, thinking they would be in a better mood in the morning. But judging by the expressions on their faces, it seemed I’d been wrong. This time, though, I wasn’t just going to stand by and say nothing.

I opened my mouth and was about to ask them what was wrong, but Patty started speaking before I had a chance. “You’re not gonna launch your

lanterns?" she asked, not noticing that something was amiss.

This seemed to pull Aina out of her thoughts. "Patty..." she mumbled as she looked up at the little fairy, her face dark.

"Wh-What's with that look? What's wrong, Aina?" Patty asked in a panic.

"Did something happen?" I said gently to the little girl.

She didn't answer. Her little hands clutched the hem of her skirt tightly, almost as if she was trying to hold back something.

"Mr. Shiro, Patty... I'm sorry," Stella said, looking equally as sad as her daughter. When she explained the reason for their melancholy, her voice sounded like she'd given up all hope. "My husband didn't come to us last night."

I was so shocked by this revelation, all I could blurt out was a quiet "Huh?"

"We both put our hands in the fount, but he didn't come," Stella continued.

"That's..." I started, but I was unable to find the words to finish the sentence.

I couldn't believe my ears. This meant that Stella and Aina had been the only ones who hadn't witnessed Nathew's miracle. Aina started sobbing, unable to hold back her tears any longer, and Stella bundled her up in her arms and wrapped her in a gentle embrace. I'd never seen Aina this sad before, nor Stella. While Stella wasn't crying right at that moment, I could tell from her expression that she was doing everything in her power to hold back the tears.

"Did papa forget about us?" the little girl mumbled when she had managed to calm herself down slightly. "Is that why he didn't come to us?"

"N-No, of course not!" I said quickly. "There's no way your father *forgot* about you!"

"But he didn't come."

I was having a hard time finding a way to adequately respond to that.

Her arms still wrapped around Aina, Stella looked up at the sky and bit her lip. "Mr. Shiro..." she started.

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

“Do you think he might have already been reincarnated?” she asked me.

“I...” I began, but she wasn’t finished.

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t come to see us last night.”

I finally understood why they hadn’t lit their lanterns yet. To them, the Tears of the Sky had lost its meaning.

“I can see that everyone’s ready,” Karen said from up on the stage. “So let’s all release our lanterns into the sky so that the stars won’t feel lonely, everyone! Let us pray that they never stop sparkling!”

As one, the townsfolk counted down the seconds until Karen finally gave the command to let go of the lanterns: “Now, everyone!” Hundreds of lanterns rose up into the sky all at once. The only ones that hadn’t been lit yet were the ones belonging to Aina and Stella.

I was devastated. Aina had been looking forward to the Tears of the Sky for so long, but she was too heartbroken to enjoy the festivities. At the very least, I wanted her and Stella to release their lanterns, but what could I say to talk them around? What could I say to make them smile again?

“Damn it,” I muttered, frustrated by my impotence.

That was the moment Patty chose to say something absolutely outrageous. “Oh! So your pa didn’t show up yesterday? That’s great!”

A huge grin had broken out on her face. I was totally speechless. I knew Patty often struggled to read the room, but even I had never thought she could be *that* oblivious.

“B-Boss?!” I practically squeaked. “Wh-What are you saying all of a sudden?”

But Patty clearly didn’t see any problem with what she had said because she continued, “I’m so happy for you, Aina, Stella! I’m so happy he didn’t show up!”

“Boss! Do you realize what you’re *saying*?!” I cried incredulously.

This time, she turned to me. “Huh? Why do you look so panicked, Shiro? Do you need to go pee or something?”

“I don’t!” I refuted hastily. “But you...” I quickly stopped myself when I

noticed tears welling up in Aina's eyes once more. The poor mite must have felt really hurt by Patty's lack of tact.

I couldn't let this slide. I balled my hand up into a fist and readied myself to give the little fairy a bonk on the head. It was time to revolt against my tiny tyrannical boss!

"Boss, Aina's in a state of shock, and you're just making it worse!" I reprimanded her.

But the little fairy simply looked at me with puzzled eyes, clearly not understanding what the issue was. I was just about to scold her again when she clenched her right fist and smacked it into her left palm, which indicated she had realized something.

"Oh, I see! No, no, Shiro. You've got it *all* wrong!" she said.

"And what do you mean by that?" I asked, slightly annoyed.

"Good grief..." she sighed. She hopped off my shoulder and flew right up into my face. "Listen closely, Shiro." She raised a finger like she was about to lay some facts on me, then continued. "If Aina's pa didn't come visit her, that means he's still alive, duh!"

My jaw hit the floor. Patty may indeed have been right about that. After all, Nathew had said the ritual was complete. Yet, when Stella and Aina had tried to reach Aina's father, he hadn't appeared in the fount. And of course, this was proof that he was still alive! It was so *simple*, yet I'd needed Patty to explain it to me. My boss sure was something else, huh?

Aina and Stella stared at the little fairy with eyes as wide as saucers.

"So papa is..."

"My husband is..."

The pair looked at each other in bewilderment before finishing the questions in perfect sync: "He's alive?"

As soon as these words left their mouths, their faces scrunched up. Aina started sobbing loudly again, and this time, Stella didn't even try to prevent the tears from running down her own cheeks. The mother and daughter pair

sobbed in each other's arms, only this time, they were tears of joy.

The person they had been missing this whole time was alive. That was one hell of a revelation and I couldn't blame them for their reaction.

"Wh-Why are you crying?" Patty asked in a panic. "Sh-Shiro! They're crying! Should we do something?"

I nodded. "Of course we should." I picked up the lanterns that were still lying on the ground. "We gotta help 'em launch their lanterns! Aina, Stella, are you ready?"

"Yeah!" the little girl exclaimed.

"Yes!" her mom agreed.

So we did just that.

"Mama, it's beautiful."

"Yes, it most certainly is."

Hundreds of lanterns floated up into the sky, and if you'd looked closely, you'd have been able to tell that two of them had gotten a bit of a late start.



Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the sixth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back to My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiroyuki Shimotsuki. Thanks to your interest in this series, we have made it to the sixth volume!

I had the idea for this volume way back when I was writing the second volume. I wanted to write some sort of conclusion to Patty's story, and in the end, this is what I came up with, though I must admit, I actually kept making modifications to this volume right up until the very last minute. Still, I hope you all enjoyed it.

All righty, time for some advertising.

Thanks to your continuing support, the manga version of *Peddler in Another World* is doing fantastically well. The third volume just came out last month and Shiro's little boss, Patty, is a major part of it. If you haven't read it yet, I highly encourage you to go check out Shizuku Akechi-sensei's *Peddler in Another World* manga. (It's an absolute masterpiece.) As an added bonus, the third installment is based on the second volume of the light novel, which has very significant ramifications for the very book you are reading right now! So you can now enjoy reading about the events of that volume in manga form!

Now, onto the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you so much for your fantastic work on this series. As always, the illustrations for this volume were incredible, and I particularly liked Emille's funny face. Some even almost made me shed a tear! And as if more proof were needed, I have actually set one of the double-page illustrations as the wallpaper on my desktop (*laughs*).

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, thank you so much for always producing such high-quality work, chapter after chapter. Every time I'm done reading a chapter, I always find myself already impatient for the next one!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for everything and I'm sorry for making edits right up until the last minute.

To my family, my friends, and my dogs, as always, thank you for your support.

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 children in need. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to supporting these children.

See you all for the next volume!

Hiroyuki Shimotsuki



“Mnyah!”

Still clinging tightly to my arm, Emille pulled down her lower eyelid and stuck her tongue out at the dwarves like a brat.

No one with an ounce of self-respect would contort their face in such a grotesque manner, but, well, this was Emille.



“Huh?”

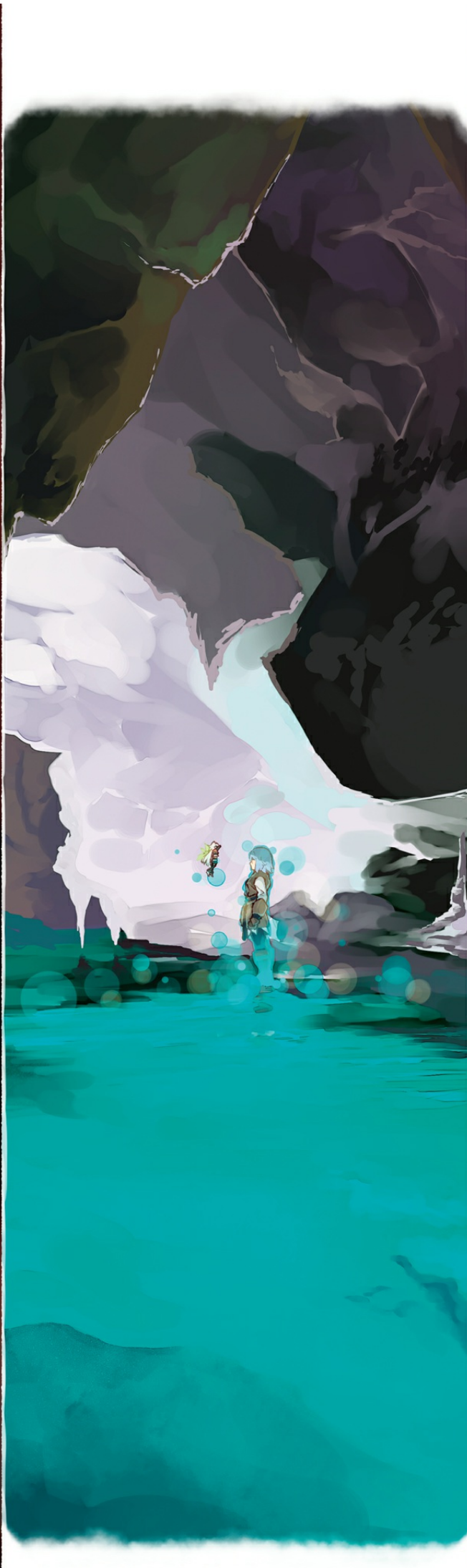
“Mama
sho cool!”

SMI RK

Suama squealed and wriggled
around in my arms as she watched her
mother breathing fire over the field.



“It’s...
It’s a
prom-
ise!”

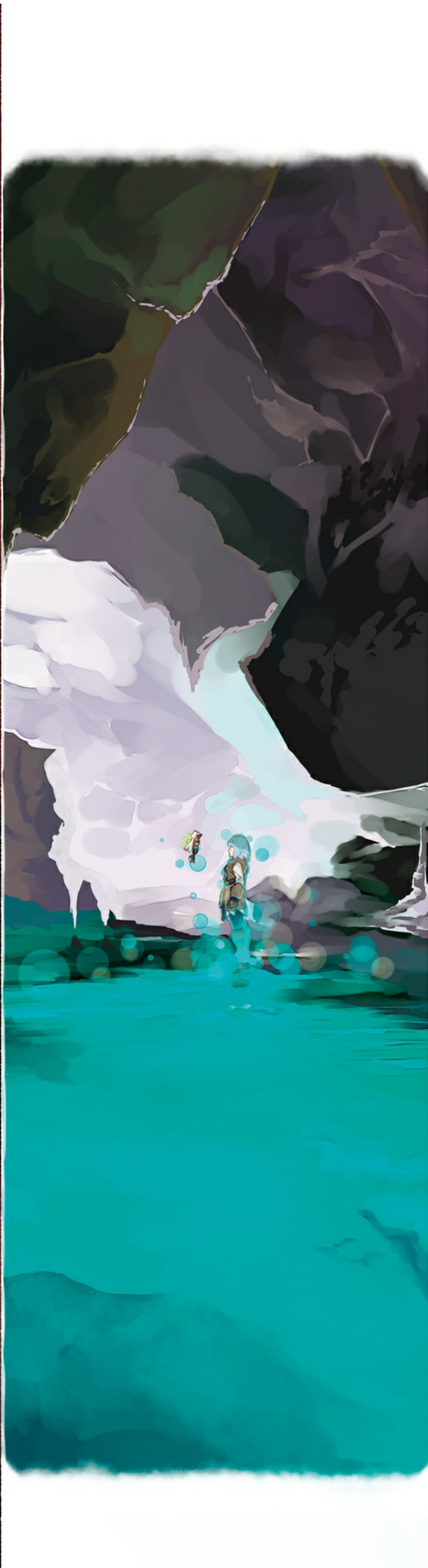


“Will
you
be my
friend
again
in my
next
life?”











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 6

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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