

story

Itsuki Mizuho

art

Nekobyou Neko

To
Another World...

with ~~LAND~~
9 MINES!



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To
Another World...

with **LAND
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Side Story—Touya's Daily Life

Touya

Tomi

Billiards!



For the tips of the cue sticks, Simon would use tusk boar ivory, and the butts could be decorated, but we didn't need any of that, and nobles would probably decorate their own sticks according to their own taste. All of the equipment would be made from wood, and the other necessary materials were mostly things that could be made and found in Laffan.



It sounded like these days, you weren't supposed to make billiard balls from wood, but we couldn't come up with any good ideas for a substitute, so Nao had to make them with magic. It was a process of trial and error. Anybody else would have a hard time copying the balls that Nao made, so it was sort of a blessing in disguise that the wooden balls ended up being too light.

Nao would probably be swamped with work if billiards ever got popular, but that was a problem we could deal with in the future.



Side Story—A New Year's Eve Tradition

Making soba noodles!

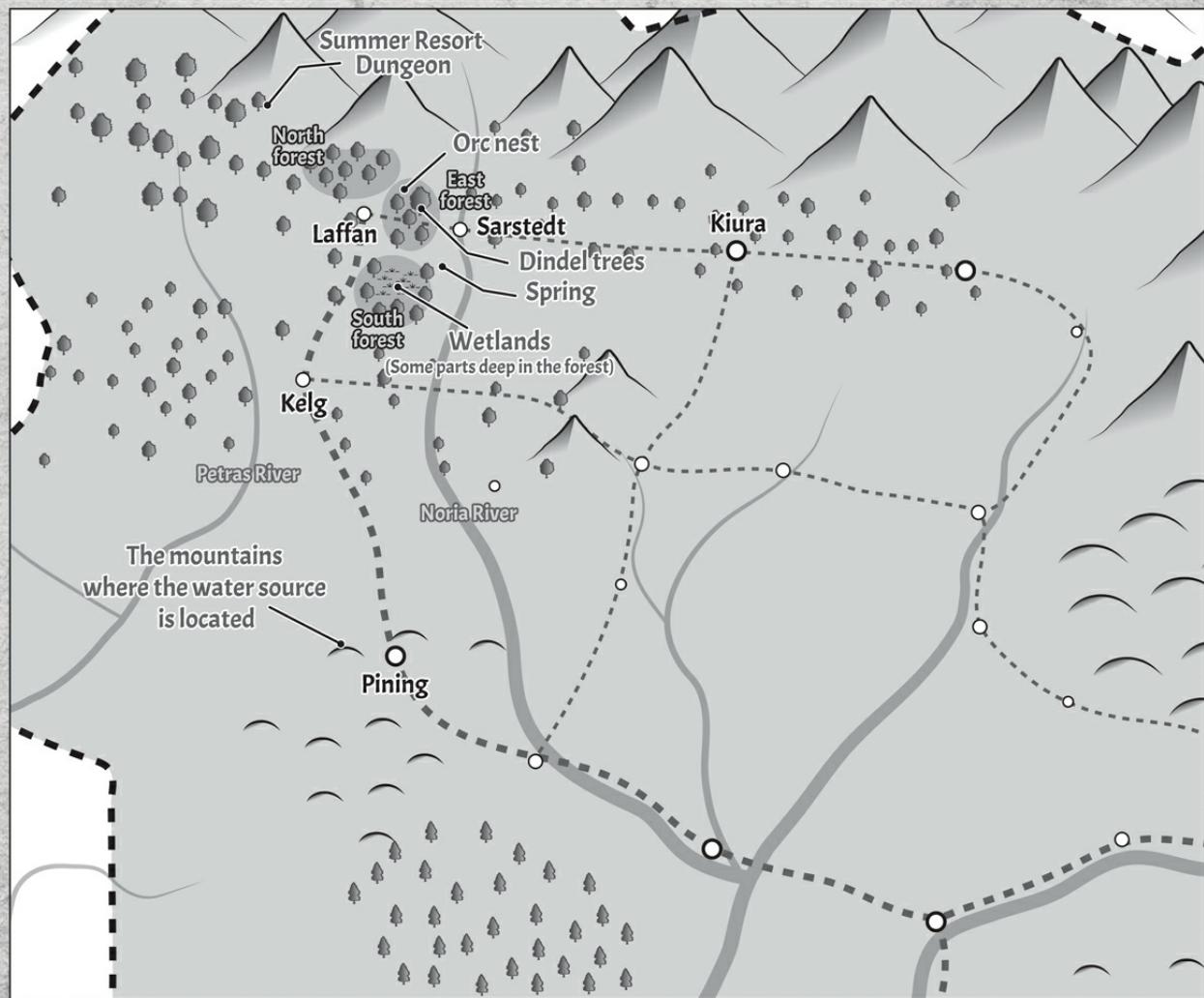
Yuki

Estelle

Sai

Side Story—Part Four of Sai's Adventures: A Step Forward

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Prologue

The Adventurers' Guild in Laffan was usually a calm enough place outside of its busiest hours during the morning and evening. Today, I was peacefully sitting behind my receptionist desk as usual. Over the last few years, the routine I'd become accustomed to was killing time with office work until the evening, but recently, a breath of fresh air had arrived in the form of Nao-san's party.

About a year ago, Nao-san's party had begun their careers as adventurers in Laffan, and their accomplishments in the short time since had vaulted them into the position of one of the guild's top moneymakers. The branch master would often complain that adventurers left Laffan the minute they were skilled enough to earn decent money, but his mood had been better recently thanks to Nao-san's party. I was very grateful too. After all, the pay that a branch master and a vice-branch master received was dependent on the performance of the guild branch. Rising through the ranks granted one power and authority, but that wouldn't necessarily result in increased pay. In fact, the branch master whom I worked under had been transferred here after working as vice-branch master at Kelg. There were many more adventurers in Kelg than in Laffan, so he must have suffered a considerable pay cut, but that was now a thing of the past. He was probably receiving more pay now than he had back in Kelg thanks to Nao-san's party.

And they seemed to have no intention of leaving Laffan in the near future, so I was guaranteed a stable source of high income. *I'm glad that I acted as a middleman and helped them purchase a plot of land! I'm so proud of that achievement! I've helped them with all sorts of other things too, so surely I deserve a raise, right? Well, it's nothing I can't handle, and the guild branch in Laffan isn't very busy, so I don't really mind, although it's rather unfair that the branch master gets paid more even though he hasn't done anything. Hmm, yeah, I'll either make him deal with whatever problem comes up next—or request bonus pay.*

There were other benefits to dealing with Nao-san's party, however, such as

the gifts they would sometimes share with me. Dindel season was coming soon, so I was curious if they would head out to gather dindels once again this year. It would no longer be a very profitable endeavor for them, but they seemed to like the taste of dindels as much as I did, so there was hope. If other rookie adventurers showed up in town who happened to be elves, I could rely on my usual plan, but such adventurers were very rare in Laffan. In fact, there were many more veteran adventurers who came here just for dindels around this time of the year. Unfortunately, those veterans would only gather dindels for themselves to eat, so there wouldn't be any spare for me. I could ask for a favor if Nao-san showed up, but...

"Now that I think about it, I haven't seen them in a while."

It hadn't been too long ago that Nao-san's party had been absent from the guild for an extended period while exploring a dungeon. I had been anxious at the time, but they'd eventually returned as if nothing had happened, like I had been worried for no reason. Still, it sounded like they'd gotten themselves into a situation that most adventurers wouldn't have been able to escape alive, so my concerns hadn't been unfounded. They had been gone for quite a while this time as well, but there was probably no need to worry considering the fact that they had ultimately been fine last time.

While I was lost in thought, one of my colleagues brought me a letter.

"A letter has arrived for you, Vice-Branch Master."

"Oh, thank you," I said.

The Adventurers' Guild offered letter delivery through its own transport network. The service was available to the general public, but it was far from cheap, so few people made use of it. Letters for me were usually business correspondence or messages from my mom. *Let's see what it is this time.*

"A letter from mom, huh? Or rather, a letter from my uncle," I said.

The first message was indeed from my mom, but the more important one was a letter from my aunt that had been bundled with it, and the actual content of that letter was from my aunt's husband, Viscount Nernas. It would attract the wrong kind of attention if a lord were to send a letter directly to an employee of the Adventurers' Guild, so we had resorted to this convoluted method in order

to avoid giving rise to rumors unnecessarily. However, my uncle paid the associated fees, so my mom seemed quite happy about the fact that she could, in essence, send me letters for free. She would usually ask after my health and tell me about recent events in her own life, so I set aside that letter and started to read the letter from my aunt, which was likely more important.

“Hmm. These are some really unreasonable demands,” I said. “I suppose I should have expected as much from my uncle.”

The “favors” that my uncle asked for were usually very difficult to deal with, and this time was no exception. The requests that Nao-san’s party brought to me were extremely easy in comparison. There were cases in which I would ask for my uncle’s cooperation—like the other day, when he’d purchased the swords that Nao-san’s party had discovered—so we did have a mutually beneficial relationship of a kind, but on the other hand, the relationship between the family I had been born into and my uncle was a major reason that it was hard for me to turn down his demands.

However, it wasn’t as if my uncle would use his position as the viscount to exert undue pressure on my family. It was more that my own position in the family was complicated.

I was the firstborn child of Baron Meredith, but my mother was one of the baron’s concubines. Had I been the child of the baron’s lawful wife, or had I been born male, then I probably would have been accepted as the family heir by the time I became an adult. However, that hadn’t been the case, and the baron’s lawful wife had been unwilling to accept me as his heir. In addition, the noble family of the baron’s lawful wife was higher in rank than the baron himself, which made things even more complicated. My father had no choice but to obey the will of his wife’s family, and as a result, I still hadn’t been appointed as the heir to his title even though his wife was now too old to bear another child.

The title of Baron Meredith wasn’t important to me in the slightest, so I would have had no objection to marrying into another family, but that wasn’t an option either, since I was the baron’s only child. That was why I was still single at my age. Even setting aside the issue of succession, marriage wasn’t a realistic option for me at this point, but neither was finding a job to become

independent. Most of the children of nobles became bureaucrats, but if I accomplished something significant, I would become the heir to my father's title, so that was unacceptable to my father's legal wife. On the other hand, my father considered any job that was open to commoners to be unfit for a noble, and he had been fiercely opposed to me following that path even though he himself had never worked a real job in his life.

When I came of age, I had despaired for my future, but my aunt, who had married into the House of Nernas, had lent me a helping hand. After surmising that neither my mother nor I had any idea what to do, she consulted Viscount Nernas, and the viscount arranged a job for me at the Adventurers' Guild. It was impossible for a mere baron to bend the will of a viscount, and that was how I had been able to work here at the guild without any trouble so far. Thus, whenever my uncle asked me for a favor, it was very difficult for me not to oblige him, but...

"Surely he's expecting too much from a rural branch of the Adventurers' Guild?"

There were two primary concerns in the letter. The first was a question about whether I had anything suitable in mind for a noble's wedding gift, the intended recipient being the heir of Baron Dias, who ruled over the territory adjacent to this viscounty. The barony was more powerful economically, so Baron Dias was not someone that the viscount could afford to treat lightly, even if he was lower in rank. With all of that in mind, the viscount was probably looking for the kind of curio that could be found at the Adventurers' Guild.

"I'd normally reply, 'Just send some of the high-end furniture that Laffan is famous for,' but..."

If a territory had a famous specialty, then the standard choice would be to send that as a gift. But my uncle had brought the matter up in a letter, so he must have been looking for something else entirely. However, it wasn't easy to find rare and unusual things at a remote guild branch like this one. There was a chance that Nao-san's party could find something that met those criteria as they were exploring a dungeon, but it was highly unlikely that they would be able to find anything suitable as a gift for a noble.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask Nao-san's party once they return," I said. "The next thing in this letter is sort of relevant to them as well."

Apparently my uncle wanted to hire strong and trustworthy adventurers for cheap. *Oh please, there's no way you could possibly hire anyone good for the kind of money you're talking about. And on top of that, you want trustworthiness? Impossible!* In the past, I would usually have written a reply like "Just to be clear, the Adventurers' Guild isn't an organization of handymen," as there hadn't been any strong adventurers in Laffan. However, things had changed now due to the arrival of Nao-san's party, Meikyo Shisui. My uncle probably had them specifically in mind, having met them before, but I couldn't exactly use my position as an employee of the guild to order them to accept a quest for so little. I would normally have turned down this particular favor, but I could understand why he had asked due to family circumstances.

My cousin, Illias, had apparently been appointed to attend the wedding of Baron Dias in my uncle's place. However, the highway that led to the barony was a somewhat perilous one that passed through the mountains and forests, and the chances of encountering monsters and bandits along the way were very high. Viscount Nernas and Baron Dias were both responsible for the situation due to the fact that neither had been able to deal with problems of that kind, but even so, I couldn't simply pretend indifference. Illias was like a cute little sister to me, so I worried for her. The troops who served in the local army under the viscount's authority were supposed to act as bodyguards in situations like this, but most of them were occupied with the reconstruction of Kelg, and their area of expertise was also rather different from an adventurer's. Troops could handle bandits just fine, but adventurers were better at handling monsters, especially in settings like forests. In addition, the members of Meikyo Shisui were much stronger than the troops who served under the viscount, so I would feel at ease if I could leave Illias in their hands.

"It would be great if I could convince Nao-san's party to accept this escort quest, but what should the reward be? Hmm..."

The House of Nernas wasn't exactly wealthy, besides which the timing was bad. Kelg was in the middle of recovering from the mayhem that the Holy Satomi Sect had caused, and money was required for a wedding gift to hand

over to Baron Dias, so it was likely that the viscount couldn't afford to spend too much. There was a chance that Nao-san's party would be willing to take on an escort quest for less than the going rate if I pleaded with them, but they were already Rank 5 adventurers, so taking advantage of their trust in me was not an option, as far as I was concerned. In addition, the consequences for failing an escort quest were much more severe if the party being escorted was a noble rather than, say, a merchant. Nobles were much more difficult to deal with as clients; a lot of them would toss out unreasonable demands. Moreover, there was no real reason for Nao-san's party to take on an escort quest when they had a myriad of other options for earning a lot of money. *Ugh, just thinking about some of the clients I had to deal with in the past makes me mad! There were so many times when I wanted to just ignore my position as an employee of the guild and punch them!* Illias was a good girl, but she wasn't acquainted with Nao-san's party, so...

"It needs to be something other than a monetary reward from the House of Nernas, and it also needs to be something that'll make the escort quest attractive in the eyes of Nao-san's party. Hmm..."

Would something like a rare work of art do? Nah, there probably aren't any good ones left. After the mithril incident, the House of Nernas was forced to let go of the majority of the art in its possession. It was also forced to pare down its standard of living in every way it could while maintaining the bare minimum necessary to keep up appearances as a noble. My aunt seems to be struggling to this day as a result.

What if the House of Nernas makes a promise to become the patron of Meikyo Shisui? Hmm. A promise like that would be far from worthless, but neither would having a poor viscountcy household as a patron be very useful. It could benefit Nao-san's party within this viscounty, but it wouldn't mean anything if they ever had to contend with other nobles.

"Oh, now that I think about it, Nao-san's party seems to be fond of meals."

Nao-san's party were unbelievably frugal for their age, but meals were one thing that they did splurge on. Some of the dishes they'd presented after inviting me to their house had been quite luxurious, and whenever they acquired delicacies like dindels and monster meat, they seemed to keep most of

it for themselves and their friends instead of selling it. *Hmm, yes, for Nao-san's party, things related to food might be a much more attractive reward than money.*

"As for something my uncle could potentially provide...it'd be either alcohol or the nearby dungeon."

I had received news the other day that the House of Nernas had purchased two breweries. The first was a long-established brewery that had suffered serious losses due to its bad business model, while the second was newer. I had no idea as to why my uncle had decided to purchase the latter. It seemed that my uncle had managed to purchase both at bargain prices, so he probably wouldn't be opposed to using them as a reward to save money. The only downside was that Nao-san's party didn't consume alcohol regularly. The ale they had offered me at their house during the welcome party for Mary and Metea was from the same long-established brewery my uncle had just purchased, so they must have liked the taste. However, although they had provided ale for their guests, they had only drunk a little themselves.

The other option was the rights to the dungeon that Nao-san's party had named the Summer Resort Dungeon. It seemed to me there was a very high chance that would be satisfactory. Dungeons were usually managed by the Adventurers' Guild, but the actual ownership of the dungeon devolved to the lord who ruled over the surrounding lands. If the dungeon was located on private property, then the owner of that property would own the dungeon, but in practice those rights were usually confiscated by the lord. However, that also meant it was possible for a lord to grant the rights to anyone of his choosing. A normal person wouldn't have been able to make use of something like the Summer Resort Dungeon, but Nao-san's party were fond of the meat they could obtain there, and they seemed to regard it as worthwhile, considering they continued to explore it.

Conversely, the House of Nernas considered the dungeon to be something of a cursed place. The events of the past had made the area difficult to develop, and in fact, if Nao-san's party hadn't entered the dungeon, it wouldn't have generated any profit at all, so the House of Nernas had nothing to lose by granting the rights to Nao-san's party. In fact, if the result was that Nao-san's

party became more motivated to explore the dungeon, the Adventurers' Guild would profit by purchasing the loot that they retrieved, and the House of Nernas would also benefit via the taxes it received from the guild.

"No one would have to spend any money; in fact, everyone would *earn* money this way," I mused aloud. "Excellent adventurers capable of exploring that dungeon and returning safely might appear here in Laffan in the future, but..."

In that event, it would be necessary either to ask Nao-san's party to allow other adventurers into the dungeon or to purchase back the rights. However, the chances of that happening were quite low. If it were really that easy to raise excellent adventurers, then the supply of precious wood would never have dried up for a matter of years.

"Mm, let's go with the dungeon as the main plan. It would probably be best for me to head out and seal the deal in person, however."

Nao-san's party were the ones who would be negatively affected by any conflicts or misunderstandings, after all. It would be a lot of work to juggle considering that I also had my responsibilities as the vice-branch master to handle, but trust was one of the most important assets a person could have, so I started to work on everything that was necessary to keep the guild functioning even if I was gone for some time.

Chapter 1—Garden Paradise?

The first thing we saw on the eleventh floor of the dungeon was breathtaking nature beyond anything I'd expected. There was an expanse of grassy plains that seemed to stretch on forever, forests scattered all over the place, and bodies of water that looked a bit too large to be classified as ponds. I looked up and saw a bright blue sky with clouds as well as a source of light shining down like the sun; it made the entire level as bright as noon outside the dungeon.

"So this is the scenery that was described in the books, huh? I kind of underestimated what it would actually look like," I said.

According to the books about dungeons that we owned, about a tenth of the dungeons that had been discovered thus far had floors that exactly resembled the landscapes outside of the dungeons. Those landscapes could be forests, grassy plains, rivers, snow-covered mountains, volcanoes, and even seas, which was pretty amazing. The skies and seas in a dungeon weren't endless, however. Apparently you would eventually bump into a transparent wall after traversing a certain distance, which would prevent you from advancing further, so there was a limit to how much of the world a dungeon could recreate.

However, the seas that had been discovered inside of dungeons were habitats in which normal fish could be found along with monsters. The whole thing sounded amazing, and it was particularly interesting to me. *Man, I really want some saltwater fish. It's been so long since I last had sashimi. Swimming probably wouldn't be safe, but access to the sea would be extremely valuable even just as a source of new cooking ingredients.*

"Whoa, we're outside!" Metea yelled, stamping her feet in place as if she was trying to hold herself back from dashing forward.

When Mary noticed that, she hastily grabbed Metea's hand. *Mm, I know how you feel, Metea. We've been walking through dark and narrow dungeon floors, so seeing something this vast makes me want to run freely too, but we are inside a dungeon.*

“We’re definitely still inside of a dungeon,” said Haruka. She turned around and looked up at the rock walls behind us. They reached up all the way into the sky—their summit wasn’t visible—but there was a hole at the base, and the stairs that we had walked down were visible within.

“If it weren’t for those stairs, we’d just think we got teleported outside,” said Yuki.

“Mm. Dungeons do contain things like return devices, after all,” said Natsuki. “The sky looks very natural, so it’s possible that Metea-chan was actually correct.”

“Um, what do you mean, Natsuki-san?” Mary asked.

Natsuki nodded in response to Mary’s question before answering. “I’m talking about Metea’s answer to my question sometime ago—why the sky looks blue. Can we be sure that the sky we see outside is the real sky?”

At the time, Metea had answered Natsuki’s question with “There’s a blue ceiling,” and we had thought she must be wrong based on our own common sense, but...

“That makes it sound like we’re in a self-contained world, like in the old Chinese legend of ‘heaven and earth in a pot’—it just looks real enough to be indistinguishable from reality,” said Haruka.

“Does that mean the places we think of as outdoors are actually still inside the ‘pot’?” I asked. “Hmm...”

Is virtual reality really “virtual” if you can’t even tell the difference? I don’t think there’s a clear answer to that question.

“Well, if we’re going to talk about this kind of thing, then there are other questions to consider,” I said. “Like, there’s the question of whether we’re actually alive or not, so—”

“Please don’t say scary stuff like that, Nao!” Yuki interrupted me, slapping me across the face before pointing at a faraway pond as if to change the topic. “M- More importantly, do you think it’ll rain on this floor of the dungeon?”

“If you think about it logically, plants can’t grow without rain,” I said. “Ponds

can't form without rain either, but..."

I tore some grass from the ground. It looked to be the same kind of grass that grew around Laffan. However, monsters in dungeons were able to survive without consuming food, so it seemed equally plausible that the grass inside of dungeons could grow without water.

"There's wind blowing here, a sun in the sky, and heat as well," said Natsuki. "Convection currents cause wind, and they also cause the formation of clouds, but there needs to be enough space, so—"

Natsuki had started to ponder the issue from a scientific perspective, but Yuki interrupted her before she could truly lose herself in thought. "There's no need to think that much about it, Natsuki. The word 'fantasy' is enough of an explanation."

Yuki's conclusion was a bit simplistic, but she was completely right. There was a lot about dungeons that was impossible to explain from a scientific perspective, so there was no way you'd be able to figure out the right answer from just one floor.

"Mm, I suppose there's no point thinking about it too deeply," said Natsuki.

"Yeah, just accept things as they are," said Yuki. "We're in a different world, after all."

"Indeed," said Haruka. "We can use magic too—that's another thing science can't explain."

"Tee hee. That's definitely true," said Natsuki. "I wouldn't be able to explain what mana is even if someone were to ask me."

Scientific knowledge was useful even in this world, but there was a lot of stuff it wasn't applicable to—mana, magic, and so forth. Mana was a type of energy that existed in our bodies, and magic was the phenomenon that could be produced by that mana. Prana permeated the air and atmosphere and was believed to be responsible for spawning monsters. Magicites could be obtained from monsters, mana could be obtained from those magicites, and magical devices consumed the mana from magicites.

However, all of the definitions for those terms were quite vague, and they

weren't commonly used by ordinary people, just as laypeople on Earth would lump together things like radiation, radioactivity, and radioactive materials all under the one word "radioactivity."

There were a lot of conflicting theories among people who specialized in magic—for example, about the question of whether or not the effects of magical devices counted as magic. That debate was still ongoing, but apparently the yeas had the upper hand right now. Of course, the majority of people didn't care one way or another as long as the devices worked.

The consensus among my party was that the effects of magical devices weren't magic. If you defined magic as a variety of phenomena that could be caused by the consumption of mana, then the main issue (according to the girls) was that the numbers didn't add up. That is, magical devices seemed to have higher mana output than input.

The hypothesis that the girls had come up with was that it had something to do with prana. However, that hypothesis in itself invited other questions, such as whether the use of prana would count as magic. Then there was the basic mystery of what exactly prana was. Overall, it was something that I could only describe as too confusing to understand.

"Well, even if we can't come up with an explanation, it's still a fact that mana exists, and so do the phenomena that it causes," I said.

"Mm. It's no different for civilizations without magic," said Haruka. "For example, gravity still exists even if gravitons are never discovered, and mass remains constant regardless of whether there's a Higgs boson."

There was a possibility that something like magic particles would be discovered a few thousand years in the future, but it wouldn't change the fact that magic worked just fine in the present, so the best way to approach this environment would be to accept it on its own terms.

"Okay, let's put aside the science talk for now," said Touya. "More importantly, what should we do next? Honestly, I'm having a hard time restraining my desire to explore this floor..."

I noticed that Metea was nodding at Touya's words, so she must've wanted to explore too. Her ears were twitching, and her tail was standing up straight, so

she was definitely excited.

“Please don’t go wild, Touya,” I said. “I get why you’re excited, but still.”

The grassy plains ahead of us looked so vast that even I felt an urge to run around freely. In fact, if I had felt nothing upon seeing something like this inside of a dungeon, then I would have retired from the adventuring life right away.

“Yeah, there’s definitely a lot of stuff that I’d like to explore and investigate too,” said Yuki. “Our next move depends on our physical conditions, though.”

“I’m fairly sure that the five of us are fine,” said Natsuki. “Mary-chan, Metea-chan, what about the two of you? Do you feel all right?”

The sisters smiled and nodded.

“Yes, I feel fine as well,” Mary replied. “Our meals and sleep have been the same as usual even though we’re inside a dungeon.”

“I’m good to go too!” Metea replied. “I’m full of energy!”

They weren’t as accustomed to exploring dungeons as we were, but they were quite tough due to the environment they’d grown up in. In fact, they appeared perfectly healthy, so there weren’t any problems.

“Hmm. All right, let’s continue exploring for a bit,” said Haruka. “But where should we start?”

We were surrounded by grassy plains, and with the walls behind us, we could head anywhere within a 180-degree arc. However, we had no idea where the stairs that led to the next floor were located. The path directly in front of us would have been the logical answer, but...

“Is your Scout skill picking up any foes, Nao?” Yuki asked.

“Yeah, there are some, but they don’t seem very strong,” I replied. “There’s nothing to block our view, and we should be able to see them considering my Scout skill says they’re not too far away, but...”

Hawk’s Eye! Well, this is a passive skill, so it’s always active—I don’t actually have to activate it. The ability to see was different from the ability to actually discover where our foes were located. When I looked again more carefully, I noticed some movements at the spots that my Scout skill had identified.

"Hmm? Oh, that's where they are?!" I exclaimed. "Whoa, that's really good camouflage..."

Everyone else tilted their heads in confusion.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Yuki asked.

"The foes ahead look like smallish wolves," I replied. "They have green fur, and they're approaching us slowly. See them?"

I pointed at the wolf that was closest to us, but the only person who could find it was Yuki, probably because she also had the Scout and Hawk's Eye skills. "Oh, you're right, I see them now," she said. "Gosh, they're really hard to make out."

The wolves weren't too far away, so they technically should've been visible to the others too. However, their green fur blended in with the surrounding grass very well, so it was probably very difficult to notice the wolves unless you were aware of their positions and observed carefully until you found them. *I wonder if their fur is similar to the ghillie suits used by military personnel on Earth.* The wolves' black noses were hidden within the grass, and they moved with the grass as the wind passed through it.

The next person to find the wolf was Haruka, probably because, as an archer, she had good eyes. "Oh, I found them," she said. "There!"



Even as she announced that she'd found it, she drew her bow and swiftly loosed an arrow at it. There were about forty meters between us and the wolf, and Haruka's arrow flew straight at its target, but the distance proved to be too great; the wolf noticed the attack and leaped into the air to dodge it.

When its leap revealed it to the rest of my party, they all sounded shocked.

"Huh?! It was there the whole time?!" said Mary.

"A dog suddenly jumped out of nowhere!" yelled Metea.

"That foe would be intimidating for people without the Scout skill," said Natsuki.

"It's really the exact same color as the grass!" said Touya. "It's hard to notice even when you know where they are!"

Those of my companions who also had the Scout skill had a rough idea of where the wolves were, but apparently they hadn't been able to see through their camouflage.

"The camouflage was very impressive, and it's very nimble, but I didn't expect it to look so skinny," I said.

I hadn't been able to tell when it was hidden in the grass, but when the wolf leaped into the air, it looked a lot skinnier than I had assumed. In fact, it looked quite a bit smaller than the howling wolves we had encountered on the seventh floor of the dungeon.

"Let's slay this one first—wait, they're all coming at us, and fast!" I yelled.

As a result of Haruka's attack, the wolves seemed to have realized that we'd noticed them, and all of the hostile signals that I'd detected were rushing toward us.

"I-It's really hard to tell them apart!" yelled Touya. "How many of them are there?!"

"Twelve, or no, thirteen," I said. "It looks like we've been surrounded in a semicircle."

The wolves had surrounded us on all sides except from behind, where the

walls were. I was aware that we were surrounded thanks to my Scout skill, but it was still really hard to see them with my naked eyes.

“This isn’t a great situation!” said Haruka. “Maybe I should level up my Scout skill too.”

Despite her words, none of Haruka’s arrows had missed after the first one, and she was already racking up quite a kill count. Touya, Natsuki, and Yuki all had the Scout skill, and they, too, were slaying wolves without any issues, but Mary and Metea were struggling a bit. The two of them kept in constant communication during combat.

“Ugh, I can’t see them well!” said Metea.

“Don’t leave my side, Metea!” Mary exclaimed. “Another one’s coming from that direction!”

I constantly kept track of their situation as I fought, but they seemed to be fine. The wolves were quite nimble, but so was Metea. Metea handled the wolves that got close to them, and Mary handled the ones that were a bit farther away. There were some close calls, but the excellent synergy that the sisters had was more than enough to keep them out of danger.

“I think that should be it, so— Wait, there’re more coming? Watch out!” yelled Touya.

I expanded the search radius of my Scout skill after I heard Touya’s warning. There were only a few wolves remaining out of the initial thirteen, but I noticed that there were over twenty hostile signals approaching us from farther away. The signals weren’t very strong, so I wasn’t worried, but...

“Hey, can I charge in by myself?” Touya asked.

“We’re fine here, so go ahead,” I replied.

“Hell yeah!”

Touya happily dashed off. Passively fighting back against foes must have bored him. Once he’d departed, I changed my weapon from a spear to a kodachi. Haruka had already put away her bow, and Yuki had switched to using her kodachi as well.

"If we just stay alert against the possibility of ambushes, then these wolves are only slightly annoying to deal with," said Haruka.

"You can find them if you pay attention to the sound they make!" said Metea.

"I'm pretty sure even the two of us can handle foes like these just fine," said Mary.

Once we'd gotten used to the wolves, we didn't even need magic to deal with them. Still, we continued to battle the wolves so Mary and Metea could gain experience, and in less than ten minutes, a pile of about forty wolves had been scattered across our surroundings.

"This is the last carcass, right? It looks like we've gathered them all," I said.

About a third of the dead wolves had been scattered far and wide when Touya had charged them. We split into groups to gather the carcasses into our magic bags. However, the wolves that we'd slain with magic were a complete mess, so we only retrieved the magicites from those. The wolves that had died in better shape were the ones that Haruka had slain with her arrows and the ones that Touya and Mary had beaten to death with their swords, and their fur was actually close to undamaged.

"It has a very beautiful color," said Haruka. "I'm surprised something like this exists."

"Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever seen an animal with fur this color back on Earth," I said.

It was a bit coarse, but it had a beautiful grassy green color. I'd never seen anything like this back in Laffan either, so it was possible that it would sell for a decent amount of money.

"I'm fairly certain that this color is only possible as a result of mutation," said Natsuki. "It's a different story with birds, of course."

"Oh, yeah, birds have all kinds of different colors," said Touya, sounding a bit confused as he thought aloud. "There are even birds that have multiple colors. Why is that?"

I hadn't thought about that myself. "Yeah, it's quite strange," I said. "Other

animals are usually brown, white, or black, and that's about it."

Compared to the variation that could be found among birds, those three colors were extremely plain. It was probably protective coloration, but there were colorful birds that had survived harsh environments, so I felt like it wouldn't be too strange for colorful mammals to exist as well.

"That seems to be a result of evolution," said Natsuki. "Colors that stand out would make it hard for herbivores to avoid being detected by their predators, and they would also make it hard for carnivores to hunt their prey."

"Is it different for birds?" Yuki asked. "Don't birds have predators too?"

"Birds can fly, and most of them have a wider variety of food sources, like fruit and insects. Those are probably some of the reasons it's different for them," Natsuki replied. "On the other hand, I'm fairly sure that only a few predatory birds are colorful... I hope that makes sense."

Yuki nodded to herself as she listened to Natsuki's explanation. "I see. Yeah, your explanation made perfect sense. I knew I could count on you to be knowledgeable, Natsuki."

Natsuki chuckled and shrugged. "I'm just guessing—I don't know whether I'm actually correct or not. Monsters seem to be completely different from normal animals, so that's presumably why they can have fur this color."

According to Natsuki, monsters didn't require food to survive, so monsters inside of dungeons wouldn't fight each other, and even outside of dungeons, cases of monsters attacking in search of food were apparently quite rare. However, monsters outside of dungeons would fight each other to establish their own territories, so they weren't exactly social creatures.

"By the way, Touya, can you tell us anything about these monsters?" I asked.

Touya looked in the air and then read the information he could see. "They're called grass coyotes. They can be found in grassy plains, and they're not very strong, but they attack their foes as a pack. Their fur is valuable, but their meat doesn't sell well. Each of their magicites is worth about a thousand Rea. That's not much money at all, huh?"

He had already read the entirety of the monster encyclopedia that we owned,

so his Appraisal skill could provide answers about any monster that had been listed in that encyclopedia, which was quite useful. Touya was essentially a walking encyclopedia that my party could access at any time. I had read through the monster encyclopedia myself, but I hadn't bothered to memorize the contents since I could count on Touya.

"Grass coyotes aren't a bad source of money when you factor in how many we can slay per hour, but it's not like they spawn infinitely, so they're not really a good option," I said.

"Yeah. There don't seem to be any left as far as I can detect," said Touya.

My Scout skill's range of detection was wider than Touya's, and I could detect a few that were quite far away, but there were no foes within our vicinity, so apparently grass coyotes only hunted in large packs.

"Well, on the bright side, we can explore this floor for a while without having to worry about monsters," said Haruka.

"Yeah, good point," I said. "I'm in the mood for exploring right now. Where should we go?"

"The only options available to us are the grassy plains or the forest," said Natsuki. "There are some bodies of water that are quite far away, but..."

Treating our left as 0 degrees and our right as 180, there was a forest ahead of us at 120 degrees. Everything else was grassland, and we could actually see the horizon due to the fact that it was mostly flat. *Man, I never imagined I'd be able to see the horizon inside of a dungeon. I mean, sure—considering what the previous floors have been like, it isn't that weird for a dungeon floor to be large enough that the horizon is visible, but still...*

"How can a space this large exist without pillars or something to hold it up? What if it can collapse on—"

I had started to wonder aloud exactly how the floor could logically exist, but Yuki interrupted my thoughts with a smile and thumbs-up. "Fantasy, Nao!"

"...Oh, right, there's no point in thinking too much about this stuff," I said.

"Yep! There's no answer, after all!" said Yuki. "All right, then. Does anyone

have a suggestion?"

"I wanna go to the forests!" said Metea. "I feel like destiny is calling me there!"

Yuki chuckled and nodded. "Destiny, huh? Tee hee. Sure, I'm down for that. I don't think the grassy plains will be fun to explore, anyway."

Touya nodded as well. "It'll just be a hassle to deal with more grass coyotes. They're a bit too easy for us."

Touya was completely right. Mary and Metea could gain some decent experience fighting grass coyotes, but the rest of us had no real reason to waste our time that way.

"Don't let your guard down, however," said Haruka. "Even grass coyotes can kill us if they get an opening to bite our necks."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "Their camouflage is very good."

There was a chance that we would have been caught by surprise without the Scout skill, and it was possible that there were other similar monsters here. We paid close attention to our surroundings as we headed toward the forest, but when we finally arrived, we were greeted by an unexpected sight.

Yuki pointed. "Whoa, look at that! There's fruit growing on the trees!"

I looked in the direction she was pointing and saw some round fruit, each about the size of a fist. The fruit was light green in color, but I had no idea if that was because it wasn't ripe yet or if that was its natural color. *Wait, hold on. Isn't it still winter right now?*

"Is that a green apple? Actually, no, based on the shape, I believe it's a pear," said Natsuki.

"A pear? That doesn't sound very exciting," I said. "Also, is that fruit actually ripe?"

"Fruit doesn't have to be exciting," said Touya. "I actually like pears."

"I'll go harvest it right now!" Before anyone could stop her, Yuki shimmied up the tree, plucked two fruits, and rejoined the rest of us.

Haruka took one of the fruits from her and rolled it around in her hands before nodding to herself. “Mm, this is definitely a pear. My Help Guide displayed the information, so it must be a common fruit.”

Metea approached Haruka and sniffed the pear in her hands. “It smells really good!” she said, sounding happy. “Destiny really was calling me!”

Mary tried to calm Metea down by patting her head, but she was smiling as well. “Now, now, Metea,” she said. “It does have a somewhat sweet smell, though.”

I couldn’t smell anything even though there wasn’t that much distance between Haruka and me. It seemed unlikely that Metea had been able to smell the pears before we had even entered the forests, but in a sense, it was true that Metea had been able to “sniff” them out, so I was impressed in a lot of ways.

“It doesn’t look like it’s ripe,” I said. “Is it actually okay to eat?”

Back on Earth, Asian pears were green, so there was a possibility that the light-green pears here were edible too, but...

“We’ll find out after we eat one,” said Touya. “Let’s peel them.”

“Gotcha,” said Yuki. She and Haruka peeled the pears they were holding, and juice dripped over their hands. “Whoa, it’s full of juice!”

Metea stared at the pear juice with her mouth half-open, and Yuki chuckled when she noticed that, then sliced off a small piece of pear and tossed it into Metea’s mouth.

Metea blinked a couple of times as she chewed the pear slice. She seemed pleasantly surprised. “It’s sweet and a bit sour, but it’s delicious!”

“Oh, really?” Right after I nodded at Metea’s words, a pear slice landed in my mouth. “Mmmph. Yeah, this definitely tastes like an Asian pear.”

Haruka seemed to be the one who had tossed it. When I glanced at her, she laughed, and I chewed the pear without any objections. It had a nice crunch to it. It was somewhat on the small side, but it would probably taste about the same as an Asian pear if you sliced one up. However, I wasn’t exactly

knowledgeable about pears, so any type of pear that tasted a bit sour seemed the same as an Asian pear to me.

“The sourness and freshness are perfect!” said Touya. “I actually really like how these pears taste!”

“They’re not too sweet, so I think they’d be perfect as something cold to eat on hot days,” said Haruka.

“Eating fruit like these feels like a wonderful treat,” said Mary. “And there are so many growing here.”

“Mm, we should definitely harvest more and bring them back with us,” said Yuki.

“If we can harvest pears that taste this good regardless of what season it is outside of the dungeon, they’ll definitely sell well,” said Natsuki.

Everyone had now taken a bite, and they all seemed to enjoy the pears. They might not sell for as much as dindels, but they would probably still sell for a decent amount of money. However, the profitability of the pears would depend on how many trees we could find and how often the trees bore fruit.

“The temperature inside of dungeons is stable, right?” Mary asked, sounding a bit curious. “I wonder if there’s any specific season for these pears.”

Mary was apparently thinking along the same lines I was, and Haruka nodded. “We’ll have to test and confirm things like that ourselves. For now, let’s pick the ones that are ripe.”

“Yeah, it would be a waste not to,” I said. “Oh, it looks like we have company to deal with first. There are three of them, and they’re getting close to us.”

“All right, let’s finish things as quick as we can and enjoy a pear-gathering party right after that!” said Yuki.

“I’m not sure if party is the right word for it, but we can definitely eat as many as we want free of charge,” said Natsuki.

“I’m real motivated now!” said Touya.

“All we can eat!” said Metea. “I’ll slay monsters as fast as I can!”

Yuki and Metea both smiled as they held up their weapons, and a few seconds later, our foes appeared. They looked like huge locusts, about fifty centimeters long, and they made use of both their legs and wings to hop from tree to tree as they approached us. Their flying speed was somewhat slow, but the speed at which they leaped between trees was quite fast.

“These are called forest hoppers!” said Touya. “Nothing in particular to note about them! Leave one to me!”

“In that case, I’ll handle another myself,” said Natsuki.

The two of them moved into position before provoking their respective forest hoppers, and the remaining forest hopper leaped toward the rest of us. However...

“Leaping in a straight line was a mistake,” I said.

Their leaps were quite fast, but the forest hoppers moved in a straight line. The way it moved its mouth parts was totally disgusting, but all I had to do was place my spear where its mouth was going to end up, and the forest hopper impaled itself without any real effort on my part. It flailed its hind legs around in an attempt to break free, but that was pointless. Soon it stopped moving, and I swung my spear to fling its dead body to the forest floor.

“Big bro Nao slew it so easily...” said Metea.

“If it’s this easy to slay forest hoppers, then I don’t think they should be too scary to deal with as long as we don’t get surrounded by a lot of them,” said Haruka.

“Don’t jinx us like that, Haruka,” I said. “What if that actually happens?”

“Each one is huge, so I highly doubt that a swarm of them will appear out of nowhere,” said Haruka. “Hmm. The carapace is a bit hard, but that’s probably not an issue.”

She nodded to herself as she poked the carcass of the forest hopper with her kodachi. My spear had pierced it easily due to the fact that I had aimed at the inside of its mouth, but it was possible that attacks would bounce off its carapace depending on what your weapon was. On top of that, I wouldn’t be able to use my spear like this if we were attacked by a large number at the

same time; under those circumstances, my spear would become unusable for a while.

"Hm? I smashed mine to death no problem," said Touya. He'd returned, bringing a forest hopper with its head severed from its body. The head was almost completely destroyed, so he must have smashed it before chopping it off.

"It's possible to slice through the carapace as well," said Natsuki.

The forest hopper that Natsuki had slain was beheaded too, but its body had been sliced into two even parts. It looked a lot cleaner than Touya's. I was amazed by how skillfully Natsuki had slain her forest hopper, especially considering it would have been much easier to slay an insect like this by aiming for its joints. However, I had impaled a forest hopper myself, so I had no good reason to comment on the best way to slay one.

"The forest hopper that died in the best shape was the one that Nao slew," said Yuki. "What parts of them are worth money, Touya?"

"Well, if you mean parts other than the magicites, just their hind legs," said Touya.

"Hind legs? You mean these long ones here?" Yuki asked.

"Yeah."

The hind legs looked like they were about thirty centimeters long when bent. They were quite large, and probably had to be due to the fact that the forest hoppers used them to hop around, but I had no idea what anyone would want them for.

"By the way, they are edible."

All of us fell silent after we heard Touya's words. Locusts were technically edible, so it wasn't that weird, but I wasn't sure how to feel about this. *Do these hind legs even taste good? I'm assuming they'll just taste crunchy, so I don't think that'll be enjoyable at all.*

"Apparently you can eat them the same way you eat crab legs," said Touya. "You know, by squeezing the meat out."

"When you put it that way, it sounds like they really could be edible," said Haruka. "I don't want to try them out myself, however."

The legs were quite thick, so they probably had more meat inside than crab legs, but I also preferred to pass on trying them myself.

"I'm actually kind of curious," said Metea. "Food is very important."

Metea had struggled to get adequate nutrition in the past, and food was necessary to survive, so she was completely right. However, everyone else had doubtful looks on their faces, including Mary.

"...Let's retrieve the hind legs just in case," said Haruka. "Fortunately for us, all of the legs are in good condition, so we can sell them."

"I guess there was no point in me slaying a forest hopper without making a mess," I said. "Well, it was a coincidence, but still."

We temporarily set aside the topic of food and stuffed the carcasses of the forest hoppers into our magic bags. Luckily for us, the other monsters that I could detect with my Scout skill hadn't moved much even though we had just finished a battle, so we were free to resume what we had been doing before.

Yuki changed the subject. "All right, let's forget about forest hoppers for now. There's pear harvesting to do!"

Metea beamed when she heard that. "Pears! That's more important!" She seemed very excited as she looked up at the rest of us to see our reactions.

"You sure seem excited, Yuki," said Haruka.

"Of course I am! Dindels are delicious, but I also like other kinds of fruit! It's been a while since we've been able to eat fresh fruit, you know?"

"Mm, you're right about that," said Haruka. "We end up drying most of the fruit we find."

Ripe fruit would spoil very quickly. Back in modern-day Japan, a lot of fruit was imported via airplane, but the fruit imported via ships had to be sprayed with fungicide, harvested while they were hard and green, and placed inside of reefer containers or something similar for temperature control, so transporting fresh fruit around the world took a lot of work. In this world, however, there

were special means of transportation such as magic bags, but that was an additional cost on top of the high price of the fruit itself and would make them too expensive for most people. There weren't many people in a rural town like Laffan who could purchase expensive luxury goods like fresh fruit, so they were a risky product to stock up on, and the only ones available on the market in Laffan were dried fruit and fruit that grew in the nearby forests.

"Well, I enjoy fruit as well, so I understand," said Haruka. "Besides, it looks like Metea can't wait any longer, so let's get started harvesting pears. The pear tree doesn't look too big, so I think just the two of us will be enough for this, Yuki."

"Yeah!" said Yuki. "Let's do this!"

It was true that the tree wasn't very big, but that was only in comparison to dindel trees and the trees that produced precious wood. In fact, when I looked up into the air, the tree appeared to be at least six meters tall. *Pear trees weren't that big back on Earth, were they? Is it because they were pruned to be smaller, or are pear trees in this world just big? Hmm.*

Haruka and Yuki climbed up the pear tree, and the rest of us caught the pears that they tossed down and stowed them in our magic bags. Touya remained on alert, but there didn't seem to be any monsters approaching us, so it was possible that monsters inside of dungeons had discrete territories.

The total number of pears that we ended up harvesting was easily over one hundred. Yuki sounded like she was about to sing a song of joy as she hopped down from the tree. "Tee hee, we managed to harvest a lot! I'm so happy!"

Metea was dancing around with one pear in each hand. "They all look delicious! Can I start eating? Can I eat as many as I want?"

Mary wasn't dancing, but she was holding pears in her hands as if they were treasures. *Man, Metea and Mary are so cute.*

"We can eat them right now, but let's chill them first," said Touya. "Nao, use your Cool spell!"

"Sure, I'll get on it right away," I said. "One pear per person should be enough for now, right?"

We were free to eat as many pears as we wanted, but even Metea probably wouldn't be able to eat a lot at once. I used my magic to chill one pear per person for a total of seven pears, and Yuki peeled them before handing them out to everyone.

"All right, time to try one out," I said. I bit into the whole pear and was greeted with its unique texture as a lot of juice burst into my mouth. "Oh, yeah, it definitely tastes better and fresher than before."

The sweetness of dindels was nice, but the cold juice of a pear felt much better as a way to pour liquid down my throat after exercising.

"Mm, pears definitely taste best when cold!" said Yuki.

"A whole pear is a bit too much for me," said Haruka. "Do you want to eat half of mine, Metea?"

"Yeah!"

"In that case, I'll share mine with Mary-chan," said Natsuki. "Would you like to eat half of my pear, Mary-chan?"

"Um, okay. Thank you very much."

Metea was beaming as she received one half of a pear from Haruka. Mary seemed a bit hesitant at first, but when Natsuki shared with her, she looked happy as well. Touya was our party's biggest eater, and he had already finished eating his pear, but...

"Are you sure just one pear will be enough for you, Touya?"

"Hm? Is one too much for you too, Nao?" Touya asked. "Wanna share?"

"Nah, that's not it," I replied. "I'm just saying that I can chill another one if you want more."

He shook his head. "I'm fine for now. There's also a good chance that we'll find another kind of fruit soon, so I don't want to stuff myself right away."

Mary and Metea were happily chewing their pears, but they froze in place when they heard Touya's words and stared at what remained in their hands.

"Metea-chan, would you like to toss your pear into our magic bags for later?"

Natsuki asked.

“...N-No, I can eat the rest,” Metea replied. “I just have to do my best!”

“I-I’m sure it’ll be fine once we get some exercise from moving around a bit,” said Mary.

After a few seconds, the sisters resumed chewing their pears, so they must have been hesitant about tossing half-eaten food into our magic bags. There was no guarantee that we would actually find more fruit, but...

“Well, I guess Touya is right—there’s a chance we can find other fruit on this floor of the dungeon,” I said. “There was a floor where we were able to get a lot of meat, so it wouldn’t be weird for there to be a lot of fruit for the taking on this floor.”

“Yeah, exactly. Just pears wouldn’t make for enough variety, so I’d like to find other fruits,” said Yuki. “They make good gifts for Diola-san, Aera-san, and Riva too, so let’s do our best to find some.”

“We can’t find something that isn’t there, but I’m good with searching,” said Haruka. “I’d like to find different fruits as well. Besides, I think it’ll be worth it to explore every nook and cranny of this floor.”

“Mm. I like sweet things too, so I approve of that idea,” said Natsuki.

Haruka and Natsuki both had smiles on their faces as they agreed with Yuki’s proposal, so it seemed our party had a plan to follow.

“In that case, let’s get started right away! Nothing’s going to stop me in my search for delicious fruit, especially since Touya will deal with anything that tries to stop me!” Yuki said, pointing at Touya’s back.

“Me?! I mean, yeah, I’ll work hard too, but really?” Touya jabbed back.

But he led the way as usual, and the rest of us followed his dependable back as we started our hunt for fruit.

In the end, we didn’t discover any other fruit trees in that first forest. We did find some more pear trees among the non-fruit trees, so we built up quite a stockpile of pears, but that was all.

However, Touya’s prediction hadn’t been completely wrong. After we’d

explored the eleventh floor completely, we learned it was laid out in a square, with each side being roughly ten kilometers. The wall from which we'd emerged was one side of that square, and there was a wall ahead of us that looked the same and had stairs leading to the next floor. The left and right sides of the eleventh floor were blocked off by invisible walls, and we hadn't been able to advance past those walls, even though the scenery ahead had been visible.

As a sidenote, the beautiful ponds that we had initially seen in the distance were behind the invisible walls, which bummed me out a bit. Luckily for us, there were a lot of other forests in this spacious floor, and we discovered apple trees and grapevines while exploring. The fruit itself wasn't as good as what could be found in supermarkets back in Japan, however. The apples were on the small side and quite sour, and each bunch of grapes only had a couple that were much larger than the rest. Still, both were fruit that we hadn't eaten in a very long time, so their appearance didn't matter to us in the slightest, and we enjoyed them just fine. In fact, we spent most of our time dashing around the eleventh floor of the dungeon in order to gather all of the ripe ones we could find. There were monsters in each of the forests that sort of served as the guardians of the fruit, but they were no match for hungry girls on a hunt for sweet fruit.



After we finished hunting for fruit, we moved on to the twelfth floor of the dungeon. The layout was more or less the same as that of the eleventh floor. The fruit we obtained on the twelfth floor were figs and loquats. The girls were extremely excited about the prospect of a third fruit, but we failed to find one even after searching through each of the forests twice over. There was a possibility that the other fruit simply wasn't in season right now, but I was fairly sure that wasn't the case. The fruit we had found on the twelfth floor was also smaller than the kind found in supermarkets, and loquats were more seed than pulp. However, there were a lot of them growing on each tree, so after we committed some time to harvesting them, we ended up with a decent amount of fruit.



The thirteenth floor of the dungeon had sumomo plums and two types of

persimmons, although one type was astringent. Both types looked similar—they were long and thin—so it was as if one type was a trap. Touya was the first victim of the persimmon trap, but his sacrifice saved the rest of us.

I'm sorry, Touya, but I swear it wasn't intentional. You were the first one to reach out for the persimmons after Yuki peeled them, so it was just bad luck on your end. I mean, sure—Haruka, Yuki, Natsuki, and I were waiting to see who would go first, but still.

The astringent persimmons looked quite similar to the ones that I remembered from Japan, so I had been wary of them right away. However, the sweet persimmons looked almost the same as the astringent ones, so my reasoning had been flawed. The astringent persimmons were a bit larger than the sweet ones, and the shape of their hulls was also slightly different, but those were only two hints for distinguishing between them. In fact, I was fairly confident that most people wouldn't have noticed unless they compared the sweet and astringent ones carefully, but the Appraisal skill was another way to tell them apart.

Mary and Metea had managed to avoid the astringent persimmon trap too. They had noticed that the rest of us were wary, besides which they had been too full to consume any more fruit after all the apples, grapes, figs, and loquats. As a sidenote, astringent persimmons were perfectly edible if you dried them, so we had actually harvested them to take back with us as well.

The sumomo plums looked like slightly large ume plums and were just as sour. However, I personally loved the sourness, so I was more than happy to harvest them. Natsuki and Touya enjoyed the plums too, but it seemed like one or two apiece was more than enough for everyone else in my party. It wasn't a type of fruit that just anyone would enjoy.



The fourteenth floor of the dungeon had raspberries and blueberries. Yuki once again looked around in search of a third fruit, but her efforts yielded no results. The raspberries were each about one centimeter long, and they looked more or less the same as the raspberries that I was familiar with. The blueberries were each about five millimeters smaller and had seeds that made

them somewhat difficult to eat. Yuki had assumed that there must be another type of fruit on the fourteenth floor due to how small the blueberries were, but in fact, we were unable to find a third one.



The fifteenth floor of the dungeon looked a bit different from the previous ones. The three previous floors had forests as well as grassy plains with grass coyotes roaming around; as soon as we engaged one grass coyote in combat, all of the others within a wide range would attack us en masse, so they were somewhat dangerous, but it was actually convenient for people like us who could handle them just fine and slay them all at once.

However, the first thing I noticed upon entering the fifteenth floor of the dungeon was that there weren't any grass coyotes in the plains. In fact, my Scout skill detected a different foe that seemed stronger.

"Be careful. There's a new enemy on this floor," I said. "It feels about as strong as an orc."

"If it's about like an orc, we should be able to slay it no problem, but we shouldn't let our guard down," said Touya.

"Yeah, you might, um, die if it gets a clean hit in," said Haruka.

I could still vividly recall the sensation of my arm breaking in a battle with an orc. In fact, I had learned a valuable lesson from it. I could endure attacks like that just fine now, having leveled up a lot and obtained new equipment since then, but it was important to never forget how scary it had been. All of us except for Touya fought with the mentality that firepower was best and we would be fine as long as we dodged attacks, and even Touya could have been classified as a dodge or evasion-focused tank. Military personnel, who only fought on particular battlefields, could completely cover themselves in heavy protective gear, but that was impossible for adventurers, who had to travel long distances. The idea of blocking attacks while protecting the back line was unrealistic for us.

"What kind of foe is it going to be this time? Is it strong?" Yuki asked.

"No idea," I replied. "If I could see something like an attack stat, I'd be able to

compare it to what we've fought so far, but oh well... Oh, there it is. It looks like a cow."

I could see something that looked like a black cow in the distance. A lot of monsters looked similar to each other, so I wasn't able to recognize and identify it at a glance, having only read through the monster encyclopedia once. However, it was possible to obtain a decent amount of information through the combination of the Help Guide and Third Eye.

Race: Strike ox

Condition: Healthy

Skills: Charge, Kick

The only information the Help Guide provided was its name. The Help Guide would apparently display the contents of the monster encyclopedia if you'd already memorized them, but I wasn't smart enough for that. On the other hand, the Appraisal skill would still display information even if your memory was a bit hazy, which was convenient. However, the Help Guide would provide information about a target's condition and skills if you used it in combination with the Third Eye skill, so it was pretty useful in its own right, although I had made sure not to rely too much on the limited information I could see. So far, I had only seen things like *healthy*, *slightly injured*, and *seriously injured* in the condition category, and those were things that anyone could determine from a glance.

Hmm, hold on... The fact that I can tell at a glance—is that why the Third Eye reveals this kind of information? Yeah, that makes sense. The information about a target's condition would be useful if other skills like Medicine revealed things that weren't obvious at first glance, but it wasn't really useful in its current state.

There was another thing I had to keep in mind: although the list of skills I could see with Third Eye was definitely accurate, it was possible for a target to have other skills that Third Eye couldn't detect. For example, the information that Haruka had seen when she'd used her Third Eye on Yasue had turned out to be a bit different from the skill build that Yasue had told us at a later time.

There was a possibility that this strike ox could actually use magic. That being

the case, I had decided that I wouldn't tell the others what skills I could see with my Third Eye. It was possible that we'd suffer an unexpected attack if we underestimated our foes, so my reasoning was that it would be better to fight cautiously and be prepared to react to all sorts of possibilities.

On top of that, this was also good practice for dealing with foes that the Third Eye skill was useless against. The only exception were magic skills, which were so dangerous that I would alert the others right away if I saw any when using my Third Eye on a target. Overall, Third Eye was somewhat unreliable, but I was pretty sure I could trust it to give me an accurate impression of how dangerous a foe was. Advastlis-sama had said so himself, and all of the foes I had fought so far had been more or less as strong as I had anticipated from using my Third Eye, so it had actually been very helpful.

"It's called a strike ox," I said. "Can you see it, Touya?"

"Nah, all I see is a black dot in the distance," Touya replied. "I'll have to get closer before I can use Appraisal."

"I guess not being able to use Appraisal until you can actually see something up close is one of its downsides. It would be great if you eventually learned Hawk's Eye, Touya," I said. "Oh, wait. Yuki, you've learned both skills, right? Can you get us any information?"

"Uh, gimme a moment," said Yuki. "Hmm. It's a bit too far for me too."

Yuki had both Hawk's Eye and Appraisal, but her skills were lower in level than Touya's or mine. She had put her Copy skill to good use, but one downside to Copy was the fact that the skills she'd copied didn't level up very fast. Apparently all she could see with Hawk's Eye was an animal with four legs.

"A cow, huh? Will it taste good?" Metea asked.

Natsuki lifted a finger to her chin and pondered that question. "I'm not sure," she said at last. "Fattened cattle taste good, but I don't know about wild cattle. Monsters might be different, though."

Beef back on Earth was delicious because it came from cattle that had been raised for use as beef. I had heard before that cattle raised for pulling plows and other agricultural labor weren't as good, but the meat from the monsters we

had encountered from the seventh to the tenth floors of the dungeon had been quite good, so...

"We can find out for ourselves by eating— Oh, it's approaching us," I said. "I think it noticed us."

"Really? From this distance? I guess cows have good eyesight," said Yuki.

"Well, it's a monster, so it might be different from an ordinary cow," said Natsuki. "And there's nothing out in the plains to block its line of sight, so it's not weird at all compared to monsters like ogres that can detect our presence without even seeing us."

Touya could see the monster in the distance even without the Hawk's Eye skill, so it wouldn't be weird if the strike ox could see us too and was already intent on attacking us. In fact, it looked quite aggressive and motivated as it charged toward us from afar.

"Oh, I can see it now," said Touya. "Yep, it's a strike ox. Sounds like you should watch out when it charges at you."

"Yeah, that's pretty obvious," said Haruka.

I had seen the Charge skill with my Third Eye, so it was clear that you had to watch out for that. The strike ox eventually got close enough that it was visible even without the Hawk's Eye skill. It looked like a gigantic, heavy cow with two sharp horns on its head, and its body was completely covered in black hair. It had its head slightly lowered with its horns pointed forward, and it looked like it was making use of its weight to build up momentum.

Mary held up her sword in her hands as if preparing herself for combat. "I-It looks really scary and powerful. O-Okay, I'll—"

Touya stepped forward to stop her. "Yeah, it looks pretty big and heavy. Time for me to shine and—"

But then...

"Leave this to me!" Yuki exclaimed. "*Ground Control!*"

Yuki stepped around Touya and used her magic before anyone else got a chance to react. The spell she used made me feel nostalgic—I hadn't seen her

use it during combat in a long time.

But now it caused a very different result than when she'd used it against me. A small hole appeared in front of the strike ox. It looked to be the perfect size for an ox leg, and indeed, the strike ox stuck one of its legs in the hole and completely lost its balance. I heard the sound of bones breaking, and its body tilted forward. A dull sound echoed through the air from its neck breaking after it crashed headfirst onto the ground, but its momentum carried its giant body rolling toward us.

"Yikes!" said Touya. "Dodge!"

"I-It's really big!" said Mary.

The two of them hastily got out of the way, and the giant body of the strike box rolled past us for some distance before finally coming to a stop at a spot slightly behind us, and its body became totally limp after it collapsed to the ground.

"Whoa, that was impressive," said Touya. "Is it dead?"

Touya walked over to the strike ox and poked its belly with his sword, but there was no reaction.

"Yeah, it looks like it," I said. "It's not the kind of foe that's supposed to be easy to slay, but..."

The strike ox's signal had completely disappeared from my Scout skill right when its neck snapped. I was extremely surprised by how easily it had gone down.

"Tee hee. Yuki Shidou doesn't let mistakes stay mistakes!"

It's been a long time since I last heard you say your own full name, Yuki. Wait, no, that's not the point here. I'm impressed that you aspired to get better at using magic, and I'm also impressed by how effective it was, but something feels off to me for some reason. There was nothing wrong with your approach, but...

"I gotta say, it's been a long time since you last used that spell, Yuki," said Touya.

Yuki shrugged. "I mean, yeah. There aren't that many foes that just blindly

charge us, and it's hard to see the ground properly inside forests. There's almost no opportunity for me to actually use Ground Control."

Timing and environment were definitely very important for a spell like Ground Control, and of course, it wasn't something she could use casually during melee combat; the holes could trip us as well.

"There's an Earth Magic spell called Pitfall, right?" I asked. "Can you use that instead?"

"Pitfall makes a hole that's big enough for a whole entire person to fall in," Yuki replied. "Ground Control is better for making a hole to trip someone or something. It's pretty slow if you don't practice, though."

According to Yuki, Ground Control reshaped the earth slowly, whereas Pitfall caused a big hole to appear instantaneously. The latter required a lot more mana too, so Yuki's decision to use the Ground Control spell to trip this foe had been completely correct. However, when a foe was charging us, it wasn't exactly easy to nail the timing so that the ground would change shape without the foe noticing, so the Ground Control spell required more finesse.

"You're amazing, big sis Yuki!" Metea exclaimed. "Mary got wound up for nothing!"

"Ugh. Please don't say that, Met," said Mary. "I don't think I'd be able to stop something that big and fast."

Mary sounded like she was at a loss as to how to deal with foes like this one, but Touya chuckled and tried to cheer her up. "Don't worry about it, Mary. I wouldn't be able to stop something like a strike ox either. Even frontline fighters have to dodge while fighting foes like that. Luckily for us, our party can handle stuff like that to an extent even if some foes get past the front line, so just remember that."

"Yeah, there's nobody in our party who can only use combat magic," said Yuki.

Touya had been sent flying during our battle with a lava boar, which went to show that it wasn't wise to underestimate factors like mass and momentum. Letting foes approach beyond a certain point was unacceptable for people like

knights and bodyguards, but we were adventurers who earned money through exploration, so it was different for us. Even Haruka was capable of close combat, so our party wasn't actually divided between pure frontline and backline fighters. The best combat strategy for us was to dodge whenever necessary and deal with our foes using magic.

"Also, to be honest, I don't really want to see a world where Mary is capable of stopping something like a strike ox in its tracks," said Yuki, chuckling.

Haruka nodded. "Oh, yeah. Physical strength is required, but you'd also need to be heavy to pull off something like that."

As a beastwoman, Mary was quite physically strong, but she still had the physique of a child. Her growth spurt hadn't started yet, but the nutritional content of her meals had been improved a lot since she had started to live with us, so there was plenty of room for her to grow bigger. *Hmm. I really hope she stays the same cute Mary that she is now...*

"A big sis that's actually as big as this...?" Metea looked back and forth between the dead strike ox and Mary, comparing them, and then shook her head as if a scary image had popped into her mind. "I'm definitely not changing the way I fight! I'll keep moving quickly and cutting through monsters!"

"What are you trying to imply, Met?!" asked Mary. "It's not like I actually want to gain weight! I mean, I'm going to train to get strong, but..."

Mary sounded like she was at a loss for words, but Natsuki smiled and patted her on the head. "I know just how you feel, Mary-chan. Every girl wants to remain cute. But even someone like me can handle frontline combat just fine, so don't worry. Feel free to take your time discovering a combat style that suits you."

"Oh, thank you very much, Natsuki-san!"

Natsuki was living proof that weight wasn't absolutely necessary for combat, and Mary smiled after she heard that explanation.

Touya chimed in with a shrug. "Yeah, there's no need to force yourself to change the way you fight in order to match how I handle combat. Anyway, about this strike ox—apparently we can sell its horns and skin. Oh, good news

for you, Metea: the meat is edible too.”

“Yay! Is it delicious?”

“It’s worth more than orc meat, so probably,” said Touya.

Of course, rarity was also a factor in the value of meat, so there was no guarantee that strike ox would taste better than orc. However, even in this world, meat that was scarce wouldn’t sell if it tasted bad, so meat that was worth something would definitely taste good.

“It also says here that you can milk it if you know how,” said Touya. “Wait, hold on. I’m not trying to complain about the automatic translation skills we got from that god, but doesn’t the word ox usually refer to bulls?”

“Yes, that’s usually the case, but it doesn’t necessarily refer exclusively to bulls,” said Haruka.

According to Haruka, ox was a word that covered every large animal in the family Bovidae, including water buffaloes, but that kind of trivia wasn’t important at the moment.

“Milk, huh? Let’s see,” I said. “Ugh. It’s definitely a bull.”

Milk was essential for all sorts of food, and it couldn’t be found on the marketplace in Laffan. I rolled over the dead body of the strike ox to check, but I saw something that clearly indicated it was male.

“Well, apparently milk from a dead strike ox is no good anyway,” said Touya. “It says here in my Appraisal skill that if you milk a strike ox after it’s dead, the milk will taste really bad, so it’s important to capture one alive if you want good milk.”

Yuki blinked in surprise several times as she looked at the strike ox. “Huh? You have to capture something as big and heavy as this alive? That sounds impossible.”

I completely agreed with Yuki. There was no way a wild cow would let you milk it without fighting back, and the difficulty of such a task would skyrocket if the cow was a monster.

“Slaying a strike ox is easy enough, but I don’t think it would be easy to

capture one alive,” said Haruka, sounding a little exasperated.

Touya shrugged after listening to all of that. “Yeah, I think that’s why milk from strike oxen can fetch a lot of money.”

“Of course,” I said. “It makes perfect sense.”

This strike ox had gone down pretty easily, but it was as strong as an orc. Very few adventurers in a rural town like Laffan were capable of slaying a monster like this by themselves. If, on top of that, you had to capture it alive before you could milk it, that would be way too difficult.

“Well, regardless of whether or not we sell it, milk would be nice to have,” said Natsuki. “It’s possible to get butter and some cheeses from the marketplace, but not raw milk. Obtaining milk would help expand the variety of food that we can make.”

“Yeah, if we had milk, we’d be able to make delicious sweets too,” said Yuki. “I really want fresh cream! We need it to make namagashi!”

“Namagashi do sound nice,” said Haruka. “There are a lot of restrictions on the kinds of sweets that we can make without milk.”

“Um, steamed manju buns technically count as namagashi,” said Natsuki.

Natsuki had tried to casually refute Yuki’s words, but Yuki flatly rejected that opinion. “That sounds like something a grandma would say, Natsuki! You need fresh cream for the kinds of namagashi that high school girls eat!”

Yuki’s opinion seemed somewhat biased, but the idea of fresh cream for namagashi was now firmly implanted in my mind as well. According to Natsuki, namagashi were defined in contrast to higashi or dry sweets. Most of the Japanese sweets that we had regularly eaten back on Earth, like dango and manju, were classified as namagashi. Rakugan and senbei rice crackers were classified as higashi, but I’d hardly ever had opportunities to eat rakugan, and senbei were kind of different from what I had in mind when I thought of namagashi.

“Senbei count as namagashi, huh? I guess that’s not wrong, but it feels off to me too,” said Touya. “For one thing, I think of them as being kind of cheap.”

Natsuki chuckled as she corrected Touya's misconception. "The most expensive senbei can actually be *quite* expensive—up to a few hundred yen apiece."

"Seriously? I know it takes a lot of time and effort to make them, but still," said Touya. "Honestly, if I'm gonna spend that much money, I'd rather spend it on stuff like cakes or doughnuts instead."

Touya had replied the way a typical young person would, but I pretty much agreed with him. Senbei were crunchy, but that was about all there was to them, so I would prefer more filling sweets like doughnuts or even cakes from time to time.

"Winter isn't exactly the right season for this, but I kind of want to eat some ice cream," I said. "It's been a while since I last had some."

"Ice cream, huh? I like that idea," said Haruka. "We still haven't found any vanilla, but we've found some fruit that we can use."

"Yeah, that sounds great!" said Touya. "Honestly, I'm tired of eating shaved ice!"

We could make ice with magic, so we had eaten shaved ice during the summer to cool down, but the only syrup we'd been able to prepare was something similar to brown sugar syrup, so Touya was right that some variety would be nice.

"We can also teach Aera-san exactly what namagashi are!" said Yuki.

"Mm. It seemed like she wasn't following perfectly the last time we explained things to her," said Natsuki. "It's hard to explain with words alone. We need to make some samples."

"Yeah, it's not easy to explain whipped cream, for example," said Haruka.

The girls were completely right. You could use words like "white," "soft," "sweet," and "melting" to describe whipped cream, but it would be quite difficult for someone who hadn't seen whipped cream before to connect the dots.

"Yeah, whipped cream is a bit different from anything that's common here,"

said Yuki. “Speaking of, this has been on my mind for a while—the whipped cream sold in supermarkets back in Japan wasn’t actually whipped, right?”

Natsuki chuckled and nodded. “Mm, it obviously looked like it hadn’t been whipped yet.”

“Huh? What does that mean?” Touya asked, sounding confused.

I could understand what the girls were talking about due to the fact that I had seen Haruka make cakes before, but apparently it didn’t make sense for Touya, who’d never had that experience.

“Well, see, there were some fresh cream substitutes that used vegetable oil to cut costs,” said Yuki. “But they were still labeled as whipped cream even though they obviously looked like they hadn’t been whipped yet.”

“Is that a case of applying a product name to an ingredient?” Touya asked. “Would it be like labeling minced meat as patties and trying to sell them that way?”

Haruka shrugged and nodded in response to Touya’s weird analogy. “Yeah, you have the right general idea... Well, actually, if you just add sugar to fresh cream and whip it, then it’ll become whipped cream, so the two are a lot more similar than your example, Touya.”

I was fairly sure that people would complain if shops or supermarkets tried to sell minced meat as patties, so I was somewhat confused by the fact that it was okay for whipped cream.

“There were actually many such cases when it came to the names of Japanese products,” said Natsuki. “I wonder what the names for the same products were overseas. Surely they couldn’t have been exactly the same?”

“Maybe something like ‘whisked’ or ‘stirred cream’? Those would be novel names,” said Haruka.

The novelty of the names Haruka had thought of would definitely attract attention, but I had a feeling that the products wouldn’t actually sell well.

“You know, if we get good-quality milk from strike oxen, then we’ll be able to use as much fresh cream as we want,” said Yuki. She had a satisfied look on her

face and covered her mouth with her hands. “Tee hee. I’m really looking forward to it! Fresh cream is so expensive.”

As Yuki was dreaming of a bright future, Haruka muttered, “It’s been a while since I last made a cake.”

Metea smiled and threw her hands up in the air excitedly after she saw their reactions. “I heard a lot of delicious words! I’ll do my best to get some milk!”

“Do you not want more meat, Met?” Mary asked.

“One cow is enough!” Metea replied. “Two would be too much even for me, and I want to try out new sweets more!”

Metea was right that a single cow would be more than enough meat for us. We had other meat in storage as well, so milk was more important. *Hmm. How are we supposed to actually milk a strike ox, though? I don’t think it’ll be easy...*

“Well, first we need to think of a way to capture a strike ox alive,” said Yuki.

“Yeah. We’ll also have to confirm if they’re male or female, so we can’t just kill them the moment we encounter them,” I said.

“Ugh! I thought I finally had an opportunity to put the Ground Control spell to good use, but I guess it’s already passed,” said Yuki.

“You want to get milk, right, Yuki?” I asked.

“Of course, but still,” Yuki replied. “Can’t you identify the sex of a strike ox before it gets close to us, Nao?”

“That’s asking for a lot, Yuki.”

There were animals like lions that you could identify as male or female from a distance, but it wasn’t easy for cows unless they had huge udders like Holstein cows, but I wasn’t sure if that was the case for strike oxen. On top of that, it wasn’t easy to see what we were looking for from the front, so it would be a daunting task.

“I think it should be fine. We can just dodge if we can’t confirm before a strike ox charges us,” said Touya. He grinned as he pointed at the thing that had allowed me to identify the dead ox as a male. “Besides, male strike oxen have pretty big packages, so that’s one easy way to tell.”

“...Yeah, Touya’s right about that,” I said.

It stood out even from afar, so I was actually kind of curious about how big it could become when fully aroused.

Yuki peeked around the two of us. “What are you— Huh?! This is sexual harassment!”

“I mean, there’s no other way to tell their sex, right?” Touya said nonchalantly. “It has to be either this or udders.”

There were some species in which only the male animals grew horns, but both sexes of cows had horns, and it was probably the same for strike oxen.

“Hmm. Yeah, I don’t think any of us know another way to identify them.” Haruka looked at each of us one by one before sighing to herself.

“Weren’t you fine cutting off the things from orcs, Yuki? I don’t remember you having any trouble during the gutting process,” said Touya.

“Yeah, the orcs had their things dangling around when they attacked us,” I said. “You could clearly see them from the front.”

Obviously I was aware that there was no point in complaining to monsters, but it would have been great if they’d had the decency to hide their private parts.

“I mean, yeah, you’re both right, but still,” said Yuki. “Natsuki, I’m being bullied by the guys!”

“Mm. Don’t think too much about it.” Casually brushing off Yuki, Natsuki walked over to the dead strike ox and tossed it into a magic bag. “Let’s just put away the dead monster for now.”

I was fairly sure that the strike ox weighed at least five hundred kilos, so I was impressed that Natsuki had become strong enough to lift it like that herself.

“Well, even if we have a way to identify whether they’re female or male, we still don’t have a plan for capturing one alive,” said Natsuki. “None of us has a spell for putting foes to sleep, right?”

“There is a spell called Sleep, but it’s Darkness Magic,” said Haruka.

“I avoided choosing Darkness Magic,” I said. “I thought it would be a bad idea.”

Advastlis-sama had called himself an evil god when he introduced himself, so I had been scared of the potential consequences of choosing Darkness Magic. The reality was that you wouldn’t get persecuted for being a Darkness mage, but they were a lot rarer than Light mages, so they couldn’t avoid standing out in a bad way.

“As far as other things we could potentially use, there’s the Stagnant Field spell, but it targets an area of space rather than an individual target, so that wouldn’t really work,” I said.

“Mm. The spell would also slow down anyone who approached the strike ox to milk it,” said Natsuki. “What if we hold its legs in place with Earth Magic?”

“Well, I’ll have to practice my Ground Control spell a lot more if I want to be able to solidify earth around a target instantaneously, so I don’t think that’s an option either,” said Yuki.

It sounded like Yuki was thinking of something like covering the ground with liquid concrete. A foe wouldn’t be able to escape once the ground had hardened, but a trick like that would be hard to pull off if the foe could move around and escape before that happened. On top of that, if we used Ground Control to stop a foe that was charging at us, then the foe would probably meet the same demise as the strike ox Yuki had just slain.

“This doesn’t seem like it’ll be easy,” said Haruka. “What’s the normal method for milking a strike ox? Did your skill say anything, Touya?”

“Nah, the Appraisal skill didn’t display any text about that,” said Touya. “I dunno for sure, but I think we might just have to do it by brute force.”

“Brute force? Would that mean something like stopping a strike ox in its tracks, pinning down its front and hind legs, and then milking it in that state?” said Haruka. “We’d need at least three people with superhuman strength for that kind of feat, so I don’t think it’ll work.”

Haruka was the weakest of all of us, but even she was stronger than the average person, so it was possible that we would be able to stop a strike ox in

its tracks if we all worked together. However, I wasn't sure if it would be worth taking that kind of risk just for milk. It would be a shame if we couldn't make and eat namagashi and ice cream, but I felt like it might be wiser just to give up on this idea.

I tried voicing my thoughts, but before I got a chance, Yuki raised her hand and interrupted me.

"Um, I remember seeing a machine for trimming the hooves of cows. It had a belly band to raise the cow up so it wouldn't be able to plant its legs firmly on the ground. If we managed to pull off something similar, it would be pretty safe, right?"

Haruka paused in thought, but she eventually shook her head. "I think that would be too dangerous for the person who has to wrap the band under the belly of the ox. We could set up a hanging trap, but it'd have to be powerful enough to support the weight of a strike ox, and we'd have to bait the ox ourselves. That sounds like a lot more work than I had in mind."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe that's actually the normal method of milking a strike ox, though."

If enough people specialized in a complicated process, it could be continually repeated on a large scale, so maybe a system like that had already been implemented in areas of this world where you could easily find strike oxen.

"The idea itself isn't bad, however," said Natsuki. "Can we solve the problem with magic? For example, what if we use the Earth Wall spell to conjure two layers of walls?"

"Earth Wall, huh? I'd probably have to practice, but it might actually work," said Yuki.

"Okay, let's give it a shot," I said. "Get down on all fours, Touya."

"Me?! Seriously?!"

"Who else is going to do it?"

Touya grimaced, but there was no way I could ask any of the girls to get down on all fours, and I had to use magic too, so I'd concluded that Touya was the

only option. However...

Mary raised a hand to volunteer. "Oh, I can do it if necessary." She seemed confused about why Touya was so hesitant.

"Me too." Metea got on the ground right away. "Like this?"

Being kids, the sisters probably had no qualms about doing it, but Touya hastily picked up Metea. "N-Nah, that's no good! F-Fine, I'll do it!"

As Touya helped Metea to her feet, she insisted that she didn't mind, but he proceeded to get down on all fours reluctantly.

I continued my discussion with Yuki. "If we create some sideways walls around his chest and belly, then I think that should be enough to lift his body."

"Yeah," said Yuki. "We don't have to lift him too high, right?"

"Mm. Speed is probably more important."

When you used the Earth Wall spell without any adjustments, a block wall—about twenty centimeters thick and two meters in width and height—appeared out of the ground. I had no idea if those dimensions were suitable for milking, but it was the fastest way to cast the spell. Our goal was to create two walls parallel to each other with a gap of roughly one meter between them, with Touya acting as a bridge across the top. From the side, it would look like the Greek letter pi. The strike ox's belly would be exposed inside of the walls, while its limbs would be dangling over the sides; that design was meant to guarantee the safety of the person who had to tackle the task of milking it.

"All right, let's give it a go," said Yuki. "You ready, Touya?"

"Yeah, hit me!"

Touya seemed to have resigned himself to what would happen next, so Yuki and I looked at each other and nodded before casting our magic at the same time.

"Earth Wall!"

"Argh!" The walls that we'd conjured from the ground jutted into Touya's chest and belly, and he moaned in pain.

“Yikes,” said Yuki. “Was that too fast?”

We’d actually conjured them at the standard speed; if we were any slower in actual combat, we would have to spend that much more time using weapons and spells to hold back a strike ox.

“Ugh. Oh, actually, I’m fine,” said Touya. “It just hurt a little at first, but it’s definitely hard to move around like this.”

Touya’s limbs were dangling in the air, so everything had gone according to plan so far. Touya could easily use his arms to grab onto the tops of the walls and escape, but it wouldn’t be easy for a strike ox because its joints had a limited range of motion and it had hooves instead of feet. It could try to destroy the walls by kicking them, but there wouldn’t be any walls behind it, and its front legs probably weren’t very powerful.

“All that’s left is to bind him with a rope,” said Haruka. “Make some protrusions around here for that purpose, Nao.”

“Okay, I’ll get to it right away.”

“Huh?! Haruka...?”

Haruka threw a rope over Touya’s back and tied it to the protrusions I’d made, restraining him from moving freely. The protrusions were located on the insides of the wall, so he couldn’t reach them to untie himself.

“It would be safer if you also tied his legs,” said Natsuki.

“Huh? There’s no need to do that now, right?”

Natsuki ignored Touya’s complaints and wrapped rope around both of Touya’s legs before tying it to the protrusions.

“Yeah, this should make it relatively safe for us to milk a strike ox,” said Yuki.

“Ugh, I can’t move an inch.” Touya flailed around in an attempt to break free, but he was like a fish on a cutting board—he had no way to resist. “I think the rope is a bit too tight. Also, did you really have to tie me up?”

“It’s necessary to test this out,” I said. “It would be dangerous if somebody took a hoof to the head while milking.”

"Nah, my limbs are on the outer sides of the walls, so there's no way they'd hit somebody inside!" Touya pointed out.

"We have to test every possibility," I said. "Also, I think this is a bit too high for the purpose of milking."

Metea was jumping around and poking Touya's belly—she seemed amused by the fact that he couldn't do anything atop the Earth Walls—but she had to jump to reach it. A strike ox's udders would presumably sag lower, but it would still be about one hundred and fifty centimeters in the air, and that would make it hard for us to reach the udders in order to milk it. However, the legs of a strike ox were quite long, so I would have felt uneasy if the walls weren't as high as we had initially made them; it was important to make sure that the legs couldn't make contact with the ground.

"Well, I think it'll be fine if we use something like a stool—or an automatic milking machine," I said. "Do you think you can make something like that, Haruka?"

"Yes, it should be possible, but I'm going to wait and see if the milk from a strike ox is actually good before I even think about working on one," said Haruka.

"Yeah, it would be kind of sad if the milk ended up not tasting very good after we went through all sorts of preparations to get some," said Yuki.

Metea was looking up at us with an expression of anticipation on her face, probably because our plan for getting milk had started to sound a lot more feasible.

"Can we actually get milk?" she asked. "Will I get to drink some?"

"If things go well, then yeah," I replied. "However, we'll need to be able to stop a strike ox in its tracks for an extended period of time if we want to pull this off."

"Mm. Our plan is actually completely dependent on Touya's strength," said Haruka.

"There's also the method of making a cattle guard and driving a strike ox inside of it, but it might suffer fractured bones as a result," said Natsuki.

“A cattle guard? What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a type of structure designed for artiodactyls like cows,” said Natsuki. “Essentially, it’s like a duckboard with big gaps between planks, or a grating over a hole.”

According to Natsuki, cattle grids were mostly used to prevent animals like deer from entering or escaping a given location, but apparently you could also use one to corner and confine an animal. However, strike oxen had a high charging speed, so there were good odds that they would end up with broken bones in their legs or even crash to their deaths like the one Yuki had slain earlier, so cattle grids didn’t sound suitable for the purpose of capturing them alive. Plus, although strike oxen were monsters, it would be ideal to let them escape mostly unharmed so that we could milk them again in the future.

“Is there a way to use medicine as a substitute for the Sleep spell?” Haruka asked.

“Do you mean medicine that takes effect immediately? I can make some sleeping pills with my Pharmacy skill as long as I have the necessary materials, but they’re administered orally,” Natsuki replied. “I don’t think I can make anything that’ll put you to sleep right away, however. Besides, it’s probably not a good idea to use medicine in order to milk a strike ox.”

“Oh, yeah, it would be bad if the contents of the medicine got absorbed into the milk,” I said.

I had no idea if we could actually assume monsters were like normal animals, but if medicine worked on one, that would mean its body had absorbed the contents into its bloodstream. Milk was made from blood, so it would probably be a bad idea to squeeze out that kind of milk.

“I guess there’s no easy solution,” said Haruka. “Getting meat is easy, but that’s not the case for milk.”

“Yeah. Milk is something we can’t get by slaying a monster, unlike meat or hides,” I said.

We continued discussing with each other, but eventually, we were interrupted by a complaint from Touya. “Hey, if you’re done testing things out,

then let me down before you keep talking. It's pretty uncomfortable being stuck like this, you know?"

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Hmm. I guess this also means that taking too long to milk a strike ox will cause unnecessary stress for it."

I nodded to myself as I observed that last bit of data from our experiment, and then Yuki and I canceled our spells at the same time. Touya dropped to the ground on all fours and untied himself.

He stretched. "Whew. I feel pretty beat. More importantly, let's just give it a shot first. The strike oxen should respawn after some time, so it shouldn't matter even if we fail and end up slaying all of them."

Touya sounded pretty casual about the whole thing, but the girls glanced at each other with worried looks on their faces.

"You're the one who has to stop the massive body of a strike ox in its tracks, Touya," said Haruka. "Are you sure about this? It'll be painful for you if you mess up, you know?"

"Mm. In fact, you would be lucky if pain was the worst consequence you suffered," said Natsuki.

The girls didn't always treat Touya kindly, but they were genuinely worried about his safety.

"Yeah, the only gain from pain might be death! Ha ha!" said Yuki.

Are you actually the most worried, Yuki? You sound somewhat uneasy.

"It shouldn't be too bad compared to a lava boar," said Touya. "Besides, we can instantly kill a strike ox if we have to, right?"

"When that lava boar attacked you, it was already on the verge of death, so I don't know if that's a good comparison, but you're right about that last part," I said.

Strike oxen were very heavy and charged at incredible speeds, but apart from that, Touya's comparison made no sense to me. In addition, if the sensation from my Scout skill had been accurate, then I felt fairly confident that any of us except for Mary or Metea could easily slay a strike ox even if it knocked Touya

into the air.

"Well, do you want to give it a try first?" I asked.

"Yeah," Touya replied. "Just heal me if I get injured and we'll be fine!"

Really? Haruka and I looked at each other and sighed simultaneously.

Yuki, however, clapped her hands and began talking in a cheerful voice as if to blow away our worries. "Okay, our next course of action has been decided! Let's begin Operation Milk!"

"Yeah!" we all yelled in unison.

"But before we get started, let's bury a teleportation marker here," I said.

"Mm," said Haruka.

"Oh, come on." Yuki seemed a bit discouraged after Haruka and I completely changed the subject. "Did I get fired up for nothing?"

"You do know that it's important to bury a teleportation marker first, right, Yuki?" I asked.

"I mean, yeah, but still..."

"It doesn't take long," said Haruka. "Help us out instead of complaining."

"Fine, fine," said Yuki.

We dug a hole in the plains at the bottom of the stairs we had descended from the fourteenth floor, then buried a teleportation marker. Teleportation markers were crucial for improving the efficiency of our adventuring in the future, so we couldn't ignore them, and the floors with grassy plains were also easier to dig holes in compared to the earlier floors, which were made of rock. We had buried teleportation markers on the eleventh and thirteenth floors too, and in the process, we learned the fruit areas of the dungeon were stacked on top of each other; you could trace a vertical line through the entrances of the eleventh, thirteenth, and fifteenth floors.

Another interesting thing that we learned was the distance between the floors of the dungeon. The teleportation marker on the eleventh floor only seemed to be about one hundred meters away, which meant each floor was

only about twenty-five meters in height—although that was a bit too short, since it didn't take into account the thickness of the floors and the height of the ceilings. When I looked up, the sky seemed to be much higher than twenty-five meters overhead, but it was possible that my eyesight couldn't be trusted here. The fact that the teleportation markers weren't too far away from each other was convenient for us when we teleported between them, but it was quite strange. However, everything about the dungeon was unnatural, right down to the size of the floors, so there was probably no point in thinking too much about how it could contain so much space.

After we'd finished burying the marker, Yuki pointed at me. "Okay, the marker is good to go. Once again, let's begin Operation Milk!"

I nodded before looking over at everyone else. "All right, let's go over things one last time. If we find a female strike ox, then we'll dodge its charge. Once it's past us, Touya will chase after it, and then he'll grab its horns to stop it in its tracks when it turns around."

"When that happens, me and Nao will cast Earth Wall to lift the strike ox into the air," said Yuki.

"Then Haruka and I will restrain it with rope," said Natsuki. "In particular, its legs are dangerous, so we'll fully immobilize its body."

"Metea and I will help out with that," said Mary.

"I'll do my best for the sake of delicious sweets!" yelled Metea.

We had originally planned to tie the strike ox's legs, but that would be dangerous while they were flailing around. It would also require us to untie the rope in order to release the ox after we finished milking it, which would be dangerous as well. In contrast, tying the ox's body to protrusions on the Earth Walls was a much safer method, and freeing it when we were done would be easy.

"Raise your voice if you think you're in danger," said Haruka. "Natsuki or I will react accordingly. Safety comes first, after all. Understood, everyone?"

"Yeah!" we all replied in unison.

We searched around for a strike ox we could milk, but they seemed to be

solitary animals, each with its own territory. In any given area, there were dozens of grass coyotes, but my Scout skill could only detect a single strike ox about five hundred meters west of us, so it didn't seem likely that we'd find a lot. If the fifteenth floor was as wide as the previous ones, then a realistic estimate for the total number of strike oxen here was probably fewer than four hundred. However, the fifteenth floor also contained forests that were full of other monsters, which appeared to cover about a fourth of the entire floor, so that reduced the plausible number of strike oxen to three hundred—or, for our purposes, one hundred fifty. According to our monster encyclopedia, it was possible to milk a female strike ox at any time of the year, so we probably wouldn't struggle to get enough milk for ourselves.

Normal cows had to be pregnant to produce milk, but apparently monsters were different. However, monsters weren't able to produce an infinite volume of milk, so there were known cases in which adventurers had captured strike oxen but had been unable to milk them because other adventurers had already done so. Luckily, that wouldn't be an issue for us; we were the only ones who had ever explored this dungeon.

"I found one," I said. "Let's sneak around it."

I'd discovered a strike ox in the distance thanks to my Scout skill. We tried to sneak around its flank to observe it, but it wasn't the kind of monster that stayed still. It could easily adjust its angle with simple movements, whereas we had to carefully traverse over one hundred meters in order to sneak around it, so it wasn't easy for us. In fact, I felt like it might have been better if we'd waited for it to move instead.

"I see it," I said. "Damn it, it's male."

"In that case, let's deal with it the usual way," said Haruka.

Haruka casually gave out instructions, and we all stood and began walking toward the strike ox. Soon, it noticed us and charged straight at us, but it quickly met its demise thanks to Yuki's magic. I wasn't sure if tripping a monster to death technically counted as a proper use of magic, but it went smoothly and left us with a dead strike ox in good condition, so I had no reason to object to the method. A bit after that, we slew another male strike ox, raising our total

kill count to three, but the fourth strike ox was different.

“Oh, this one is female,” I said. “It’s time.”

“Yeah, it’s finally time for me to shine!” said Touya.

He led the way as we approached the strike ox, and when we got close enough, it started to charge at us—that much was apparently the same regardless of whether the strike ox was male or female. Touya stepped forward to provoke it and successfully captured its attention. After confirming that it was going after him, the rest of us split into two groups to the left and right behind Touya.

“I wish I had a red cloth or something,” said Touya.

He was dancing around in a weird way as if to make up for the lack of red cloth, and he casually dodged the ox as it charged past him, then immediately turned and chased after it. The strike ox eventually slowed down as it attempted to change direction, but it seemed very surprised when it saw Touya; it froze in its tracks for a moment. Touya took advantage of that opening and grabbed its horns before planting his feet on the ground.

“Nao, Yuki, do it!”

“Gotcha!” we replied.

Yuki and I immediately cast Earth Wall and lifted the strike ox’s body into the air.

The walls under the strike ox were about two meters tall, and the top of its head ended up three meters in the air, so Touya had no choice but to let go. “Whoa, it’s really high!” he shouted. “I can’t reach the horns anymore!”

The strike ox thrashed its head in an attempt to escape, but the walls were quite widely spaced, so it wouldn’t be easy for it to break free.

“Help me out, Touya!” Haruka called.

“Okay!”

Haruka and Touya wrapped rope around the strike ox’s body and immobilized it while Mary and Metea tied the ends of the ropes to the protrusions on the walls. Natsuki, Yuki, and I worked together to bind the lower half of the strike

ox's body. After we had finished restraining it, the only freedom it had left was to swing its head around uselessly. It was in the same position Touya had been in earlier.

"Whew, it worked out in the end," said Touya.

"Mm. Mary, Metea, thank you for your help," said Haruka. "It would've been very difficult for me to restrain the strike ox by myself."

"No problem!" said Metea. "I'm always ready to work hard!"

"To be honest, this wasn't very hard," said Mary. Then she hesitantly brought up an idea of her own. "Um, Haruka-san... If it's fine with you, would you like to swap roles the next time?"

Haruka fell silent for a moment, but she eventually nodded as if she understood that Mary's idea was perfectly logical. "...That's actually a great idea. I don't think I'm a match for you anymore in terms of raw strength."

"Thank you!" Mary clenched her fists and nodded, looking very excited. "You can count on me!"

Haruka had the Enhanced Muscles skill, so in reality, she could probably still win against Mary in a competition of raw strength. However, there was a good chance that Mary would learn the same skill eventually, and Mary still had a lot more room for physical growth, so it would have been reckless for elves like Haruka and me to try competing against beastwomen of the tiger subspecies. The fact that Mary was still a kid was probably the only reason Haruka hadn't agreed right away, but the sisters themselves had decided to live their lives as adventurers, so it was necessary for us as a party to make decisions based on logic instead of emotion and assign them the tasks they were most suited for.

"Now then, everything went according to plan for the most part, except for when Touya had to let go of the strike ox," said Haruka. "Is there any way to deal with this?"

By the time Touya had been forced to let go of the horns, its hooves were already in the air, so it hadn't been a real issue. The strike ox was still kicking the walls, but they weren't that fragile.

"Its body isn't too long, so I think a one-meter wall would still be enough," I

said. "It might still be too high for Touya to plant his feet properly, though."

"Well, I think I can still reach the horns if the walls are one meter high, but I won't be able to exert any strength with my arms stretched out that much," said Touya.

When a strike ox lowered its head to charge, its head was about one meter off the ground. At that level, Touya had no trouble bracing his feet to stop it. But we had lifted the strike ox about two meters into the air with our Earth Wall, so its head was now about two and a half meters up in the air. Touya could probably reach the horns if its head were instead about one and a half meters up, but he probably wouldn't be able to restrain it from moving its head.

"We have the power of numbers on our side, so it should be fine," I said. "More importantly, were you okay when you grabbed the horns in the beginning, Touya?"

"Yeah, it's not dangerous if the strike ox has no momentum. I just have to wait for the moment when it's trying to change directions," Touya replied. "I'd be in danger if a bunch of them came after me, but they're not much of a threat if we can deal with them one at a time."

"Yeah, it's easy to actually dodge the charge," I said.

Strike oxen were quite fast when charging, but they couldn't turn easily, so they weren't hard to dodge. A strike ox would be very dangerous if you encountered it in a narrow passageway with no room to evade, but we were in grassy plains with plenty of open space around us. In addition, each strike ox seemed to have its own territory, so they probably didn't move in herds. Strike oxen were reasonably strong relative to the floor of the dungeon we were on, but they had a couple of weaknesses that made them easy to deal with.

"All right. I think it's about time to get to the fun part," said Yuki. "Let's milk it. The Earth Walls won't last forever!"

"Mm," said Haruka. "It's quite high up, however."

"We'll need something like a stool," said Natsuki. "Can you make one, Nao-kun?"

"Sure," I replied. "*Ground Control.*"

The udders were hanging down around one and a half meters from the ground, just like we had predicted. We could technically reach them like this, but there was no way we'd be able to milk them, so I created a step stool and a jar for the milk, which I handed over to Natsuki.

"Thank you," said Natsuki. "We don't know how much milk we'll be able to extract, so can you make some more jars, Nao-kun?"

"No problem," I said. "Two more should probably be enough for now, right?"

It was important that the jars be easy to carry around, so I gave them each a capacity of about five hundred milliliters. Natsuki cast the Purification spell on both jars as well as on the udders of the strike ox, then commenced milking it. The milk that sprayed out looked very thick and rich, but I felt a bit hesitant about drinking it. However, Natsuki didn't look bothered at all as she took out the cup that she usually drank from, scooped up some of the milk, and took a sip.

"Th-This tastes much better than I imagined!" Natsuki extended the cup toward me, flapping her free hand in excitement. "You take a sip too, Nao-kun!"

It was rare and heartwarming to see Natsuki like this, so I accepted the cup from her.

"Whoa, this does taste good! Is this really milk?"

The milk was thick, rich, and sweet. In fact, to me, it tasted like something completely different from milk. I had heard before that fresh milk was delicious, but the milk I'd just tasted was way beyond that. It was lukewarm, but that didn't bother me at all given how good the flavor was. Natsuki was completely right; the taste was better than anything I had imagined.

Haruka looked like she was silently urging me to pass the cup, so I placed it in her hands.

"Let's see," she said. "Mmm. We need to make an automatic milking machine. We should definitely gather a lot of this milk."

"It's already similar to fresh cream in this state," said Yuki. "It might be a good idea to dilute it a bit with water if we drink it often."

"I can't believe this is actually milk," said Touya. "Give it a try, Mary."

As the cup continued to go around, everyone was surprised by how good the milk was, but Mary flinched back and seemed a bit scared.

"U-Um, well, I don't really like milk," said Mary.

"Huh? I didn't know that," I said.

Hmm. Oh yeah, Mary didn't seem as motivated as Metea about this whole idea.

Unlike her sister, Metea reached out for the cup without any hesitation and grabbed it. "I'll drink some! Mmm! It's delicious!"

Metea smiled after she'd had a sip and continued drinking, but Mary seemed extremely surprised to see that. "Are you okay, Metea? You used to hate milk too, but..."

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about, but this tastes delicious! Try it out"

Mary seemed unable to refuse the offer when it came from her younger sister, who had a big grin on her face. Mary took the cup and slowly brought it to her lips, then tilted her head as if confused before she took some more sips.

"Whoa. This is amazing..." Mary seemed very surprised; she blinked a couple of times and lifted the cup toward her lips again, but Metea tugged on Mary's sleeve.

"Mary, my milk!" Metea said sulkily.

"O-Oh, sorry," said Mary. "Here you go."

"Mm," Metea said happily, but when she received the cup, there wasn't much left, apparently. "Oh, it's empty now..." She peered sadly into the cup, then turned to look at Natsuki. "I want to drink a bit more. Is that okay, big sis Natsuki?"

"Of course," said Natsuki. "Here you go."

"Thank you!"

Metea drank about half of the milk that Natsuki had poured into the cup for

her and then handed it over to Mary. The sisters had probably shared things like this many times in the past, and Mary had a smile on her face as she thanked her younger sister. She drank the milk slowly, as if savoring it.

“Mmm, this really is delicious,” said Mary. “It tastes completely different from the milk that I’ve had in the past.”

“What kind of milk was it?” I asked.

“It was goat milk. I drank it when I was raising Metea.” According to Mary, their mother had never fully recovered from giving birth to Metea and had died shortly afterward. As a result, Metea had been raised on goat milk that their father had worked hard to buy. However, it had tasted quite bad, and Mary had often struggled to force Metea to drink it. It must’ve been leftover milk, so it had left her with a bad impression of milk until now, and that was why she was surprised by the taste.

“Yeah, this milk tastes really good,” said Touya.

“Even we were surprised, and we’ve had normal milk before,” I said.

On the other hand, Metea had been a baby when she was forced to subsist on goat milk, so she had no memories of it. That was likely the reason she hadn’t hesitated to drink the strike ox milk.

“So goat milk tastes bad, huh?” I asked.

“I’ve never drunk any myself, but I’ve heard before that its flavor can vary greatly depending on how the goats were raised,” said Natsuki.

“Really? Maybe we could only afford the cheapest, worst-tasting milk?” Mary asked.

“Perhaps,” Haruka replied. “Unfortunately, I don’t know much about goats myself.”

“I don’t know much about goat milk, but I know that goat cheese fetched high prices back on Earth,” said Natsuki. “It is an acquired taste, however.”

“I’ve never had goat cheese,” said Yuki. “Does it taste good, Natsuki?”

Natsuki smiled awkwardly and then gave an ambiguous answer. “Well, I don’t really know how to describe it, but suffice it to say that the people who like

goat cheese *really* like it.”

Mm, yeah, the way people react to cheese can vary greatly. The only type of cheese I used to eat on a regular basis was processed cheese, and that was made to be as universally palatable as possible.

“Speaking of price, strike ox milk must be worth a lot,” said Haruka. “How much is it worth, Touya?”

“If you’re talking market price, then it’s anywhere from two to four large silver coins per cup,” said Touya.

Mary choked on her milk when she heard that. “R-Really?!” she asked, staring at Touya. “It’s that expensive?!”

The price was comparable to that of a slightly expensive energy drink. It was technically affordable, but even I would hesitate to spend that much money on just a drink. The strike ox milk was definitely worth its price, so people probably wouldn’t hesitate as much to purchase it once they’d had a taste for themselves, but it was still a bit too pricey for the average person.

“Yeah, that’s a bit expensive,” said Yuki. “We can drink as much as we want, though. Thanks, strike ox!”

Uh, Yuki, the strike ox you just thanked is snorting as if to indicate its displeasure about Natsuki milking it.

“Yep. Thanks, strike ox!” Touya clasped his hands together as if to offer a prayer of gratitude and then muttered something with a solemn look on his face. “I came up with a short poem. Hear me out. *‘Oh my dear mother I am thinking about you as I drink this milk.’*”

“...Where did that come from all of a sudden?” I asked. “Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?”

“Oh, nah, it’s something that just popped up in my mind after I looked over there.” Touya pointed toward the strike ox’s udders.

Yeah, it certainly is “motherly.”

“After we took in Mary and Metea, I finally realized how our parents must’ve felt after finding out we’re dead,” said Touya. “People used to believe that if

you made your parents grieve by dying before them, you had to atone by piling up stones into little stupas by the bank of the river of the dead.”

All of us fell silent after we heard Touya’s words. I had assumed he was just thinking some random nonsense, but this was actually a pretty serious matter. Of course, the fact that we’d left our parents behind had crossed all of our minds before. When we first arrived in this world, we had been completely focused on survival, but once our lives had stabilized, we’d had a chance to think about that loss. We’d all talked about it to comfort one another, and we had moved on to a certain extent, but...

“Hmm. *‘These bones, already broken, / will never again see home.’* Think about it like this,” I said. “As far as everyone back on Earth is concerned, we clearly died. That’s actually better than if we’d remained missing for a long time.”

All of us had died, and some of us were now completely different races, so there was no way we could ever return home. However, I felt sure that this state of affairs was better for our parents than if we’d mysteriously vanished as a result of being summoned to another world or something similar. Given that we had no way to return home, it would have been a lot harder on our parents if we’d been treated as missing, and they would have had a harder time moving on.

All of us understood that we had died, so this different world was kind of like the afterlife for us in a way. My parents were probably still grieving for me, but my death had been the result of a traffic accident instead of some supernatural phenomenon, so I wanted to believe that they could recover eventually.

“Besides, it’s not like any of us were responsible for the traffic accident itself,” I said.

We’d simply been riding in the bus, so none of us had been even a little bit responsible. It wasn’t like we’d dashed in front of a truck in hopes of being reincarnated in another world.

Haruka and Yuki joined in the conversation Touya had started.

“In death, I wish my parents a peaceful life. We have no choice but to move on,” said Haruka. “It was unfortunate that we died, but luckily, we were granted

a second life in this different world. That's all there is to it."

Haruka's words sounded a bit cold, but it was true that there was nothing we could do. We had memories of our lives back on Earth, but nothing could change the fact that we had died.

"Huh? Do I have to come up with something too? Hmm," said Yuki. "Right now, what I really want is a new sibling. All of us were single children. I wonder if my parents can raise another child. I'm sure they'll get a decent insurance payout, so that should help cover the expenses of raising another child."

"Upon reflection, my first sincere thought was gratitude," said Natsuki. "I regret the fact that I had no chance to express my gratitude and to say goodbye, but alas. Please hand me a jar, Nao-kun."

"Here you go," I said. "Yeah, I wish I'd at least been able to express my gratitude to my parents."

I took a jar full of milk from Natsuki and handed her an empty jar. Natsuki was the only one among us who had experience milking cows, so she was the only one milking the strike ox. She had managed to fill an entire jar while we were chatting with each other, so as far as I could tell, she was pretty good at it.

"I am grateful. Not a lot of opportunities for me to express it in words, though," said Touya.

"Mm. I wish I could at least send my parents a letter," said Yuki. "But, well..."

"Even if we could send them a letter, it'd probably be treated as a malicious prank," said Haruka. "Hmm? What's wrong, Mary?"

Mary was watching us with a somewhat confused expression on her face. Everyone turned around to look at her, and she hesitated for a moment before slowly saying, "Um, well, Haruka-san, I was just surprised all of you have parents too."

Haruka and Yuki both laughed.

"Of course we do," said Haruka. "It's not like we appeared out of thin air."

"Well, in a way, we did suddenly appear in this world," said Yuki. "But back in our world, we came from our parents just like everybody else."

Mary slowly shook her head. “No, what I mean is that I thought all of you were adults, so it just kind of surprised me to hear you talking about your parents. There’s nothing weird about it, but it somehow never crossed my mind.”

“And you own a house, and that’s amazing,” said Metea. “You’re self-reliant grown-ups.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s true that we’re technically adults in this world,” I said.

Hmm. Is this like how kids in elementary school think of high school or college students as adults? We do own a house, and we earn a lot of money, so I guess Metea’s right about us being self-reliant, but...

“It’s not really something to be proud of,” said Natsuki. “I fully intend to become a dependable adult, however.”

“Y-You’re all very dependable!” said Mary. “We wouldn’t be here without your help!”

“Yeah, big sis Natsuki! You saved us!”

“Tee hee. Thanks. I appreciate the sentiment.” Natsuki smiled reassuringly at the sisters. “We’ll continue to do our best to live up to your expectations.” She stopped milking the strike ox. “Okay, I think this should be enough milk. There are about ten liters total in the jars.”

“Thanks for your hard work,” said Haruka. “I’ll cool and store the milk. First, let’s seal the jars with leather, and—”

“You should probably use the Disinfect spell too,” I said.

“Oh, yeah, that’s a good idea,” said Haruka.

Haruka cooled and disinfected the jars before storing them in our magic bags. Magic bags could preserve food like milk that spoiled rapidly. It was one more thing that made me grateful for the existence of magic.

“All right, let’s untie the rope and release the strike ox,” I said. “We’ll need it to produce more milk for us in the future.”

“It’d be nice if we could somehow mark this strike ox. That way we’d know it’s a female even from a distance,” said Yuki.

“Painting it wouldn’t be easy since it’s completely black,” said Haruka. “We can think of a way to address this issue next time.”

Domestic cows back on Earth had ear and nose tags. I wonder if there’s anything similar in this world. We could technically brand the strike ox, but that would feel kind of wrong. Sure, it’s a monster, but we’re the ones who stole its milk. Branding it would be going too far.

“Man, I wish we had white varnish,” said Touya. “I’d make it look like a cow.”

Yuki, who was untying the rope, laughed. “You mean like a Holstein cow, Touya? Sure, it would look like a dairy cow that way, but that would be a waste of varnish.”

When we left the area, we kept the walls standing. I felt a bit bad for the strike ox, but it would probably have attacked us if Yuki and I had canceled our spells while we were still nearby, and we couldn’t cancel our spells remotely. The walls would crumble after about thirty minutes, so it probably wouldn’t be an issue.

We observed the strike ox from afar for a while, and in time, the walls crumbled to dust and it was freed. It stamped the grounds with its hooves, looking very irritated, but after a while, it stopped and resumed roaming around.

“Looks like it’s fine,” I said.

“Nice! That means we can keep getting milk from time to time!” Yuki clenched her fists, looking quite happy.

Natsuki hesitantly interrupted her. “Unfortunately, Yuki, there’s a limit to how much I can milk by hand. It’s actually quite exhausting.”

“Is it hard milking a strike ox?” I asked. “If we only want enough for ourselves, we can take turns, right?”

“It’s easy once you get used to it,” Natsuki replied. “I’m fairly sure anyone can do it after practicing a couple of times.”

Natsuki said that pretty casually, but she was also a fast learner, so I wasn’t sure if I could actually trust her answer. On top of that, she had just said that it

was exhausting...

“Also, if we use the milk to make butter or cheese, then our stock will quickly be reduced to a tenth of the original volume,” said Natsuki.

“I’d like to share some with Riva and everyone else, so it would be ideal if we could get enough milk for at least ten people,” said Haruka.

“Yeah, we should definitely make an automatic milking machine!” Yuki sounded very eager about that idea. “I wonder if there’s any information in the alchemy books that would help us out here.”

It had taken Natsuki quite a while to completely fill two jars with milk, so an automatic milking machine was absolutely necessary due to the volume we wanted.

“All right, let’s return to town for now,” I said. “We’ve been exploring this dungeon for quite a while, and I think Mary and Metea must be tired by now too.”

It was the second time the sisters had explored the dungeon with us, and many days had passed since we’d first set foot on the eleventh floor. I felt fairly sure that they were a bit mentally drained by now, but...

“I’m still good to go. I can eat as much meat and fruit as I want here, and it doesn’t cost money, so I actually like it better than town,” said Metea. “I wouldn’t mind living here at all!”

The floors with grassy plains were bright and wide open, so it didn’t feel like we were cooped up inside of a dungeon, and we could obtain meat and fruit easily just walking around. In fact, it was comfortable enough that the idea of building a house here sounded quite nice if there was a safe area where monsters wouldn’t attack.

“Met, you know that the reason we can eat delicious food, stay clean, and sleep safely is because everyone else is with us, right?” Mary asked.

“Of course I know!” Metea beamed. “Where we go doesn’t matter to me as long as we’re all together!”

Touya and I felt a bit embarrassed and glanced away after we heard Metea’s

honest feelings, but Haruka and Natsuki reacted with smiles, and Yuki went way overboard hugging Metea and patting her head.

“Oh, you’re so cute, Metea. Good girl,” said Yuki. “We can only get stuff like bread, vegetables, and condiments in town, though. We still have plenty in stock, but we’ll run out eventually.”

“Ugh. I like meat, but I want to eat bread from time to time too,” said Metea.

“Really? Is that enough for you, Metea?” I asked. “I’d personally like to eat bread and vegetables at every meal.”

“Vegetables aren’t very important!” Metea declared.

Nah, you need to eat vegetables to stay healthy. Well, I guess it’s not something that kids think about.

“You’ve become really picky, Met,” said Mary. “I’m very sorry about this, everyone.”

“Don’t worry—I think this kind of conversation is perfectly normal between family members,” said Haruka. “In fact, I think it’s fine for you to say what you want more assertively, Mary. You’ve been an older sister for most of your life, but now you’re our younger sister as well.”

“U-Um, okay,” said Mary. “B-Big sis Haruka?”

After uttering Haruka’s name in a very faint voice, Mary looked down out of embarrassment.

“Tee hee. You don’t have to change the way you address us, but I’d be really happy if you would depend on me as your older sister,” said Haruka. “By the way, Metea, just so you know, we can’t make sweets here even if we have milk.”

Metea gasped. She immediately changed her opinion and pointed at the stairs that led to the floor above. “Let’s go back right away! Hurry!”

The rest of us looked at each other and laughed, then started to jog back to where we’d come from.

Chapter 2—New Ingredients and Food

We had been away from home for a long time, and when we finally returned from the dungeon, we were greeted by a field full of brown rapeseed pods. This must've been what Touya had been working on before we left, but it looked a lot bigger now. The kids from the temple orphanage were probably responsible for the field in front of us; we'd hired some to take care of our yard and had also given them some seeds. It seemed they had been diligent workers.

"I'm happy for you, Yuki," I said. "Look at how magnificent these flower beds are. This is what you wanted, right?"

"F-Flower beds?" Yuki seemed a bit confused as she looked back and forth between the flower beds and my face. "I mean, yeah, there are flowers, but this is kind of different from what I had in mind."

Our yard had probably looked very pretty when the rapeseed flowers were in full bloom, but only the pods were left now, and they looked a bit dirty. You could simply clear away ornamental plants after their flowers had withered, but rapeseed was a crop, so we needed to leave them alone for the pods to ripen. The sight in front of us was the natural result of our decision to plant rapeseed for vegetable oil. I patted Yuki on the shoulder to comfort her for a bit.

Then a voice came from behind me. "Hmm? So you've returned home."

I turned and saw Seira, one of the assistant priests at the orphanage. She was wearing some gardening clothes that were covered in dirt, so she must have dropped by to work on our yard, but there weren't any kids with her.

"It looks like everyone has been working hard. We really appreciate it," I said. "Did you come to work all by yourself?"

Seira smiled. "You paid quite a bit of money in advance, so it's only natural that we'd work hard." She pointed at the field. "Grass grows slowly during this time of year, so I'm just here today to check on the field—it should be ready for harvest soon."

"That seems to be the case," said Haruka. "I'm surprised it's almost ready for harvest after just one month, however."

"Um, actually, this will be the second yield," said Seira, sounding like she wasn't sure how to explain things.

Yuki blinked in surprise a couple times. "Huh? The second yield? Does that mean you already harvested the rapeseed pods that grew while we were gone, and the pods in front of us are the second batch?"

"Yes. The compost that you provided proved very effective," Seira replied. "The rapeseed grew extremely fast."

I had no idea how long rapeseed normally took to grow, but I felt quite sure that two rounds in one month was too fast even accounting for the fact that we'd used potent compost to accelerate the process.

"I've heard of a variety of fast-growing radishes that can be harvested within twenty days," said Haruka. "Is this similar?"

"Nah, that's different, Haruka," said Yuki. "They just get harvested before the seeds or flowers are grown."

"I guess that means it's truly abnormal for seeds to mature in just twenty days," I said.

The girls had made a compost device in order to get rid of the waste from gutting monsters. It was a very useful device—it had significantly cut down the amount of work that we had to do—but we'd ended up with more compost than we could possibly use. We had spread some of it across the field that Touya had plowed, but that had only used up a fraction of it. In the end, we had left our compost stash with the priests and kids from the orphanage, but...

"I didn't think it would be *this* effective," said Touya.

We hadn't used any supernatural materials in making the compost, so Touya was right: it was way too effective. *Well, actually, I guess monsters kind of count as supernatural? Hmm...*

"Surprising, isn't it? By the way, a lot, and I really mean *a lot* of kuttoes have been harvested too," said Seira. "Follow me."

Seira led us to the small smithy that Touya kept in one corner of our yard. When we entered, we saw a bag for storing grain that looked large enough to hold up to sixty kilos of wheat. Instead, it was completely full of kuttoes.

“Whoa! There’s no way we can eat all of those by ourselves,” said Metea. “Let’s share some with Remi-chan!”

“Mm, that’s a good idea,” said Haruka. “There are enough here to share with Riva and the kids at the orphanage, so—”

“Oh, um, these are only a quarter of the kuttoes that were harvested,” said Seira. “We delivered half of the kuttoes to Riva-san and Aera-san per your instructions, and a quarter of what remained, along with the kuttoes from your other yard, were stored at the orphanage.”

Okay, yeah, I understand why Seira emphasized the words “a lot” to us. All we’d wanted were enough kuttoes to eat and share with Riva-san and Aera-san, so we had agreed to let the orphanage keep the rest of what the kids harvested. We hadn’t discussed a set amount, but that wasn’t an issue; it looked like there were plenty of kuttoes for us.

“I’m sure that this bag won’t be empty even by the next harvest.” Touya sounded a bit exasperated. He pointed at something. “Wait, what are those bags over there?”

The bags that Touya had pointed at were stacked up against the walls. They looked roughly as big as the bag of kuttoes, but there were about thirty in total.

“These are the bags of black seeds that were harvested from the rapeseed pods the other day,” said Seira.

“I’m amazed by how many there are,” said Haruka. “Did you store any of the seeds at the orphanage?”

“No,” Seira replied. “You just entrusted us with harvesting the seeds, and besides, we can’t do anything with them.”

All you had to do with kuttoes was roast them lightly, but extracting oil from rapeseed required more work, and most people didn’t own the necessary equipment. There were also other tasks involved, like processing the seeds at a high temperature and, ultimately, waste removal. We planned to handle the

work using magic and alchemy, but an orphanage definitely wouldn't be capable of that.

"What do you think about offering them some of the oil that we extract, Haruka?" I asked. "A monetary reward doesn't feel like enough to me considering how much work they've done."

"Mm, sure, that's fine," Haruka replied. "I already planned on making magical devices to handle the extraction process, so once that's done, producing the oil shouldn't require that much more effort."

"Really? Cooking oil is quite expensive, so that would be much appreciated," said Seira. "May the gods bless you."

She was wearing gardening clothes, but the way she smiled and prayed, she looked like the model of a pious priest. All of us murmured to ourselves, impressed, and Seira coughed as if she felt self-conscious about our reactions. After that, she gave us a summary of what had happened while we were away from home and encouraged us to spend the remainder of the day resting, since she would be coming back tomorrow to help harvest the rapeseed pods. Then she hastily departed for the orphanage.



I suddenly felt very tired now that I had finally returned home from the dungeon. My life was definitely way more comfortable than the average adventurer's, but it wasn't completely stress-free, so fatigue had probably caught up to me once I'd returned to a safe place. As a result, I slept until noon the next day.

It was the energetic voices of kids in my yard that woke me up. When I got up and looked down from my window, I saw the kids from the orphanage hard at work harvesting the rapeseed plants.

"Hmm? Is Metea helping out?"

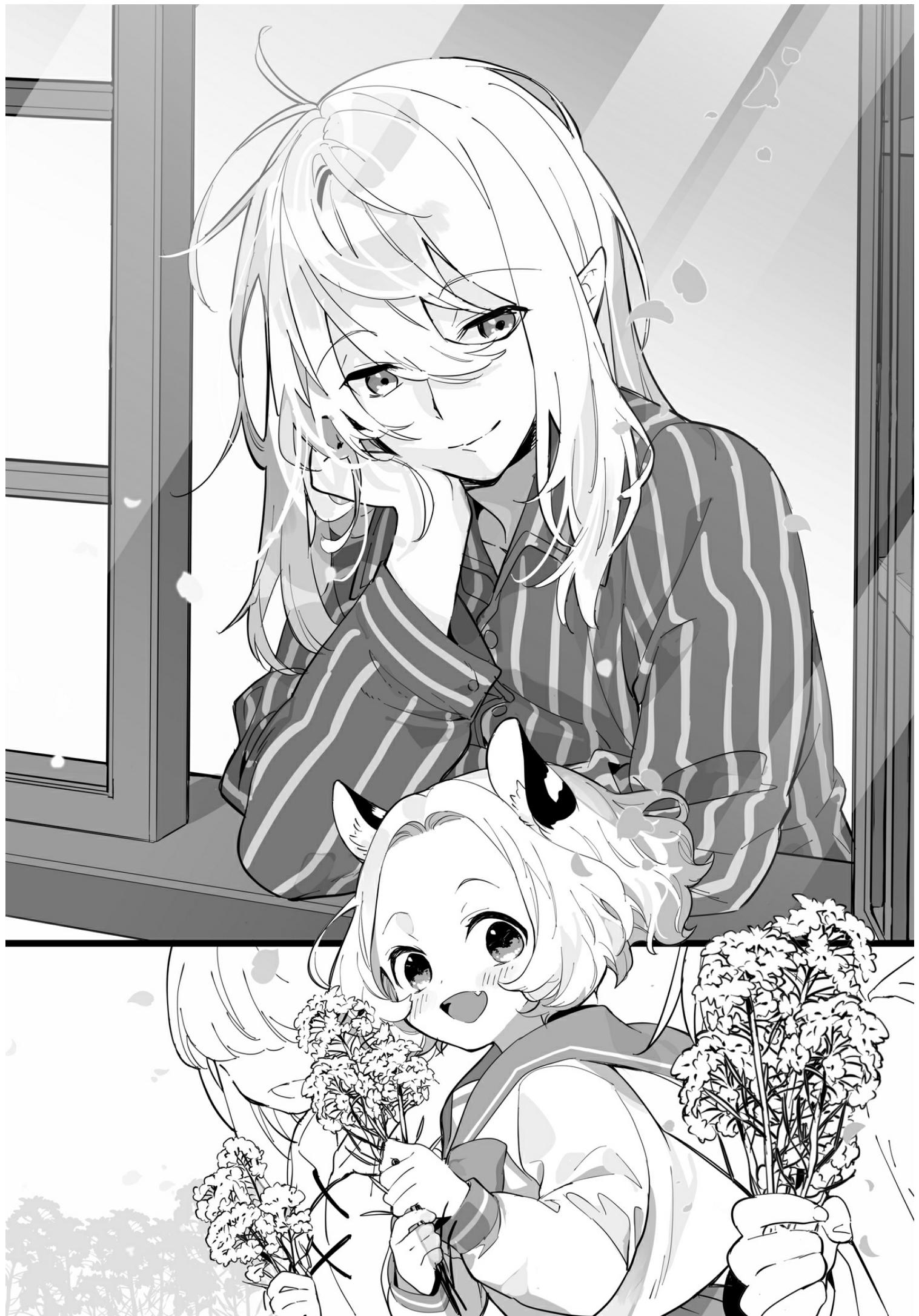
Metea was working next to Remi and looked like she was enjoying herself. We were paying the kids from the orphanage, so there was no need for Metea to help out, but for her, it was probably similar to playing with friends.

"Hmm, I don't see Mary anywhere. Are the girls awake already?"

I listened carefully for any noises from the rooms to my left and right, but the kids' voices were so loud that I couldn't hear a thing. I climbed out of bed and quickly got dressed before heading out of my room. However, the moment I stepped into the corridor, I heard the sound of a door opening, and Touya appeared before me.

"Oh, it's only you, Touya? Did you just wake up too?" I asked. "Morning."

"Yeah. Morning." Touya grinned. "And what do you mean *only* me? Was Haruka's face the first thing that you wanted to see in the morning?"



I just laughed and shrugged in response to his teasing. “Of course. Compared to Haruka, the only part of your face that’s worth looking at is the area above your hair.”

“Above my hair? Wait, do you mean my ears?!” Touya touched his fluffy wolf ears, then jabbed back, “I mean, yeah, I kind of agree, but still!”

Together, we walked downstairs to the dining room, where we found Natsuki lining up dishes.

“Morning,” I said. “Is it just you here, Natsuki?”

“Morning,” said Touya. “Did we get here second?”

“Good morning. No, everyone else already woke earlier,” said Natsuki. “Metea-chan is outside helping with the rapeseed, and Haruka and Yuki have begun attempting to extract oil from the seeds. Mary-chan is helping the two of them.”

Based on what Natsuki had just told us, Touya and I were, in fact, the last ones to wake up.

“Huh? Really? Everyone’s already up and working?” Touya asked. “Did me and Nao sleep for too long?”

“Don’t worry about it. The two of you were fighting on the front line quite often, so you were undoubtedly very tired,” Natsuki replied. “Feel free to rest now that we’re home. Now then, it’s a bit late in the day for this, but here’s breakfast.”

Natsuki was smiling as she reassured us that it was fine to oversleep sometimes, but she herself had done a lot of fighting on the front line. Her words were probably completely sincere, but I still felt a bit bad, and when Touya and I glanced at each other, it looked like he felt the same way. Still, we went along with Natsuki’s gentle suggestion and sat down at the table to eat breakfast.

“Are they extracting the oil?” I asked. “Have they already completed the press?”

“I believe they’re putting on the finishing touches right now,” Natsuki replied.

“If you leave rapeseed alone for too long, it’ll mold, so they’re trying to hurry.”

According to Natsuki, it wouldn’t be an issue if we simply used the Dry spell to dehydrate the seeds or if we stored the pods in our magic bags, but if we didn’t extract the oil now, it would be a long time before we got another chance, so the others had decided to move on it as quickly as possible.

“They’ll probably harvest a lot of rapeseed today too,” said Touya. “I’m kind of scared that my little smithy is gonna get buried in rapeseed.”

“It’s certainly larger than an ordinary kitchen garden,” said Natsuki. “We own plenty of land that we’re not using, so it might be a good idea to build our own warehouse.”

Natsuki was totally right; the crop yield from our kitchen garden was way beyond what a single household could consume. There was the option of not planting any crops at all, but it would have been a waste to simply pay for someone to mow the grass and do nothing with the land. On top of that, we could help out the orphanage by sharing produce with them, so our plan was to continue growing crops in our kitchen garden.

“A warehouse, huh? Well, I guess it’s true that we can’t just leave produce in our magic bags forever,” I said. “The batch they’re harvesting right now should be the last one for a while, so we have until spring to make a decision. By the way, Natsuki, how much oil do you think we’ll be able to extract?”

“We should be able to extract about two-tenths of the weight of the seeds, but we don’t know what variety the rapeseed we planted is, so it’s hard to say for certain,” said Natsuki.

“Oh. Well, we should still end up with over a hundred liters of oil minimum, right?” Touya asked. “Shouldn’t we be able to make as much tempura as we want?”

Touya was looking around aimlessly as he fantasized about all the things we could do with rapeseed oil, but Natsuki shook her head at that estimate.

“No, I’m fairly sure that we’ll end up with over two hundred liters of rapeseed oil just from the amount of seed that we saw in your smithy yesterday,” said Natsuki. “The amount of rapeseed being harvested today will probably end up

being roughly the same, so..."

"It sounds like making tempura will barely drain our stock of rapeseed oil," I said. "Should we go help out too?"

Natsuki shook her head. "No, I don't think it's necessary yet. More importantly, there's something else that I'd like the two of you to help me with."

She pointed at a citrus fruit that was sitting on the dining table. It looked a bit smaller than a yuzu, and some of its refreshing fragrance reached my nose even from over there.

"Oh, that's from one of the things we transplanted before, right? Did the fruit grow without any issue?" I asked.

"Yes," Natsuki replied. "I scattered compost around the area where we transplanted them, so there is actually *a lot* of fruit ready for picking."

Previously Natsuki had brewed some delicious green tea for us using leaves from a plant we'd found in the forest. Afterward, we had transplanted that plant to our yard along with some other plants, including something that looked like a citrus plant. The plant had long, sharp thorns, but our skin had become more resistant to physical damage as a result of leveling up, so the thorns had only been a bit prickly. It hadn't been easy to move the citrus plant to our yard, but it seemed like it had been worth it.

"My Appraisal skill didn't tell me anything about the plant, so it was kind of a gamble, but looks like the fruit is edible." Touya rolled around the citrus fruit in his hands, then tossed it over to me.

"Whoa, be careful," I said. "Hmm. This kind of looks similar to a yuzu."

The skin felt quite thick, and the color was closer to yellow, so it probably wasn't an orange.

"Mm. I actually have a peeled one with me as well," said Natsuki. "Would you like to try it?"

Natsuki brought a peeled fruit to my mouth, so I bit into it.

"Ugh! It's really sour!" I hollered. "I bit a seed too!"

It was so sour it was actually a little painful. In fact, it was way more intense than biting into a lemon. On top of that, my teeth had clashed against some seeds. I'd bitten in way too carelessly.

"Isn't it? It caught me by surprise as well," said Natsuki. She smiled in a playful way, as if she had successfully pulled off a prank.

"Did you want someone to suffer together with you, Natsuki?!"

"Not at all, Nao-kun. I'm just a girl who wanted to share something amazing with the person I like," she said with a cute smile on her face.

"I don't believe you!"

Natsuki was talking like a girl in love, but I was confident that it was just because she hadn't wanted to be the only one to endure the sourness of the fruit.

"Ugh, my mouth still stings," I said. "We can probably use this as a substitute for lemon juice or sudachi, but it isn't really edible."

"Mm, it's too sour," said Natsuki. "We could also combine it with sugar to make things like jam, but..."

"Sugar's a bit too expensive," I said.

The amount of sugar required to make jam was a lot more than the weight of the fruit, so jam would be very costly to make. On top of that, the only type of sugar we could obtain resembled brown sugar and had a strong, unique flavor.

"If we add enough sugar to balance out the sourness, the jam might end up becoming brown sugar syrup instead," said Natsuki.

"...Is this fruit really *that* sour?" Touya asked. "You two aren't just exaggerating, are you?"

"Yeah, we're serious," I replied. "I'm confident that anyone in your family, like the howling wolves, could be subdued with ease if you just sprayed them with the juice of this fruit. Take a bite yourself."

Natsuki handed a piece to Touya. She seemed like she was looking forward to his reaction.

"I told you before, they're no relatives of mine. But all right, I'll give it a shot. Let's see..." Touya pursed his lips and slowly put it in his mouth. "Ugh!"

I nodded to myself when I saw his reaction. "Yeah, I knew you would react that way. It's not really suitable for consumption, right?"

Natsuki laughed. "Well, the fruit does have a refreshing smell, so I think it would be suitable as flavoring for ice cream. It may not be suitable for eating as is, but a little bit of its juice would go well with things like tempura."

She extended the peel toward me, so I brought my nose closer to it.

"Yeah, this does smell nice," I said. "By the way, how soon can you make ice cream?"

I really wanted some, so I anxiously awaited Natsuki's answer, and she laughed as she looked at me.

"Tomorrow," she replied. "Please look forward to it."

"Really? Yay! In that case, I'll work hard today harvesting that sour fruit!"

"You know," said Touya, "you expect the fruit to taste good and it betrays you, so you could also say they make you salty."

"What kind of lame joke is that supposed to be, Touya?" I asked. "I kind of agree with you, but still!"

Touya and I continued exchanging lame jokes as we headed outside with Natsuki. There, in a corner of our yard, I was greeted by a citrus tree that was slightly taller than me. Its branches were bent under the weight of the fruit.

"Yeah, I guess you really weren't kidding when you said there's a lot of fruit here, Natsuki," I said. "The branches look like they could snap at any moment."

"I guess the compost was very effective," said Touya. "You scattered some around the dindel trees too, right, Natsuki? I'm looking forward to next year."

"Mm, as am I," said Natsuki. "However, the dindel trees are much larger, so I doubt the compost will be as effective."

"That makes sense. Well, it's all good as long as the number we can harvest doesn't decrease," I said. "As for the citrus tree here, I think we can just call it a

yuzu tree. Did the kids from the orphanage not pick any of the yuzu?"

We had told the orphanage that the kids were free to keep some of what they harvested for themselves. There were plenty of yuzu growing on the tree, and yuzu were quite difficult to obtain in the marketplace, so it seemed a bit weird to me that they'd been left alone, unlike the kuttoes.

"Well, apparently some of the kids did eat the fruit that fell to the ground," said Natsuki. "However..."

"Oh, yeah, the taste of the yuzu probably killed any motivation they had to harvest them," I said.

According to Natsuki, the kids had been unable to tell whether the yuzu were decorative or edible due to how sour they were.

"The kids will probably harvest these for us if we ask them to, but the thorns are dangerous, so we should do it ourselves," said Natsuki.

"Yeah, good idea," said Touya. "The thorns can't pierce our skin."

"I would feel bad if the thorns tore holes in our clothes, though, so let's roll up our sleeves and get to work," I said.

You would normally need to wear clothes with long, thick sleeves for harvesting fruit from plants with thorns, but our skin was actually tougher than cloth, so it was better to bear with some itchiness rather than damaging our clothes. All of us rolled up our sleeves and started to harvest the yuzu, but...

"Pretty sure that there's more than ten kilos of yuzu here." Touya sounded exasperated as he stared at the mountain of yuzu we had harvested. "Can we really use up all of these by ourselves?"

We would normally share fruit with people we knew if they were delicious, but that wasn't the case here.

"They don't have much pulp either," I said.

We sliced open a yuzu to see its components, and there was a ratio of about three parts skin to two parts flesh to one part seeds. They hadn't been tweaked through selective breeding, but even knowing that, I still felt somewhat disappointed. Dindels also grew in the wild, but unlike yuzu, they could be

eaten whole if you dried them.

“There are so many seeds, it would feel like a waste to throw all of them away,” said Natsuki.

“But it’s not like we can use the seeds, right?” I asked.

“Well, some seeds are edible, depending on the plant,” Natsuki replied. “Sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds, for example. Most of what people call nuts are actually seeds as well.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true,” I said.

The kernels of nuts were generally the part that humans consumed, so Natsuki was completely right.

“Plenty of seeds contain toxins, however,” said Natsuki. “Things like green plum pits are especially dangerous for dogs.”

“Yikes! Wait, why were you looking at me when you said that, Natsuki?”

Natsuki was definitely implying something, because she looked at Touya’s tail and smiled before continuing, “Oh, no real reason. In any case, green plum pits can be dangerous for humans as well if you consume a lot in one day. However, citrus fruit should be safe. We can extract oil from yuzu seeds as well, but probably only one-tenth of a seed’s weight even if you’re efficient about it, so it’s not practical.”

“Mm. It’s not like we need yuzu to earn money, and it’s also kind of annoying to pick out the seeds,” I said.

We would probably only need a couple of yuzu at a time for their juice, and they weren’t useful as a source of oil either. Maybe we’d need yuzu oil eventually, but...

“Back on Earth, special oils were worth a lot of money, but the demand was also rather limited,” said Natsuki.

“I guess all we can do with these yuzu is use their juice with stuff like grilled fish, hot pot, or sweets,” said Touya. “We definitely won’t be able to use up all of them.”

“Let’s share some with Aera-san,” said Natsuki. “I’m fairly sure that she’ll be

able to come up with a good way to use them.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “She’ll probably be able to use them up in the dishes she serves at her café.”

Our plan for reducing our yuzu stockpile sounded good, but I felt fairly sure that we wouldn’t need to go out of our way to use compost around the yuzu trees unless Aera-san asked us for more.

After we finished harvesting the yuzus, we headed over to join Haruka and the others. The kids from the orphanage would harvest the rapeseed for us, but Haruka and the others were probably working on extracting the oil, and I was confident that it wouldn’t be easy for them to deal with so many seeds on their own.

“They should be working in Touya-kun’s smithy,” said Natsuki. “Oh, hmm. Yes, I think we definitely need to build a warehouse.”

“I don’t use my smithy very often, so I don’t mind,” said Touya. “It’s not the easiest place to work in, though.”

We saw a bunch of bags full of rapeseed in front of Touya’s smithy, and the kids were stacking more bags along the wall. The smithy wasn’t very big—Touya had originally built it for casual experiments in blacksmithing—so that was probably why the bags had been left outside. We wove our way through the kids to peek inside the smithy, where we saw Haruka, Yuki, and Mary sitting around two devices. One was a box that looked like a small fridge. It had a large aperture at the top, and Mary was stuffing bags into that aperture and pouring the contents of the bags into the device. The other device looked like a barrel. Haruka was working next to it, but it didn’t seem to be active, so it probably wasn’t ready for operation yet.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I asked. “Do any of you need some help?”

Yuki looked up after she heard my voice. “Oh, excellent timing! Yeah, we do! Help us!” She seemed very happy to see me.

“Hello, Natsuki-san, Touya-san, Nao-san,” said Mary.

Mary and Haruka smiled after they saw us, but Haruka’s smile looked a bit more playful than Mary’s pure smile.

“I assume you finished harvesting the fruit. What did you think?” Haruka asked. “It was great, right?”

“The only good thing about that fruit is the reaction you can get from people the first time they take a bite,” I replied. “I hope your Cooking skill can make it actually taste good, Haruka.”

“Tee hee. Well, we can try frying them into tempura and see if that works,” said Haruka. “But first, help us finish the work here.”

“Sure,” I said. “What do you want us to do?”

Yuki beckoned us to come closer and started giving out instructions. “Touya, help Mary carry the bags of rapeseed. Nao, your role is to be a mana tank. Haruka and I have used up a lot of our mana. The square device here is a dust collector, and the other device is an oil press.”

Yuki sounded very proud of herself as she presented the two devices to us. According to her, both of them operated more or less automatically. The jobs that had to be done by hand were things like waste removal, loading the seeds, and extracting the dregs, but that seemed to be it.

“These devices are powered by mana, huh? I’m really impressed that you managed to make something like this,” I said.

“It honestly wasn’t that hard. All we did was adjust the machines so that they would operate automatically as long as they were drawing on our mana,” said Yuki. “The blueprints for the devices themselves were from the research papers that Edith left behind. Oh, Mary, stop for a bit.”

“Okay,” said Mary. “It should be almost full.”

Mary stopped pouring seeds into the dust collector and then pulled a box out of the bottom that seemed to be about fifty centimeters on each side. I looked inside and saw some very clean seeds. The seeds in the bags were mixed with debris like leaves, stalks, and residue from the pods, so the difference was readily apparent.

“Okay, the next thing to do is to use the Purification spell on these seeds,” said Yuki. “Can you take care of that, Natsuki?”

“Sure,” said Natsuki. “*Purification.*”

“Thanks. You’re up next, Touya,” said Yuki. “Can you pour the contents of this box into the oil press? It’s somewhat heavy, so be careful.”

“Roger,” said Touya. “Whoa, this is way heavier than I thought it would be! How many kilos is this?”

The aperture on top of the oil press was level with my eyes. Touya lifted the box, but he grimaced as he brought it over to the press.

“We poured in about three bags’ worth of seeds, so that box probably weighs over a hundred kilos,” said Yuki. “We couldn’t really make Mary carry it, so we were kind of waiting for you.”

“Well, I can probably lift it,” said Mary. “But I’m not tall enough to reach the top, so—”

“Don’t worry about it, Mary. Leave this to me, okay?” Touya laughed as he placed the box on top of the oil press and tilted it to pour the seeds in. “Huh? I smell something fragrant all of a sudden. Where’s it coming from?”

“The seeds are being heated up inside, so that’s what you’re smelling right now,” said Haruka. “It’s apparently somewhat difficult to extract oil if you don’t heat the seeds first. Nao, can you take over for a while?”

“Sure.” Haruka had been supplying the press with mana. When I swapped with her, I said, “Whoa, this consumes more mana than I thought it would.”

Haruka looked inside the press and nodded to herself. “It’s because there are a lot of seeds inside. I think the oil press will use up a lot of mana as well, but it appears to be working just fine.”

The oil press had been making a dull sound the entire time, but it diminished a bit when Touya had emptied the entire box.

“The heating process seems to be finished too. All that’s left is to turn on the switch and apply pressure,” said Yuki. She reached around from behind me to flip a switch. “Boom!”

“Why did you say ‘boom’ while flipping a switch?!” I jabbed back at her.

However, before either of us had the chance to continue bantering, the oil

press started to work, and a yellow, slightly cloudy liquid was squeezed out of what looked like a faucet on the side of the machine.

“Whoa, it’s real rapeseed oil,” said Touya. “Guess it actually works.”

“Of course it works, Touya,” said Haruka. “Even I would cry tears of disappointment if it didn’t after all the work we put into making it.”

The pressing process stopped once the amount of oil extracted exceeded thirty liters, and I heard a dull sound as a round object rolled out from under the press. It looked similar to a manhole cover.

Haruka tapped it with her fingers after she picked it up. “This is a press cake. Hmm. The machine might have squeezed too much.”

“It looks really solid and hard,” said Yuki. “Well, it shouldn’t be an issue, right?”

“Mm. It doesn’t look like there are a lot of impurities present,” said Haruka.

I had no idea what the two of them were talking about, but everything seemed to be going okay. We decided that we would toss the round object into our compost device before we continued extracting oil. The process was a smooth one: pour in seeds, pour in mana, and then store the extracted oil in barrels. It required a lot more energy and mana than I had anticipated, but we pushed on and eventually ended up with a total of over three hundred liters of rapeseed oil.

“Man, I’m beat,” said Touya. “Are we finally done?”

“Not yet,” said Haruka. “We have to let the oil sit for a while so the impurities settle out, and then we’ll separate the impurities from the oil so that we can finally use it for cooking.”

“The final product should be quite similar to canola oil,” said Natsuki. “We’ll finally be able to eat proper tempura.”

“Yeah. I don’t think lard would be suitable for frying vegetable tempura, so I’m glad we have another option now,” I said.

Pork cutlets fried in lard felt perfectly fine to me, but the smell and taste seemed like they would be a bit off for vegetable and seafood tempura. On a

sidenote, rapeseed oil was available in the marketplace, just like rapeseed itself, but it was meant to be burned as a source of light, not used in cooking. There probably wasn't anything weird or dangerous mixed with that oil, but I wasn't sure if it was clean and safe to use.

"So this is just half of what we can extract, right? I don't think we'll be able to use up all of this in a whole year," said Touya.

The volume of oil we had extracted was incredible, but Yuki shook her head and shrugged. "Nah, Touya, fried food actually uses a lot of oil. We're a family of seven, so we'll probably have to use at least three liters a day if we want to make enough delicious fried food for everyone."

"Seriously? We'll run out in no time if we eat deep-fried food on a daily basis," said Touya.

"Huh? There's no way we'll eat deep-fried food that often, Touya," I said.

"Nah, I could do it. Like, I wouldn't mind eating stuff like fried chicken every day. Or I guess I should just say, I just really wanna eat fried chicken."

"Fried chicken... Yeah, I kind of agree with that," I said.

Fried chicken was delicious, and we were still young enough that we wouldn't suffer too much from eating fried food on a daily basis. Touya and I looked at Haruka with excitement in our eyes, but she just shook her head, looking a bit exasperated.

"I don't think those of us who are in charge of cooking would enjoy cooking the same thing every day. We can technically fry a lot of food in one day and store it in our magic bags, however. We eat a lot, so we might actually end up using a lot of oil."

All of us were young people who enjoyed food, and Touya in particular exercised and ate a lot every day. If the girls deep-fried a lot of food, then they would have to change the oil they used quite frequently. Haruka was probably reviewing all of those considerations mentally.

Mary's tail drooped as if she felt a bit bad. "Um, I'm very sorry. I eat a lot, and so does Met..."

Haruka looked a bit surprised after she heard Mary's apology. "Huh? Oh, you don't have to worry about it, Mary. Touya is the one who eats the most." She paused in thought for a moment, then smiled at Mary. "However, I would be very happy if you would help us with cooking. I'd like to teach you a lot of things."

"O-Okay! I'll do my best!" Mary clenched her fists, seeming very determined to learn, but presently, a puzzled expression appeared on her face as she looked up at the rest of us. "Um, does deep-fried food taste delicious?"

"Yeah, I love deep-fried food," I said. "Tonkatsu is one example, but there are a lot of different kinds."

"T-Tonkatsu? I'll look forward to trying them," said Mary.

Tonkatsu could be served in all kinds of ways—in sandwiches, rice bowls, or just drenched in sauce. We had a lot stored up, and Mary had already tried some a couple of times before. A blissful expression appeared on her face as saliva dripped out of her mouth, so she must have been thinking about tonkatsu, but she hastily snapped out of it, shaking her head, and sucked her drool back in.

"Tee hee. In that case, let's make some tempura today to celebrate," said Haruka.

"Mm. The oil is still a bit cloudy right now, but it's suitable for cooking," said Natsuki.

"We haven't had fish for a while, so let's fry some fish," said Yuki. "I'm sure it'll taste delicious with just a little salt."

Mary smiled again and nodded, looking quite excited.



We brought the oil we had extracted with us when we checked on the kids from the orphanage, and we shared as much as they could carry before we sent them back to the orphanage. Later, during the evening, all of us gathered in the dining room to enjoy the tempura the girls had cooked.

"This is very light and crispy!" said Metea. "It's delicious!"

“So this is what tempura tastes like,” said Mary. “The fish itself is delicious too.”

Metea and Mary seemed totally amazed by the tempura, but actually, I felt the same way. Even taking into account the fact that it had been a long time since I’d last had tempura, this was delicious. *I wonder if this is what it’s like to eat at a restaurant that specializes in tempura.*

“Fish is definitely great,” I said. “I kind of want to go fishing again once it gets warmer.”

It had been a while since we’d last gone fishing with Tomi. Our stock of meat had constantly increased thanks to the dungeon, but our stock of fish was somewhat depleted now.

“Yeah, I’m down for that too!” said Touya. “It would be great if we got attacked by fish inside of a dungeon, but we haven’t encountered any so far.”

“Are you talking about an underwater floor, Touya? We can avoid drowning thanks to magic, but underwater battles aren’t easy,” said Yuki.

“Our battle at the spring was a special case,” said Haruka. “Just so you know, we still have plenty of emperor salmon left, but we didn’t use any of it for tempura because we thought it would be more suitable for meunière or salt-grilling.”

On one of our vacations during the summer, we visited a spring along with Riva, Aera-san, and Luce-san. Our “battle” against the emperor salmon technically counted as an underwater battle, but the reason we’d been able to slay it so easily was that the emperor salmon was a normal fish; it hadn’t aggressively attacked us. If we had to fight monsters underwater, then it would have been necessary to keep the Breathe Water spell active at all times. On top of that, our movements would be somewhat restricted underwater, and there were a lot of spells we wouldn’t be able to use. The restrictions meant that underwater combat would be quite risky, so if we encountered an underwater floor in the dungeon, retreat might be the best option depending on the circumstances.

“Metea-chan, what do you think of this vegetable tempura?” Natsuki asked.

"The vegetable ones are delicious too," Metea replied. "But the ones big sis made aren't very good."

Mary had worked hard to help the girls with cooking tempura, and she looked a bit sad after she heard Metea's blunt and honest assessment. "Ugh. Just so you know, Met, it might seem easy to make tempura, but it's actually pretty hard. I don't know why, though."

The tempura that Natsuki had made was light and crispy, but Mary's were a bit soggy. They had used the same ingredients, so the difference was probably that Natsuki was much better at cooking in general.

"Well, I think you did just fine for your first time making tempura, Mary," I said.

"Mm. You weren't scared of the oil at all, Mary-chan, so I'm sure you'll improve quickly with practice," said Natsuki.

"Yeah, I was scared the first time I made tempura," said Yuki. "Were you okay, Mary?"

Mary seemed a bit puzzled by Yuki's question, but she tilted her head and nodded. "Um, yes. The battles in the dungeon were much scarier. There were monsters that could breathe fire, after all."

"Oh..."

Mary's answer made perfect sense to all of us. On a sidenote, the yuzu had been a nice addition to the tempura, but they weren't the main dish, so they weren't very important.



We resumed work on the tasks that we had planned for after we had dealt with the rapeseed. Yuki was in charge of creating the automatic milking machine, Natsuki was in charge of making ice cream, Haruka would aid both of them, and I was in charge of making bottles for the milk. Touya had nothing to do, so he headed out to distribute oil and fruit to friends like Aera-san and Riva-san. He also watched over Mary and Metea's training to kill time. He had visited the Adventurers' Guild to share some gifts with Diola-san, and to get an appraisal of the monk's staff we'd found on the tenth floor of the dungeon, but

apparently Diola-san wasn't around. According to Touya, Diola-san had gone to another town on a business trip, and the rest of the guild staff had no idea when she would return. As a result, Touya had simply entrusted the monk's staff to the guild for appraisal and returned home.

We had researched whether it was safe to entrust potentially valuable items to the guild—we were worried about the possibility of items going missing or being stolen—but it seemed we could rest at ease for the most part. Trust was very important to the Adventurers' Guild, so it would mete out harsh punishments to people who damaged its reputation or credibility, one example being hunt quests to slay former adventurers who had resorted to banditry. If someone who worked at the guild swapped or stole an item that an adventurer had entrusted to the guild for appraisal, then the guild would confiscate all of that person's assets and fire them. Afterward, their only option if they wanted to survive was to become a slave, but that actually wasn't the worst possible outcome. If you tried to flee, then the guild would make you "disappear," exactly as if you were someone with a bounty on your head. Based on our interactions with Diola-san, my impression of the Adventurers' Guild had been that it was a loose sort of organization, but it seemed there was a lot more under the surface.



Four days after we returned from the dungeon, everyone finally finished the tasks we had been assigned, and we all brought the results of our hard work with us as we gathered in the dining room.

Yuki was the first one to show off what she had completed. "Check out the automatic milking machine that I made!"

She placed something on the table that looked like a suction cup with a hose attached to the bottom. The structure of the machine was quite simple.

"All you have to do is attach this cup to the udders of a strike ox, and then you press this switch here," said Yuki. "After that, attach the end of the hose to something that can contain milk, and the milking process will be automatic. All you have to do manually is turn the machine on and off."

According to Yuki, the machine she'd made wasn't capable of automatically

stopping when the strike ox's milk was nearly depleted, but that probably wouldn't be an issue for actual use. We had to obtain our milk from monsters, so it would be necessary to watch over the process the entire time for our own safety.

"Hmm? Didn't you make something shaped like a syringe at first, Yuki?" Haruka asked.

"Oh, yeah. I made a prototype, but I think it would require more effort to get milk from a lot of strike oxen with something shaped like that, and I also wasn't sure if it would actually work. I did my best to modify it and make it automatic, but it wasn't easy at all."

Yuki produced something that looked like a giant syringe. It looked like you just had to push and pull the piston, so the structure seemed equally simple, but it would probably consume a lot of energy if you used it to extract milk from dozens of strike oxen, to say nothing of the hundred plus that we planned on milking.



“Good job, Yuki.” I gave her a thumbs-up.

She seemed quite proud of herself, and a smug look appeared on her face. “Tee hee, praise me more! This is an original magical device that I made by myself without copying anything from Edith’s papers! Well, I don’t know if it’ll actually work, but we’ll find out.”

Ugh. That last caveat made me feel a little uneasy, Yuki. Well, trial and error is an essential part of invention, so if this one ends up being useless, I guess I’ll just look forward to your next project.

“I guess I’ll go next. I made some bottles for holding milk,” I said. “Each bottle can contain up to two liters. I thought that would be the best volume for bottles that are easy to use.”

The bottles were glass—or technically, silica sand, just like our bathtub. They were shaped like wine bottles with short necks. Four or five bottles would probably be enough for one strike ox. The first bottles I’d made were a bit larger, but the shape I had settled on in the end was better for everyday use. I had shaped the mouths to be the same size as those of wine bottles so that it would be easy to pour out milk and reseal them with a wooden cork. I had considered something like a screw top, but I had abandoned that idea; the complex shape required too much mana. I had no idea how many female strike oxen there were in the dungeon, but I would need to make at least seven hundred bottles if we planned to milk up to one hundred fifty of them, so I couldn’t spend too much time on each bottle. Wide-mouth bottles were easier to clean and reuse, but the Purification spell could take care of that, and if we simply stuck the hose of the milking machine into the bottles, milk wouldn’t spill out.

I felt like I had done a pretty good job, but apparently Yuki wasn’t impressed. “Hmm. I don’t really know what to say about this. I guess these look okay, but there’s nothing interesting about them.”

“Huh? Practical products like bottles don’t need to look interesting.” I mean, yeah, my bottles look very mundane, but there’s nothing wrong with that.

“I thought we could just make those large metal cans instead,” said Touya. “You know, the ones that people used to transport on horse-drawn carts.”

“Sure, that would be pretty cool, but I don’t think it’d be practical for us,” I said.

The idea of metal milk cans had popped into my head too, and Touya had offered to help make them with his Blacksmithing skill, but the size of the cans would have been an issue. Cans that could contain dozens of liters of milk would have been somewhat inconvenient to use both for consumption at home and for selling to other people if we went that route. On the other hand, mass-producing a large number of small cans would have been too much work for Touya, so my final conclusion had been that it would be better to simply make glass bottles with magic.

“Mm. If we’re going to transfer the milk to small bottles in the end, then we might as well just store milk in bottles in the first place,” said Haruka.

“Yeah. Transportation and cleanliness aren’t issues for us, after all,” I said.

Metal cans wouldn’t break easily, so that would be one advantage of using them for milk. Glass containers were way too fragile to transport via horse-drawn cart on unpaved roads. Leather waterskins were another option, but they had a distinct odor, so we had stopped using them after we obtained magic bags.

“Just to be clear, I’m personally fine with using bottles,” said Touya. “I just offered to help make cans because I thought bottles would be a lot of work for you, Nao.”

“Well, you’re right that it’ll take a while,” I said.

I had spent two days on the bottles before finally settling on the shape and structure I wanted, and in the time since, I had managed to make about two hundred bottles. I could make the bottles as long as I had earth to work with, so I could probably produce enough by the time we actually had to use them, but...

“Hmm. I guess it might actually be better if we use both bottles and cans,” I said.

We could recycle the bottles we used for our own consumption and for selling milk to people we knew. It would take some time to refill them, but storing milk

in something like a tank might represent the least amount of work for us.

“Also, if we want to sell milk to the Adventurers’ Guild, then there might be some criteria we have to meet,” said Yuki. “They might only accept certain standardized bottles, for example.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I said. “We should probably discuss this with Diola-san once she’s back.”

We could technically discuss things with the other guild staff, but we’d found Diola-san to be the most reliable. She had helped us in all sorts of ways, so we weren’t worried at all even though we were somewhat ignorant about this world.

“Mm. We have some ‘gifts’ to share with her, so I’m sure that she’ll help us out,” said Haruka. “Okay, last up are Natsuki and me.”

“Finally!” Metea leaned forward, looking very excited, and Mary started to fidget around as well. The sisters had remained silent up until now, but I had noticed that they were trying their best to contain their excitement.

“Tee hee. Feel free to try them out.” Natsuki handed each of us two servings of ice cream. The first one was brown, while the other was white with some bits of yellow.

“C-Can I eat this right away?” Mary asked.

Natsuki smiled at the sisters. “Go ahead.”

Taking spoons in their hands, Mary and Metea slowly scooped some ice cream into their mouths. Both of them opened their eyes wide in astonishment after they’d tasted it.

“It’s cold, sweet, and it melted in my mouth!” said Metea. “It’s delicious!”

“This is amazing!” said Mary. “I’ve never had something like this before!”

The sisters devoured their ice cream in no time. They probably wouldn’t suffer stomach pain, but I casually cast the Warmth spell to warm up the dining room as I scooped some ice cream into my own mouth.

“Yeah, these definitely taste like brown sugar ice cream and yuzu ice cream,” I said. “They have a distinct flavor, though.”

The ice cream was delicious, but that was it. It was better than the expensive ice cream that could be bought at convenience stores back on Earth, but it tasted a bit lackluster considering how amazed I had been when I drank strike ox milk for the first time.

“What you just mentioned, Nao—that’s the whole issue. We can’t make plain ice cream because the flavor of the sugar is too strong,” said Haruka. “We tried to refine some of the sugar, but the ice cream still ended up tasting a bit odd when we used too much of it.”

“I feel like the yuzu flavor is kind of missing,” I said. “It also doesn’t taste very sweet.”

“Huh? Is that a problem? I think this is perfectly fine,” said Touya.

Yeah, I expected that kind of reaction from you, Touya.

But Yuki didn’t seem quite satisfied with the ice cream either. “I’d like to eat some fruit ice cream, so I’m down for the idea of making refined sugar.”

“Refined sugar? Is it possible to make some?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Yuki replied. “Haruka and Natsuki asked me about this, and...”

According to Yuki, the only sugar available in Laffan was brown sugar, made from crystallized sugarcane juice that had had its impurities and most of its water content removed. The sugar had a distinct taste that made it unsuitable for general use. However, if you filtered the sugar and put it through a centrifuge, then you could turn it into castor sugar or white sugar, which were the kinds the girls wanted for baking. Sugars with a neutral flavor were easier to use in a wide variety of dishes and sweets. Apparently they were also necessary for making things like whipped cream.

“I wouldn’t really mind if it was only relevant to ice cream, but we need refined sugar for namagashi too, huh?” I said. “Hmm.”

“We can survive without stuff like that, but I’d feel kind of bad about missing out,” said Touya.

If we put aside the matter of how difficult it was to refine sugar, the other issue we had to deal with was the cost. We could only get a small volume of

white sugar from the brown sugar we refined; most of it would become molasses. Sugar was already very expensive, and if we refined it, we would end up with a lot less. The molasses could be used for other purposes, but it wasn't as versatile as white sugar.

"Namagashi..."

I wasn't exactly eager to go through the whole process of refining sugar, but Mary and Metea stared at us as if they really wanted to try out new sweets, so I would have felt bad and awkward objecting.

"Well, I'll leave this to you girls," I said. "I don't mind as long as our food expenses don't get too extreme."

"Yeah, same," said Touya. "It's not like us guys hate sweets."

As Touya said, the two of us didn't hate sweets, but that also meant we were satisfied with the ice cream that Haruka and Natsuki had made. We would eat cakes if the girls could make them, but it wouldn't really matter to us if they couldn't. The girls were the ones who really wanted to eat new sweets. *Hmm. Now that I think about it, I remember back on Earth when I'd been dragged along for seasonal dessert fairs, all-you-can-eat cake buffets, and limited-edition sweets that could only be ordered by couples. It's definitely a bad idea to fight against their desire for sweets, so I guess I have no choice.*

"Thanks," said Haruka. "Given the expense, I don't think we'll be able to obtain more than a small amount of refined sugar, but we'll do our best."

"Mm. Well, sugar *is* expensive, but we won't use too much, and it's more or less the same as milk from a strike ox in terms of value," said Yuki.

A cup of strike ox milk could sell for anywhere between two and four large silver coins. If the girls used that volume of milk to make ice cream, then they would probably need about one to two tablespoons of sugar. They would have to double the amount of sugar if they wanted to make refined sugar, but the milk would still be the more expensive ingredient.

"Um, can this actually get even more delicious than it already is?" Mary sounded like she couldn't believe what she'd heard. The older girls weren't satisfied with the quality of the ice cream, but Mary and Metea probably

thought it was perfectly delicious.

Natsuki smiled and nodded at Mary's question. "Yes, that's our goal. Please look forward to it."

"Whoa! That sounds really great!" said Metea. "I'll wait patiently!"

"Me too!" Mary hollered. "I'm so glad to be here!"

The sisters beamed with delight, but as they licked their spoons, they seemed a bit sad about the fact that they had already finished their ice cream. Natsuki smiled when she saw that, and she casually shifted her own ice cream, which she hadn't touched, over to the sisters for them to eat.



If you wanted to explore deeper into a dungeon, it was important to have a method for traveling through the floors you had already cleared. That wouldn't matter for adventurers who could only handle the earliest floors; they could enter the dungeon and begin fighting monsters right away to earn money. However, once you reached a higher rank, that wouldn't work anymore. You could earn more money by fighting monsters on deeper floors, but you also had to factor in things like the number of days it would take to get there and the cost of supplies, so access to a method of fast travel was very important.

The trip back from a dungeon wasn't an issue for all adventurers, however. Most dungeons had return devices, so you could ensure that your exploration was safe and efficient as long as you memorized their locations. The real issue was the journey back to where you'd left off. There were some dungeons in which the Adventurers' Guild had set up teleportation devices for use by adventurers, but the initial installation and maintenance cost a lot of money, so they were only implemented in a few popular dungeons. In most dungeons, adventurers had no choice but to enter using their own two feet. The Summer Resort Dungeon was a very obscure one, so there was no way the guild would ever install any teleportation devices here, but we had a solution of our own to deal with that problem.

"The teleportation marker at the entrance of the dungeon seems like it's still working fine, Nao," said Yuki.

"I see. I'm more worried about the markers that we buried inside of the dungeon, honestly," I replied.

We'd returned to the dungeon a week after we last exited it. Yuki was investigating the ground near the entrance, but she clicked her tongue with a smug look on her face and wagged a finger as if to scold me.

"Come on, Nao. It's not just a dungeon. It's the Summer Resort Dungeon."

"...Do you really like that name, Yuki?" I asked.

"I mean, nobody's going to use it if we don't," Yuki replied. "I did my best to come up with that name, so yeah, I do like it!"

"Mm, it's true that you came up with it, but if I recall correctly, you only put a few seconds of thought into it," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Yuki. "More importantly, the teleportation markers inside of the dungeon are what we need to be worried about."

"That's what I just— Never mind," I said.

Yuki stuck out her tongue playfully, and I sighed before looking away toward the entrance of the dungeon. The teleportation markers had still been active when we'd last teleported outside the dungeon, but I had no idea if that was still the case or if the dungeon's automatic repair function had erased them.

"This will be a turning point for us," I said. "The results will impact our future dungeon exploration, so..."

"Are we gonna have to run a marathon through the dungeon and cut down any weak monsters that get in our way?" Touya asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Also, even if the teleportation markers are still inside, we might have to run a marathon anyway, depending on my mana."

The closest teleportation marker that we had buried inside was located in the last room of the fourth floor. We had buried one there because we had calculated that it was the farthest we could teleport at the time, but today would be our first attempt at teleporting everyone across a long distance, so I had no idea if I could actually pull it off. On a sidenote, we had used the Area

Teleportation spell the last time we'd explored the dungeon, but we had only teleported from the fifteenth floor to the eleventh. In addition, we had teleported to the thirteenth floor before teleporting to the eleventh, so the distance of each teleport had only been about fifty meters.

"Can't you just teleport us from here all the way to the fifteenth floor?" Touya asked.

"Nah, I can't pull off a feat like that, Touya," I replied. "Just so you know, teleportation is very difficult."

If it were possible to teleport longer distances just by practicing for a bit, then there would probably be more people out in the world who were capable of teleportation. In actuality, it was one of the hardest types of magic that existed, although apparently the author of the Time Magic grimoires I owned was capable of teleporting between different kingdoms, so that kind of thing technically wasn't impossible—assuming the author hadn't just lied about his own mastery of Time Magic.

"Well, I think it should be possible to teleport all the way down to the tenth floor," I said. "Let me check first."

I had been able to detect the teleportation marker at the entrance of the dungeon when we had buried a marker at the tenth floor, so they were probably close enough to each other. I walked inside of the dungeon to confirm which teleportation markers were detectable.

"The markers seem to be okay," I said. "Yeah, it should theoretically be possible to teleport to any of them."

I'd succeeded in detecting four teleportation markers. One of them was the marker next to the entrance, and the other three were probably the ones in the last rooms of the fourth floor, seventh floor, and tenth floor based on how far away each felt to me.

Yuki, standing beside me, put a finger to her forehead and paused in thought. "Hmm. I can detect the marker on the tenth floor, but I can't detect the one on the eleventh floor," said Yuki. "The tenth and eleventh floor aren't that far apart, so that's kinda weird. What's the difference between them?"

“Those two floors have very different environments, and there might also be some kind of spatial distortion between them,” I said. “In any case, don’t think too much about it. It’s a dungeon, after all.”

The words “it’s a dungeon” were an easy way to hand-wave away everything mysterious about it. Having offered Yuki that reply, I tried to measure the distance between the teleportation markers again. The closest in terms of direct distance were on the seventh floor, the fourth floor, and the tenth floor. It would probably be safer to teleport twice between the floors, but the teleportation marker at the tenth floor was located in the perfect place; it felt like I could just barely make it in one go. However, I would probably run out of mana and collapse on the spot afterward.

“Yuki, can you teleport one person with you?” I asked.

“To the tenth floor?” Yuki thought about it, then clasped her hands together apologetically. “Nah, I think I can only teleport myself. Sorry.”

“I see. I guess I’ll have to teleport six people by myself,” I said. “Sorry in advance if I collapse to the ground afterward.”

“Don’t worry, Nao!” said Touya. “Even if you end up being useless for half a day, it’ll still be faster than having to go through the whole dungeon on foot!”

“Ugh. I mean, you’re right, but the way you phrased that irritates me a bit,” I said. “Running out of mana feels really uncomfortable!”

I felt a lack of appreciation from Touya. He seemed very carefree as he patted me on my shoulder, so I punched him in the stomach, but he continued smiling at me, so an elf’s strength clearly wasn’t anywhere near enough to damage him.

“Well, if you do run out of mana, then you can just rest for a bit to recover,” said Haruka. “I’ll use the Mind Heal spell on you as well.”

“Mm. I’ll let you rest on my lap if you work hard, Nao-kun,” said Natsuki with a smile.

I wasn’t sure if she was joking or not, but Yuki dug her elbow into my ribs when she heard that. “Whoa, you’re such a lucky guy, Nao. I’m so jealous.”

Yuki was definitely aware of how awful it felt to run out of mana, so I glared at

her as she was goofing around. “In that case, do you want to take my place? You might vomit, but surely you wouldn’t mind if you’re *that* jealous, right?”

But Yuki just shook her head and pinched her own thighs. “Nah, I can’t teleport as many people as you can, and definitely not all the way to the tenth floor. All I can do is offer you my lap.”

“M-My lap is free as well, Nao-san,” said Mary.

“Mine too!” Metea exclaimed.

“Uh, I don’t need that many laps to rest on,” I said.

I would probably feel a lot better if I could touch Mary and Metea’s ears and tails, but there was no way I could actually request something like that, so I sighed and resigned myself to my fate.

“Whew. All right, let’s go. Everyone except Yuki, stand as close to me as you can.”

Yuki walked a little ways away from the rest of us, while Touya walked over right in front of me. Natsuki and Haruka placed their hands on my shoulders, and the sisters clutched my back. I checked one last time to make sure everyone was close before I activated my magic.

“*Area Teleportation.*”

The scenery in front of my eyes changed immediately, and at the same time, my body was completely drained of mana. I felt weak and started to collapse, but Haruka and Natsuki held up my arms before I could make contact with the ground.

“Are you okay, Nao?” Haruka asked. “*Mind Heal.*”

“We’ll support you, Nao-kun, so rest at ease,” said Natsuki. “Please sit down here.”

Touya had swiftly set up a makeshift bed for me, and I covered my mouth as I nodded in response to Natsuki’s words and sat down on the bed.

Metea sat down next to me and patted her legs. She smiled at me, seeming very eager to lend me her lap. “Use my lap, big bro Nao!”

Mary picked Metea up from behind and shifted her away. “Maybe another time, Met.”

Natsuki sat where Metea had been beside my bed.

“Feel free to rest your head on my lap, Nao-kun.” Natsuki smiled as she spread her arms a little to welcome me.

I felt a bit embarrassed, but the spell had consumed a lot more mana than I’d expected, so I laid my cheek against Natsuki’s lap and took some deep, slow breaths as I tried to hold back from vomiting.

A while after I’d lain down to rest, Yuki teleported to our location. “Whew, success.” She just wobbled for a bit before regaining her balance, so she must not have been as exhausted as I was due to the fact that she’d only had to teleport herself.

Yuki smiled when she saw me and sat down by an open space next to the bed. “I see you succeeded on your end too, Nao. I gotta say, though, this really uses up a lot of mana!”

“Nao is more or less down for the count, but what about you, Yuki?” Touya asked. “Do you feel fine?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’d probably end up like Nao if I had to teleport one more person with me, though.”

“I see. Well, I’d kind of feel bad if Nao had to exert himself like that every time,” said Touya, pointing at me with his chin. “Can’t you make something like the teleportation devices that the Adventurers’ Guild installs in dungeons? Those would eat up much less mana, right?”

Yuki shrugged. “Those devices consume magicites instead of mana. Unfortunately, there’s nothing about them in the alchemist encyclopedia or the Time Magic grimoires. I have a hunch that it’s secret guild technology or something like that.”

“Oh, yeah, I get what you mean,” said Touya. “The guild might be powerful *because* it has knowledge of secrets like that.”

“Well, there technically is a similar Time Magic spell called Create Gate,” said

Haruka.

"I'm pretty sure that the Area Warp spell is more similar, Haruka," I said.

Create Gate connected two different areas of space via a magical portal. Its main purpose was to facilitate transportation of a lot of people or objects. The caster had to constantly feed mana into the gate as long as the spell was active, so it was very hard to keep it open for an extended period of time. Area Warp, in contrast, teleported objects between two different areas of space. The guild's teleportation devices would apparently transport you in an instant, so the Area Warp spell was probably the origin of those devices.

"Hmm. Would a device like that actually work, though? You look completely drained, Nao, so I can't even imagine how many magicites it would take," said Touya. "Sounds kinda unrealistic to me."

Touya was right that my mana reserves were empty, as evident by the fact that I was resting on Natsuki's lap. However...

"Well, it's like the difference between oral magic and ritual magic," I said.

Oral magic could actually be cast without an incantation—that was the case for everyone in my party who could use magic—but spells that you could prepare with your mind were a lot simpler than spells that were prepared and completed with the support of external factors like magic circles. When it came to teleportation magic, the difference was similar to the difference between, say, eyeballing distance and measuring it with a tape. A talented mage with an extremely good grasp of distance, to the point of instinctively knowing how many centimeters each of his own steps was, could perform ritual magic feats with just oral magic, but I wasn't capable of something like that at the moment.

I tried to explain everything in simple terms to Touya, but he just folded his arms and nodded. "I see. None of that made any sense to me."

"It's kind of similar to the difference between magic bags and the Spatial Expansion spell," I said. "Or, like, it's not easy to draw a completely straight line freehand, but it's easy if you use a ruler, right?"

"...Well, yeah, a tool would make it really easy," said Touya.

It seemed like Touya still wasn't grasping what I'd been trying to get across,

but Haruka and Yuki chimed in to help me.

“Machines are probably a better example,” said Yuki. “It’s like the difference between running with your own legs and riding a motorcycle.”

“You’d have to design and build a motorcycle yourself, and you’d also have to prepare fuel for it,” said Haruka. “But once all of that was done, anyone else could use the motorcycle too, and the only thing that would get consumed would be the fuel.”

“Oh, yeah, that example makes more sense to me,” said Touya. “Huh? Wait a second. Doesn’t that mean offensive magic would be more effective if you prepared it with ritual magic?”

“Well, it would become easier to use once the preparations were complete, but ritual magic isn’t very really useful for simple magic,” I said. “You could increase a spell’s penetrative force or area of effect, but that’s not too hard to accomplish by just practicing the spells normally, so we don’t need ritual magic for things like that.”

The potency of offensive magic scaled with the amount of mana you used, so it was relatively simple compared to other types of magic. It was a different story if you wanted a precise temperature for Fire Magic spells, but there was no need for that if you simply wanted to use magic to inflict damage. That said, if you wanted to make a stove with different temperature settings, then alchemy technically counted as a form of ritual magic you could utilize in order to create a magical device for that purpose.

“In terms of a device that can channel offensive magic for its user, there was the mithril-enhanced bow that Gantz-san showed us ages ago,” said Haruka.

“Hmm. Yeah, you’re right,” said Touya. “I bet nobody would buy— Oh, everything makes sense to me now.”

It’s been a long time, but if I recall correctly, that bow was a bargain, right? It was a weapon enhanced with mithril, but Gantz-san was willing to sell it for less than a hundred gold coins... Actually, on second thought, that’s still very expensive. Never mind.

“The bow would consume a fixed amount of mana each time you used it to

create arrows, and you wouldn't be able to adjust the potency or speed of the arrows," said Haruka. "Those downsides meant that our own Fire Arrows are a lot more useful, and the bow itself wouldn't work as a normal bow due to the fact that it would consume your mana every time you drew the string."

"From what you've told us, Haruka, it sounds like that bow was meant for someone who has a lot of mana, can't use magic, and either has no need for normal arrows or also carries around an additional bow," said Natsuki. "That's an extremely specific type of customer."

"No wonder the bow didn't sell," said Touya, sounding a bit exasperated. "It definitely ended up all the way out here in Laffan for a good reason."

"Yeah, for sure. Why did Gantz-san ever buy it?" Yuki paused in thought for a bit, but she quickly snapped out of it and clapped her hands together. "Okay, let's get back to what we were talking about. We can't and don't know how to make a teleportation device, so we'll have to rely on Nao for the time being! Yep!"

"Hey, you need to work hard too, Yuki," I said. "Based on what you said earlier, you can handle teleporting one more person with you, right?"

"Uh, I'll end up just like you if I do that," said Yuki.

"Do it. You should rest here in place of me next time," I said. "I'll let you have priority."

I had no intention of asking Yuki to teleport another person with her every time, but I wanted to at least take turns due to how awful it felt to drain my mana completely.

"Well, Natsuki's lap would be quite comfortable, but I think I'd prefer to rest on your lap, Nao," said Yuki.

"That's not the issue at hand here, but I don't mind if it gets you to work hard," I said. "You can freely choose between my lap and Natsuki's."

"Oh, my, it seems my lap is sold out." Natsuki covered her eyes in an exaggerated way, as if pretending to cry. "It's okay, however. I'm the kind of woman who endures mistreatment."

“Are you being bullied, big sis Natsuki?” Metea asked.

When I noticed Metea had been taken in by Natsuki’s joking around, I hastily jabbed back, “Don’t make it sound like I did something bad! You’re perfectly okay with lending your lap to Yuki, right, Natsuki?!”

“Yes, of course. I was just teasing you, Nao-kun. In any case, I know how uncomfortable it feels to deplete your mana completely.” Natsuki smiled playfully at me before looking at Yuki. “I’m only capable of healing, so I hope you can muster the will to work hard, Yuki.”

Haruka nodded and chimed in, “Mm. It’d be ideal if we could prevent Nao from having to suffer like this every time. What if you teleport us twice over shorter distances instead of once over a long distance?”

“That’s one option, but I think single teleports are better,” I said. “I’ll have to get used to teleportation one way or another, so it’s necessary to exert myself a bit.”

Time Magic was the one thing I was better at than anyone else in the party, and I was determined to continue practicing it. In a way, the fact that I could safely use up all my mana for teleportation actually meant it was the perfect way to improve my proficiency at Time Magic.

“Big bro Nao is a hard worker.” Metea turned her pure and innocent eyes on Yuki. “That means big sis Yuki is the villain here!”

Metea probably hadn’t meant to do it, but her gaze must have stung Yuki, because she clutched her chest. “Ugh. W-Well, I’ll work hard too, of course. It’s just that it’ll make me feel very uncomfortable, so I want to experience something soothing in return. To be more specific, I want to touch Mary and Metea’s cute ears and tails!”

“Me?” said Mary. “If that’s all I have to do to be of help, then I don’t mind.”

“Hm? You already touch our ears and tails a lot, big sis Yuki,” said Metea.

That’s the Yuki I know! She’s got way more guts than I do! She’s my idol! I want to be her, but I know there’s no way I can! Ugh!

“From what all of you have said, it sounds like using powerful magic is really

exhausting,” said Mary. “I can’t imagine what it’s like, since I can’t use magic, but how does it actually feel?”

“Well, the state Nao is in right now is a perfect example,” said Yuki. “You feel nauseous, dizzy, and weak. It’s different from pain and harder to put up with. I might end up puking next time.”

“Don’t worry, Yuki.” Haruka put her hands on Yuki’s shoulders. “I’ll be ready to use the Purification spell right away.”

Yuki just laughed dryly. “Ha ha, that’s good to know. My image as a cute girl is in danger...”

“Huh? You’re still concerned about that after all we’ve been through?” Haruka sounded a bit exasperated. “Are you serious, Yuki?”

But Yuki waved her hands around in protest. “Of course! I want to remain a cute girl at all times!”

I watched her for a moment, then raised one of my hands in the air and gave her a thumbs-up with a smile on my face. “You’re always cute, Yuki. I’m counting on you to do your best with magic.”

“Thanks for that empty compliment, Nao,” she replied. “But I’m a simple girl, so I’ll play along with you!”

As we continued discussing magic to kill time, we ate snacks and joked around. I occasionally changed the lap I was resting on, and after a few hours, my mana had fully recovered. After that, we walked down to the eleventh floor and teleported to the fifteenth floor to resume our exploration of the dungeon.

This time, we had an automatic milking machine, bottles, and white paint for marking strike oxen. We immediately started looking for the strike ox we had milked previously. Our goal was to check how much milk it had produced while we were gone. If a week was enough for it to restore its milk reserves, then the fifteenth floor of the dungeon would work perfectly as a dairy farm, but you had to be a very strong herdsman or adventurer in order to handle strike oxen.

“Looks like the strike oxen we slew haven’t respawned yet,” said Touya.

“Yeah, I can’t detect any here,” I said.

When we first arrived on the fifteenth floor, there had been a strike ox within range, but this time, my Scout skill wasn't picking up any signals.

We walked toward the area where we had milked the strike ox, and soon, my Scout skill detected something. I had no idea whether it was the same strike ox, but I was certain that we were in the right area.

"Let's hope that strike oxen have fixed territories," said Haruka. "Next up is to capture it and test things out. We're counting on you, Touya."

"Okay! I've got the timing down perfect!"

Luckily for us, strike oxen seemed to lack the capacity to learn from past mistakes. Touya whipped out a piece of cloth he had apparently prepared to taunt the strike ox, and it charged straight at him. Touya easily dodged the charge and grabbed its horns again right as it was about to wheel around. At the same time, Yuki and I cast Earth Wall, and Touya's body was lifted into the air, but he ended up only half as high as he had the last time; Yuki and I had been practicing. Two meters was definitely too high to truss up a strike ox and milk it.

"Success! I'm glad this was easy, but I didn't expect a strike ox to be that stupid." Yuki smiled at the ox, and it snorted at her aggressively. I wasn't sure if it was unhappy to see Yuki's smile or if it was unhappy about the fact that it had been restrained a lot more easily than the last time.

Yuki completely ignored the strike ox's reaction and attached the automatic milking machine to its udders.

"Milk, milk, pump out that milk!"

Yuki sang happily to herself as she attached the other end of the hose to a bottle and pressed the switch on the automatic milking machine. The machine produced a faint sound as it started up, and milk flooded into the bottle immediately. The milking process was quite rapid; the first bottle was completely filled in less than thirty seconds.

"Oh, nice, it actually worked," I said. "I'm impressed you nailed it on your first try, Yuki."

Yuki had a smug look on her face. "Tee hee, yep! Natsuki helped me out!"

Touya glanced at Natsuki. “Natsuki ‘helped you out,’ huh?”

“...Touya-kun, the way you’re looking at me constitutes sexual harassment. You know that, right?” said Natsuki.

Touya, why did you have to look down a bit instead of looking at her on the level? Come on, dude...

“Just to be clear, Natsuki only taught me how the *process* of milking cows works, and I applied the concepts I learned to make this automatic milking machine,” said Yuki.

“Yeah, that’s what I had in mind! What else could I possibly have been thinking of? Nothing, of course!”

I respect your attempt at a rebuttal, Touya, but you should have said it without shifting your eyes. You’re not helping yourself at all.

“You really dug your own grave, Touya,” said Yuki. But then she showed him some mercy by shifting her attention to the strike ox. “Oh well. Hmm, I think the strike ox is out of milk now. The total volume looks like it’s about the same as what we got last time.”

Yuki’s automatic milking machine had filled just a little less than four whole bottles. If this was the same strike ox we had captured previously, that meant the time required for a strike ox to recover from milking was somewhere between a few days and one week.

“Yay!” Metea cheered. “We can eat as much ice cream as we want!”

“It recovered faster than I thought it would,” said Natsuki. “I suppose this means we’ll be able to drink a lot of milk if we want to.”

“I don’t know if this applies to wild cows and monsters, but it’s apparently normal for dairy cows,” said Haruka.

According to Haruka, you could obtain a large volume of milk on a daily basis from dairy cows that had been selectively bred to produce milk, like Holstein cows, and it could actually harm the cows if you didn’t milk them.

“Probably no point overthinking this when it comes to monsters, but we haven’t seen any calves drinking from adult strike oxen,” said Touya.

“Mm,” said Natsuki. Metea looked like she was still dreaming of eating lots of ice cream, so Natsuki, sounding a bit like a caring mom, warned her, “By the way, Metea-chan, you can’t just eat as many sweets as you want. That would be bad for your body.”

“Really?” Metea asked. “I want to eat a lot of ice cream, so...”

“Well, you won’t grow taller if you don’t eat a balanced diet,” Natsuki replied.

Metea looked up at her. “...Do you mean I’ll end up like big sis Yuki?”

Natsuki nodded. “Yes.”

Yuki immediately protested, “N-No, that’s completely wrong! I’m just short because of my genes! I’ve never been picky about what I eat! Not in my whole life! Besides, I’m more or less the same size Haruka is!”

I tended to think of Yuki as a short girl, but it was true that there was actually almost no difference between her and Haruka. However, Haruka had become a bit shorter after being reincarnated in this world. All of us still remembered our days back on Earth, so everyone else was probably thinking of Yuki as the shortest person among us too.

Yuki pointed at Haruka and began, “Besides, if we’re talking about growth in general, then Haruka is—”

But Haruka approached Yuki with a smile and wrapped one arm around her neck before physically sealing Yuki’s mouth with her palm. “Being healthy is more important than growth, Metea. I’m sure you understand that. You don’t want to get sick, do you?”

“N-No, I don’t!” Metea seemed very scared of something; she was nodding vigorously. “I can hold back from eating too many sweets!”

Sickness, huh? Don’t worry, Metea, I’m scared of getting sick too.

Haruka smiled at Metea as she released Yuki from her grasp. “Mm. Some of us can use magic, but there’s no guarantee that we’ll be able to heal every kind of disease.”

Yuki pouted as she turned around toward Haruka, but...

“Cough, cough. You didn’t have to be so rough with me, Haruka. Besides, it’s

not a big deal, so—" But she glanced away as soon as she saw the look on Haruka's face, and she quickly set to taking out the white paint that we had prepared. "N-Now, then, all that's left to do is to mark this strike ox, and then we can leave it alone. It needs to stand out in a way that's easily recognizable, yep!"

Yuki whistled awkwardly to herself as she started to paint the strike ox to look like a Holstein cow. It sounded like she was trying to pretend nothing had happened. The paint had actually been somewhat cheap, so it was fine for Yuki to act like an artist, but the whole purpose of this exercise was to make it easy for us to identify individual strike oxen by sex. All we wanted from female strike oxen was their milk, so it would be great if we could avoid unnecessary combat.

"All that's left is to add a number as the finishing touch," said Yuki. "Okay, I'm done. Let's get out of here."

The strike ox was still flailing around on top of the walls, but we left it alone and headed to the next area.



After we had milked the first one, we walked around the fifteenth floor in search of more strike oxen. We marked the females after milking them and slew every male we encountered along the way. Three days had passed when we finally finished exploring the fifteenth floor.

"Whew, we're finally done," said Yuki. "How many strike oxen were there total? There were more than a hundred for sure, but..."

"I didn't bother counting them," said Touya. "The milk that we collected would definitely fetch a good amount of money, though."

The volume of milk we had collected would probably earn us over one hundred gold coins if we sold all of it. On top of that, we had a lot of horns, skin, meat, and magicites from the male strike oxen that we had slain, as well as a lot of fruit that we had gathered from the forests. The fruits that we'd found on the fifteenth floor were ume plums and peaches. Ume plums were apparently not a very popular fruit in this world due to how sour they were, so they could only be found on the marketplace in certain parts of the world. On the other hand, peaches were worth a lot of money due to how difficult it was to transport

them, and they were delicious as well, so we had happily harvested all of the peaches we could find.

“You know, I think the ume plums are the first fruit that we’ve actively avoided harvesting,” said Yuki. “It kind of feels like a waste not to.”

“They’re bad! I was deceived!” Metea seemed very angry about her initial experience with ume plums. Ripe ume plums smelled delicious, so Metea had bitten into one without any hesitation, but she’d screamed and spat it out right away.

“Ume plums aren’t really useful,” said Haruka. “I don’t think we can really do anything with them.”

“They’re not edible as is, so our only options would be to dry or candy them,” said Natsuki. “We don’t really drink alcohol, so plum wine isn’t an option.”

Ume plums wouldn’t sell as readily as other fruits, and they also weren’t fruit that we would ever consume a lot of ourselves, so the decision we had arrived at as a group was that we would only harvest enough for our own use. Our plan was to ask people like Diola-san and Aera-san about the ume plums, and if they told us there were other uses for them, then we could simply return to the dungeon at a later date to harvest more.

“The strike ox meat was somewhat disappointing too,” I said.

We had tried out some strike ox meat the last time we returned home, but it hadn’t impressed me as much as strike ox milk. The meat wasn’t bad by any means, but it was kind of average, similar to the cheap imported meat at supermarkets back in Japan. Some cuts were probably suitable for steaks, but overall, strike ox meat seemed very ordinary to me.

“Really? I thought it tasted good,” said Touya.

“Yeah, we know that you love any cut of meat as long as it’s thick, Touya,” said Yuki. “I thought it tasted pretty decent for lean meat. It might change if we cured it, but I don’t know how to do that.”

“It was cooked well, so I actually liked it too,” said Mary.

“Yeah, the meat was good,” said Metea.

"In a way, I actually think the strike ox meat is better than marbled meat," said Haruka. "It's not good to eat fatty meat on a daily basis."

"Mm. The strike ox meat is also suitable for beef jerky," said Natsuki.

Huh? Am I the only one who didn't really like the strike ox meat? I mean, I thought it was okay, but it was just different from what I expected. Wait, hold on... "Beef jerky?! Can we really make beef jerky?!"

Natsuki seemed a bit puzzled by my excitement. "Y-Yes. We can make it, but I'm not sure if we can get the taste right. If you're thinking about the jerky that was sold back in Japan, Nao-kun, then it'll require some trial and error before we can recreate that flavor."

Haruka gave me a dubious expression. "I didn't expect you to show that much interest, Nao. Did you like beef jerky?"

"Yeah, I actually loved beef jerky," I said. "It was expensive, though, so it wasn't something I could buy all the time."

"Oh, yeah, beef jerky was definitely delicious," said Touya. "It wasn't too hard to chew, and the balance of soy sauce and spices was perfect, so I liked it too."

Most of the dried meat we could get in Laffan was hard and salty, so it was quite different from the beef jerky I had in mind. The beef jerky back in Japan had a perfect balance of sweetness and spiciness, and also the perfect toughness, so I had a hard time believing that the dried meat in Laffan could technically be classified as the same thing.

"I used to dream of one day being able to eat beef jerky until I was completely stuffed," I said.

"Yeah, same here," said Touya. "I always wanted more."

Touya and I nodded at each other and shook hands.

"Seriously? Well, beef jerky was pretty expensive relative to your allowances, so that makes sense," said Haruka.

The allowance I had gotten back on Earth had been nowhere near enough to purchase the amount of beef jerky it would have taken to fill my stomach. I understood why beef jerky was so expensive—on top of the cost of the beef

itself, the drying process consumed a lot of time and resources—but regardless, the fact was that I had only been able to afford a very small amount of it. Beef jerky was just too expensive for a regular snack.

“If it’s really delicious, then I kind of want to eat some too,” said Metea.

“U-Um, I’m also curious about what beef jerky tastes like,” said Mary.

“In that case, I suppose we can try making some,” said Natsuki. “However, there’s a lot of sodium in beef jerky, so you can’t just eat it until you’re stuffed.”

I was really glad that Mary and Metea had expressed interest as well, since that seemed to have been what finally convinced Natsuki to give it a try. I was kind of sad about the fact that I wouldn’t be able to stuff myself with beef jerky, but I was glad that I had something to look forward to.

“Okay, I think it’s about time for us to get going,” I said.

I stood and turned around, as did everyone else. Before me was a door, something we hadn’t seen in a while. We were in the final area of the fifteenth floor, so if this floor was the same as the preceding ones, the boss room was probably behind that door. We had been resting in front of the door to prepare for a boss battle.

According to my Scout skill, a strike ox was as strong as an orc. The seventh floor had been full of picows, and the seventh-floor boss monster had been a tyrant picow, so we had good reason to suspect that the boss monster here on the fifteenth floor could be as strong as an orc leader in the best-case scenario and as strong as an orc captain in the worst-case scenario. It would be extremely unwise for us to underestimate the boss monster. Luckily for us, the dungeons in this world didn’t lock you inside of boss rooms, so our plan was to flee right away if the Third Eye skill told us that the boss monster was dangerous.

“I’m gonna open the door,” said Touya. “Ready?”

After everyone nodded, Touya carefully opened the door. The layout of the room behind the door looked the same as the boss rooms we’d seen before. Against the wall opposite us was a bull walking on two legs. It looked much larger than a strike ox. A minotaur technically fit the description of a bipedal

bull, but minotaurs were part man and part bull. In contrast, this boss monster had zero human parts. In this world, orcs were basically bipedal boars, and the boss monster was similar in that it was a bipedal bull. Its body was hunched forward a bit and completely covered in hair, and it had the face of a bull, so there was nothing human about it. However, its forelegs didn't terminate in hooves—they looked like they were capable of grabbing objects—so that was a major difference between the boss monster and a normal bull.

On a sidenote, the reason I could tell it was a bull was the thing hanging from its crotch. It was somewhat tucked away, but it was also directly in front of me, so I was a bit bothered. It would have been great if bipedal monsters had had the decency to properly conceal their private parts, but that wasn't the case, so I had no choice but to accept the reality before me.

"Nao, can we beat it?!"

"Yeah, I think so," I said.

The boss monster was powerful, but not so powerful that we wouldn't be able to prevail. My Help Guide revealed that it was called a mad tauros, and it seemed to be a little bit stronger than an orc leader. It was using both of its hands to wield an axe that was as long as Touya was tall, and it seemed very angry as it glared at us.

Something else also stood out to me among the data from the Third Eye skill. "It has the Roar skill, so it might use it! Keep that in mind!"

"Roger!" Touya yelled. "GRAAAAHHHH!"

Touya acted first and used his Roar skill as he charged at the mad tauros. His skill only halted it briefly, but it was actually very effective. As a result, the mad tauros's reaction was slowed slightly, but its strength was still formidable. Their weapons clashed for a few seconds before the mad tauros lifted its axe and deflected Touya's sword. Touya was forced to step back.

"Damn it! I guess it has more brute strength than me."

The mad tauros could easily reach double Touya's height if it stood up straight. Relative to its body, its legs and arms were a lot thicker than a normal bull's, and its arms in particular looked thicker than my waist, so its attacks

were definitely powerful and had a lot of weight behind them. In fact, Touya would probably have lost already if he hadn't had mana to boost his own strength.

"Do you need backup, Touya?" I asked.

"Nah, I'll be fine. Let me handle this!"

The mad tauros was strong, but it was just one monster. It didn't seem to be as dangerous as a lava boar, so we could probably slay it with ease if all three of the mages in my party attacked it with magic. Natsuki and Mary had stepped forward too, but when they heard Touya's words, they looked to me. I nodded at them, and they fell back to where I was, though they continued to hold their weapons at the ready.

The mad tauros didn't react to the sisters falling back; its attention seemed to be completely focused on Touya. It swung its giant axe at him, but Touya dodged the wide swings with ease and gradually dealt it damage.

The mad tauros was the second-largest monster we had ever encountered, and its attacks were probably more powerful than those of an ogre. However, it wasn't very fast, so it wasn't a threat if you could dodge its attacks. Touya seemed to be aware of this; he patiently wounded its legs, and its movements gradually became slower.

But Yuki frowned as she watched the battle play out. "Hmm..."

"What's wrong, Yuki?" I asked. "Is there something on your mind? It looks like Touya's doing just fine..."

"Nah, it's nothing serious," Yuki replied. "I was just wondering if we could use its arm to make manga meat."

Really? That's what you were thinking about, Yuki? I mean, yeah, I think it's possible, but why now?

"Mm, that arm might be thick enough," said Haruka. "But actually, there are two bones, so that wouldn't work. We'd probably have to use the legs if we wanted to make manga meat."

Oh, right, there are two bones in the forearm. What about the upper arm—

Wait, why am I thinking about this seriously? Sure, eating manga meat would be cool, but still!

“Back in Japan, there were products called manga meat, but they were small and made with processed meat,” said Natsuki.

“Large ones probably wouldn’t sell very well,” said Haruka. “You can’t really cook them at home, and it’d also be too much meat.”

“Mm, nuclear families have become more common,” said Natsuki. “I’ve heard before that even regular-size watermelons haven’t been selling well recently.”

Large watermelons were hard to store and cool in normal fridges. They took up a lot of space, and small families would have a hard time consuming one at a reasonable pace. My parents had once received a giant watermelon for free when they had bought a new fridge, but the only time when you’d have enough space inside of a fridge for a giant watermelon was probably when it was brand-new.

“Wait, hold on,” I said. “Manga meat is completely different from watermelons, Natsuki.”

“I think they’re actually quite similar,” said Natsuki. “Even Touya-kun wouldn’t be able to eat either of them by himself.”

“Yeah,” said Yuki, “the kind of manga meat that looks like it’s cooked well would probably weigh at least ten kilos.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense to me,” I said.

It was true that most of the manga meat I had seen in fiction looked like it would weigh at least ten kilos, which would be just a little bit more than twenty pounds of beef. My party included a beastman and two beastgirls, so we could probably consume all of it if we divided it proportionately, but in that case, I wouldn’t be able to bite into a massive chunk of manga meat.

Hmm. Well, I’d probably get sick of manga meat pretty quick after eating just one, so I don’t really care that much. It’s kind of similar to how I’ve always wanted to eat a whole watermelon or cake by myself: even if I got the opportunity to do so, I’d probably give up halfway through, so I guess it’s best for these kinds of dreams to stay dreams.

“Hey, don’t just chatter while I’m struggling over here!” Touya shouted.

“Hmm? Are you actually struggling?” I asked.

“Well, no, but...”

Although Touya was unhappy with the small talk, we were still paying attention to the battle so that we could help him out with magic at any time. The reason we could chat with no worries was that it looked like Touya was handling the mad tauros with no problem. It wasn’t an easy foe to slay, but it also wasn’t strong enough that a single mistake would lead to instant death. In that sense, the mad tauros was actually a perfect foe for combat practice. Touya had focused on properly countering its attacks, so he appeared to be aware of that as well. We could slay most foes quickly with magic if all we wanted was to obtain materials, but we wouldn’t be able to level up our skills if we used magic to end every battle immediately, so it was necessary to fight prolonged battles from time to time. *Sometime in the future, should I use a boss monster to practice my abilities with a spear in actual combat? Hmm...*

“Hi-yaahh!”

While I was thinking to myself, Touya sliced open a large wound on one of the mad tauros’s legs, and it fell with a loud crash. Next, Touya destroyed its right wrist, and its giant axe fell to the ground.

“It looks like it’s almost over.” I sighed with relief at the fact that nothing unexpected had happened.

Yuki, however, sounded a bit troubled as she watched the end of the battle. “Oh no. A leg wound...”

“That’s what you’re worried about?!” I exclaimed. “Do you really want to make manga meat that bad?”

“Yeah,” said Yuki. “Well, the other leg is unharmed, so it should be fine. I’ll be satisfied after just making it once.”

A whole roasted leg wasn’t actually very delicious. The girls had cooked a whole roasted tusk boar when we had held a welcome party for the sisters, and it had *looked* pretty impressive, but we’d ended up slicing it and dipping the pieces into sauce.

“Hey, where’s your praise for my victory against the mad tauros?”

Once the mad tauros had dropped its axe, its head had been wide open, and Touya had brought his sword down on its neck to finish it off.

I sarcastically clapped twice for Touya. “Congrats. You get exactly two claps from me.”

Haruka responded with half-hearted praise. “Yeah, yeah, good job. *Purification.*”

As Haruka cleansed Touya of the blood from the mad tauros, Natsuki chuckled and lowered her naginata.

“You were amazing, big bro Touya,” said Metea.

“Yeah, I agree,” said Mary. “You faced off against that big monster all by yourself! That was really cool.”

“Well, we kind of let him fight the monster by himself, so I think he should actually thank us for that,” said Yuki.

The sisters had offered Touya some sincere praise, but he sighed at Yuki’s teasing. “I knew I could count on Mary and Metea for some soothing words. I know that I’m the one who asked for permission to fight the mad tauros by myself, but still.”

“Yeah, it was a foe we could have slain quickly if we’d wanted to,” I said. “It’s definitely true that we need to get actual combat practice against decently strong foes.”

“Right? There’s a limit to what we can learn from sparring against each other,” said Touya.

“Also, our individual combat styles are pretty different,” said Yuki.

“Everyone has taught Metea and me how to fight,” said Mary.

My spear, Touya’s sword, and Natsuki’s naginata were all used differently in combat. Everyone except Touya and Mary used kodachi, but Yuki and Metea were the only ones who used kodachi as their main weapons. Another major issue was the fact that combat against humans was vastly different from combat against monsters.

“Boss monsters as sparring partners, huh? I think that’s a good idea, but the respawn speed for boss monsters in this dungeon seems to be very slow,” said Haruka.

“Mm. I have no idea what it’s like in the average dungeon, but apparently we need to wait anywhere from ten days to a month for boss monsters to respawn in this dungeon,” said Natsuki. “That being the case, we won’t be able to fight boss monsters routinely.”

If we wanted everyone to have an opportunity to fight a boss monster and level up their skills, it would take many, many days. Some boss monsters would probably be too hard for certain members of my party to solo, so there was no need for everyone to fight every boss, but even a single boss would consume a few months of time if we wanted to fight it multiple times.

“I thought we could just become stronger by fighting foes as we explored the dungeon, but the foes outside of the dungeon entrance are still stronger than the ones we’ve encountered inside so far,” I said.

It would probably be easier for us to level up if we fought the foes outside of the dungeon entrance, and we could also earn more money on them. The fruit we had harvested from the dungeon had made a delicious addition to our diets, but we had already stocked up on enough for an entire year.

“It’s a bit cold at this time of the year outside of the dungeon, but that’s also suitable weather for combat,” said Haruka.

“Treasure chests are one thing we can look forward to inside of the dungeon, but we haven’t found any since the eleventh floor,” said Yuki. “I wonder if it’s because of the completely different environment. Hmm.”

The only good treasure chests we had discovered so far were the ones that had probably been first-time rewards for defeating bosses. I would have been very motivated to slay bosses if those treasure chests had respawned, but it seemed that only the bosses respawned, so my theory that the chests were first-time rewards was probably correct.

“Well, before we make a decision, let’s wait and see what monsters we encounter while we explore deeper floors,” said Touya. “We can think about this again once we get to a floor that seems a little too tough for us. More

importantly, let's check the reward waiting for us. It's been a while since our last treasure chest."

Touya pointed at the new door that had appeared while we were chatting with each other. If it was the same kind of door as the ones we had seen before, then there was probably a treasure chest in the room behind it. Metea looked like she was very excited after she heard Touya's words, and the rest of us looked at each other, then laughed to ourselves. We retrieved the enormous carcass of the mad tauros as well as its axe, then we headed over to the door to open it.

"Yeah, it's the same as before," I said.

In the small room behind the door were a treasure chest, a return device, and some stairs that led to the next floor, so it was no different from the ones we'd encountered in the past. The chest itself contained a large two-handed sword. Touya's sword could be wielded with either one or two hands, but the sword in the treasure chest was too big and heavy for a normal person to wield. The blade could've spanned the distance from my feet to my waist, and that was without counting the hilt, so it was quite large even for a two-handed sword. In fact, I felt fairly sure that only something like a mad tauros would be able to wield and swing the sword one-handed.

"Hmm. I'm not sure what to do about this weapon," said Haruka.

"Try picking it up, Touya," I suggested.

"All right," said Touya. "Whoa, it's really heavy! I can swing it around if I use both hands, but it's really hard to use."



Touya swung the sword around with both hands, but his swings weren't very fast. It looked like it could deal a lot of damage if it landed a clean blow, but that probably wouldn't be easy with such a slow weapon.

"Mary uses a two-handed sword, but I doubt she can lift this one," I said.
"Right, Mary?"

"Uh-huh. If Touya-san can only swing it around slowly, then there's no way I could use it properly," said Mary.

"Hold on, this is actually made of white iron," said Touya. "I'm pretty sure we'd have to pay a lot of money for something like this."

When Touya said that, I gave the sword another look. There wasn't any visible rust on it, so he was probably right. Compared to blue iron and yellow iron, it was harder to distinguish white iron from regular iron that was simply well polished, so I was impressed by Touya's discerning eye.

"Well, even if a white iron sword is expensive, that doesn't necessarily mean that we can sell it for a lot of money," said Natsuki.

"Yeah. A weapon is worthless if nobody can use it," said Yuki.

"Let's just sell it to Gantz-san. He can use it as a source of raw materials," said Haruka. "White iron should fetch us a decent amount of money."

Haruka's idea sounded like a perfectly reasonable one, but Touya frowned.

"Huh? That kinda sounds like a waste. Like, we got this from a treasure chest..."

"I mean, another way to look at it is that we can easily get iron swords from treasure chests," said Haruka. "Do you have any other ideas for how we can use this sword?"

"Uh, well, we could maybe use it as exercise equipment," said Touya.

I laughed. "Oh, I didn't know that you wanted expensive exercise equipment, Touya."

It was true that you could probably build muscles by swinging the white iron sword for practice, but something like a normal iron bar would be a more cost-

efficient option. A white iron sword as large as the one we'd obtained from the treasure chest would probably fetch over one hundred gold coins, after all.

"Um, so is that a no?" Touya asked.

"Not exactly," Haruka replied. "But do you think we *need* this?"

Touya seemed to have no idea how to refute Haruka's argument. "Well, when you put it that way, the answer is no, but..."

So the white iron sword wouldn't be useful to us at all. Tomi used war hammers, so there was a chance he could use it, but the only time we ever fought together was when we went fishing. On top of that, the monsters on the way to our fishing spot were either goblins or even weaker enemies, so the white iron sword would be overkill against them.

"We could also hang this on the wall of our house as decoration," said Yuki. "It's no work of art, but everybody's got their own hobbies and tastes."

"This sword is meant for actual use in combat," Haruka pointed out.

The use of arms and armor as decoration was common around the globe, but my impression was that most rich Japanese people would display the armor and katana used by samurai, although those who owned Western houses might instead choose things like full plate armor and sabers. I had seen some examples of the former at Natsuki's house back in Japan, and I had seen examples of the latter when I'd visited a Western-style mansion that had been turned into a tourist spot, so I was probably right. However, decorations like that probably wouldn't mesh well with our house, so if someone really wanted them, I would prefer if they kept them inside of their own rooms.

"Well, it's not as if we're in desperate need of money, so I don't particularly mind if Touya-kun really wants to keep the white iron sword," said Natsuki. "I had some katana on display at my house back in Japan, so I can understand wanting a sword for that purpose."

"Oh, I didn't expect you to agree to the idea of keeping the sword, Natsuki," I said.

I had assumed that Natsuki was the type of person who wouldn't want to keep around things that were meant for practical use unless we were actually

using them. Her room back in Japan had been very neat and free of pointless things, and her room in this world was the same.

“Besides, we can just confiscate the sword if we really need something to sell,” said Natsuki.

“Yep, that’s the Natsuki I know!” I said. “You really don’t hold back at all.”

“I’m just a very pragmatic person,” said Natsuki. “However, as long as Touya-kun is willing to use his own pocket money to fund it, he’s free to decorate or display whatever he wants.”

Natsuki’s suggestion was definitely a very rational one. We pooled our money to cover the goods, weapons, and armor that were necessary for our lives as adventurers. We also shared items that we obtained from treasure chests, but anyone who wanted a weapon that wouldn’t be used in actual combat had to pay for it out of pocket. Thus, if Touya wanted to display the white iron sword in his room, he would have to purchase it himself, but...

“Uh, I never said anything about wanting to display this sword,” said Touya. “I just thought we might need a weapon like this in the future if we encounter a foe that can only be dealt with by brute force. Like, we’re not very good at dealing damage to foes with tough armor.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense,” I said. “The only things we have that can be used as blunt weapons are Touya and Mary’s swords.”

“So, like, a foe that’s immune to magic and can’t be cut? You should have brought that up before, Touya,” said Yuki.

Touya sounded a bit offended that we had wrongly assumed he wanted the white iron sword as decoration, and he’d brought up a good point. For example, if we encountered something like a golem, our weapons probably wouldn’t be very effective against it. Haruka’s arrows would be useless, and our kodachi weren’t so ridiculously sharp that they could slice through rock. My weapon was a spear, and Natsuki’s was a naginata, so we could use the butts of our weapons to deal some damage, but it probably wouldn’t be very effective. War hammers like Tomi used would be the ideal weapons for foes like that. There was a good chance our magic would still work, but it would be an issue if Touya had no way to deal damage as the guy who helped hold our front line.

“I mean, yeah, I thought about bringing it up right away, but I hesitated because I don’t know if I’ll ever get a chance to put the white iron sword to good use,” said Touya. “Even if a chance presents itself, the sword might end up not being effective, so I didn’t feel completely confident about this.”

“You needn’t worry about such things,” said Natsuki. “We change the weapons we use quite frequently.”

“Yeah. It’s unacceptable if you purchase a weapon and end up not using it at all, but you have to test out a weapon yourself to see if it’s useful or not,” I said. “Besides, we didn’t spend any money on this white iron sword, so it’s fine.”

There were some weapons that we didn’t use anymore, but all of the weapons that we had purchased so far had helped us in one way or another. It would be a waste of money to buy a weapon that we weren’t sure would ever be useful for us, such as a halberd, but there was no issue with keeping a weapon we’d obtained from a treasure chest to test it out for a bit. Weapons weren’t the kinds of items that would lose value if they weren’t completely new, and the ones from treasure chests already counted as secondhand goods anyway.

“If I recall correctly, you have the Weapon Proficiency: Swords and Swordsmanship skills, right, Touya? Hmm,” said Haruka. “You might also be able to apply what you’ve learned from using the Staff Fighting skill in the past, so I think it’s worth it for you to try using a two-handed sword.”

“Yeah, you’re the one among us who has the best chance of mastering it, Touya,” said Yuki. “Good luck!”

“There were tank characters in games that used two-handed swords, so I’m sure you can do it,” I said. “Do your best to become a masochist, Touya.”

Touya sighed; he sounded a bit exasperated at my friendly words of encouragement. “Huh? There’s no way I’ll become a masochist! But anyway, I’ll do what I can.”

The sixteenth floor of the dungeon had the same grassy plains and forests as the previous five floors. There were strike oxen as well, but all we found in the forests were chestnuts. I felt a bit disappointed—nuts weren’t exactly what I’d been hoping for—but Yuki was very pleased, so I was happy for her. The

monsters in the forests were the same as before, but the chestnut trees themselves posed a new threat to us. When monsters leaped down from the branches of the trees, chestnut burrs would fall on us, and they were actually quite dangerous. Our bodies were strong enough that burrs couldn't pierce our skin, but they still hurt when they landed on our faces. In addition, the burrs that landed on the ground and the chestnuts that fell out kind of hindered our progress, and the girls complained if I accidentally crushed them. As a result, Haruka was the most successful at dealing with the monsters since she could stand in one place and use her bow. Those of us who could use magic helped a bit as well, but we avoided using Fire Magic while we were in the forest.

Overall, our exploration of the sixteenth floor had gone smoothly enough so far, but one minor problem had arisen.

"We're out of milk bottles," said Metea.

We had milked all the female strike oxen we'd found on the sixteenth floor. I had prepared a lot of bottles beforehand, and Yuki had helped me make more bottles during short breaks, but we'd still run out of bottles halfway through the sixteenth floor. We could easily make more if we had the time, but...

"Well, I think we've got enough milk for now," I said.

"Yeah, I agree," said Yuki. "We have enough milk for a year even if each of us drinks a liter a day."

Yuki was completely right. There was no way we would ever drink that much, so our current stock was probably more than enough even if we shared some with other people.

"Even if we want to sell some of the milk, we'll have to discuss things with Diola-san and calculate the potential profits first, so there's no real point in stocking up too much," I said.

"I'm down for a break from milking strike oxen!" Touya interjected. "To be honest, I'm getting bored. I have to concentrate each time to make sure I don't mess up, so it's kinda exhausting!"

"Mm, I suppose it's true that you technically do have the hardest job, Touya-kun," said Natsuki.

Touya's job was to stop a strike ox in its tracks in order to create an opening so Yuki and I could cast Earth Wall. He had tackled more than a hundred strike oxen over a couple of days, so I wasn't surprised in the slightest that he had gotten bored of it. Yuki and I had been making bottles and walls the entire time as well. Regardless, I felt like we had enough milk by now.

"Well, if our bottle makers and Touya want a break, I'm fine with that," said Haruka. "We can just come back at a later date if we run low."

Metea had been looking a bit sad, but after she heard that, she became energetic again. "Yeah! We can come back to milk more if we run low!"

Mary wasn't opposed to the idea either, so we ignored the rest of the strike oxen as we continued exploring the dungeon. Still, strike oxen were a precious resource, so we wanted to avoid wasting them if possible. Thus, we made use of the Stealth and Sneak skills, both to practice and to avoid combat as much as possible on our way to the seventeenth floor.

The environment on the seventeenth floor was much the same, although the nuts we found in the forests were kuttoes. They were exactly like the ones that we had already gotten a ton of from our own yard. All of us were extremely disappointed, so we checked to confirm that there were nothing but kuttoes before moving on to the next floor without harvesting any.

There were walnuts in the forests on the eighteenth floor, and we worked hard to gather as many as we could. We had already consumed all of the walnuts that we'd harvested last year, and Natsuki said she wanted to make some walnut bread, so it was a good opportunity to stock up. However, things like walnuts, chestnuts, and kuttoes weren't worth much money, both because they were so common and because of their long shelf lives. All three of them were easily obtainable from forests outside of the dungeon too, and their market prices were quite affordable due to the fact that you could easily preserve them for a long time. As a result, it wouldn't be worth it to tackle a dangerous place like a dungeon in order to gather those three nuts.

"I wonder if we're in the nut area of the dungeon," said Yuki.

"That might be the case," said Haruka. "We found fruit all the way from the eleventh to the fifteenth floor, so it would make sense if the next few floors

after that were nut floors.”

“I do like nuts,” said Mary. “But they’re not worth much money, are they?”

“Nuts aren’t very filling,” said Metea. “I’m kind of sad about this.”

It was true that nuts weren’t very filling compared to things like meat and vegetables. On top of that, even Metea had been able to afford kuttoes in the past, so perhaps as a result, she didn’t seem to be a fan of nuts in general.

“Yeah, nuts don’t feel like the kind of rare loot you’d expect to find in dungeons,” I said. “I’d be quite happy if we found cashews, though. I’ve always wanted to try out a cashew apple at least once.”

I had seen cashews for sale before, but I had never seen or eaten a cashew apple, so I was curious about what they tasted like.

Natsuki, however, frowned a bit at that. “I like cashews as well, but it’s somewhat difficult to eat the nut portion, Nao-kun.”

“Really? Hmm,” I said. “I know they have a weird shape, but...”

The edible parts of most nuts were the kernels, so a lot of work was required to make them fit for human consumption. For example, it was necessary to remove the husk of a walnut before eating it. However, there was a store in town that sold a specialized tool for that task, so it wasn’t *that* hard to do. The tool looked similar to a small washing machine, and all you had to do was to toss walnuts into it and crank the handle. It would remove the husk for you, and you would be left with the shelled walnuts familiar from stores. After that, you simply had to clean and dry them before they were ready for consumption.

We were actually strong enough now that we could easily crack walnuts bare-handed, just like martial artists in kung fu movies. However, there was a high likelihood that we would also end up crushing the contents of the shells with that method, in which case the girls wouldn’t be happy. Touya and I had happily cracked some walnuts before, but the girls had scolded us and given us some tools that looked like guitar picks to use instead. When we’d obeyed them and tried out the tools, we’d easily extracted the walnut kernels with very little force, so our time as kung fu masters had been brief.

In contrast, all I knew about cashew apples was that they looked similar to

upside-down red peppers with cashew nuts hanging from the undersides. If they were similar to walnuts, you probably had to remove the fruit and crack open the shell that housed the nut, but...

“Mm. They’re both seeds, and you’re supposed to eat the kernels,” said Natsuki. “There are two major issues, however. One is the fact that cashews belong to the sumac family, and the other is that it’s very difficult to extract the kernels.”

“Sumac? Ugh...” I had no idea whether my current body would be all right, but my body back on Earth had been quite susceptible to rashes, so the prospect was a bit concerning. *Surely I'll be okay, right? I have the Robust skill...*

“Cashews have hard shells. Even if you can open the shells and extract the kernels, there’s also a thin skin that you need to peel off,” said Natsuki. “I’ve never done it myself, but I was always impressed by the amount of labor that went into preparing the final product.”

Walnuts were sold with the skins still on them, but cashews were sold without the skins. I had seen some that had a few bits of skin remaining, but most of the ones for sale had been quite clean.

“Does removing the skin take a lot of manual labor?” I asked.

“I believe so, yes,” Natsuki replied. “You probably know, since you’ve seen cashews for sale before, but the kernels are all different shapes and sizes.”

If it wasn’t possible to fully automate the process, then it made sense that cashews were so expensive. There was a chance that cashews could become cheaper back on Earth if artificial intelligence one day became advanced enough to produce a robot that could handle the entire process, but none of that was relevant to us.

“I guess that means we can’t just eat a ton of cashews even if we find some,” I said.

“Mm. We’d probably have to spend a lot more time peeling the cashews than eating them,” said Natsuki.

“Ugh,” I said. “Oh, wait. Haruka, can you use alchemy to make something like a golem to deal with this problem?”

I was a little optimistic as I asked, but Haruka just laughed and shrugged. “Well, it is possible to make golems, but they’re only capable of simple tasks. It would definitely be a lot cheaper to just hire actual people for tasks that require precision.”

“Oh, right, labor is pretty cheap in this world,” I said.

Hmm. In a way, the world we’re in is kind of like a developing country back on Earth that relies on manual labor, whereas developed countries rely on machines. With that in mind, I guess sophisticated golems would be kind of like cutting-edge machinery.

“Incidentally, mangoes belong to the sumac family as well,” said Natsuki.

“Huh? Does that mean there are people who are allergic to mangoes?” I asked.

“Yes. They can get a rash from eating mangoes,” Natsuki replied. “Most people won’t show any symptoms as long as they don’t eat too many, however.”

“I guess some tropical fruit can be more dangerous than it looks,” I said.

Pineapples made my mouth tingle uncomfortably, but I’d never heard of mango allergies, maybe just because I’d only consumed them a few times in my life.

“Even if we find things that look delicious, we should probably avoid eating too many of them,” said Yuki.

“Mm. We often obtain a lot more than we can consume ourselves, anyway,” said Haruka.

We basically had exclusive use of all of the products that nature produced inside this dungeon, but there were downsides that we had to keep in mind. All of us nodded to each other in agreement before resuming our exploration of the dungeon.

In the forests of the nineteenth floor, we found nuts called bilels, which looked very similar to wisteria seeds. The nuts themselves were inside of pods that were about three centimeters wide and twenty-five centimeters long.

Natsuki mentioned that they looked like sword beans, but I had no idea what she was talking about; I had never seen sword beans before. The pods were as hard as walnut shells, but you could obtain about ten kernels the size of broad beans from each pod once you successfully cracked it open. The kernels were similar in shape to almonds, and they also tasted quite similar after we roasted and tried some out. They were covered in a thin skin, but it fell off when we roasted them, so they were actually easier to eat than almonds. They were easy to harvest too, so they were actually very good for our purposes.

Eventually, we reached the twentieth floor, which we had assumed would be the same as the previous floors. However...

“Hmm. My Scout skill detects something a bit different here,” I said.

The signal I had detected felt very similar to that of a strike ox but slightly more dangerous. Monsters varied somewhat in strength even within the same species, and no two signals that I detected were ever exactly alike, but the difference this time was way too significant to brush off as a minor variation.

“Well, it looks like a normal strike ox to me,” said Yuki.

“Hmm...”

The closest strike ox was within eyeshot, and Yuki could see it more clearly with the Hawk’s Eye skill. However, my Hawk’s Eye skill was higher level, so I could see the ox in more detail, and it was close enough for the Help Guide to work on it, so I decided to check it out for myself.

“Wait, what? A red strike ox?”

The others all tilted their heads in perplexity.

“Red? I can’t see it clearly, but it’s black, isn’t it?” Haruka asked.

Its fur was, in fact, completely black, so its name was confusing to me too, but...

“Hold on,” I said. “I think its horns are a bit red.”

Strike oxen normally had black horns, but this one’s horns appeared to be a very dark red. It would be hard to notice if you didn’t pay close attention, but no other part of it was red, so the horns were probably the reason for its name.

“I wonder if that means it’s three times faster than a normal strike ox,” said Touya. “It has red horns, after all.”

“I don’t know if it’s actually three times faster, but based on what I can tell from my Third Eye skill, we definitely have to be careful,” I said.

The red strike ox wasn’t strong enough to pose an actual threat to us, but I felt like we could get caught by surprise in the worst way if we treated it like a normal strike ox.

“Well, if it’s a different foe, then we gotta fight it to find out,” said Touya. “I’ll handle this! Go ahead without me!”

Touya stepped forward and prepared for combat. He was standing in the same kind of stance he had used when facing off against normal strike oxen, but...

“Do you really enjoy jinxing yourself, Touya?” Yuki asked, sounding exasperated. “Are you stupid? Do you have a death wish?”

Touya turned back to her with a smug expression and gave her a thumbs-up. “Of course not! I won’t die! One of you will save me before I get anywhere near death!”

“Wait, what? That’s not what a frontline fighter is supposed to say,” I said. “It’s your job to protect the rest of us, moron.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted to say something like that at least once.”

“I figured as much!” If Touya had been serious about relying on someone else to protect him, then I would have kicked him in the rear to snap him out of it.

“The monster noticed us while you were fooling around,” said Haruka. “Move forward a bit more and get ready, Touya.”

“Roger. Wait, what?! It’s really fast!”

No sooner had Touya walked a few steps farther at Haruka’s urging than the red strike ox charged him. It reached him in no time. I hadn’t expected it to be so fast. I knew Touya had been making a *Gundam* joke when he suggested it must be three times as fast as a normal one, but it genuinely looked like it was at least twice as fast.

Touya dodged the ox, and it charged past us. He hastily chased after it, but he wasn't able to keep up with it, so it was definitely much faster than a normal strike ox. However, Touya could catch up once it slowed down to change directions. When it turned, he grabbed its horns to hold it in place, but...

“Wh-Whoa!”

Touya was slowly pushed back a bit even though the red strike ox had no momentum behind it at all.

“Yikes, this thing really is strong! I’d need to wear spiked shoes or something to hold it in place!”

Touya sounded a bit anxious as he planted his feet and tried to hold the ox back. He was probably being pushed back due to a difference in traction rather than strength. It would have been a different story if Touya had been able to plant his feet on some kind of platform, but he was standing on flat, grassy plains. The red strike ox had four legs on the ground, and Touya only had two, so it was obvious which one had a more secure stance.

“Well, I should be able to keep it here like this, so—”

Touya’s words were cut off as fire enveloped his body.

“Argh!”

Touya yelled and jumped back from the red strike ox, then rolled across the ground.

Haruka reacted instantly. “*Extinguish Fire!*”

The fire was immediately extinguished, but the red strike ox had started to move again the minute Touya was forced to release it. However, the rest of us hadn’t just been idly watching Touya’s battle; we were ready as well.

“*Earth Wall!*”

I created a wall in front of the red strike ox, and I heard a dull sound as it crashed into the wall headlong and stopped moving. Immediately afterward, the red strike ox’s legs were lifted into the air by another wall that Yuki had created. The red strike ox had been forced into a headstand, and it struggled for a bit before finally slipping between the walls and collapsing on its side.

“Oh, it’s female,” I said. “You know what to do, Yuki.”

“Yep,” said Yuki.

“*Earth Wall!*” we exclaimed together.

After Yuki and I had cast Earth Wall, the girls swiftly bound the red strike ox with rope. That much was more or less the same as usual. There were a few differences, however. It took strength to restrain the red strike ox, and the rope creaked disconcertingly. In addition, the red strike ox was spewing fire as it swung its head around—apparently that was something it could do, but my Third Eye skill hadn’t revealed anything of the kind, so I had been a little bit careless. *Mm, yeah, I really shouldn’t trust Third Eye too much.*

“Ugh, my precious tail got singed.” Touya had tears in his eyes as he caressed his tail, but it looked like only the end of his tail was crispy, and only a little bit. His wolf ears and hair looked a bit frizzled too, but he probably couldn’t see them himself.

“Poor big bro Touya. Tail condition is very important. I’ll comb your tail for you.” Metea’s own tail drooped down as she looked up at Touya, so she must’ve genuinely felt sorry for him. She took a brush and started combing Touya’s tail. That was probably her way of trying to cheer him up.

“Oh, thanks, Metea,” said Touya. “I really appreciate it.”

“You should thank Haruka too, Touya,” I said. “It was thanks to her that your tail escaped mostly unscathed.”

“Right. Thanks, Haruka.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad I made it in time,” said Haruka. “The last thing I want to see is a bald guy with animal ears and a tail.”

“I wouldn’t mind shaving my head if I had to, but I don’t want to lose my ears or tail,” said Touya. “You really saved me.”

I completely agreed with Haruka. I had seen some breeds of dogs that were hairless, and they just didn’t have the same appeal as fluffy dogs.

“By the way, Haruka, how were you able to react so fast?” I asked. “I was really surprised by your reaction speed.”

Yuki and I had used the Earth Wall spell as usual, but the Extinguish Fire spell that Haruka had cast wasn't something we had planned out before. Haruka had a sharp mind and was a quick thinker, but I felt like her spell choice had been almost too perfect.

"Well, I just happened to recall earlier that there was a line of text in the monster encyclopedia about how some variations of strike oxen have breath attacks, so I prepared myself just in case."

"Huh?!" said Touya. "If you knew that, why didn't you tell me beforehand, Haru—?"

But he was forced to shut his mouth when Haruka smiled and scolded him, "You should always use your Appraisal skill beforehand. Right, Touya?"

"Uh, yeah, of course," said Touya.

Given that the information Haruka had brought up was from the monster encyclopedia, Touya would have been able to recall it for himself if he had simply used the Appraisal skill once the red strike ox was within range. If he'd had that much forethought, he could definitely have dodged any breath attack from the red strike ox with ease, so he had no one but himself to blame.

"Well, if red strike oxen are capable of breathing fire, then we can't just have Touya stand in front of them to hold them in place like we've done so far," I said.

"Yeah, I don't want to face off against a red strike ox from the front again," said Touya. "I actually take good care of my tail, so I'd like to keep it in good condition."

Yeah, I know, Touya. I've seen you brush and touch your own tail, so I know you like how fluffy it is. Touya would sometimes look at the sisters' ears and tails as well, and he had actually bought some moderately expensive brushes as gifts for them. However, he hadn't ever tried asking them if he could touch or brush their ears and tails, so I was glad that he had some restraint. Hair was a delicate topic for girls in general, and any guy who wanted to touch or brush a girl's hair would be treated as a pervert unless he was family or in a relationship with the girl.

However, it seemed like Touya had successfully convinced Metea to brush his tail for him. He was probably happy about it, but I wasn't sure if it was enough to satisfy his desire to touch fluffy things. On a sidenote, the girls touched and brushed the sisters' hair all the time, so I was kind of jealous of them.

"Well, we can get milk from normal strike oxen, so should we just quickly slay any red strike oxen we run into?" Yuki asked. "Sure, they're faster and more powerful, but they act the same way as normal strike oxen, so it should be easy to deal with them using magic."

"Yeah, all they do is charge at us in a straight line," I said.

Recently, we had been using the Stone Missile spell to slay male strike oxen. They couldn't dodge if we simply stood directly in front of them and fired the spell. In fact, the strike oxen would crash into the Stone Missiles with the full force of their speed and momentum, so it was a very efficient way for us to slay them. It was possible that the skulls of red strike oxen were harder than those of normal strike oxen, but that strategy would probably still work.

"Oh, wait a second." Touya pointed at the air, so he must've finally used his Appraisal skill, but the rest of us couldn't see the display window that was visible to him. "It says here that the milk from red strike oxen is worth more than milk from normal ones."

If that was true, then...

Mary looked very excited. "Does that mean it tastes better?"

Metea also had an excited look on her face as she glanced at us.

"Well, I guess we can try milking it," I said. "It won't take long to make a couple of bottles."

I caved to the silent pressure from the sisters and worked with Yuki to make some bottles. Together, we started to milk the red strike ox, but...

"Hmm? The milk looks a bit red," said Yuki. "I'm not just imagining it, right?"

The milk that was filling the bottles definitely looked a bit red, but it was more like pink. It reminded me of strawberry milk. *Hmm. Nah, there's no way monsters would produce strawberry milk, right? It might be blood, then. I don't*

really want to try something like that, so—wait, the girls have already started tasting it?

“It tastes good, but it also tastes more or less the same as the milk from normal strike oxen as far as I’m concerned,” said Yuki.

“I think the milk from normal strike oxen tastes much better,” said Natsuki. “But you said it’s more valuable, Touya-kun?”

“Yeah, that’s what my Appraisal skill told me,” said Touya. “I don’t know how much more valuable, though.”

I took a sip of the red strike ox milk as well. It was a bit odd and smelly compared to normal strike ox milk. Metea and Mary furrowed their brows after they each had a taste, so they probably had similar impressions.

“It smells kinda funny,” said Metea.

“I agree,” said Mary. “I would prefer to drink normal strike ox milk instead.”

“In terms of taste, I don’t see any reason to purchase red strike ox milk over normal strike ox milk,” said Haruka. “Is the red strike ox milk worth more because it’s rarer? I know that some nobles and rich people are willing to spend a lot of money on rarities, so that might be it.”

“A red strike ox requires a lot more work to restrain, so I don’t think there’s any need to milk—”

I cut myself off when I heard some cracking sounds. I whipped around and saw that the walls looked like they were about to break. All of us reacted swiftly to the situation at hand. Yuki took the automatic milking machine and the bottles of milk with her as she fell back, and the rest of us held up our weapons at the same time that the front wall broke. The red strike ox’s front hooves were about to make contact with the ground, but Touya smashed his sword against its head before that could happen. A dull sound echoed through the air as the red strike ox’s body lost its strength. It collapsed backward toward the wall behind it as its body crashed to the ground. Our party breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Sorry, I messed up,” I said. “The red strike ox was a lot stronger than I anticipated.”

The wall that had cracked was the one I had created. Strike oxen were able to kick the front wall with a lot more force than they could bring to bear on the wall behind it, so I had made sure it was decently sturdy, but apparently the red strike ox was much stronger than I had assumed. I had used more mana to create the wall than I did in creating the walls for normal strike oxen, but the red strike ox had been able to break free while we were still milking it, so the amount of mana I had used was obviously far from adequate.

“It’s the first time we’ve dealt with a red strike ox, so don’t worry about it,” said Haruka. “We’ve talked beforehand about what to do in case of emergencies.”

We had been casually chatting with each other while we milked the red strike ox, but it was a monster, so we had discussed what each of us would do if it broke free. As a result, we had been able to react and deal with the red strike ox without any issues.

“Well, it would be a waste to use more mana than needed, but at least you learned that you need to use a bit more than you did,” said Yuki.

Yuki put away the bottles of milk and the automatic milking machine before canceling her Earth Wall. The ideal would be to use the minimum amount of mana necessary to create an Earth Wall that would last until we had finished milking, painting, and running away from a strike ox, but I had underestimated the red strike ox and thus failed to judge that amount accurately. I probably should have assumed it had very powerful kicks when I saw the way it had pushed Touya back.

“I messed up too, so you’re not alone, Nao. My tail got burnt,” said Touya. He retrieved the magicite from the red strike ox and used his Appraisal skill on it. “Oh, this is worth five thousand Rea, huh?”

He tossed both the magicite and the dead red strike ox into one of our magic bags.

“The magicites of normal strike oxen are only worth thirty-two hundred Rea, right? That’s a significant difference,” said Haruka.

“If the difference is that big, then I guess it’s only natural that the red strike ox was able to break my wall,” I said. “I need to be more careful next time.”

“You can handle it, right?” Touya asked.

“Yeah, no worries,” I replied. “I just have to use more mana.”

I could easily make my Earth Walls sturdier by simply using more mana. However, I wasn’t sure whether or not it would be worth it for us to restrain red strike oxen.

“One bottle of milk from a normal strike ox is worth between three to four gold coins, so we could get up to eight gold coins per bottle of red strike ox milk if it’s worth at least twice as much,” said Haruka.

The bottles that Yuki and I had made could contain up to two liters of liquid. A cup of normal strike ox milk was apparently worth anywhere between two and four large silver coins, so Haruka’s calculations checked out for me.

“The difference in profit could potentially be sixteen gold coins if we fill four bottles with red strike ox milk,” I said. “That’s a decent sum of money, but I’m not sure it warrants putting Touya’s tail on the line.”

“It wouldn’t be worth it at all! My tail is worth way more than that!”

“Well, if we can restrain a red strike ox before it breathes fire, then—”

“No!” Touya hollered. “The one we just ran into breathed fire on me immediately, remember?!”

Hmm. Yeah, you’re right, Touya. You would have to stop it in its tracks before the rest of us lifted it into the air with magic and restrained it with rope, and then you’d need some time to get out of the way yourself, so I guess there’s no way we would have enough time for all of that before a red strike ox got a chance to breathe fire.

“...Nao, I think you’ve forgotten something,” said Haruka, sounding a bit exasperated. “You can use the Fire Resistance spell, right?”

I clapped my hands together. “Oh, right, there is a spell like that. There hasn’t been any need for it so far, so I completely forgot about it.”

“So will fire breath not affect me if you use that spell on me beforehand, Nao?” Touya asked.

“Probably.”

Fire Resistance protected you from fire damage. The protection it provided scaled with the amount of mana that you used in casting the spell, but Touya had survived the red ox's fire breath just fine, so it probably wouldn't require too much mana to render him impervious to fire. On the other hand, if a fire breath attack was extremely powerful, then it seemed plausible that the Fire Resistance spell would lose its effect right away, no matter how much mana you used.

"Good news for you, Touya," Yuki teased him. "Now your tail can stay safe even if you get hit by the fire breath from a red strike ox." She sounded amused.

Touya pouted a bit but nodded to indicate that he was willing to try again as long as his tail was safe. "Hmm. Well, in that case, I don't mind if we face off against another red strike ox in the future. But if my tail still ends up getting burnt, then I'll never do it again!"

"All right, that's good to know. In any case, we have to discuss things with Diola-san before making a decision about this," I said. "If the red strike ox milk isn't worth a lot more than normal strike ox milk, then it wouldn't really be worth your efforts, right, Touya?"

"Of course not! I'm putting my tail on the line, so it better be worth it!"

I'm kind of surprised by how much you care about your tail, Touya.

In the end, we decided to postpone milking more red strike oxen and prioritize exploring the twentieth floor instead.



We tried to avoid red strike oxen while we explored the forests on the twentieth floor of the dungeon, but that turned out to be difficult due to the fact that red strike oxen were capable of detecting us from much farther away than normal strike oxen. Everyone in my party, including Mary and Metea, had learned the Stealth and Sneak skills by now thanks to all of the training we'd done, but red strike oxen were still able to detect us. There was no place we could hide in the grassy plains, and that plus the fact that we were moving as a group of seven probably explained how they detected us so often.

We were forced to slay a lot along the way. They would respawn eventually, so it wasn't an issue, but I was a bit peeved that we were getting caught so often by monsters we could easily defeat. The Stealth and Sneak skills would probably be useful in the future, so I planned to continue leveling them up whenever possible.

The nuts that we found in the forests were called griphors. They were very similar to camellia fruit but had less flesh. The griphor seeds were a bit large, but the fruit split open just like camellia fruit and the seeds fell out, so griphor nuts were quite easy to eat. If you roasted one in the shell and bit it delicately, the shell would split in half to reveal the edible kernel within. In terms of their taste, cashews sprang to mind as a comparison. They were sweet and a bit crunchy, but they were less soft and oily than cashews. Griphor nuts were second to bilel nuts in terms of how easy it was to eat them, but they tasted a lot better. In addition, griphor nuts were easy to harvest, and they were a lot easier to prepare for consumption than walnuts, so it was necessary to exert some self-control to avoid eating too many of them. Nuts were very healthy if you exercised enough, but they still had high caloric content, so we had to be careful.

Griphor nuts apparently weren't worth any more than most nuts, but everyone liked their taste, so we worked hard to gather a lot of them. They might not be worth our time in terms of pure monetary value, but that didn't matter to us. Cheap or not, we couldn't buy any if they weren't sold in the marketplace in Laffan, so we had no choice but to gather nuts ourselves if we wanted to eat some. After we had finished gathering griphor nuts, we resumed our exploration of the twentieth floor, and in time, we arrived in front of the door that led to the boss room.

Side Story—A New Year's Eve Tradition

“I wanna eat some soba noodles.”

Touya muttered that desire one day when we were eating a late lunch. *Oh, yeah, we haven't done anything with the buckwheat we purchased a while back. But why did you have to bring it up now, Touya? We're eating lunch with the people who made lunch for us, you know? Look, now Haruka's glaring at you.*

“Where did that come from all of a sudden?” Haruka asked. “Are you not satisfied with my cooking?”

She sounded like she was trying to imply that she might not let Touya eat anything depending on his answer, but he hastily shook his head.

“N-No, that's not it! The food you cooked is delicious! What I mean is that it's almost New Year's Eve, so I kind of wanna have some soba noodles for the occasion. What do you think of that idea, Haruka? We have soy sauce, so...”

The soy sauce Touya had mentioned was actually just a version of inspiel sauce with a similar flavor, but we had started referring to it as soy sauce among ourselves. We probably wouldn't refer to it as imitation soy sauce until we found or made some real soy sauce ourselves, and the same applied to the other inspiel sauce variation we'd made that had a similar taste to miso.

“Speaking of traditions, we need to do some year-end cleaning before New Year's Eve as well, although cleaning doesn't take long to do in this world,” said Haruka.

“Mm. Magic can take care of that problem for us,” said Natsuki. “I probably would have given up on the life of an adventurer by now if magic didn't exist.”

“Yeah, keeping things clean would normally eat up a lot of time,” I said.

My heart would have probably been overcome with despair if I'd had to clean the house every time we returned from an adventure. Instead, Haruka and Natsuki constantly used the Purification spell to clean the house with ease, so there was really no need for any involved year-end cleaning.

“Soba noodles, huh? Hmm,” said Haruka. “We don’t have any bonito or kombu soup stock, but I don’t think that should be an issue.” She nodded to herself as she pondered that idea.

Mary had a slightly confused look on her face as she chimed in with a question. “Um, what are soba noodles?”

“Oh, right, I guess you wouldn’t know, Mary,” I said. “You see, soba noodles are made from buckwheat, and we bought some back in Kelg, but we were told it isn’t very popular. You haven’t heard of this either, have you, Metea?”

Metea nodded when I looked at her. The person who’d sold us buckwheat had told us that most merchants didn’t stock it, so it made sense that the sisters weren’t aware of it.

“I’ve never heard of soba noodles before,” said Metea. “Are they delicious?”

“Mm, I like soba noodles,” said Yuki. “Well, to get specific, it’s more like I enjoy the taste of mentsuyu sauce.”

“The quality of the noodles is important, but the sauce is just as important,” said Haruka.

“Oh, if we can make mentsuyu sauce, I’d love to eat some somen noodles too when summer rolls around.”

When Touya uttered those carefree words, Haruka stared at him with a slightly exasperated expression. “Somen noodles? Are you serious, Touya? In a way, they’re actually one of the hardest noodles to make for people who don’t have experience making them from scratch.”

“Oh, really? Hmm,” said Touya. “They do seem difficult to make given how thin they are, but...”

“They’re definitely the most difficult among the popular types of noodles. You could probably make some cheap, low-quality somen by extruding them under pressure, but hand-pulled somen is a completely different story,” said Natsuki. “It requires true culinary craftsmanship, so it would probably be very difficult to make it ourselves.”

I had assumed that hand-pulled somen would be difficult to make, and it

sounded like my assumption was correct. Cheap somen would probably be easy to make with brute force if we asked Tomi for help, but when I thought of somen noodles, I imagined something smooth and chewy. I had never enjoyed the odd texture of cheap somen noodles; I only wanted to eat hand-pulled somen. However, the task of making hand-pulled somen had looked very difficult in the videos I'd seen online back on Earth. The people in the videos had made it look easy when they stretched the noodles out with two rolling pins in their hands, but it only looked easy because they were masters of the art, and the same applied to a lot of things that looked easy at first glance in videos.

"Well, that's a shame," I said. "I actually enjoy somen noodles a lot, but I guess it's not practical in this world."

I sighed to myself, but when Natsuki heard my disappointment, she turned toward me and said, "I'll do my best to make some. It might take a while, however."

"Huh? Are you sure? Didn't you say they would be difficult to make?" I asked.

"Yes, but don't worry about it," Natsuki replied. "It'll probably take me until next year or the year after, however. Are you fine with waiting that long, Nao-kun?"

"Of course," I said. "The fact that you're even willing to try makes me really happy. Thanks, Natsuki."

"It's no trouble. I'll do my best, so look forward to it!" Natsuki smiled, looking very motivated.

The existence of the Cooking skill would probably make things a bit easier, so there were decent odds that Natsuki would eventually succeed at making somen noodles.

"Haruka and I will help out too!" Yuki interjected. "Right, Haruka?"

"Mm. I toured a somen noodle factory once, so I do know how they're made."

But after Yuki and Haruka voiced their intention to cooperate with Natsuki, Touya pouted at their reactions. "Huh? Is it just me, or did you girls react way differently to Nao's request compared to mine?"

“Natsuki didn’t say that they would be impossible to make,” Haruka replied. “She only said that it would be difficult. Right, Yuki?”

“Yep. Also, I just figured it wouldn’t be possible to make them in a short amount of time, that’s all.”

Haruka and Yuki looked at each other and nodded in unison. Touya regarded them doubtfully. “Would you girls have been willing to try making somen noodles even if Nao had said he didn’t care?”

“Of course,” Haruka replied. “Right, Natsuki?”

“Mm. Of course.”

“Of course, Touya,” said Yuki.

“Of course...?”

After the girls had all replied the same way, Metea echoed their words, sounding a bit confused. However, Yuki swiftly changed the subject before Touya could pursue the matter any further.

“Well, let’s start with the buckwheat,” said Yuki. “We’ll have to turn it into flour, but...”

“We’d need a millstone for that, right? I can help out with that part,” I said.

It was possible to create all sorts of objects and tools with Earth Magic. A millstone would probably be easy to make, so I didn’t hesitate to offer my help, but Yuki just paused in thought. “Hmm. Actually, I think rolling pins would be better for buckwheat. There are the buckwheat hulls to deal with too. What do you think, Haruka?”

“Well, if we’re going to make a lot of soba noodles, that would be less work,” said Haruka. “However...”

“I think the noodles will taste better if we use millstones to mill the buckwheat,” said Natsuki. “It’ll be more work, but if we’re just going to make some for ourselves, then I think using a stone mortar is perfectly fine.”

“I’ll help out too!” Metea exclaimed. “I wanna eat delicious food!”

“If I just have to rotate something, then I think I should be able to help out as

well,” said Mary.

“When it comes to jobs that require a little muscle, I’m ready anytime,” said Touya.

I had no idea if the beastmen and beastwomen of my party had volunteered to help because they’d heard the words “taste better” from Natsuki or if they were simply happy that there was something for them to do, but Natsuki smiled at me. “You heard them, Nao-kun. Can you please make a millstone for us?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll experiment together with Yuki and come up with something.”

A place with bare soil was best for using Earth Magic, so we headed over to a corner of the yard. There, I sat down on the ground, as did Yuki.

She held an index finger in the air. “The most important thing for a millstone is the material you use for the stones and the grooves.”

“Yeah, I understand the importance of the material,” I said. “You can’t mill something if the stone is softer than what you’re milling.”

If the stone was softer than what you wanted to mill, then pieces of the stone would be chipped off and end up in your food. Thus, granite, as a relatively hard stone, was commonly used for millstones. There were harder rocks, like chert, but granite was probably used because it was easier to work with.

Our magic had eliminated the need to think about the materials, however. We had previously used silica to make a bathtub for our house. Silica was a very hard mineral, so I felt like it would work just fine for a millstone, but Haruka had a different idea: she suggested using silicon carbide. I had no idea what she was talking about, though, and Touya seemed confused as well, so it wasn’t just me.

According to Haruka, silicon carbide was the third-hardest material in the world back on Earth, with boron carbide and diamond being the second and first, although she had no idea if silicon carbide was the third-hardest material in this world. Apparently small mills back on Earth, like coffee grinders, had used alumina instead of quartz. Quartz was composed of silica, so if something harder than silica was used for mills, then Haruka’s idea of using silicon carbide would probably work out just fine.

“I’m not quite sure what to do about the grooves,” I said. “I only have a rough idea of what they look like.”

“Same,” said Yuki. “They apparently affect the mill’s efficiency and the fineness of the flour, but I guess we’ll just have to figure it out by trial and error.”

“Well, we don’t have to make them by hand. With magic, we can simply make whatever adjustments we need to as many times as we want,” I said.

The shape, position, and depth of the grooves were all adjustable as long as we had enough mana, and we could even remake the entire thing if necessary.

“There are also other factors, like the weight of a millstone, the rotation speed, and the rate at which you can fill it, but let’s leave all of that for later,” said Yuki. “For buckwheat, all we need is something to dehull it and something to mill it.”

“Got it,” I said. “I’m surprised that you know all of this, Yuki.”

“Well, I’m just repeating what Natsuki taught me,” said Yuki. “She had a millstone at her house, actually.”

Oh, yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Wait, surely they didn’t use it on a daily basis, right? I hope not...

“First, let’s try making the silicon carbide itself,” I said. “*Create Earth.*”

Silicon was abundant in soil, but there wasn’t as much carbon, so I prepared some charcoal to make up for it. I cast the Create Earth spell, and a square block appeared in front of me. Yuki picked it up and used a knife to scratch its surface.

After a moment, she tilted her head and said, “Looks like you successfully made a hard black object. I don’t know if this is silicon carbide, but it seems to be harder than chert. And anyway, the composition doesn’t matter as long as it works. How much mana did this take?”

“A lot,” I said. “In fact, it was way more than the amount of mana I used to make our bathtub.”

I had gotten better at magic since creating the bathtub, and the fact that I’d prepared the raw materials ahead of time had helped as well, but I would

probably have felt an urge to vomit if I'd tried to create silicon carbide without any preparations.

"Gotcha," said Yuki. "Okay, next up is to shape this into a millstone, and..."

"The grooves probably need to be a bit deeper," I said. "Adjust the slant, and..."

"It'll become heavier, but I think a bigger size would be more efficient, so..."

Yuki and I discussed things over the next few days as we made and tested a few dozen different models. Both of us collapsed a few times after running out of mana, but our hard work eventually paid off in the form of a decent millstone.



We finished our preparations for making soba noodles in about a week. Touya, Mary, and Metea all worked hard to rotate the millstone after Yuki and I had completed it. The tools that Yuki had used to make udon noodles, such as rolling pins, knives to cut the noodles, and the cutting board, could all be used for soba noodles as well. We used Earth Magic to make substitutes for the wooden mixing bowls traditionally used for kneading buckwheat flour. Laffan had a flourishing woodworking industry, so we could probably have ordered high-quality bowls, but the ones used back on Earth were lacquered wooden bowls, and unfortunately, we hadn't seen any lacquerware here. Other types of coating were either not completely safe or had weird odors, so we had decided that it would be better to simply make bowls out of silica ourselves; they were clean and water-resistant. The bathtub in our house was proof of how good silica was, and it was pretty easy to make the bowls. The only downsides were their weight and the fact that they would break easily if we dropped them, but all of that also applied to glass bowls. In addition, we could easily remake the bowls with Earth Magic even if we broke them, so it was perfectly fine.

"All right, let's make some soba!" said Touya.

Our designated noodle makers were Touya and Yuki. Touya had apparently made soba noodles before with his dad, and Yuki had made udon noodles before, so that was why we'd picked the two of them. Although Yuki, unlike Touya, had no actual experience making soba noodles, she did have the

Cooking skill. I had a feeling that it was obvious who would make the better noodles, but I was still looking forward to seeing the results for myself.

“Let’s use a ratio of seventy percent buckwheat flour and thirty percent wheat flour today.” Touya used a cup to roughly measure the buckwheat flour and wheat flour before pouring some into the wooden mixing bowl in front of him.

That confused me; we had plenty of buckwheat flour to work with. “You’re not going to use a hundred-percent buckwheat flour, Touya?”

Touya shook his head. “Soba noodles made with a hundred-percent buckwheat flour just end up coarse and not that good if they’re being made by amateurs. It might work if you know how to use a binding agent, but we can’t get anything like that, so it’s better for amateurs like us to use a bit more wheat flour.”

As she copied Touya’s movements, Yuki asked, “Oh, is that why you’re going with thirty percent wheat flour instead of twenty percent, Touya?” Unlike Touya, she had used a tablespoon to precisely measure the amount of flour.

“Yeah. The quality of the wheat flour isn’t consistent.”

The wheat flour we could purchase in Laffan wasn’t categorized into distinct varieties such as cake flour, all-purpose flour, and bread flour. On top of that, the quality and taste of the flour varied a lot as well, and there was even some that contained large amounts of wheat bran. Recently we had managed to obtain some flour of relatively consistent quality by purchasing it from a specific store that sold top-shelf products, but in the past, we had been duped into buying flour cut with sand. *Ugh, I never want to taste sand in flour ever again.* The Purification spell hadn’t been able to remove the impurities in the flour, and I had a feeling it was due to the fact that flour like that was normal in this world. The spell had no trouble with removing sand in our clothes, so it was a bit confusing, but we’d been able to remove the sand from our flour with the Ground Control spell. We’d simply had to think outside the box.

“Next up is to evenly mix the flour with water,” said Touya.

“Okay,” said Yuki. “Mix, mix~!”

Touya and Yuki mixed the water in for a bit, and presently, the flour started congealing into small lumps.

“Be quick about it,” said Touya. “You can’t pull them into nicely shaped noodles once they’re dry, so you have to work efficiently.”

Touya gathered the lumps together in one place and kneaded them into dough.

“Tuck the outside surface of the dough inward and rotate until the folded parts look like chrysanthemum petals. Make sure there aren’t any holes. After all of that, you have to press down to flatten it and shape it into something that looks like hard flour.”

“Wow...” Metea seemed very interested as she watched Touya and Yuki at work.

Yuki, meanwhile, was glancing at Touya as she worked, but it looked like she was better at it than he was despite the fact that one of her eyes wasn’t on her own dough.

“Yuki, you have to— Oh well, I guess you know what to do,” said Touya. “All right. Next up is to roll the dough. You need to spread the disk into a square with sharp edges, so aim for a diamond shape.”

Touya and Yuki used the rolling pins to roll the dough out on the table. Yuki had gotten much better than Touya at this point; in fact, she was a lot faster and rolled the dough a lot thinner as well.

“You sure are good at this, Yuki,” said Touya.

“Well, this is thinner and less elastic than udon dough, so it’s actually a bit hard to work with.” But despite Yuki’s words, her edges looked beautiful and perfect, so I was pretty impressed by her abilities.

Touya chuckled and stopped trying to provide instruction after he noticed that Yuki was ahead of him. “All that’s left is to fold and cut the dough. Do whatever you think is best.”

“Sure. It’s a bit of hassle, though, since this is thinner and flatter than udon,” Yuki replied casually as she sliced up the dough.

The sliced up parts looked exactly as thin and flat as the soba that had been sold commercially back on Earth.

"You're doing amazing work, Yuki," said Haruka. "I'm actually captivated watching you."

"Well, I'm used to handling noodles since I made udon before, and the Cooking skill has helped out a lot too," said Yuki. "You're also good at cutting noodles, aren't you, Haruka?"

"Yes, but I can't cut them as fast as you can," said Haruka. "Soba noodles are about half as thick as udon noodles, right?"

"Mm, but all you have to do is shift the knife a little to the side every time you cut, so I'm sure you'll be able to do it this fast once you get used to it."

That's easier said than done, Yuki. I had attempted making udon noodles before myself, but it wasn't easy at all. Yuki was good at it because she had previous experience. Bread was still our main staple food, but we consumed udon noodles on a fairly regular basis, and all of those were made by hand. Natsuki and Haruka would make the noodles, and Touya and I would contribute by kneading the dough. Most of the time, however, Yuki had been in charge of rolling and cutting the udon noodles, so she was the most experienced among us. Soba and udon noodles weren't the same, but her experience was unquestionably an asset.

"Hey, Haruka, can you cut my dough for me?" Touya asked. "I've done the work all the way up to the folding, so..."

"You're not going to do it yourself?" Haruka asked.

"I mean, you're better at cutting noodles than I am, so I think I should leave it to you," Touya replied. "Soba noodles are ruined if you don't cut them well. Besides, it's not like I'm good at making soba noodles..."

"You looked pretty decent at it for an amateur," said Haruka. "But very well."

Haruka swapped places with Touya and started to swiftly cut the dough. She wasn't as good at it as Yuki was, but she was much better than Touya, who had only ever kneaded the dough for udon noodles.

“Once you’re done cutting the noodles, all that’s left is to boil them, and then they’ll be ready,” said Touya.

“Mm, the boiling water is ready,” said Natsuki.

Once Haruka and Yuki had finished cutting the noodles, they deposited them into the boiling water. After the soba noodles were boiled, they used a sieve to retrieve them and clean them in ice water, then drained them. The New Year’s Eve soba noodles that I’d eaten at home in the past had been served with hot broth, but today’s soba noodles were served cold so we could appreciate their flavor.

“Look, big sis!” Metea exclaimed. “There’s a lot of ice!”

“Mm. Magic is super amazing,” said Mary.

Apparently it was our magically produced ice that had surprised the sisters the most. Ice was a scarce resource in this world, and there hadn’t been many opportunities for us to make it since the sisters had joined us. When we first arrived here, we had used ice to chill the game we had slain, but there was no need for us to lug it around anymore now that we’d acquired magic bags and learned the Freeze spell.

And with the existence of magic, there was no need for us to make something like the icehouses that people in ancient Japan had used to store ice. There were some ice shops in town that were run by mages, but the services were a bit on the expensive end for ordinary citizens. However, a lot of people visited those shops during the summer, so they must’ve made a killing. In fact, it was apparently possible to earn a comfortable living by selling ice even if you only opened shop during summer. All you had to do was make ice with magic, so there was almost no need for a lot of shop space. It would be possible to stay in business even as you grew older, so Haruka, Yuki, and I had a way to make decent money even if we retired from the adventuring life, although that was just a backup plan; our main plan was still to build up enough savings for a pleasant retirement.

“All right, let’s try out these soba noodles,” said Natsuki. “It’s a shame that we don’t have many condiments, but oh well.”

“Thank you for the food,” we all said in unison.

The condiment we had prepared was a plant similar to wasabi that Touya had found a while back. Natsuki mixed it into the dipping sauce she'd made for us. *Hmm. I guess I'll try Yuki's first.* I picked up some soba noodles with my chopsticks and dipped them lightly into the sauce before slurping them up.

"Oh, yeah, the aroma of soba noodles is something else," I said. "They taste really good too."

I had eaten soba noodles before at a place that was famous for them, but the noodles in front of me tasted just as good, and their aroma was actually better due to the fact that they'd been made with freshly milled buckwheat. *Man, I'm really impressed that you were able to make such good soba on your first try, Yuki.*

"Mm. The mentsuyu sauce is a bit lackluster, but the soba noodles are exceptional," said Natsuki.

"I think the quality is perfectly fine considering we're missing some key ingredients," said Haruka. "With that in mind, this isn't a bad imitation at all."

"Yeah," said Yuki. "Did you use mushrooms, Natsuki?"

"Mm, and some roasted dried fish as well. I really want some seaweed, however."

Natsuki might not have been satisfied with how the mentsuyu sauce had turned out, but I thought it was quite decent, and the sisters nodded to themselves after dipping their soba noodles and slurping them up, so it seemed like the sauce suited their tastes as well. They were using forks instead of chopsticks, however.

"Mary, Metea, what do you think of this?" Haruka asked.

"They're a lot more delicious than I thought they would be from how they looked," said Metea.

"What did you just say, Met?!"

Mary scolded Metea for those frank words, but Haruka simply laughed; apparently she wasn't bothered at all. Metea was right that eating soba noodles didn't exactly make for an aesthetically pleasing sight, however. The noodles

themselves were thin, long, and brown, and you dipped them in a black liquid, so...

"Feel free to speak your mind," said Haruka. "What about you, Mary?"

"They taste very light, so I think they'd be great to eat during hot weather," said Mary. "The noodles by themselves aren't very satisfying, though."

"Mm, good point," said Natsuki. "I'll go get something for us to eat with the soba."

Natsuki stood up, went to the pantry, and returned with some tempura. There was some shrimp tempura, some vegetable tempura, and what appeared to be deep-fried killergator meat.

"Yay!" said Metea. "Time to dig in!"

"Mm! Let's dig in!" said Mary.

Metea and Mary were both beaming as they stuck their forks into the deep-fried meat and brought it to their mouths. *I guess soba noodles are a bit too plain by themselves for young people, huh? Well, I'm technically a young person too, so it's probably just a matter of individual taste.*

I picked up some shrimp and vegetable tempura and dipped them in my mentsuyu sauce before tossing them into my mouth. *Yep, delicious as usual.* Our pantry was magic bags in the shape of cupboards, so the tempura that had been stored inside was still hot and crispy. The girls had used shelled shrimp for the shrimp tempura, and the batter itself was great, but I felt kind of sad that they lacked tails. However, the shelled shrimp tempura tasted richer and more delicious than regular shrimp tempura, and there were some pieces of river shrimp in the vegetable tempura, so the lack of shrimp tail tempura was a very minor personal issue.

After I'd eaten some tempura, I tried out Touya's soba. *Yeah, these taste good too, but the noodles are a bit too thick. Haruka sliced them, so I guess it's probably because Touya didn't roll the dough enough.*

"...Sorry. I guess I was bad at this," said Touya as I was comparing his noodles and Yuki's.

When I heard a self-deprecating tone in Touya's voice, I shook my head. "Nah, you actually did fine. I once got handmade soba noodles from someone I knew, but the noodles were even thicker and broke apart when I boiled them, so you're already better than that."

I had no intention of speaking ill about a gift, and the noodles had actually still been edible, but it was a fact that you couldn't expect much from soba noodles made by an amateur. Touya's noodles were pretty good—good enough that he could be at least somewhat proud of what he'd accomplished.

"Your dad really liked to make soba noodles, right, Touya?" I asked.

"Yeah. He went out of his way to buy all of the tools for it," Touya replied. "He would share soba noodles he made with our neighbors all the time too, and he was always after me to make some with him."

According to Touya, his dad had bought a tool that let you cut the noodles to a consistent width just by lifting and lowering a lever. That was one of the reasons Touya hadn't sliced the noodles himself earlier. The girls were so good at cutting noodles that we probably didn't need a specialized tool for the task, but it would be useful if we ever had to mass-produce some soba noodles.

"Well, anyway, there's no need for me to make soba noodles again," said Touya. "I've already explained the process, so it'll be better if we just leave it to the girls."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I said.

Today had been Yuki's first time making soba noodles, and hers were much better than Touya's, so his conclusion made perfect sense to me. A few months later, we ate some New Year's Eve soba noodles that Yuki made for us, and they were excellent.

Chapter 3—A Quest from Diola

“Whew. We made it safely home from the dungeon once again,” I said.

“Mm. I’m not sure what our earnings will end up being,” said Haruka, “but we gathered a bunch of delicious nuts, so I feel pretty satisfied with the results of our exploration.”

We unequipped our gear and took a break in the living room. We had completely ignored the boss monster on the twentieth floor; we had already spent a lot of time in the dungeon, and there were things like the milk from the red strike ox that we wanted to discuss with Diola-san. We had been a bit curious about what the boss monster was, but it would have been foolish to underestimate it considering how strong the red strike oxen were. It was possible to escape from boss rooms, but the boss monsters could also escape if the door was open, so cracking the door to take a peek inside wasn’t an option. That said, bosses as large as a mad tauros probably wouldn’t be able to fit through the door of a boss room.

“The nut floors gave us a lot of new additions to our diet, so it doesn’t really matter if our earnings aren’t impressive,” said Yuki.

“Mm. Nuts are delicious,” said Natsuki.

The snacks we were having with tea today were the nuts that we had gathered in the dungeon. The girls had put in some extra effort to roast them, so they actually tasted a lot better than when I’d first tried them out.

“Nuts are actually better than I thought,” said Metea. “I kind of want to get good at cooking now.”

“These nuts are crunchy, and those over there are crispy,” said Mary. “I had no idea that they could change so much.”

Metea had seemed slightly unhappy about the nut area of the dungeon, but she was happily eating the nuts that the girls had cooked, and Mary also was rapidly comparing the different kinds. The rest of us were mainly drinking tea,

but the sisters were snacking as if they were addicted.

“...Um, Mary-chan, Metea-chan, I think the two of you should probably stop,” said Natsuki with a troubled look on her face.

Apparently I wasn’t the only one who was a bit shocked by how fast the sisters were consuming nuts.

“Huh?” Mary tilted her head, but she hastily stopped and lowered her gaze to apologize when Haruka pointed at the mountain of shells in front of the sisters.

Metea also looked embarrassed after she realized how much she’d eaten. “Ugh. I guess I ate a bit too much.” But she still tried to stealthily snatch some more nuts before Mary slapped her hand. “Well, I can eat a bit more, so...”

“Met!”

Tears appeared in Metea’s eyes as she held her hands together.

“Tee hee. The nuts are definitely delicious, but it’s bad for your body if you eat too many, so you should try to control yourself,” said Haruka.

“It is very tempting to reach for nuts when they’re right in front of you,” said Touya.

Haruka smiled at the sisters, while Touya nodded to himself a few times. We were probably at fault for placing a large plate of nuts on the table, and even we were tempted to reach for them despite the fact that we were older and had more self-control than the sisters, so Touya was completely right.

“Most nuts have very high fat content. Stuff like brown sugar walnuts and candied chestnuts have a lot of sugar too,” said Yuki. “Just so you know, you’ll get fat and puffy if you eat too much, so keep that in mind.” She giggled as she playfully poked Metea’s cheek.

Metea placed both her hands on her own cheeks and flinched in shock. “That would be really bad! I’m going to become a strong adventurer!”

Despite her words, Metea continued to stare at the large plate full of nuts. The rest of us glanced at each other before laughing in unison, and I stood to carry the plate back to the cupboards.

“The number of nuts that you can lightly pack into one hand is the

appropriate number to consume in one day, Metea-chan,” said Natsuki. “Please try to restrain yourself from eating more today.”

“One hand...” Metea stared at her own hands. After that, she glanced at Mary’s hands, our hands, and then back to her own hands.

“...Don’t think about trying to find a way to stack up nuts, Met,” said Mary.

“H-Huh? Th-That’s not what I was thinking about at all, big sis!” Metea tried her best to refute Mary’s words, but her efforts weren’t convincing in the slightest.

“Mary, I’ll leave it to you to place the appropriate number of nuts on a small plate for yourself and Metea,” said Haruka. “Don’t eat directly from the large plate of nuts. You might end up eating too many.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“Oh, come on! Please believe me!”

Metea pouted after she heard Haruka’s instructions, but Haruka just laughed and shook her head.

“Look, I understand how addictive good food can be, but there are things that can become poisonous if you eat too many of them, so you have to be careful,” said Haruka.

“Mm. For example, ginkgo nuts are harmless if you only eat a few, but they can cause acute poisoning if you consume too many,” said Natsuki.

A worried look appeared on Metea’s face. “I-Is there actually a lot of food like that?”

“Yes, there is,” Haruka replied. “In any case, you should avoid stuffing yourself with *any* food no matter how delicious it may be.”

“Mushrooms are actually dangerous as well,” said Natsuki. “The only reason they don’t cause issues is because people don’t consume a lot of them.”

Touya looked extremely surprised. “Wait, does that also include mushrooms that aren’t poisonous?”

Natsuki replied with an example I hadn’t expected at all. “Yes. For example, if

you eat nothing but matsutake mushrooms until you're completely full, they're apparently quite dangerous."

"Really? I had no idea," said Touya. "Well, I can't imagine matsutake mushrooms ever causing issues for us, ha ha!"

"Yeah. It's not relevant to commoners like us," I said.

Matsutake mushrooms weren't exactly meant for consuming in large quantities, and when we lived on Earth, a single whole matsutake mushroom wouldn't have been affordable for most of us. In fact, even if we found something similar to matsutake mushrooms in this world, we probably wouldn't eat too many.

"Once again, 'everything in moderation' is important to keep in mind when it comes to food," said Haruka.

"Okay. I'll be careful," said Metea.

"Mm, please do," said Natsuki. "We're genuinely worried—we're not trying to be mean or anything like that."

Is this how it feels to be a parent who tries to make a kid listen while getting begged for candy? Metea wasn't a selfish kid at all, and she was actually quite understanding as long as we explained things to her, so we hadn't really experienced any parenting struggles, but whenever she looked sad, I felt an urge to spoil her. *Man, it really isn't easy being a parent, huh? I finally understand.*

A month had passed since the last time we'd dropped by the guild. We set out with no idea of whether Diola-san was still away, but when we arrived, she was there to greet us with a smile.

That smile froze after she heard my first words, however.

"Diola-san, we're sorry to bother you, but there's something we'd like to discuss," I said.

"...I feel rather wary anytime I hear something like that from you, Nao-san," said Diola with a laugh. "But at any rate, please follow me."

Diola-san kept her smile fixed in place as she led us to the meeting room that

we frequently used for private discussions. The five of us sat on one of the two sofas, and Diola-san sat down on the other, opposite us. Mary and Metea hadn't tagged along this time. We had told them that they could skip out if they weren't interested, since our plan was to talk business. Metea had replied that she would go play with Remi while we were busy, and Mary had accompanied her.

"All right. What would you like to discuss this time?" Diola asked.

"Thank you for taking the time to help us, Diola-san," I said. "First of all, we'd like to hand over this as a token of our gratitude."

Everyone in my party had agreed that as a matter of policy, we needed to give Diola-san gifts to compensate her for her time. I took three pears out of one of our magic bags and lined them up on the table in front of me, then pushed them toward Diola-san.

"Oh, are those sheaspares? They're rather expensive, aren't they? Are you quite sure about this?" Diola asked.

Sheaspares were a variety of pears unique to this world, although based on our research, they seemed to be similar to Hosui pears and Asian pears of Earth. Sheaspares were one of the more delicious varieties of pears in this world, so Diola-san was undoubtedly right that they would have been quite expensive on the market.

"Nah, we didn't buy them," I said. "But would you happen to know what the market price is, Diola-san?"

"Well, a hundred Rea is apparently sufficient if you buy one fresh from a farmer, but the price at Pining is about three hundred Rea apiece," said Diola. "They don't ordinarily appear on the market here in Laffan. For one thing, they're not in season right now."

In this world, magic bags made it possible to acquire fruit that wasn't in season as long as you had enough money. In a way, food preservation was more advanced in this world than it had been back on Earth, but it was also a lot more expensive. Magic bags were scarce and extremely valuable, and they were meant for transporting goods. If you used them just for preserving goods, you would lose out on the potential profit from efficient transportation, so you had

to factor in the cost of preservation as well as the income lost as a result of keeping the bags filled. Thus, fresh fruit preserved in magic bags wasn't remotely affordable for an ordinary citizen.

Diola-san nodded as if she had arrived at a conclusion. "Hmm. I suppose that means your party harvested these sheaspares in a dungeon and you're interested in selling them, right?" Diola asked.

We were all quick to shake our heads.

"No, that's not it, Diola-san," I replied. "We're going to just use these sheaspares ourselves. We don't have any plans to sell them."

"Oh, really? They're worth quite a lot, as I said," said Diola. "If you can harvest them year round, then you might be able to make as much money on them as you have on dindels."

"That sounds like a very attractive idea, so— Wait, no, we're not going to sell any of them," I said. "We'll share some with you, Diola-san, but that's about it."

The limited number of fruit that we could harvest was the reason we'd decided that we wouldn't sell any of the sheaspares. We could get more milk from strike oxen just by waiting a few days, but even in the dungeon, ripe fruit didn't respawn quickly. Fruit would ripen only gradually regardless of what season it was outside of the dungeon, besides which there was a limit to how much ripe fruit we could harvest. It wasn't an issue at the moment, since my party was the only one exploring the dungeon, but we wanted to keep the dungeon a secret in order to avoid having to compete with other adventurers.

Diola-san nodded deeply; she must have inferred my meaning from the look on my face. "...I see. Very well. I will handle this accordingly."

"Thank you very much, Diola-san," I said. "Also, here are some more gifts that I forgot to take out earlier." I lined up three apples in front of her.

"Thank you very much," said Diola. "These are the 'gifts,' I take it?"

"Yeah, they're just tokens of our gratitude," I said.

The fruit we had offered to Diola-san weren't bribes or anything like that, so there was nothing wrong with this situation *at all*.

“The main topic that we wanted to ask about is this.” Haruka produced a bottle of strike ox milk from one of our magic bags. She poured some of the milk into a cup, then offered it to Diola-san. “Please take a sip, Diola-san.”

Diola-san, however, smiled awkwardly and leaned back into the sofa. “Um, I’m not really fond of the taste of goat milk.”

“Don’t worry, this isn’t goat milk,” said Haruka.

“Hmm?”

Diola-san seemed a bit confused. She blinked for a bit before leaning forward and sniffing the milk in the cup. She cocked her head as she thought, but then her eyes went wide in surprise.

“W-Wait, is this what I think it is?!”

Diola-san hastily took the cup of strike ox milk from Haruka. After she’d taken a sip, she exclaimed, “Mm, this is definitely strike ox milk! It tastes delicious and doesn’t smell bad in the slightest!”

“Indeed. I’m surprised you know what strike ox milk is, Diola-san,” said Haruka.

“W-Well, I’ve had some before...”

Strike ox milk was very expensive, but apparently it was perfectly affordable for a vice-branch master of the guild. Even at the discount prices that Diola-san took advantage of, her beloved dindels were still luxury fruit, so I wasn’t surprised that she’d also tried strike ox milk before.

“How did your party find this?” Diola asked. “I take it you didn’t purchase it?”

“Correct. We collected this strike ox milk in the dungeon, just like the fruit,” said Haruka. “We were thinking of selling some depending on how much it’s worth. Would the guild be willing to buy some?”

“Of course. The guild will pay a high price,” said Diola. “Strike oxen can’t be found anywhere near Laffan.”

“That would be greatly appreciated,” said Haruka. “As for the containers...”

"Oh, that's right, we'll need bottles," said Diola. "Would you like me to issue a workshop order for bottles through the guild?"

Yep, I knew we could count on you to get things done fast, Diola-san.

"Are you sure about that? Wouldn't that cost you more time?" Haruka asked.

"It's a very minor thing to be able to purchase strike ox milk," said Diola. "This milk is fresh, high-quality, and doesn't smell like leather bags. Magic bags are truly wonderful."

Ceramic and glass bottles were very fragile, so normal adventurers couldn't realistically tote around a large number of them. As a result, leather bags were commonly used for transporting goods, but the bags would leave milk with a slightly unpleasant odor. In addition, freshly squeezed milk would take anywhere from a day to a couple of days to bring back from the source, during which time it would remain at room temperature, so that wasn't a safe way to handle raw milk.

In contrast, magic bags solved all of the problems that plagued normal methods of transporting milk. Milk stored in magic bags didn't smell bad, and it remained fresh too, so it was only natural that such milk would be worth much more. In addition, we were able to purify it of bacteria immediately after milking a strike ox, and we could cool it as well, so I felt confident that we could produce milk that was much better than unhomogenized pasteurized milk.

"All that's left is to decide on the price itself, but that won't be easy," said Diola.

"Is there no standard price for strike ox milk?" I asked. "The guild does deal in strike ox milk, right?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't be right to apply that price to high-quality milk like this," said Diola. "Numerous factors need to be taken into consideration, including the volume of milk your party wants to sell and how often your party plans to sell milk."

The guild could have earned a tidy profit if it were to buy our strike ox milk at a standard price and sell it at a more premium price, but apparently Diola-san had no intention of acting in such a dishonest manner.

"So how much would this strike ox milk be worth at retail price?" I asked.

"Well, a noble would probably be willing to pay up to forty gold coins for a bottle of high-quality strike ox milk like this."

"Really? I guess nobles have no problem spending money on high-quality goods," I said.

So a cup of strike ox milk would be worth anywhere from thirty to forty thousand yen? Isn't that a bit too expensive? Actually, come to think of it, there are things like expensive wines back on Earth and in this world as well, so I guess that price isn't too outlandish for a beverage. Expensive wine wasn't something I ever drank back on Earth, though, due to both its price and my age.

"A count could easily afford such a price, as could a sufficiently wealthy viscount," said Diola.

"What about Viscount Nernas?" I asked.

Diola-san laughed and shook her head awkwardly. "Well, the House of Nernas probably wouldn't buy strike ox milk. The viscount doesn't have much money to spare these days."

With the recent incident in Kelg, the viscount probably couldn't afford to waste money on delicacies.

"There are some issues involved in selling strike ox milk at a high price, however," said Diola.

One issue, she explained, was that the buyers who could afford high-quality strike ox milk were limited in number, so the guild couldn't necessarily afford to purchase all of the milk that we wanted to sell. Another issue was that other adventurers might venture into the Summer Resort Dungeon. That said, you had to be a decently experienced and strong adventurer to make it all the way to the floor where strike oxen could be found, and it wasn't easy to milk them. In addition, it would also be difficult to transport and preserve strike ox milk without magic bags, so magic bags were necessary to obtain milk of this quality and value.

The difficulties involved would ordinarily discourage people from attempting to acquire high-quality strike ox milk, but money had the power to make people

throw reason out the window. It would be tragic for us if our convenient source of money and food ended up being ruined by a swarm of other adventurers. At the same time, the guild had no intention of spurring adventurers toward pointless deaths.

“In that case, what do you think the ideal price would be, Diola-san?” I asked.

“I would say five gold coins per bottle at the very least, but something around ten gold coins is a more appropriate price considering all of the other things that the strike ox milk will affect,” Diola replied.

Diola-san went on to tell us that the upper limit for the purchase prices of most goods at the guild was five gold coins, but the strike ox milk we had obtained was of higher quality than average, so apparently it would cause a lot of trouble if we sold it for only five gold coins per bottle. That made perfect sense to me. If high-quality meat and cheap meat were sold at the same price, then people would either only purchase the high-quality meat or demand a cut in price for the cheap meat. We had to factor in the economic well-being of other adventurers as well, so it would be risky for us to sell high-quality strike ox milk at a relatively low price.

“There is also the option of selling your strike ox milk at twenty gold coins per bottle and agreeing to a limit on how many bottles the guild will purchase,” said Diola.

One advantage of selling things at the Adventurers’ Guild was the fact that the guild would usually purchase everything that you brought. The trade-off was that the guild generally offered below market prices, but that way, adventurers could avoid the hassle of negotiating with individual merchants. It sounded like Diola-san was proposing that she help us take care of the work in exchange for us agreeing to a limit on the number of bottles.

“Twenty gold coins per bottle is better for us, right, Haruka?” I asked.

“Of course,” Haruka replied. “There’s the option of providing a larger supply at the price of ten gold coins per bottle, but I don’t think it would be worth the effort.”

Touya nodded a couple of times, probably because he was responsible for facing off against strike oxen. Shortly thereafter, everyone else nodded in

agreement.

“How many bottles do you think the guild will be able to handle at a price of twenty gold coins per bottle, Diola-san?” I asked.

“Hmm. I would say about fifty bottles per month,” Diola replied. “That number can be increased depending on situational factors, but fifty should be appropriate most of the time.”

Filling fifty bottles would probably require us to milk up to fifteen strike oxen, but we could finish that task in a single day if we worked hard, and the total amount of money divided by seven would amount to around 140 gold coins for each member of my party. *A stable monthly income equivalent to 1.4 million yen, huh? I love the sound of that!* We wouldn’t even need to enter the dungeon every month, since we could simply store a few months’ worth of strike ox milk in our magic bags. It would save us a lot of time, and anyway, we had other sources of income as well. In fact, we had no reason to turn down Diola-san’s proposition if it would reduce the chances of other adventurers exploring the dungeon.

“That sounds good to me,” said Yuki. “What do you think, Nao?”

“Yeah, it seems perfectly fine,” I said. “Let’s go with your suggestion, Diola-san.”

“Very well. I will place an order for bottles, so please drop by again on another day to pick them up,” said Diola. “Is that all that you would like to discuss?”

Diola-san sounded a bit wary when she asked me for confirmation, so I nodded casually and began, “Yeah, all that’s left is to sell the magicites we obtained, so—”

Haruka poked and interrupted me. “There’s one more thing that you forgot about, Nao.”

“Huh? Oh yeah, right,” I said.

I took out the magicites we had gathered along with another bottle of milk. The milk in this bottle was from the red strike ox. Red strike ox milk was apparently worth more than normal strike ox milk, but they were both milk, so I

had no idea whether the former was valuable enough to be worth collecting.

“Um, precisely what is this?” Diola asked. “I take it this is different from the strike ox milk that you showed me just now?”

The bottles that I made were fake glass, and due to the material’s slightly lower transparency, the contents weren’t clearly visible. Diola-san seemed a bit confused as she examined it, so apparently she couldn’t tell the difference at a glance. However, red strike ox milk was pink, so it was easy to distinguish from normal strike ox milk outside of the bottle.

“It’s hard to tell when the milk is inside of a bottle, but this is actually red strike ox milk,” I said.

“Wh-What?! P-Please give me a moment!”

Diola-san hastily covered her mouth with her hands and breathed deeply as if to calm herself down, and when a moment had passed, she looked directly at me.

“I’m very sorry for raising my voice,” said Diola. “Um, is this really red strike ox milk?”

It seemed Diola-san couldn’t quite believe my words, so I said, “Would you like to have a sip? The color difference will be obvious once we pour some of it into a cup.”

But she warded me off, waving her hands. “Thank you, but no, I’ll pass! I couldn’t possibly drink something so valuable!”

“...Is it really worth a lot of money?” I asked.

“Of course! Red strike ox milk is much harder to obtain than normal strike ox milk.”

The red strike oxen’s fire breath was the biggest hurdle you had to overcome in order to milk them. It would be dangerous to stand right in front of a red strike ox without the protection of magic. In addition, the kinds of adventurers who could easily deal with red strike oxen could also earn money from a lot of other sources. The milking process had been easy enough for my party thanks to the way we’d used magic, but mages were actually quite rare in this world,

so it normally wouldn't have been easy to gather several in one party. As a result, the expenses involved in milking a red strike ox were considerable.

"The effect of red strike milk is another reason it's so valuable," said Diola. "It's very popular among nobles."

"What do you mean by the effect?" I asked.

Diola-san blinked a couple of times as if she was surprised by my question, and she seemed a bit hesitant to answer it. "Oh, were you not aware? I see. Well..."

"Um, is there some risk involved in consuming red strike ox milk?" Haruka asked.

"No, it's perfectly safe to consume. It's just that, um..." Diola-san blushed and averted her eyes before continuing more quietly. "A man who drinks red strike ox milk becomes...very energetic. Like a wild bull."

"Oh, I see. Does it actually work, though?" Haruka asked. "We tried out some of the red strike ox milk ourselves, but nothing happened, so—"

"That's because you're all young," Diola replied. "Another reason is that you're a girl, Haruka-san."

Hm? Wait, guys get "very energetic" from drinking red strike ox milk? Oh, okay, Diola-san must be referring to the male libido. So red strike ox milk is like an aphrodisiac for guys, huh? No wonder she was a bit hesitant to answer my question.

"That kind of stuff sells well, huh?" said Touya, sounding impressed. "Makes sense to me."

Diola-san laughed and nodded. "Mm. Offspring are very important to nobles."

Scientific treatments for infertility were definitely not available in this world, so things like red strike ox milk were probably very important for nobles who wanted their lineages to endure.

"How much would red strike ox milk be worth if we wanted to sell some?" I asked.

"There's a limit to the number of bottles that you can sell, but each bottle

would go for at least ten times the price of normal strike ox milk," Diola replied.

"Really?! *That* much?!" I was shocked that nobles would pay that much money for something like this, but apparently aphrodisiacs were absolutely necessary for certain people.

Admittedly, treatments like Viagra had also been very popular back on Earth. However, marriage at an early age was common in this world, so I had a hunch that a guy's ability to get an erection wasn't the main issue at hand. *Does the red strike ox milk have other effects on top of being an aphrodisiac? That would make more sense to me. People are willing to spend a lot of money to treat infertility. I even had some relatives who spent a lot of money on a variety of treatments, including supplements and health products.*

"Um, does red strike ox milk actually work, Diola-san?" I asked.

Diola-san looked at me as if surprised that I couldn't get my little buddy ready for battle at my age. "...Do you happen to need red strike ox milk for yourself, Nao-san?"

I firmly denied her assumption. "N-No, that's not it!" Then I asked the question that was really on my mind. "What I'm trying to say is that pregnancy isn't guaranteed even if a guy can get energetic enough for the act, right?"

Diola-san nodded lightly. "It doesn't raise the chances of success to one hundred percent, but it does make a difference. However, apparently a man has to continue drinking red strike ox milk for a certain period of time in order for it to work, so the expense involved is considerable."

According to Diola-san, it would take at least one month for the effects of red strike ox milk to kick in. A month's worth of red strike ox milk was probably worth it for nobles if it helped them produce heirs, but that amount of money could easily fund something like a house.

"I see," I said. "So, will the guild purchase this red strike ox milk off us?"

"Of course. However, it will require more complicated handling than normal strike ox milk, so it would be much appreciated if your party were willing to produce red strike ox milk only when the guild places an order," said Diola.

"Yeah, that's fine with us," I said. "Thank you again for your help, Diola-san.

We're counting on you."

"Mm. Rest assured and leave everything to me." Diola-san smiled in a very confident way as she accepted my request, but then... "Well, this makes it much easier for me to ask a favor of your party."

All of us were caught off guard. "Huh?"

"What did you just say, Diola-san?" I asked. "I think I heard some disturbing words..."

Coming from Diola-san, the words "a favor" reminded me of the haunted mansion and the incident at Kelg. An "evil" spirit called Edith had been the reason the mansion was haunted. Although Touya had been the only one who suffered as a result, the quest we had accepted to slay bandits along the way had been a nightmare for us. In fact, the sight that the bandits had left in their wake was so terrible that it still literally appeared in my nightmares from time to time. The incident at Kelg had been pretty bad too, but we'd benefited from it in the end, and I felt a bit conflicted when I reflected that we wouldn't have been able to save Mary and Metea if we hadn't been dispatched there.

It seemed the others had also been reminded of the gruesome sight that we had run into during the quest to slay bandits.

"Personally speaking, I'd like to avoid having to slay bandits again if possible," said Yuki.

"We would definitely have to leave Metea-chan and Mary-chan at home if we had to embark on such a quest again," said Natsuki.

"Yeah, we got through it, but I think it's too early for them to see shit like we saw last time," said Touya.

Diola-san hastily waved her hands when she noticed our reactions. "Oh, don't worry, I was just planning to ask for a small favor. Trust me."

But all of us remained skeptical, so she took out a wooden box and placed it on the table as if to change the subject.

"L-Let's deal with this first," said Diola. "The appraisal for the monk's staff that your party entrusted to the guild has been completed. I'm sure that you're

interested to learn the results, right?"

"Well, yes, somewhat." I was more curious about the favors that Diola-san wanted to ask of us, but it was hard to ignore something that was right in front of me.

Diola-san smiled at my response and took the monk's staff out of the box. "This is classified as a Charisma Monk's Staff. It's a magical device that slightly enhances your charisma when you talk while holding it in your hands. You would be able to obtain about fifty gold coins if you sold it to the guild."

"Slightly enhances'?" I asked.

"Yes, slightly," Diola repeated. "Regardless of the subject you're talking about, the monk's staff will make you seem like someone dressed in a priest's fine clothes rather than an ordinary citizen."

The example that Diola-san had given was a bit hard to follow, but I had some idea of what she was trying to imply. For example, a well-spoken man in a suit describing a drug that was safe because it had been approved after rigorous testing and clinical trials would be a lot more convincing than a random young guy on the street saying, "Yo, dude, this is safe, trust me! It's super good!" It wouldn't matter if neither person presented any evidence; most people would still be more inclined to trust the guy in the suit.

"Incidentally, there is a significant demand for Charisma Monk's Staffs in temples," said Diola, "as they help make sermons sound convincing."

"Do they still work even if the person delivering the sermon is bad at speaking?" I asked.

"Yes, they do," Diola replied. "The effect isn't ridiculously powerful by any means, however."

It sounded like a Charisma Monk's Staff wasn't capable of making anyone obey your words, so it struck me as a normal magical device with realistic limitations. *Well, I mean, it'd be bad if just anybody could get their hands on a magical device that would make them capable of persuading people with ease.*

"Hmm. What should we do with this? I don't think we have any use for it," said Haruka.

“We could keep it as an asset for our savings,” said Natsuki. “There’s no point in only carrying actual money with us.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said. “We’re not struggling for money, so there’s no real need to carry a lot with us all the time.”

Adventurers who traveled to all sorts of different places would exchange their earnings for things that were easier to transport, like jewelry, but it was possible to lose money that way if you weren’t careful. Luckily for us, we had magic bags, so storing money was no problem, but we could also use our bags for bulkier items, so we didn’t have a pressing need to exchange valuable items for money either. One benefit of carrying around valuable items was that we would be able to deal with situations in which money couldn’t be used for purchases. I doubted we would ever visit a place where money was worthless, but rare and hard-to-obtain items would be quite valuable if we ever had to negotiate with a rich person.

“Very well. Please take this magical device back with you,” said Diola. “Now, then, as for the favors that I would like to ask...” We sat up straight to brace ourselves for what we were about to hear. Diola-san laughed when she noticed our reactions, then went on, “First, I’d like to ask your party to help me prepare a suitable wedding gift for a noble.”

“A wedding gift for a noble? Why would you ask adventurers like us for help with something like that?” Haruka asked.

Everyone in my party was confused; whatever we’d expected to hear from Diola-san, this wasn’t it.

“It’s a matter of money. Viscount Nernas is the party who made the request, but he doesn’t have much money to spare after what happened at Kelg,” Diola replied. “He requested help finding something that isn’t too expensive but is rare enough to enable him to keep up appearances...”

“That sounds like quite a difficult request,” I said. “We are adventurers, though. Even if it’s a quest from the lord with you acting as the middleman, Diola-san, we’d still prefer to avoid any business that would force us to incur a loss.”

It was true that we had already requested Diola-san’s help with all sorts of

things, but it wouldn't be good if she assumed that we would take on anything she asked.

Diola-san hastily reassured me, "Oh, don't worry, I have no intention of causing your party to incur a loss. If your party agrees to sell the item to the client at the price that you would normally receive from the guild, that reduction in cost will be sufficient."

The items that adventurers acquired went through the guild and merchants before finally ending up in the hands of people who needed them. The guild and merchants would increase those prices in order to secure profits for themselves, so apparently the retail prices of many items could end up over double the original price for which adventurers had sold them to the guild. However, transportation costs were included in the retail prices, so they weren't exactly unreasonable.

"That would be fine with us, but what about the guild?" I asked.

"For a transaction like this, the guild would earn a commission fee, so it's no trouble," said Diola. "It actually isn't as easy as you might imagine for the guild to earn a profit from selling items that were purchased from adventurers."

Diola-san said the guild incurred a lot of additional costs, such as storage, transportation, quality assurance, as well as the costs involved in locating buyers. In the case of items that didn't sell, the cost of disposal also had to be factored in, so by all accounts, the Adventurers' Guild was far from an easy, lucrative business.

"Okay, then. But do we actually have something that would work as a wedding gift? I can't think of anything off the top of my head," I said.

"How about something like a fruit basket?" said Touya. "We have a big selection to choose from now."

"That's more like a 'get well soon' type of gift," said Yuki. "What about something like grass coyote pelts?"

"If we go that route, I think howling wolf pelts would be better," said Haruka. "Larger pelts would probably be more suitable for a noble."

"There's also the axe that the mad tauros wielded," said Natsuki. "It would be

useless in practical terms, but it would certainly draw attention.”

Diola looked very surprised by all the ideas that my party had suggested, but she swiftly shook her head. “I-I didn’t expect to hear so many ideas, but I’m afraid none of those are what I had in mind.”

“Oh, does that mean you want us to sell the Charisma Monk’s Staff, Diola-san?” I asked.

Diola-san had told us about the staff right before bringing up the topic of the wedding gift, so my assumption was that she wanted us to part with it, but she shook her head again.

“I did consider it, but your party showed me something perfect just now.”

“Something perfect? What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m talking about the red strike ox milk,” Diola replied. “Don’t you think it would be the perfect gift for a newly married couple?”

Diola-san laughed as she confidently stated her idea, but...

“...I think that would be a bit too crude, Diola-san,” said Haruka.

“O-Oh, please don’t look at me with those judgmental eyes, Haruka-san!” Diola objected. “Red strike ox milk is a standard wedding gift!”

“Really? Personally speaking, if somebody gave me an aphrodisiac as a wedding gift, I wouldn’t really want to stay friends with that person,” said Yuki. “It wouldn’t be funny even as a joke, and if it wasn’t a joke, then—”

“I’m not lying! Please believe me! Having children is very important for nobles!”

I couldn’t really understand a newly married couple needing aphrodisiacs right away, but according to Diola-san, the couple’s married life wouldn’t go well if they proved unable to produce offspring. Apparently a lot of nobles would get pestered about when they would have a child, so red strike ox milk was very important for resolving that kind of conflict.

“If that’s the case, then I guess it makes sense,” I said. “By the way, you sound like you’re speaking from experience, Diola-san. Is that how you happen to know so much about this?”

Diola-san averted her eyes and responded vaguely, “Huh? Oh, well, in a way, yes... More importantly, let’s return to the topic of red strike ox milk. Would your party be willing to go collect some as soon as possible? A decent volume of red strike milk is required.”

I had no intention of attempting to press a woman about something she clearly didn’t want to discuss, so I just nodded and followed up on Diola-san’s question about red strike ox milk. “Well, if you can prepare the bottles, then we wouldn’t mind, but how many bottles are needed?”

“If we factor in the spare bottles that are needed in case some break, then around one hundred would be ideal.”

“One hundred?!” Haruka exclaimed. “It’ll take some time for us to fill one hundred bottles, but more importantly, can the potential buyers even afford that?”

Diola-san had told us earlier that red strike ox milk would go for at least ten times the price of normal strike ox milk. The sum would differ greatly depending on whether Diola-san had used average red strike ox milk or the exceptionally high-quality red strike ox milk that we had gathered as a basis for that calculation, but it would still be huge in either case.

Diola-san sighed and shook her head. “Even if they’re otherwise the type to save money whenever they can, nobles will pay up when necessary. They’ll go into debt too if there’s no alternative. I’m aware that this might be hard for commoners to understand, but this is just how things are for nobles.”

Is this similar to desperately looking for the cheapest price you can find online, even if it ends up being a waste of time? Actually, maybe it’s more like treating the defense budget of Japan as equal in importance to the budget for road maintenance and repairs, or the idea that if you can afford a yacht, it’s better to fix the road in front of your house. Oh well, there’s no real point in comparing things like that. All that’s important is to spend money as needed and save money wherever possible, so I guess Viscount Nernas is competent enough.

“However, the purchase will be in bulk this time, so would a lump sum of ten thousand gold coins be acceptable to your party?” Diola asked. “Even something like twenty thousand would be a bit on the cheap end considering

the quality of the red strike ox milk that your party can collect, but..."

"O-Oh, don't worry, that's more than enough money for us," I said. "Right, guys?"

When I turned around and asked for confirmation, everyone else nodded a couple of times. Our house had cost around one thousand gold coins to build, so ten thousand gold coins would probably be enough for a luxurious mansion. *Are nobles in this world willing and able to spend that much money on wedding gifts? Yeah, I guess they are. They must value money differently than ordinary citizens.*

"This sure is an extravagant way to spend money," said Haruka. "Even then, wouldn't one hundred bottles be a bit too much milk, Diola-san? One hundred would probably be enough to last a married couple up to two years, even if they drank a cup per day."

"Nobles put a great deal of stock in appearances and reputation, Haruka-san. The correct thing to do when sending gifts is to send far more than the recipient could possibly need," said Diola. "For example, if you were invited to someone's house and saw just a single wine bottle on a table, then you would hesitate to drink it, right?"

"...I don't drink wine, but I understand what you're getting at, Diola-san," said Haruka. "I'd hesitate to eat snacks if there weren't many left."

Oh yeah, I wouldn't hesitate to reach for the chips if there was a big pile of them in front of me, but I would probably pass if there were only a few left. I feel the same way about things like fried chicken. Considering the importance of appearance and dynamics between nobles, it was probably important to demonstrate that you had the power and money to prepare something that was way more than adequate.

"By the way, I'm kind of surprised that nobles actually send food and beverages to each other as gifts," I said. "I assumed that nobles would be wary of being poisoned..."

Diola-san laughed and waved her hands. "No, the nobles in this kingdom aren't *quite* that brutal. Besides, there are magical devices that can detect poison in food, and it would be very obvious who the culprit was, so it doesn't

happen.”

Assassinations via poison would be more realistic if the culprit really wanted someone dead and didn’t mind causing a conflict between nobles, however. If murders like that weren’t prevalent, it probably meant that nobles in this kingdom weren’t generally on bad terms with each other.

“Well, as an ordinary citizen of this kingdom, it’s good to know that the nobles here don’t feud with each other,” I said.

“Mm. We don’t want to get involved in conflicts,” said Natsuki. “Peace is best.”

We were indifferent to nobles as long as their actions didn’t affect our lives, but unusual actions by the lord who presided over a territory could definitely affect commoners. For instance, the incident that had taken place in this viscounty years ago had led to a lot of unjust arrests.

“Unfortunately, the number of conflicts is greater than zero,” said Diola. “They aren’t common here near Laffan, but minor conflicts do occur sometimes.”

“What about wars between this kingdom and other countries?” I asked.

“All-out wars, no, but this kingdom does have a hypothetical rival, so small-scale conflicts occur from time to time,” Diola replied.

Based on Diola-san’s account, I got the impression that the kingdom where I lived was a relatively peaceful place, which made me very grateful to Advastlis-sama for transporting us here instead of other places in this world. Ordinary high school students like us were used to the peaceful environment of Japan, so we would have been at much greater risk of dying if we had been transported to a more dangerous country.

Diola-san began to describe the geography of the surrounding countries. The country that my party lived in was called the Lenium Kingdom, and it was fairly large compared to its neighbors. In addition, it was politically stable, and ills like extreme poverty and racial discrimination were rather rare, so it was a relatively peaceful and comfortable place to live.

East of Lenium was the Principality of Austianim. The two countries were

allies, and their nobility were also connected by marriage, so the ties between them were very strong. In fact, life as a commoner in either of the two countries was apparently quite similar, but religion had a bigger presence in the principality. However, it wasn't a theocracy as such, so my party probably wouldn't feel uncomfortable if we visited at some point in the future. The principality apparently had some magnificent temples, so it would be our first choice as a tourist destination if we ever traveled out of Laffan to go sightseeing around the world.

The Yupikrisa Empire was a relatively large country that was located southwest of the Lenium Kingdom. That was the nation Diola-san had referred to as Lenium's hypothetical rival. Trade between the two countries was open, and they had never directly confronted each other, but the kingdom was still obliged to tread carefully around the empire. According to Diola-san, the kingdom and the empire usually tried to resolve disputes through words rather than force, so nothing serious had happened yet. However, the empire favored humans and discriminated against all other races, so as an elf, I definitely wanted to avoid it. According to Diola-san, I wouldn't be captured and sold into slavery, but needless to say, I wouldn't be able to enjoy sightseeing either.

The Fegrey Kingdom was a politically unstable country, also located southeast of the Lenium Kingdom. Civil war hadn't yet broken out, but internal conflicts between nobles were very common. A country like that would normally get invaded and collapse, but apparently it had been left alone due to the troublesome nature of its national culture as well as the lack of attractive land to seize; the costs of invasion outweighed the benefits.

The national culture of the Fegrey Kingdom was defined by rampant ethnocentrism and elitism; that was why neighboring kingdoms maintained their distance. Foreigners and nonhumans faced severe discrimination, and there was a strict caste system in force among the native-born citizens, so dealing with the kingdom on any level was extremely difficult. The Yupikrisa Empire had previously invaded and placed some of the kingdom's lands under its own yoke. However, the capital that the empire had invested in developing its newly acquired territory had all been for naught due to the low moral standards of the citizenry, and ultimately the empire had withdrawn and

abandoned its conquests. A common saying that had been born as a result of this episode was that “It’s best simply to drive away Fegrey slaves. Their very existence is a negative influence, and they’re completely useless. If you have food that you can give to such slaves, then you would be better off selling it and using the money to hire citizens of the empire, even if it means you have to reduce your labor force to a tenth of the original number.” The standard of living in the Fegrey Kingdom was very low, and it was the worst of the surrounding countries—the one it behooved everyone to avoid at all costs.

Lastly, Diola-san told us about the territory northwest of the Lenium Kingdom, an area that was apparently no-man’s-land. There weren’t any countries there for the regional powers to establish diplomatic relations with, and the lands were completely untouched and unexplored. There was a possibility that other countries existed beyond this area, but exploration and development was impeded by monsters, so domestic development was a more efficient use of resources. On a sidenote, the town of Laffan had been constructed facing the no-man’s-land.

I had heard of the Lenium Kingdom before, but most of the other information that Diola-san conveyed, we were hearing for the first time. It was the kind of information I’d been curious about, but none of it was easy to obtain. Commoners had no opportunities to learn about such things, and some people were ignorant even of the name of their own homeland. In fact, Mary and Metea had been uncertain about the name of the Lenium Kingdom, to say nothing of foreign countries. The fact that Diola-san had been able to smoothly relay all of this information to us was concrete proof that she was the vice-branch master of the Laffan guild for good reason.

“Okay, I think that’s most of what you need to know about neighboring countries,” said Diola. “The country where you choose to work is important for adventurers, after all. Do you have any questions? I can address them if I happen to know the answer.”

“...What happens to adventurers if war actually breaks out between countries?” I asked.

“As a general rule, adventurers are free to continue their ordinary lives,” Diola replied. “The only additional tasks that you might be obligated to take on are

quests to repel monsters if any should attack towns amid the chaos of war. There is a chance that the nation might ask for your cooperation, however."

"Cooperation?"

"Mm. Adventurers are not *obliged* to cooperate, but it would be a good idea if you plan to continue living in the kingdom," said Diola.

Carefree adventurers who refused to cooperate during hard times would probably leave an extremely negative impression on others. It would be perfectly fine to ignore cooperation requests from a country if you were only visiting, but that wouldn't be a realistic choice here in Laffan, especially since my party had plenty of acquaintances in town.

"However, there are some countries that do not respect the independence of the Adventurers' Guild, so I would recommend that you assess the situation and escape as soon as possible should you happen to be staying in such a place," Diola added.

I had no plans to ever visit the Fegrey Kingdom, which was presumably one of the countries that Diola-san was talking about, and the Yupikrisa Empire was dangerous for us as well due to the fact that elves faced discrimination there. If at all possible, I wanted to avoid having to contribute to any kind of war effort, but I would have to reconsider if the Lenium Kingdom seemed likely to lose a war. It would be bad for me if the place where I lived comfortably got conquered, and if the Lenium Kingdom lost a war, the Principality of Austianim would probably be the victor's next target. My party included elves and beastfolk, so it would be extremely bad for us if the Lenium Kingdom and the Principality of Austianim perished, and it wasn't likely that we could find another country to flee to. Information about other countries wasn't easy to obtain, so we wouldn't be able to tell which would be safest for us.

"Well, you don't really have to worry about wars. It's been ten years since the last war with another country," said Diola. "Even if war does break out, Laffan is located far away from the kingdom's borders with other countries, so it won't have much of an impact on us. The biggest threat would be monsters attacking Laffan, and your party would be obligated to defend the town in the event of something like that."

I had no misgivings about battling monsters in order to defend Laffan. Adventurers slew monsters for a living, and our house was in this town, so my party had plenty of reasons to participate. On a sidenote, according to Diola-san, day laborers weren't ordinarily counted among the adventurers who were obligated to participate in town defense quests. The reason for this was that forcing those people to participate would only increase the death toll for no reason, so they would instead be placed in logistical support roles even when the guild chose to recruit some of them.

"I see," I said. We weren't so careless as to enter a different country without doing some research beforehand, and we had no such plans for the near future, but a summary of important information was still very useful for us. I took the opportunity to thank Diola-san again. "Thank you for teaching us about all of this, Diola-san."

Diola-san smiled at me, seeming quite pleased. "It's my job to help adventurers to the best of my abilities. And besides, Nao-san, thanks to your party, I was able to resolve one of my own outstanding obligations."

"Oh yeah, earlier, you used the word 'first' when you started talking about favors that you wanted to ask of us," said Yuki.

"...Okay, I think that's all, so it's about time for us to head home." I stood up and tried to leave after I recognized the implication behind Yuki's observation, but Diola-san's next words stopped me in my tracks.

"Would you like ownership of the Summer Resort Dungeon?" Diola asked.

Everyone in my party fell silent as we thought over the implication of Diola-san's words. We looked at each other for a moment, then resumed our seats on the sofa. Diola's smile deepened after she saw our reactions.

"Can you please tell us more about what you mean?" I asked.

"Of course," Diola replied. "In the near future, two nobles are getting married. This is related to the first favor that I mentioned earlier."

The need for wedding gifts of course implied a wedding, and the heir to the title of Baron Dias was the one who was getting married. According to Diola-san, the barony was adjacent to this viscounty, so the viscount had an

obligation to attend. However, the viscount was still occupied with sorting out the aftermath of the mayhem in Kelg, so he had no time to travel.

“The viscount has appointed his daughter to attend the wedding in his place, and so there’s a need for bodyguards,” said Diola. “He asked me to look for strong and trustworthy adventurers who could be hired cheaply.”

“Seriously? Wouldn’t you have to pay a decent amount of money to hire adventurers who were both strong and trustworthy?” Haruka asked. “Besides, aren’t knights and troops of the local army meant to act as bodyguards for nobles in these kinds of situations?”

“Yes, of course. Troops will accompany the viscount’s daughter as her bodyguards,” Diola replied. “However, the troops who serve in the local army aren’t terribly proficient at combat, as I believe your party is already aware.”

“Yeah, most of the troops that we met during the Kelg incident seemed kinda weak,” said Touya. “Us adventurers actually ended up being the key to the counteroffensive. I think Sadius was the only nonadventurer who was strong.”

“Part of it is due to the lingering influence of the past lord, but it’s also because this viscounty is peaceful,” said Diola. “The viscount also isn’t very wealthy, so the local army is quite small.”

Diola-san added that the viscount had fewer troops available than usual due to the fact that he’d had to assign some to Kelg. However, the highway his daughter would follow to the barony was a somewhat perilous one, and the chances of being attacked by monsters along the way were quite high. An adequate escort was absolutely necessary, which was why the viscount wanted to hire some adventurers as additional bodyguards.

“So you want us to work as bodyguards, Diola-san?” I asked.

“I was a bit confused earlier when you started telling us about the neighboring countries, but it was all leading up to this, right?” Haruka asked.

“Mm. You are the strongest and most trustworthy adventurers in Laffan.”

Diola-san beamed as she praised us, but the girls seemed a bit confused.

“Thank you for the praise, Diola-san,” said Natsuki. “However...”

"We're not good at escort quests," said Yuki. "Or I guess I should say, we've never done an escort quest before..."

Diola-san was of course aware of what kind of work my party did for a living, so all of us felt uneasy about the fact that she was suddenly asking us to participate in an escort quest.

However, Diola-san continued to smile as she attempted to reassure us that we were suitable for the task. "Don't worry. I'd simply like to ask your party to be on the lookout for monsters and bandits and to slay any that pose a threat. The troops will handle the task of actually guarding the viscount's daughter, so I believe this should be relatively easy for you. You won't need to worry too much about how to interact properly with the viscount's daughter either."

"Really? Just so you know, Diola-san, we have no idea how to behave around nobles," I said.

"That's not an issue in the slightest. The viscount's daughter isn't haughty, so it'll be fine as long as you act normally," said Diola.

Hmm. This would be a good opportunity to get some experience with escort quests, and it sounds like we won't be held completely responsible even if something bad happens. I have a feeling that there's also another good reason we should take on this escort quest.

"If your party would be willing to take on this escort quest, then I promise that you will obtain complete ownership of the Summer Resort Dungeon and the lands in the vicinity of the dungeon in place of a monetary reward," said Diola.

"So in essence, the dungeon would become our private property?" Haruka asked.

"Correct. Your party would have the right to decide what to do with it, including the power to prohibit entry," Diola replied. "It would be up to you to decide if you would like to implement that kind of restriction, however."

According to Diola-san, there were a multitude of options available to us, like sealing off the dungeon, charging entry fees, and implementing a tax on the items that people obtained inside, but whatever rules we decided on, we would

have to hire people to implement them.

“So we’d gain complete control of the dungeon?” said Touya. “Can you transfer those rights to other people?”

“Yes, you can,” Diola replied. “It’s not very common, however.”

Most nobles didn’t transfer land ownership because it was directly related to their interests and status. Our house had been built on land that we technically owned, but we had to pay taxes on it every year, and the lord could confiscate our land if he really wanted to. People who had their land confiscated would ordinarily be paid compensation, but if the lord refused to compensate them, commoners wouldn’t be able to do anything. However, according to Diola-san, failure to pay compensation was an opening that other nobles could take advantage of, so nobles paid an adequate sum in most cases.

“However, the reward this time is different,” said Diola. “The dungeon will be registered with the kingdom itself, so only the king would be entitled to confiscate it.”

“Is that a pretty big deal, Diola-san?” I asked.

“Yes,” Diola replied. “The location of the dungeon played a part in this decision.”

According to Diola-san, the lands around the dungeon were located at the edges of the viscounty, so it was ambiguous whether the viscount enjoyed the rights to those lands. It was also the same area where a previous Viscount Nernas had messed up badly. The House of Nernas wanted to get rid of it if possible, so it had multiple reasons to transfer ownership of the lands around the dungeon to us, and we were also the only ones currently exploring it. Most of the items we brought back would be consumed within the viscounty, so the regional government would also earn tax revenue from our activities. In addition, the viscount was operating under the assumption that he could expect even more items if ownership of the dungeon served to motivate us; he had decided that it was actually a good deal to hand over a bad asset in exchange for being able to hire Rank 5 adventurers.

“Did you use those exact words when negotiating with the viscount, Diola-san?” Haruka asked.

Diola-san laughed and nodded. “It would have been no good if the viscount had insisted on hiring adventurers for cheap, so I tried my best to come up with a middle-ground solution that would benefit both him and your party.”

Viscount Nernas probably wasn’t aware of our circumstances, and we lacked the skills and information we’d need to negotiate with him. In addition, he was the lord of the viscounty that we resided in, so we had no choice but to obey his requests within reason. Diola-san had negotiated with the viscount in our place, and the conditions that she had managed to get for us weren’t bad at all, but...

“Well, the viscount can afford to blow money on wedding gifts, right, Diola-san?” Touya asked. “So he should be able to afford a cash reward on top of—”

“That’s exactly why the viscount wants to save money whenever possible,” Diola replied. “I’m confident that the viscount would have resorted to a monetary reward first if he hadn’t been able to prepare a satisfactory alternative, however.”

Hmm. I guess this means that the viscount probably asked Diola-san if she had any ideas for how to save money, huh?

“Simply put, it would be a good deal for the viscount if he could sell the dungeon for the equivalent of a few thousand gold coins,” said Diola.

“Huh? A few thousand? Would it be *that* expensive to hire us for an escort quest?” Yuki asked.

“Yes, it would be,” Diola replied. “The escort quest will require five Rank 5 adventurers to work for an extended period of time.”

“Now that I think about it, each person in our party was offered twenty gold coins per day as a reward for our cooperation at Kelg,” said Haruka.

It sounded like we had become high-income earners without realizing it. A few thousand gold coins would disappear in no time if we spent them on new weapons and armor, however.

“I’m personally down for the idea of taking on this escort quest,” I said. “What do you all think?”

I didn’t want to embarrass Diola-san after she had gone out of her way to

negotiate with the viscount on our behalf, besides which the reward sounded quite desirable.

“It would be ideal if we could prevent other adventurers from entering the dungeon,” said Haruka.

“Mm. Other adventurers could easily harvest the fruit and leave nothing for us,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, and they might even harvest the fruit before it’s ripe,” said Yuki.

It would also become harder to obtain milk if other adventurers slew all of the strike oxen. Even if we decided to permit other adventurers to enter, we could set and enforce rules, so there were numerous benefits to owning the rights.

“I’m down for taking on this escort quest too,” said Touya. “It’ll be a nice opportunity to visit a different town.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true,” I said. “We don’t really have reasons to travel outside of opportunities like this...”

We had almost no complaints about our stable lives, so there was no reason to seek out different experiences away from Laffan.

“Mary and Metea would probably want to come along too. They like the dungeon,” I said. “All right. We’ll accept this escort quest, Diola-san.”

Diola-san smiled and sighed in relief. “Thank you very much! Frankly, there weren’t any other trustworthy adventurers I could ask for help if your party turned down this quest. I’m very glad that you accepted it. Now I no longer have to worry about the viscount’s requests.”

“You’ve helped us out a lot, Diola-san, so I’m glad that we’re able to return the favor,” said Haruka. “However, aren’t there numerous adventurers in Pining? It’s the capital of this viscounty...”

“No, Pining is also a peaceful place,” said Diola. “There are strong adventurers there, but as for high-ranking ones...”

It sounded like there wasn’t much work available for adventurers in the entire viscounty. Of course, it was a good thing that this region didn’t suffer the kinds of problems that only adventurers could resolve, but that wasn’t an

unambiguous positive from the standpoint of stimulating the economy.

“A party with a lot of girls was ideal as well, and it wouldn’t have been easy for me to find another,” said Diola.

“Mm. The person we’re going to escort is a girl, after all,” said Yuki.

“How old is the viscount’s daughter?” Natsuki asked.

“She is nine years old,” Diola replied. “She’s a bit younger than Mary-san.”

I didn’t expect her to be so young! She’s going to be acting as Viscount Nernas’s representative, so I assumed that she was an adult, but I guess I was wrong. Is this really going to work out?

While the rest of us were stunned by that revelation, Natsuki corrected Diola-san. “Oh, um, Mary-chan actually happens to be nine years old.”

Diola-san herself looked extremely surprised at Natsuki’s response. “Is that so? She seems very mature for her age.”

“That’s because of her family situation. If anything, we wish she’d feel free to act her age,” said Haruka. “By the way, Diola-san, can children around the same age as Mary and Metea register at the guild?”

“Technically speaking, yes,” said Diola. “It’s hard for children to find work without the help of their guardians, however. Would you like to register them as adventurers?”

“Oh, yeah, we introduced the sisters to you, Diola-san, but we never registered them as adventurers,” I said.

“Most guardians do not register children as adventurers if the children are simply helping out with minor tasks,” said Diola. “The guild would issue a warning if the guardians were not treating their wards well, but you adopted and are raising Mary and Metea, so that’s a different story.”

According to Diola-san, in the case of families who worked together as adventurers, it was up to the guardians to decide whether or not they wanted to register their children as adventurers. Registration had no downsides, but evaluation of the children’s ranks would be tied to their guardians, and apparently if children who had ranked up thanks to family connections ever

decided to go independent, they would be subject to harsher standards.

“If your rank is higher than it should be, there’s a risk that you’ll be offered quests that you’re not quite prepared for,” said Diola. “Given that danger, there are guardians who don’t let their children register as adventurers until they become independent adults.”

For normal guardians who didn’t abuse their children, there were no downsides to keeping their children unregistered, and as long as they trained hard, they could rank up in no time once they’d become independent adults. Diola-san added that the guild didn’t recommend registering children in most cases.

“One benefit of registration is that children learn to fend for themselves, but that can also turn out to be a downside,” said Diola. “Mary-san and Metea-san cannot leave Laffan by themselves at the moment, but...”

“They’ll be able to pass through the gates by themselves once they obtain identification cards, huh? I see,” I said. “Well, I think the two of them should be fine...”

“Mm. They’re not the kinds of kids who do things without asking us first, so it’d probably be fine to let them register,” said Haruka.

As Metea’s older sister, Mary was very mature for a kid her age. I was less sure about Metea, but Metea probably wouldn’t head out by herself to slay goblins or anything like that. *Hmm. Actually, I guess Metea might say something like “I wanna eat tusk boar meat!” and set out on her own all of a sudden, so I should probably warn her not to do that. There’s a good chance that she could defeat a tusk boar just fine, but that very fact might lead her to behave recklessly.*

“Very well,” said Diola. “Would you like me to make their adventurer cards now?”

“Oh, can you do that without them being here?” I asked.

“Yes,” Diola replied. “Your party is present, and you’re their guardians. All that’s necessary is your permission.”

The adventurer cards in this world didn’t have special functions like the ability

to register and track a person's mana. As a result, they could be made even if a person wasn't physically present at the guild, but there were some restrictions. Diola-san said she had offered to help make the adventurer cards right now because, in addition to the fact that we were the girls' guardians, she had met them before.

But Touya objected to Diola-san's idea. "Nah, we should let them get their adventurer cards made in person. It's really cool watching your own card being made right in front of you. You guys know what I mean, right?"

His reasoning made perfect sense, and the rest of us all nodded in agreement.

"Mm, I suppose you're right, Touya," said Haruka. "Sorry, Diola-san, but can we ask you to do this at another time?"

Diola-san smiled and nodded. "Of course. Let me know whenever."

Hmm. Now that I think about it, I was really worried about how to survive when I first came here to register and get an adventurer card. Back then, we weren't even sure if we could earn enough money to continue staying at an inn. Well, the circumstances are totally different for Mary and Metea, so I bet they'll feel excited and hopeful about the future when they register as adventurers. I'm really glad that Touya suggested this.

As long as you picked the right time to visit, the Adventurers' Guild in Laffan wasn't generally the kind of place where adventurers would pick fights with children who wanted to register, and so we got Mary's and Metea's cards with no issues. The sisters were happy, although it seemed like they were more excited about what we had planned for the rest of the day.

"We can finally eat some fresh namagashi!" said Metea.

Now that we'd gotten enough milk to make fresh cream, we could finally make namagashi. The girls planned to make the sweets at Aera-san's café. Aera-san herself had seemed quite interested when the girls had told her about namagashi, so she had closed shop for the day just to learn how to make them. The girls had headed over Aera-san's café first; they'd assigned Touya and me the task of handling Metea and Mary's registration.

"These sweets will be as delicious as the ice cream we ate the other day,

right? I'm looking forward to them," said Mary.

"It can vary depending on individual preference, but I personally think they're just as good," I said.

"It's not the kind of stuff I could house a lot of in one sitting, though," said Touya.

Touya must've been thinking back on the way the girls used to devour cakes.

"You shouldn't eat a lot of sweets even if you think you can," I said. "It's not good for your health."

"That sucks," said Metea. "Well, I'm still excited to try some, so let's get going!"

At Metea's urging, we walked at a decently fast pace until we arrived at Aerasan's café. There was a closed sign at the entrance, but we ignored it and opened the door. Inside, I saw Luce-san and Riva sitting on customer seats and chatting with each other inside. They noticed us right away, and Luce-san greeted us with a cheerful smile, while Riva greeted us with a shy smile.



“Oh, welcome, everyone,” said Luce.

“H-Hello,” said Riva.

“Thanks for having us over today, Luce-san,” I said. “It’s been a while since we last met, Riva.”

The sisters bowed as they greeted Luce-san and Riva.

“Hello,” said Metea.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Mary.

Touya’s nose twitched as he looked toward the kitchen. “Yo. The girls are in the kitchen, huh?”

My nose detected a sweet scent too. I looked around the interior of the café, but no one else was in sight. There were only two cups on the table in front of Luce-san and Riva, so the sweets must not have been finished yet.

“Mm. They’re making sweets together with Aera,” said Luce.

Metea immediately dashed toward the kitchen. “I’ll go help them!”

“Met?!” Mary hastily chased after her. “I-I’ll go over as well. I want to learn how to make sweets.”

Do they actually want to learn, or do they just want a bite before anyone else gets one? Mary has been helping the girls cook lately, so it’s probably the former for her, but it’s definitely the latter for Metea.

“Oh, I had no idea that Mary-chan knows how to cook,” said Luce.

“Luce-san, Riva, are you sure you two don’t want to go and watch too?” Touya asked suggestively. “The sweets that the girls make are awesome. Don’t you want to learn how to make stuff like that?”

After Touya offered that frank suggestion, Luce-san and Riva looked at each other, but Luce-san immediately turned back toward Touya and lifted a finger to her cheek as if she were about to enlighten him.

“I’ll teach you a lesson that you should never forget, Touya-san,” said Luce. “You see, due to financial restrictions, normal people can’t make sweets even if they’re good enough at cooking! And regardless, I’m not good enough at

cooking to make sweets even if I had the money!"

Did you really have to declare such a sad truth so confidently, Luce-san? I mean, yeah, namagashi would definitely cost a lot of money to make in this world, but still!

"Also, what was that milk? I only tasted a sample, but it seemed to be extremely high-quality!" Luce went on. "Even the restaurant where I used to work didn't use such high-quality milk!"

"Oh, yeah, we gathered that ourselves," I said. "It would definitely cost a lot if you had to buy it."

Hmm. I wonder if the cost of a slice of cake could skyrocket to ten thousand yen due to the material cost. My party could technically afford that, but I'd hesitate to fork over that much money just for sweets. Well, I wouldn't hesitate if it were for Wagyu beef, so I guess it just depends on what you value.

"Actually, Riva might be able to afford that milk," said Luce. "She's been making money hand over fist recently."

Luce-san turned to look at Riva for an answer, but Riva lowered her eyebrows and gently shook her head. "I haven't really made that much money. But I have become more financially secure thanks to Luce."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard that your store has been doing well recently," I said.

Riva explained that when all of us had gone swimming at the spring in the forest, Luce-san had been very impressed by her medicine and tonics, which could also be used as cosmetics, but when Luce-san had seen Riva's store for herself, she'd been shocked. After that, Luce-san had given Riva all sorts of tips to improve the appearance and atmosphere of her store, and it had been transformed into a more welcoming place that mainly sold cosmetics. In fact, I had heard rumors that plenty of women visited Riva's store nowadays.

"Mm. I've been able to avoid starving," said Riva.

"That's good to know," I said. "In that case, do you no longer need the kuttoes?"

I had asked the kids from the orphanage to deliver some kuttoes to Riva

because she'd mentioned that she liked them, so I felt a bit worried that they'd become a burden for her, but she hastily shook her head. "Not at all! I genuinely like the taste of kuttoes! However, I couldn't eat all of the ones that were delivered to me, so I gave half to Aera."

"Yeah, there's no way one person could go through all of those kuttoes by themselves," I said.

You couldn't finish four kilos of kuttoes even if you consumed ten grams per day, so something like a tenth of the kuttoes in one bag were almost certainly still too many for Riva. *Huh? Wait, half?*

"If you shared half with Aera, does that mean you ate the other half all by yourself?" Touya asked. "Are nuts, like, the go-to food for the rabbit beastfolk?"

"Come on, Touya, there's no way that's the case," I said. *I'm curious too, but straight up asking her about it isn't the right thing to do! There's no way that nuts are their staple food. Look, now Riva's smiling awkwardly because of you!*

"Well, nuts were *my* go-to food until recently, so..."

"You should feel free to get angry in these kinds of situations, Riva," I said. "It'd even be fair to jab back at Touya physically. You have my permission if you want to."

"N-No, I won't. I'm weak, after all..."

Does that mean she would do it if she were physically strong? Is she actually a bit pissed off?

Luce-san placed a hand on Riva's shoulders and pointed at Touya, so it seemed like she had also noticed the hidden meaning behind Riva's words.

"Don't worry, Riva. You might lack physical strength, but you have something else that's very powerful. All you need to do is to look at Touya-san and say, 'I hate insensitive guys like you, Touya-san.' Go for it!"

Riva hesitantly looked up at Touya, and...

"...I hate insensitive guys like you, Touya-san?"

Touya clutched his chest and collapsed onto the table in front of him. I heard a muffled "Blessed..." from him.

“Huh...?” Riva tilted her head in confusion, her long rabbit ears swaying. *Ugh! Gosh, that was close. I can’t believe even a stray bullet is this dangerous...*

“Tee hee, I knew you could do it, Riva.” Luce-san pretended to wipe some sweat off her brow as if she had just done a good job herself. “I expected a completely different reaction, but this works out too.”

“...I see that you’ve become good friends with Riva, Luce-san,” I said.

Luce-san and Riva had first met when all of us went swimming at the spring.

Luce-san smiled proudly. “Yep! In fact, I’d go so far as to say that we’re best friends now!”

“Cosmetics brought you two together, huh?”

“Yeah—I mean, no, that’s not the only reason!” Luce corrected herself. “Sure, I use the cosmetics that Riva makes, and she sells them to me at a discount, but still!”

Luce-san was a very honest woman. I turned to Riva for her opinion, and she shook her head with a gentle laugh.

“The reason my store is doing well now is that Luce gave me useful advice and helped advertise my products, so I don’t mind at all. In fact, I think it’s only fair to give her a discount after all she’s done for me.”

Luce-san seemed very moved. “Oh, you’re such a good girl, Riva! Let me pat you on your head!” She hugged Riva and patted her.

Riva blushed and pushed back against Luce-san’s body. “U-Um, Luce, please stop. There’s only a one-year age difference between us, so...”

“Oh, right, my bad,” said Luce. “You look younger than your age, Riva, so I completely forgot.”

“Should I consider that praise? As an alchemist, I worry that I lack dignity,” said Riva.

Luce-san grinned as she playfully poked Riva’s cheeks. “Yeah, it’s a compliment! In fact, I’d say that your age and smooth skin probably helps you get more sales.”

“Ugh. M-Money is important...”

Riva seemed to have some misplaced ideas about the kind of alchemist she wanted to become, but nothing could be accomplished without money, and her eyes wandered around as if she wasn’t sure about which mattered more, money or dignity.

“Ha ha. By the way, Riva, what do you plan to do with the kuttoes?” I asked. “There’s no way you could possibly consume even half of a bag by yourself, right?”

“Huh? Oh, the kuttoes? Well, I plan to extract oil from them,” said Riva.

“Oh, right, I forgot that you can also get oil from kuttoes,” I said.

The girls had used kutto oil before to sauté barrash mushrooms. Back on Earth, there were some cooking oils extracted from nuts, like walnut oil, but those were basically luxury ingredients. Not a lot of dishes called for kutto oil, so we hadn’t planned to extract any ourselves, but...

“A few drops of kutto oil add a nice scent and flavor to a dish,” said Luce. “Like I said, though, I don’t know how to cook.”

“Yeah, the dishes I’ve had with kutto oil were delicious. We have way more kuttoes than we can possibly use, so I guess it wouldn’t hurt to extract some oil from them,” I said. “By the way, we extracted some rapeseed oil ourselves. Would you like some, Riva?”

Riva looked up at me somewhat hesitantly. “Well, I would really appreciate it if you have some to spare. Are you sure about this, though?” She also seemed excited about the prospect of rapeseed oil, however.

I nodded. “Yeah. We have plenty of rapeseed oil, so it wouldn’t hurt to share some with you.”

“Oh, I’m kind of jealous. Can you also share some with us to use here at the café?” Luce asked. “Riva has mentioned before that she’s disappointed about not being able to buy good quality rapeseed oil here in Laffan...”

“Well, we planned to divide it up for personal use, but we didn’t put aside enough for a café,” I said.

"I'm not asking for you to share it for free, of course," said Luce. "Is it not possible for you to deliver rapeseed oil like you do meat?"

"Meat is something that we get in the course of adventuring," I said. "Aera-san buys all different kinds from us."

In the beginning, we had only delivered orc and tusk boar, but recently, we'd discovered a source of lots of different kinds of meat. In fact, at this point, we were delivering all of our spare meat to Aera-san, and she had bought it all without any complaints, so apparently she was able to put it to good use. Our deliveries were essentially a way for us to get rid of excess inventory, but rapeseed oil was completely different; you had to cultivate the rapeseed before extracting the oil.

"We've left the task of cultivating rapeseed in the hands of the children from an orphanage," I explained. "If you want to negotiate for rapeseed, I'd suggest going there."

We could provide the land, tools, and the fertilizer, but we were adventurers, so we had no intention of farming full-time.

"I see," said Luce. "Okay, I'll discuss this with Aera."

"Good idea. The girls made an oil press, so you'll have no problem getting an ample supply as long as you can provide the seeds themselves," I said.

Capital investment was no longer necessary now that we already had an oil press, so my party, the orphanage, and Aera-san's café could all benefit from this arrangement. *I'm sure that Ishuca-san won't mind as long as the orphanage has enough people to spare.*

"Oh, the girls made an oil press? In that case, can I borrow it sometime?" Riva asked.

"Oh, do you want to press some kutto oil? Sure, I guess," I said. "I doubt the girls would mind either."

Considering its size, the oil press must've cost a lot of money to make, so it wouldn't hurt to put it to use whenever possible.

As we continued chatting, the sweet smell from the kitchen gradually became

stronger, and eventually, the girls emerged with trays in their hands.

“Sorry for the wait,” said Haruka. “The desserts are ready.”

“Finally! I really can’t wait to try them out!”

Luce-san sounded delighted, but when Aera-san appeared from behind Haruka, she gave Luce-san an exasperated look.

“Gosh, why are you acting so excited? You’re the oldest person here, Luce, so calm down.”

“How could I *not* get excited by the delicious smell coming from the kitchen? Or rather, I should say, *you’re* the oldest person here, Aera! Sure, your appearance makes you seem like one of the youngest, but that has nothing to do with your actual age!”

“O-One of the youngest? N-Nah, there’s no way,” said Aera. “Metea-chan and Mary-chan are here as well...”

Hmm. I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Aera-san. You definitely look older than Metea, but you versus Mary is a close call. For another thing, you’ll probably end up as the youngest-looking person here in a few years. It looks like you have an ally in Yuki, though.

“It’s hard to get people to treat you your age when you’re short, so I completely understand what it’s like to be treated as too young, Aera-san!”

“Mm. I suffered considerable hardships during my time as an adventurer as a result of my height,” said Aera. “People would understand once they found out that I was an elf, but I still wish I were a bit taller.”

Uh, your height isn’t the only thing that makes you look young, Aera-san. I probably shouldn’t say any more, though.

“If you want to gain some height, you should eat a lot of the sweets that we made,” said Haruka. “Milk was one of the ingredients.”

I wasn’t sure if Haruka was joking, but Aera-san sounded a bit sad as she replied, “The only thing I’ll gain from eating a lot of sweets is width.”

However, Haruka ignored Aera-san’s rebuttal and placed the cake trays on the table in front of us.

"The first thing we made is a shortcake with peach compote," said Haruka. "This kind of cake was the first thing that came to mind when we tried to figure out what we wanted to do with fresh cream."

The cake was the same shape that most Japanese people would imagine upon hearing the word shortcake. It consisted of a base of sponge cake with layers of fresh cream and fruit. The cake itself was also frosted with fresh cream, and it was topped with a heap of cream and fruit. Although strawberries were more commonly used for shortcakes back in Japan, the girls had used peaches this time.

"Well, I've more or less accepted that my height probably won't change at this point. But all of us get a decent amount of exercise adventuring, so I'm not super worried about gaining width," said Yuki. "Next up is a tart with fresh cream and an assortment of nonseasonal fruits. We alternated thick layers of fresh cream with some of the fruit that we had stocked up. I'm not scared of the calories at all!"

The tray in Yuki's hands held a tart with a diameter of about ten centimeters. It was filled with fresh cream and fruit, and it looked like there was twice as much cream as fruit, so Yuki hadn't been exaggerating. I had no idea how you were supposed to eat something like this, but I noticed there were some spoons, so my assumption was that you would start into the crust after you scooped out the filling. I wasn't exactly scared of the calories either, but I was a bit scared of a stomachache given the sheer size of the tart.

"I'll definitely need to exercise a bit after today. I was told that this next dessert is called a Mont Blanc," said Aera. "We used a lot of chestnuts, so it's certainly a very fancy dessert—although I suppose all of these desserts are fancy..."

The Mont Blanc was the kind of chestnut pastry I was familiar with. It was a bit smaller than the tart, and the surface was covered with a spiral of chestnut cream. The top was decorated with chestnuts, and the insides were presumably stuffed with cream.

"All of these desserts do look delicious, but isn't this a bit much?" I said. I felt like there were too many sweets, and apparently the Mont Blanc wasn't

the last.

“The next one is the last!” Metea carefully carried the last tray to the table in front of us.

On top were some slightly deformed puddings. They were decorated with fresh cream and fruit as if to conceal their shapes, but the result was that they looked similar to the kind of desserts served at family restaurants back in Japan.

Touya frowned suspiciously. “Huh? Are these puddings? They look che—”

“These are some puddings à la mode that Metea and Mary worked hard to make,” said Haruka.

“Th-They look delicious!”

It’s obvious that you pivoted to something completely different from what you were about to say, Touya! But I know you did your best, so I’ll try to help you out.

Before the girls had a chance to think about what Touya had been trying to say, I chimed in, “Oh, Metea, Mary, did you two help out with making the desserts as well? They look quite well-made.”

The girls smiled and nodded.

“Yeah! We worked hard!” said Metea. “I’m sure they’ll taste delicious!”

“Mm. We had to follow the recipe step-by-step, though,” said Mary.

“These are all of the desserts that we made today,” said Natsuki. “Okay, everyone, feel free to—”

Luce-san leaned forward excitedly and interrupted Natsuki. “Can I start?!”

Aera-san sighed. “I guess you’ve already forgotten what I said earlier, Luce. Oh well. Feel free to start eating, everyone.”

Riva and Luce-san set right to it.

“O-Okay,” said Riva. “Whoa, this is really fluffy and sweet!”

“I-I can’t believe sweets this good actually exist! Ugh, I can’t stop myself from eating!” said Luce. “My weight is in danger! I know I’ll regret this later, but I still can’t stop myself!”

They really seemed to be enjoying themselves. I looked at the sweets on the table to decide what I would try first, but...

“I don’t think I’ll be able to try all of these,” I said. “A quarter should be enough for me...”

I enjoyed sweets as much as the average person, but one cake was more than enough as a meal. I hesitated between choosing one or cutting some slices, and while I was lost in thought, Haruka sat down beside me. “Why don’t you just try a little bit of each? I’ll eat the rest if you can’t eat more.”

“Hmm. I’m curious about what each of them tastes like, so that sounds good to me,” I said. “In that case, I’ll start with the peach shortcake.”

The peach shortcake looked like the kind of cake you would find back in Japan, and I hadn’t eaten anything like that in a very long time, so I was excited as I carved a piece with a fork and lifted it to my mouth.

“Whoa, the fragrance of the peach works really well with the soft sponge cake and the fresh cream,” I said. “Hmm? Oh, is the sugar different from what you’ve been using?”

Haruka seemed pleased that I’d noticed. “Yes, it actually is. Aera-san taught us a spell called Refine, and we used that to make better sugar.”

Apparently the purpose of the Refine spell was to remove impurities. The spell was mostly used for cooking, but very few people knew about it, besides which very few people could use magic, so it sounded like cooks capable of casting Refine were rare.

“Does that mean you used the Refine spell on brown sugar?” I asked.

“Yes. The final product isn’t as good as white sugar, but it’s pretty similar.”

Although Haruka used the word “similar,” the fresh cream was very white, so the new sugar was probably more or less identical to white sugar.

“The fresh cream would have tasted a bit off if we’d used normal brown sugar,” said Yuki. “We adjusted it so that the taste would be palatable. Okay, try this out next, Nao! Devour it!”

Yuki had carved out a small portion of the tart and lifted it to my mouth. I bit

into it and felt the light texture of the tart crust first. Then the taste of the fresh cream and fruit burst into my mouth and combined into a perfect balance of sourness and sweetness.

“Mm, the fresh cream tastes great,” I said. “It’s not too sweet, and the ingredients are good too.”

“Yeah. The raw material cost of this tart is probably at least ten gold coins.”

“...Why did you have to bring up the topic of money, Yuki? You made it much harder for me to eat this now,” I said.

But Yuki’s estimate was undoubtedly correct if I factored in the price that we could sell the milk to the guild for. I felt like it was a bit of a waste to use such valuable milk on sweets, but Yuki didn’t seem to care at all as she chomped on the remaining piece of tart and licked the fresh cream from her fingertips.

“We worked hard to squeeze this milk out, so we have the right to enjoy it,” said Yuki.

“I mean, yeah, I get what you mean, but...” I couldn’t stop thinking about the amount of money we could have earned if we’d sold the milk instead of using it for sweets. I glanced at Riva, thinking she probably felt the same way I did, and saw she had frozen in place with a fork in her hands. Her ears were twitching in fear, so she must’ve overheard my conversation with Yuki.

Natsuki was the next person to notice Riva’s reaction, and she turned toward Yuki as if to scold her. “Look, you made it hard for Riva-san to enjoy the sweets as well. There’s no need to hesitate, Riva-san. The milk we used is something that we can easily acquire ourselves, so don’t worry about it.” She smiled at Riva as if to encourage her to resume.

“O-Okay,” said Riva. “Th-The sweets are really delicious. I’m sure that this is the first and last time I’ll ever get to eat anything like this.”

Riva slowly lifted a slice of cake to her mouth as if to savor it for the last time. *Yeah, I feel the same way, Riva. The ingredients are way too expensive. If I were still in Japan, I wouldn’t dare to eat a tart that cost more than one hundred thousand yen.*

“It’s true that these are expensive, but you’ll probably get plenty of

opportunities to eat sweets in the future, Riva,” said Haruka. “Well, that’s as long as you remain friends with us...”

“O-Of course! All of you are my friends—some of the few friends I have,” said Riva. She hastily added, “A-Also, just to be clear, I’m not saying that just because I want to eat sweets!”

Haruka laughed. “Don’t worry, we understand perfectly. You’ve helped us before, so consider it even. Okay, Nao, next up is—”

Aera-san held out a fork and interrupted Haruka. “N-Nao-san, I cut a slice of Mont Blanc for you. Here you go.”

The Mont Blanc on the fork had been beautifully split into four, and the layers of cream and sponge cake inside were visible.

“This is all yours! I added a whole chestnut on top too!”

Aera-san moved closer as she urged me to eat the Mont Blanc, and I saw out of the corner of my eye that Haruka was laughing and shrugging.

Since Haruka didn’t seem to mind, I took a bite out of the Mont Blanc. “Whoa, the chestnut flavor is very rich. I can taste some other nuts too... This has a very balanced taste.”

Too much chestnut cream could make a Mont Blanc crumbly, but that problem was nonexistent here. The fragrance and chewiness of the nuts were great too. The whole chestnut was a bit of a chore to eat, but it was still delicious, so overall, I was very impressed by what a professional cook like Aera-san could create together with the girls, all of whom had the Cooking skill. All three of the sweets I had tried so far were exceptional as well as easy to eat—they weren’t too sweet. But I had enough by now, so...

“Big bro Nao, please try out the pudding that I made!” Metea’s eyes were shining with excitement as she offered me a bowl.

Ugh, I can’t say no to this! I took the bowl from Metea and scooped up some of the pudding with a little bit of the cream. *Hmm. I see. The pudding is a bit deformed, and the caramel is a bit bitter, but there aren’t any bits of eggshell inside, and the pudding itself has a smooth texture, so it’s very delicious. The girls must’ve supervised the sisters while they made this.*

"The milk is quite rich, and so is the egg. It's delicious. I think you did a great job, Metea." I patted Metea on her head as I praised her.

Metea smiled happily and wagged her tail. "Tee hee. It was my first time making something like this, but I did my best!"

"I happened to have some good-quality jabbs eggs in stock," said Aera.

"O-Oh, I see..."

Ugh. I didn't want to hear that, Aera-san. Jabbs were reptiles the size of chickens, and their eggs were a common food in Laffan. I had become accustomed to eating the eggs, but I still felt a bit squeamish whenever someone reminded me of where they came from.

I stopped eating after I'd finished about a third of the pudding, and Haruka took away the remainder. Touya, meanwhile, also seemed not to have been able to eat an entire serving of each of the desserts, instead consuming small portions of each one, and his leftovers had disappeared into Mary and Metea's stomachs. The other girls had each been able to consume one serving or more of each dessert, but as they sat around the remaining desserts and chatted, they looked like they could still eat a lot more.

"These desserts are really delicious. It'd be nice if we could add them to the menu here," said Luce.

"Th-That's impossible," said Aera. "Even the customers who visit this café won't purchase sweets that are this expensive."

"It's up to you to somehow cut costs while maintaining the same quality, Aera," said Luce.

"As I just said, that's impossible," said Aera. "These desserts are so good because we used high-quality strike ox milk as an ingredient..."

"That's where you need to get creative as a cook," said Luce. "Nao-san said he would provide some rapeseed oil as a discount, so I'm sure you can figure something out, right?"

"Huh? Really, Nao-san?"

"Uh, that's not exactly what I told her, but I did say something along those

lines.” I proceeded to summarize my earlier conversation with Luce-san.

Aera-san placed a hand to her chin thoughtfully. “That idea sounds like it’s worth considering. It might be possible to reduce costs if I have high-quality oil. Well, this is only if your party is willing to allow it, Haruka-san...”

“I personally don’t mind,” said Haruka. “Yuki wanted some wonderful flower beds, but there’s no way she’d be able to maintain something like that.”

“Mm, our yard is far too large for flower beds,” said Natsuki. “It’s the size of a full-fledged garden, the kind that would require a professional gardener to maintain.”

“Ugh. I guess a flower garden is a much more realistic choice,” said Yuki.

As the girls talked business, they continued consuming the desserts at a steady pace. Touya and I moved away from the girls and drank some slightly bitter tea to kill time.



A few days had passed since our fresh cream desserts party when we finally received a message from Diola-san informing us that the milk bottles were ready. We picked up the bottles at the guild and headed straight to the dungeon to milk some red strike oxen.

I teleported everyone from the entrance to the eleventh floor just as I had last time, and once again, I felt sick and had to rest for a spell. One major difference this time, however, was the fact that Yuki had to rest as well. Yuki had only teleported herself and Metea because Metea would take the least mana to teleport of any of our party members, but even that had been enough to completely drain Yuki, so she had to lay down next to me.

On a sidenote, Natsuki had been assigned the task of offering her lap to Yuki as a pillow. Yuki grumbled and mentioned that I had promised to offer my lap as a pillow, but I still felt totally beat, even though it wasn’t as bad as last time, so her request had to wait for another time. We recovered a bit faster than I had before, so we teleported two more times and arrived at the twentieth floor less than a day after entering the dungeon.

“All right. We’re going to capture a red strike ox the same way as we did last

time, right?” I asked. “I’ll cast the Fire Resistance spell on Touya, and he’ll grab its attention.”

Touya grimaced. “I guess we don’t have any other choice. I’m kinda scared, though. Your Fire Resistance spell isn’t that stable.”

“Please, unstable isn’t the right way to describe it,” I said. “You should at least say that it’s hard to gauge.”

In numerical terms, if we used one point of mana to shoot a Fire Arrow at someone who’d been buffed by the Fire Resistance spell, also cast with one point of mana, then the arrow would pierce through the resistance buff and deal damage. The reason for this was that the Fire Resistance spell covered a person’s entire body, while the force of the Fire Arrow spell was concentrated in a single spot. As a result, it would take about ten points of mana for the Fire Resistance spell to completely block a Fire Arrow that had been conjured with one point of mana.

However, it took two to three times more mana for the Fire Resistance spell to negate spells that dispersed their power over a wider area, and there was a high chance that the spells with the widest area of effect, such as Jet Fire, could be resisted with the same amount of mana. In fact, Jet Fire was probably the spell that most closely resembled a red strike ox’s fire breath.

“Well, I’ll start off by using more mana than usual for the Fire Resistance spell just to be safe, so you can rest easy, Touya,” I said.

“Roger. I’m counting on you,” said Touya. “I don’t wanna end up bald.”

“Relax, Touya!” Yuki interjected. “I’ll cast Extinguish Fire before you get burnt to a crisp!”

To those carefree words, Touya protested, “I’ll turn tail right away if it looks like I’m about to get burnt to a crisp!”

But considering how things had turned out last time, he would probably be fine. There was no point in talking further, so I started to prepare my magic. “Get ready, Touya! *Fire Resistance*.”

A dim layer of light appeared around Touya. The layer would become thinner when the effect of the spell was about to run out, at which point I could cast it

again to refresh the buff. Touya wouldn't suddenly become vulnerable to fire as long as I paid attention and made sure the effects of the spell didn't run out, so it was completely safe—unless the fire turned out to be more potent than I'd anticipated.

"Okay, you're good to go," I said. "Perfect timing. There's actually a red strike ox right there. Good luck!"

"Huh?! Already?!" said Touya.

"There's no point in lollygagging here, right? Get going!" I pointed at a red strike ox, barely visible in the distance, and gave Touya a push.

He reluctantly started toward it, and the rest of us followed, keeping our distance from him. The red strike ox eventually noticed us, and the encounter played out the same way it had in the past. Touya gracefully dodged its charge and, when it turned around, grabbed its horns to hold it in place. Yuki and I simultaneously cast Earth Wall to lift the red strike ox into the air, at which point Touya was engulfed in flames.

"Whoa! The fire doesn't feel hot, but it's still pretty scary!"

Is it actually scary, Touya? You sound like you're having fun. Touya's fluffy tail hadn't been damaged at all, so clearly my Fire Resistance spell was working properly, and the layer of light didn't appear any dimmer.

"You only get covered in fire for a brief moment, so bear with it," I said. "I guess I can use a bit less mana next time."

"Please don't!" Touya, still swathed in flames, reprimanded me. "It's important to have a high safety margin! Obey all of Haruka-sama's orders!"

"I never expected to hear such nostalgic words here," I said. "What do you think, Haruka?"

Haruka laughed as she and Mary secured the red strike ox with a rope. "Well, if you have mana to spare, then I think it's fine to continue using the same amount for the Fire Resistance spell."

Touya breathed a sigh of relief before letting go of the strike ox's horns. He helped the others restrain it, after which Natsuki started milking it. Meanwhile,

Yuki was marking its body with paint. Red strike oxen, being much stronger than normal strike oxen, were capable of destroying the Earth Walls, so we had no time to waste. There was the option of using more mana to reinforce the Earth Walls, but that would have been a waste of mana, and based on our previous encounter with a red strike ox, we could probably finish in time if we were fast.

“Please assist me, Metea,” said Natsuki.

“Okay!”

Metea’s job was handing empty milk bottles to Natsuki and sealing the bottles when they were full. Throughout the process, the rest of us continued to restrain the red strike ox, holding our weapons at the ready just in case.

After Natsuki announced, “We’re done!” she and Metea fled, and the rest of us untied the rope, then chased after them. The Earth Walls crumbled shortly after all of us had managed to escape from the red strike ox’s patrol area.

“Whew. We barely made it,” said Yuki.

“Yeah. I’d say this was a success, though,” said Touya. “The fire scared me, but it wasn’t hot at all.”

“That was the whole point of the Fire Resistance spell,” I said. “We might be able to do this more efficiently if we skip the step of restraining the ox with rope, but...”

“Hmm. Would that work?” Yuki mused, swaying back and forth. “We could have Haruka swap roles with Natsuki and milk red strike oxen. I could let Metea handle the painting, and I’d be free to restrain the red strike ox, but...”

The task of restraining a red strike ox would be a huge ordeal for someone of Yuki’s physique.

“...I think it might work out if Touya could handle the workloads of a person and a half,” Yuki concluded.

“Yeah, I should be able to handle that,” said Touya. “All my role takes is pure strength.”

“We can just return to the option of using rope if this plan proves to be too dangerous,” said Haruka. “How much milk did you get, Natsuki?”

“Four and one-fifth bottles,” said Natsuki. “We worked at a decent pace.”

Diola-san had provided us with a total of 110 bottles, including the spares. Viscount Nernas planned to send one hundred bottles of red strike ox milk as gifts, but it would have been extremely careless to only prepare exactly one hundred bottles. According to Diola-san, nobles who valued appearances had to keep their word, so it wouldn’t be acceptable if the total number dropped to ninety-nine or fewer as a result of bottles breaking during transportation. We had a lot of bottles left to fill, but we’d probably only have to milk about thirty red strike oxen even if some of them gave less milk than others.

“Okay, let’s go with that new plan and continue milking red strike oxen,” said Haruka.

We tested out our new plan on another red strike ox. I wasn’t sure if it would work out, but it actually turned out to be much more efficient than using rope. We were able to significantly reduce the amount of time we had to spend milking the red strike ox, and we were also able to eliminate the slightly dangerous task of untying the rope afterward, so the entire process was also a bit safer. The only real downside to our new plan was that the paint on the red strike oxen looked a lot more like graffiti now that Metea had been assigned to that task, but it wasn’t an issue as long as we could recognize oxen we had milked before.

The paint would help us identify the red strike oxen that we had already milked, but identifying females was still pretty annoying. Red strike oxen had a much wider patrol area than normal strike oxen, so it was hard to check their sex before they noticed us, and there were a couple of times when we were only able to check after Touya had pinned an ox in place. We didn’t actually handle the males any differently than regular male strike oxen, however. We used magic to slay normal strike oxen from afar; the only difference in the case of red strike oxen was that we switched to physical attacks from Haruka’s kodachi or Natsuki’s naginata. The red strike oxen would charge us headlong just like normal ones, so they were very easy to slay.

In the end, our milking adventure went pretty smoothly, and after just a few days, we had collected all the milk we needed. My Third Eye skill also leveled up. It was now able to identify a target’s sex. I felt kind of baffled by this new

function, which had very limited utility.

Diola-san seemed very surprised when we dropped by the guild to deliver the bottles of milk.

“Have you already filled all of the bottles?! Th-Thank you very much!”

She must’ve expected us to take much longer, but even so, she paid us in cash. We received a total of ten million Rea. That amounted to ten thousand gold coins, which we could never have carried, so we were paid with large gold coins. *Ten million Rea in just about one week, huh? I bet this is enough to fund five entire houses similar to ours. No wonder there aren’t many high-rank adventurers.*

Our earnings were only possible because of magic, and I was well aware that there weren’t many mages in this world. However, my party of Rank 5 adventurers had been able to earn a massive amount of money in a short amount of time, so higher rank adventurers could probably earn a decent amount of money even if they couldn’t use magic, and it would undoubtedly be easy for them to save up for retirement.

Do most adventurers retire early? Those who continue adventuring probably enjoy the life—or else they have to continue earning money because they spend too much and are bad at saving. I know that there are a lot of adventurers who just immediately spend everything they earn without thinking, so maybe the concept of saving money for retirement isn’t common in this profession.

“Also, would your party be willing to take care of transporting the bottles of red strike ox milk when you depart from Laffan for the escort quest?” Diola asked.

“Sure, we don’t mind,” I replied. “We’ll have to go to the same place, after all.”

“Thank you very much,” said Diola. “Your party will be paid a separate reward for this.”

We had to travel to Pining at a later date in order to begin the escort quest. Transporting the red strike ox milk would be easy if we just stored the bottles in our magic bags, so there was no reason for us to turn down Diola-san’s request,

especially if the guild would pay us more. It was essentially free money, but the guild also benefited from this arrangement.

“There aren’t many people whom the guild can trust to transport a shipment of goods worth ten thousand gold coins in total,” said Diola. “You are some of the few adventurers who won’t be tempted by that amount of money, and your safe method of transportation is also very reassuring.”

Diola-san took a deep breath, then sat up straight and continued.

“I’ll handle the necessary preparations, so please drop by the guild again on the assigned departure date. I sincerely apologize for any inconvenience that this may cause, but I’m counting on your party.”



Since we’d returned with the red strike ox milk more quickly than the guild had expected, we had plenty of time left before our departure, so next, we headed up the Noria River to fish. There had been the option of training inside the dungeon until the day we had to leave Laffan, but we hadn’t had a real vacation in a long time, and once we began the escort quest, we wouldn’t be able to take days off work for a while. According to Diola-san, the length of time we would be away from Laffan would depend on our client, but her estimate, taking into consideration all sorts of factors, was that it would take at least two months, hence our decision to take a vacation beforehand.

Since we were going fishing, Tomi had tagged along, but he could only stay one night now that he had a stable job, and he had to return to Laffan by himself tomorrow. We wouldn’t have allowed him to accompany us in the past, but after we’d told him he could gauge his experience points by visiting a temple, he’d continued to train on his own, and he had gotten strong enough to fend for himself on the way from Laffan to our usual fishing spot. I was fairly sure that fishing wasn’t the only reason he’d continued training, but I was still a bit surprised to learn that he was a diligent guy.

“Whoa! There’s so many fish!” Metea exclaimed.

“I-I can’t believe it’s so easy to catch them!” said Mary.

The fish at our usual spot would bite at every cast, so Metea and Mary

seemed to be enjoying their first experience of fishing. Metea seemed to enjoy the act of fishing itself, while Mary seemed like she felt a bit shocked about the fact that it was so easy to catch fish, which had been very hard for them to obtain in the past. Fish were worth a decent amount of money, so as far as they were concerned, it was almost like we were fishing for gold.

“I guess it’s always easy to catch fish here,” said Haruka.

“Yeah. This is a very valuable fishing spot for us, and especially for our diet,” I said.

I had heard rumors before that girls didn’t like to accompany guys fishing, but Haruka, Natsuki, and Yuki had never really complained and would tag along with Touya and me most of the time. There had been a few times when Touya and Tomi were the only ones who’d accompanied me, however. The girls were probably only willing to go because it let them restock on food, but whatever the reason, I was glad that we could fish together.

“I’m personally not all that satisfied,” said Tomi. “There isn’t much room for improvement.”

“Sure, but the fish that you’ve caught are all huge, Tomi,” said Touya.

“That’s because of my fly lure and the size of my hook that I made,” said Tomi. “One advantage I have is that I’m a blacksmith.”

There wasn’t a significant difference between the fish that we caught and the fish that Tomi caught, but Touya was right that the fish that Tomi caught were quite large on average. We weren’t competing, so it wasn’t that important, but I was a bit jealous. I would have been ecstatic to catch fish that size.

“The rod you’re using looks a bit different too,” I said.

“Yeah. It would be bad if it snapped, so I made some adjustments,” said Tomi.

For our rods, we had simply used the first branches that we came across, but Tomi’s rod looked like a high-quality one, at least comparatively. According to Tomi, he had paid a cabinetmaker to make his fishing rod, and he had also made the metal fittings himself.

“So I take it the improvements you made to your fishing equipment don’t

really matter here?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, yeah. None of the fish here are strong enough for the flexibility of my rod to matter, and even the slightly bigger ones can be easily scooped out with landing nets,” Tomi replied. “You basically don’t really need anything complicated to catch fish here.”

“Mm. I feel like you barely need a rod,” said Touya.

Touya was completely right. Even if a slightly bigger fish bit the bait, all we had to do was to hold the thread and pull it closer, then scoop it into a net. In fact, I was pretty sure that a wooden branch with no flexibility or even just a spool of thread and a hook would work fine.

“I made some prototypes for things like gaffs and fishing reels, but I don’t know if I’ll ever get to use them,” said Tomi. “Do you guys have any plans to visit the sea eventually?”

A gaff was a stick with a hook on one end, meant for pulling up large fish, but none of the fish in the Noria River were big enough to require that kind of tool. The same applied to fishing reels: there weren’t any fish that required something that powerful, and distance wasn’t an issue either, so a reel would only be useful if you were fishing in a body of water at least the size of a lake. With all of that in mind, the sea would be a better place if you wanted to put a fishing reel to use, but...

“Nope,” I said. “This kingdom is landlocked—you can’t reach the sea here.”

“Really?!” Tomi’s eyes widened in surprise, but then he sighed to himself. “I mean, I kind of assumed that was the case, but I was right, huh? Ugh...”

It seemed like he had somewhat expected something like this. Even living as adventurers, we’d only learned about other countries recently, so there was no way someone who was busy smithing would have any geographical knowledge.

All of the nearby countries were landlocked as well, so you had to travel beyond them if you wanted to reach the sea, but the route through the Principality of Austianim was the only realistic choice if you wanted to avoid trouble along the way. That route, however, wasn’t easy to traverse, so it wouldn’t be a journey that someone could casually embark on for the sake of a

little sea fishing.

“I asked you before if you were willing to put your life on the line for fishing, but that’s the minimum requirement if you want to fish at the sea,” said Touya.

“Really?”

“Yeah. There’s barely any information available about the countries you have to go through to reach the sea,” Touya replied. “In fact, there’s a chance you might get captured and forced into slavery the moment you set foot in a different country, especially since you’re not a human.”

“Touya’s right. The Fegrey Kingdom is probably the most dangerous of all the nearby countries,” I said. “Even in the other countries, anything can happen to you depending on the lord of the territory you’re in, and we’ve heard that discrimination is rampant as well.”

The Lenium Kingdom, where we lived, was better than most of the nearby countries, but the viscount of two generations past had forced innocent people into slavery in order to obtain miners, so no matter where you lived, this world was dangerous.

“I don’t mind if I have to fight monsters, but I’d like to avoid putting my life on the line like that,” said Tomi.

“Yep,” said Touya. “So anyway, we’ll let you know and invite you to tag along if we ever figure out a safe route to the sea, but don’t expect too much.”

“I appreciate the thought,” said Tomi. “I’m counting on you, Touya-kun!”

I did want to eat sashimi made with saltwater fish if possible, so I had no objections to Touya’s idea of inviting Tomi to accompany us, but the odds of us finding safe passage to the sea were quite low. In fact, I was fairly sure that the only way we could safely reach the sea was if I someday became capable of teleporting across countries, but even that would require me to visit the sea on foot at least once beforehand, so my desire for sashimi would probably remain a pipe dream for a long time.



Trips to restock on fish were usually a form of vacation for us, but we had

some first-timers with us, namely Mary and Metea, so we planned to let them experience what it was like to cook fish on skewers over a campfire. They were now preparing the fish under Natsuki's supervision.

"Start by removing the scales," said Natsuki.

"Okay!" said Mary.

"Ew," said Metea. "They're kinda slimy..."

The sisters were quite good at gutting animals and monsters, but they looked a bit unsure of how to deal with fish; apparently it was a bit different for them.

"Once you remove the scales, open the belly and remove all of the entrails," said Natsuki. "Remove the gills as well."

"Like this...?" Mary asked.

"Yes. You're doing well," Natsuki replied. "The next step is to rinse it."

Yuki and Haruka were standing next to Natsuki, and while she taught the sisters, they swiftly dressed the fish that the rest of us were going to cook. Tomi was dressing some fish as well, and he looked quite skilled at it. Touya and I were working on the campfire. We couldn't cook fish without fire, so that was an important task as well.

"You seem pretty familiar with all this, Tomi," said Yuki, sounding a bit surprised. "Do you cook very often?"

"No, not at all," said Tomi with a laugh. "I just know fish because my parents always made me clean the fish that I caught."

Tomi had shown off how good he was at cleaning and dressing fish when he had tagged along with Touya and me, so he must've accumulated a lot of experience at home.

"Oh, I see. Did your parents not know how to dress fish?" Yuki asked. "Whole fish have gotten a bit harder to find at supermarkets in recent years, so that might be completely normal, but..."

"No, I think they were better than average," Tomi replied. "They forced me to help whenever I caught too many fish, though."

"I guess it'd be a bit of a hassle if you had to gut a lot of fish," said Yuki. "But I never had many opportunities before I was transported to this world..."

"Mm. The fish sold at supermarkets generally came in the form of fillets or processed fish in trays," said Tomi. "There were some whole fish too, but the people who worked there would dress them for you if you asked."

"Yeah, exactly! They were much better at it than I was, so there weren't many opportunities for me to gut fish myself," said Yuki. She laughed and shrugged. "I've lost count of how many times I've dressed fish since I got transported to this world, though."

And she wasn't exaggerating. We used fish for broth too, so we had caught hundreds by now, and the girls had dressed most of them for us.

"Well, the fish that you've dressed are just the ones that you've caught here, right? They're much easier to dress than saltwater fish," said Tomi. "I sometimes used to catch weird sea fish that were really hard to dress."

"Really? Can you give an example?" Haruka asked.

"Well, the commonly known ones were pike congers and anglerfish," Tomi replied. "I looked up how to clean an anglerfish on the internet, but the process of cutting pike conger bones was really difficult—it required extreme precision."

"Yeah, I imagine you can't simply follow information off the internet for something like that," said Haruka. "What did you do with the pike congers? Did you just eat them with the bones intact?"

"Nah, I tossed them into a food processor and minced them."

"That almost sounds like a waste, but I suppose it's the smart choice," said Haruka. "That way you wouldn't need to cut the bones."

"The minced congers were actually great," said Tomi. "They were a bit different from the ones you'd get at a restaurant, though."

"What about the less commonly known fish that you caught?" Haruka asked.

"Flatheads were annoying to clean," Tomi replied. "They were delicious, though, and not the kind of thing you could get at a supermarket."

"Yeah, I've never had one," said Haruka.

Hmm? Oh, Natsuki's cooking class looks like it's almost over. Time passed really quickly while Tomi was talking fish with Haruka and Yuki, huh?

"The last step is to wriggle the fish before inserting the skewer, and then all you have to do is salt it," said Natsuki.

"Done!" shouted Metea.

"I'm done too!" said Mary.

They held their fish skewers aloft as if to show them off. The skewers looked quite decent considering it was the sisters' first time, but Haruka, Yuki, and Tomi had each finished thirteen skewers in the time it had taken the sisters to make two. *Oh well. Speed isn't the important thing today, so I'm not even going to bring it up.*

"Metea-chan, Mary-chan, please line up the skewers around the campfire next," said Natsuki.

"Okay," they replied in unison.

The total number of fish skewers around the campfire came to sixteen after Natsuki added her own skewer together with Metea and Mary's. Sixteen could be divided into two skewers per person, but a mere two skewers wouldn't be filling, so Natsuki prepared a second campfire and started making some barley gruel. Barley gruel and barley rice were actually quite common meals for us. They were basically substitutes for actual rice. There were also some wheat varieties that tasted similar to pearl barley, and the girls would sometimes turn wheat into rolled oats, so the wheat products were actually quite enjoyable to eat.



Metea stared excitedly at the fish skewers. “Are they done yet? Almost?”

“Calm down, Met,” said Mary. “Um, how much longer will it take until the food is ready?”

Mary was also having a hard time hiding her excitement, but the sisters were about to be extremely disappointed by Haruka’s response.

“Well, the fish will get very tasty if we let them cook for about an hour,” said Haruka.

“A-An hour?!” Mary gasped.

“Really?! I can’t wait that long!”

Metea waved around both hands to express her discontent, and the rest of us laughed. Fish could be cooked much faster if we placed them on a net over the charcoal fire, but fish skewers would take a bit longer, and the rest of us were all aware of this due to how experienced we were at cooking fish. The girls were roasting some other fish without seasoning that they would eventually dry for fish broth, but those fish would take about two to three hours. One hour was nothing compared to that, so the salted fish skewers would be ready in no time if we had some tea while we waited.

“We can just enjoy some fruit while we wait. The barley gruel will take some time too.” Yuki produced an assortment of fruit that we had gathered from the dungeon.

Metea stared at the fruit in Yuki’s hands and immediately retracted her opinion. “I’ll wait!”

We all laughed again when we saw Metea’s cute reaction, and we ate some fruit and nuts to kill time as we stared into the campfire. I personally enjoyed time spent waiting around a campfire, but...

“...I think the fish is ready by now,” said Metea.

Yuki had only provided us with a small amount of fruit and nuts since an actual meal was awaiting us. Metea had finished her portion very quickly, and she couldn’t seem to wait any longer.

“Be patient, Met,” said Mary. “Our patience will make the fish taste even

better!"

"Ugh. They already look really tasty..."

While they looked at Natsuki for permission, Metea and Mary both clenched their fists as if to endure the temptation to snatch the fish skewers, but she simply smiled and shook her head. The same interaction occurred a couple times more before the fish skewers were finally ready. The sisters lifted their skewers to their mouths at the same time. Immediately after taking a bite, they both beamed and shouted the word "Delicious!" in unison.

The rest of us started to tear into our own skewers. *Mm, yeah, fish cooked over charcoal fire tastes absolutely delicious.* The fish that the girls cooked back home was just as good, but I felt like the skewers tasted a bit better due to the fact that we were eating them in the open around a campfire.

"This was worth the wait!" Metea declared. "I'll catch even more fish!"

"It'll be a waste if we don't catch a lot of fish while we can!" said Mary.

After the sisters had experienced the wonderful taste of fish cooked over a charcoal fire, they were highly motivated to catch more, and they worked very hard to catch fish in the afternoon as well. Tomi reluctantly headed back to Laffan by himself the next morning, but the rest of us extended our stay at the Noria River by two days at the sisters' behest. As a result, we managed to restock on plenty of fish, shrimp, and crabs before we returned to Laffan.

We continued to relax for a while even after returning from our fishing trip. We'd never attempted an escort quest before, so we made the decision that it would be best for us to remain in perfect condition until the quest began. Thus, we spent our time on things like cooking, alchemy, and magic instead of adventuring. Over a year had passed since we had been transported to this world, but it had been a long time since we'd gotten a chance to relax like this. The peaceful days warmed my heart, and I was very grateful to the strike oxen that had "shared" their milk with us.

None of us were skipping our daily training even now, however. I'd heard rumors that it took three days to catch up for every one day you missed. We usually never took a break from training; we were diligent and wanted to maintain constant focus in battle. The only exceptions were days when we were

out of town for work and the days right after we returned to town. Otherwise, all of us usually jogged in the morning and trained with each other.

In addition, I'd personally continued to visit Advastlis-sama's temple to offer prayers. I would drop by during my morning jogs to donate money and check my current experience points. I didn't care too much about my level in itself, but I'd come to value the daily routine of making sure that I hadn't been slacking and that I was slowly becoming stronger.

Today I dropped by the temple to make an offering per usual, but...

"Whale bonus! Congrats!"

"...Huh?"

No sooner had I heard that carefree voice in my head than my surroundings were engulfed in white light. I recognized that voice, but I had no idea why I was hearing it now.

Advastlis-sama completely ignored my confusion and continued, "You swiped a lot—I mean, you donated a lot of money, so I'm gonna reward you with a special bonus!"

Hold on, I need to react and say something! "Um, what's this all about?"

"Huh? You whaled—I mean, you donated a lot of money, so this is my way of saying thanks," Advastlis replied. "You donated large silver coins every time even though you didn't have to, and you contributed a lot in other ways too."

Oh yeah, I guess the amount of money that I've donated at this temple has exceeded the amount of money that I gave to charity in my whole life back on Earth. I earn much more money than I did when I was just a normal high school student, after all.

"Is this another bonus that only applies to me?" I asked.

"Nah, it applies to everyone who whaled, so anyone who donated a lot of money will be eligible," Advastlis replied.

Hmm. I don't think "whaled" is the right term. It's not like you spent a lot of money to make us stronger.

"That doesn't matter at all as long as you understand what I mean!" Advastlis

interjected. “Don’t nitpick my choice of words!”

Man, I never thought I’d get scolded by a god.

“Anyway, I actually give out special bonuses to anyone who fulfills certain conditions and donates a decent amount of money, but keep it a secret,” said Advastlis.

Hmm. So money isn’t the only condition. Is it the number of times a person visits the temple? Before, I got a “first-time login bonus,” so maybe each visit counts as a login?

“It’s up to you to figure it out,” said Advastlis. “But keep in mind, if you tell anyone about this, that person will become ineligible for the bonuses.”

“Does that include my own party members?” I asked.

“Of course,” Advastlis replied. “But everyone has a chance, so feel free to wish something for yourself this time.”

For the first-time login bonus, I’d wished for a blessing that would apply to my entire party; I had felt bad about being the only one to receive a blessing even though all of us worked hard. It sounded like everyone had a chance to get the “whale” bonus, however, so that was a relief, but I had to make sure not to accidentally mention it. Everyone else visited the temple to donate money from time to time, so they would probably become eligible eventually, and I would feel really bad if I unintentionally denied them that chance.

“Okay, let’s get starte—”

“U-Um, may I ask a couple of questions first?” I asked.

“Questions? Well, I don’t know if I’ll be able to answer them, but sure!” Advastlis replied.

Huh? Oh, I didn’t think my request would actually go through. There are some questions that we all came up with in case I met Advastlis-sama again, but there’s probably no point asking those, since I won’t be able to tell everyone how I found out if I can’t mention the bonus. I guess we can just ask about what we want to know individually or discuss things after everyone has received the bonus.

“First of all, why did you transport me and my classmates to this world?” I asked.

“Well...”

“Well?”

“That’s classified information!” Advastlis exclaimed.

“...Huh?”

“Oh, did I get that quote wrong? I heard that those words let you brush off any question...”

Who did you hear that from?! It only works if a cute girl with big boobs does it! Also, I really didn’t expect to hear such a dated reference!

“Oh, come on, I’m definitely cute,” said Advastlis.

“Uh, I can’t see what you look like right now, Advastlis-sama,” I said. “Your voice also sounds like a young boy’s...”

“Everyone knows what the gods look like deep down in their hearts,” said Advastlis. “All you have to do is to think about the cutest girl that you can imagine, and you’ll arrive at the answer.”

So you’re not going to show me what you look like, huh? If I recall correctly, you looked like a young boy when you transported me to this world. Your statue looked like a young male god too...

“Well, I never said anything about being male,” said Advastlis. “You shouldn’t assume things from statues alone.”

“Does that mean you’re actually a goddess, Advastlis-sama?” I asked.

“Who knows? Maybe, maybe not.”

I guess a trickster god would never give a clear answer. However, if the appearance that I first saw wasn’t deceptive, then Advastlis-sama might be a tomboyish girl, but it’s absolutely inconceivable that Advastlis-sama is a girl with big boobs, so...

“Just so you know, I’m gonna end your question time early if you continue with that insolent thought,” said Advastlis.

“O-Oh, I-I’m very sorry!” I stammered. “Um, I don’t really understand how my own level is related to my stats...”

“Oh yeah, you can only check your level and experience points, so that isn’t much information at all,” said Advastlis. “I guess it isn’t very helpful, huh?”

“Also, it’s hard to compare myself to other adventurers when I only know my own level,” I said.

“Hmm. There’s no such thing as a national exam system for levels, and there aren’t any institutions that gather that kind of data, so it’d be kind of unfair if you and your classmates were the only ones who could see other people’s levels,” said Advastlis.

No partiality allowed, huh?

“You’ll have to just meet a lot of people and train your Third Eye skill so that you can get a rough feeling for how strong others are,” said Advastlis. “For reference, it’s technically possible to level up all the way to level 1,000...”

“Level 1,000?!”

That’s way too far away! I haven’t really fought any strong foes lately, but my level is only 22 right now, so I can’t imagine how long it’d take to reach level 1,000.

“Yeah, level 1,000 isn’t easy to reach,” said Advastlis. “As an elf, you do have a longer lifespan than most people, but you’ll have to do your best and devote all your time if you ever want to get that far.”

Is that all I need to do if I want to reach level 1,000? I mean, sure, my party has been taking it slow and easy, but still.

“As for your stats, think of it like getting twice as good at your specialty every time you double your level,” said Advastlis. “In your case, that would mean something like your mana pool doubling in size, so you would be able to use the same spell twice as often as before.”

“Does that mean magic training is pointless for me?” I asked. “Will my mana pool scale with my level regardless of how hard I try to increase it?”

“No, that’s not it. How should I phrase this? You’re familiar with games, so

think of levels as something like minimum stat growth,” said Advastlis. “For example, it’s possible to increase your mana pool through training alone, but you won’t get any experience points as a result and won’t be able to level up.”

Hmm. Does that mean it’s impossible to come up with a high-level character who has all their points in one stat? In terms of numbers, it sounds like someone with 10,000 mana could remain stuck at level 1 if their strength was only 1. Powerful mages or people with ridiculous strength would also remain at a low level if they didn’t raise their other stats. At the same time, doesn’t it imply that there are low-level warriors out there in the world who can deal massive damage?

“Also,” Advastlis went on, “although you barely get any experience points if you only slay weak monsters, it’s possible to get more depending on how you slay them. The key to becoming stronger is what you get out of a battle.”

Oh, I see. The result of stat growth gets converted into experience points instead of a set amount of experience points resulting in stat growth, right?

“Yeah, you’ve got the right idea. Slaying powerful foes is also a good way to get stronger, but it’s almost pointless if you want to try power leveling,” said Advastlis.

Almost pointless, huh? I wasn’t sure if the act of slaying monsters was important or if witnessing a battle against a strong foe would also count toward your experience points, but Advastlis-sama continued without answering my question.

“Everyone has different rates of stat growth, of course. You and Touya-kun won’t have the same physical strength even if you’re both the same level,” said Advastlis. “Think of levels as a measurement of how powerful you are overall.”

According to Advastlis-sama, the minimum stat growth was different for every person, so people weren’t guaranteed the same stats by certain levels. My mana had to be at least 100 if I wanted to reach level 10, but Touya could reach level 10 with just 50 mana.

“Do you have any other questions?” Advastlis asked.

“Um, could you possibly adjust our status screens so that we can see our own

stats? It'd be great if we could see things like HP and MP," I said.

"...You need to face reality, Nao-kun," said Advastlis. "You can't just measure everything in the world with numbers."

Did I just get told to face reality by a fantasy god?! I mean, sure, it would be weird to see how much damage your body could endure in the form of HP, but...

"Gods might be fantasy in your world, but they're real in this world," said Advastlis. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to give up on this."

"Wh-What about mana?" I asked. "It'd be really convenient if we could tell how much mana a spell consumes by looking at MP..."

"Hmm. I could technically do that, but I'm not going to," Advastlis replied.

"Why not?!"

"It would give you too much of an advantage."

I fell silent at those words. *Fair and impartial as always, huh?*

"Do your best to get a sense of how much mana each spell consumes," said Advastlis. "That sensation can vary a lot depending on your condition, though, so it won't be easy. But things will probably work out just fine once you figure out the smallest unit of mana that you can use."

I appreciate the advice, but that's the hard part. It sounds kind of similar to how experienced artisans can grasp the thickness of something down to less than a tenth of a millimeter just by touching it, so it's going to take a long time before I'm at that level.

"Um, what about stats other than HP or MP?" I asked.

"Hmm. Well, I might update your status screens in the future if I feel like it, but don't expect too much," said Advastlis.

Is that like a promised update patch that never comes?! Oh well. It's usually pointless to ask the developers to implement changes you want. Sorry, everyone! I did my best, but it didn't work out!

"Now, then, let's get back to the topic of the whale bonus," said Advastlis.

"Oh, um, can I say one last thing before we get started?" I asked.

“Hmm? Sure, go ahead,” Advastlis replied.

While I still had time, I hurriedly said, “Thank you very much for blessing Metea and Mary as well as us, Advastlis-sama.”

I heard a joyful laugh in response. “You’re welcome. I would’ve felt sorry for the two of them if they’d gotten left out even though they’re members of your party now. Besides, they revere me a lot more than you and the original members of your party.”

“Oh, um, I’m very sorry about that...” Japanese people like us weren’t very pious to begin with, and we had seen what Advastlis-sama looked like before, so...

“Don’t worry, I don’t really mind. I didn’t choose you and your classmates based on piety, after all,” said Advastlis. “All right. It’s finally time for your whale bonus! You can choose between darts, slots, a lottery wheel, or pulling one string from a bundle of strings!”

The equipment for the options that Advastlis-sama had described appeared out of nowhere in front of me. The slots and lottery wheel were very obvious. The dartboard was spinning, so I couldn’t just easily aim for a certain spot. The strings were the kind you would see at Japanese festivals. Each string had a prize attached to the end, and you would get the item that moved after you pulled a string. There were some things that had the words “Double stats!” and “Access to all types of magic” written on them, but there was no way that Advastlis-sama would actually grant something overpowered to someone, so I wasn’t tempted at all.

“Oh, come on, I went out of my way to prepare all of this! Don’t be so distrustful,” said Advastlis. “It would be bad manners for adults to buy all of the strings for themselves at a festival, so countermeasures like this are necessary, right?”

“Well, I think they’re actually kind of a scam, so I don’t like them,” I said.

Back in Japan, I had seen some stalls that had expensive game consoles to attract customers, but the strings had been bundled in such a way that no one could actually win the consoles, so it was a cruel system that was designed to prey on children. In fact, I had been deceived a couple of times in the past

myself...

“It’d be a scam if they advertised the game consoles as being among the prizes, but I’m pretty sure the stall owners just placed the consoles on top as a decoration,” said Advastlis. “You should be able to tell if it’s actually possible to win a game console based on how expensive each string pull is, right?”

I had been a pure and innocent kid back then, with no idea at all about how the world worked.

“I’m surprised that you’re so knowledgeable about games at Japanese festivals, Advastlis-sama,” I said.

“I am a god, after all,” said Advastlis.

Yeah, I guess that makes sense.

“By the way, can I request something this time again?” I asked.

“No,” Advastlis replied.

I figured as much. I guess the first-time login bonus was special, so I can’t get my wishes granted easily—

“I don’t want to put these things to waste after all the time I spent preparing them,” said Advastlis.

That’s the reason?!

“Now, then, feel free to choose any of the ones I prepared,” said Advastlis. “Make sure you won’t regret your choice!”

Everything except the darts was luck-based. I had no idea what was actually inside the lottery wheel, and the slots weren’t the type that had three reels. There was only one reel to spin, and you could only see the stopped part and the parts above and below it. As far as I could see, the prizes on offer were “Harem Route Entry,” “Reverse Harem Route Entry,” and “Revenge Route Entry.” I had no idea how to react to this. I could somewhat understand the “Harem Route Entry” prize, but the other two made absolutely no sense to me. *There’s no way the last two prizes would work unless I suddenly started going to a school, right? Will Advastlis-sama twist fate to make this work? He’s a god, so it might be possible, but still.*

I was confident I couldn't win the prizes in the string game, so in that sense, it was actually quite normal. The dartboard was constantly spinning, so the prize I could win would be based on luck, but my actions could technically affect the result to a certain extent. The prize on display in the middle of the dartboard looked like a tawashi brush, however. *Why is a tawashi brush the prize for striking the center?! Isn't this supposed to be a whale bonus?!*

"Um, is the center prize for the dartboard really what I think it is?" I asked.

"You can rest easy when it comes to fairness and transparency," Advastlis replied. "I guarantee that you will receive the prize that you win."

"Even if it's a tawashi brush?"

"Even if it's a tawashi brush. It's a very good product," Advastlis replied. "I made it myself, and it's a replica of high-quality tawashi brushes made by Japanese artisans."

I've heard of tawashi brushes that cost ten thousand yen, but I wouldn't feel happy at all if I won one right now!

Slots were an absolute no for me. I didn't want my life and fate to be twisted against my wishes. The string lottery game had some amazing prizes, but I was confident that those prizes were just for show. Advastlis-sama had promised that I would receive the prize that I won, but it would be pointless if I won a junk prize. The lottery wheel was completely up to chance, so there was no room for me to affect the result. A result based on luck alone would be easier for me to swallow compared to other results, but I was scared because I had no idea what prizes were inside the wheel.

"Do you have any recommendations, Advastlis-sama?" I asked.

"I'm going to refrain from commenting about the strings. As for the slots, there are five types of prizes that vary from common to uncommon, rare, super rare, and ultra super rare," Advastlis replied. "You can technically get any of them, but you know which types have the highest odds of showing up, right?"

Of course. The chances of winning a rare or above prize is almost zero, right? I bet the ultra super rare prize is just bait. I'm kind of curious about the rarity of the routes that I saw, however.

“In a way, the lottery wheel isn’t bad at all,” said Advastlis. “Each prize is different, and the chances of getting a common prize and an ultra super rare prize are the same.”

Seriously? In that case, I’ll go with the lotte—

“However, there are also a lot of prizes in the lottery wheel that don’t show up in the other three options, like skills that are a bit hard to make use of, so keep that in mind.”

Nope, never mind. They’re definitely land mine skills, so there’s no way I’d take that gamble.

“The dartboard is exactly what it looks like. It’s very straightforward,” said Advastlis. “There are some very good prizes, but there are a lot of consolation prizes too. You can throw a dart yourself, but you can’t ask for a retry after you throw it. It’s only fair.”

One thing I liked about the dartboard was that it was possible to see what prizes I could win, and I could estimate the probability of winning the prizes based on the width of the section. There was a tawashi brush prize in the middle, but the good prizes looked okay to me. *Hmm? Wait, what’s that?*

“Um, Advastlis-sama, what’s that prize section with the word ‘pajama’ written on it?” I asked.

“Hmm? It’s exactly what it looks like. I’ll let you choose the type of pajamas you want as a present if you land a dart in it,” Advastlis replied.

It’s really just pajamas?! The tawashi brush was bad enough, but why is this even a prize?!

“I don’t really get why you’re disappointed,” said Advastlis. “Does it count as a consolation prize for you, just like the tawashi brush?”

Huh? Oh, wait, are you referring to a Mitsubishi Pajero instead? That’s the name of a car, Advastlis-sama! I’m pretty sure that most people of my generation have never seen one before! Man, I really underestimated how different a god’s sense of time could be!

“Oh, really? Well, I can’t exactly give you a car as a present. It wouldn’t match

the world you're in," said Advastlis. "There aren't any gas stations either, so you wouldn't be able to drive it."

Yeah, I don't know what I would do with a car either. Sure, it's definitely something that nobody else has, so my party might be able to sell it, but that would just invite trouble.

"Yep. I guess I'll leave this as pajamas, then," said Advastlis.

"Huh? Can't you change it to a different prize?" I asked.

"Hmm. Nothing comes to mind, so no," Advastlis replied.

"No?!"

Ugh. Well, the prize section for pajamas is tiny, so the chances of a dart landing there are quite low, and I don't know if I can trust my luck in a situation like this. I do have Level 1 Throw, so I think I'll be able to avoid the pajamas and the tawashi brush, but I might inadvertently aim for the middle if I get nervous, so...

"Um, can I practice throwing darts first?" I asked.

"Practice? Hmm. Sure, I'll give you one chance to practice," Advastlis replied.

The slots, lottery wheel, and strings faded away as a dart appeared in my hands. The dart looked the same as the ones that I was familiar with, and the flight appeared to be made of plastic while the shaft, arrow, and tip were made of metal. I had very little experience with throwing darts, but I had faith that my Throw skill would help me. The dartboard had stopped spinning for now, and I stood in front of it as I threw a dart toward the pajama prize. My dart pierced through the space between the first two letters, just like I'd intended. *Hmm. I didn't think it'd be this easy to aim for a specific spot on the dartboard. I guess I shouldn't have trouble avoiding the tawashi brush.*

"Looks like you're ready," said Advastlis. "Next up is to do this for real. Move away!"

"Huh?"

The dartboard moved away from me even though I hadn't moved at all myself. *Huh? What's going on?*

“Ha ha ha! Did you really think I would let you throw darts at a close distance when you have the Throw skill? It would be too easy! It wouldn’t be fair at all.”

It sounded like Advastlis-sama had no intention of allowing me to land a dart with one-hundred-percent accuracy. When the dartboard stopped retreating into the distance, it was about ten meters away from me. *Is this necessary to make things even compared to someone who doesn’t have the Throw skill, or did Advastlis-sama also take into consideration my ability and familiarity with throwing darts? Hmm...*

“Go ahead and throw whenever!” Advastlis hollered.

As the dartboard started to spin, another dart appeared in my hands. *Well, it’s pretty generous of Advastlis-sama to grant this kind of bonus in the first place, and if these conditions are fair, then I guess I have no choice but to accept them, but the dartboard is still really far away. I can easily see the board itself thanks to my Hawk’s Eye skill, but it’s hard to tell which prizes are in each section due to how fast it’s spinning. The center with the tawashi brush prize stands out a lot, though. Ugh, it takes up way too much space...*

“Well, I guess I’ll take it easy and hope for the best,” I said. “Even something like the tawashi brush won’t be that bad.”

“Yep. You might be able to make the girls happy if you give them a tawashi brush as a present,” said Advastlis.

“Didn’t you say earlier that I can’t tell anyone about this, Advastlis-sama?” I asked.

“Oh, right. In that case, I’ll pass on a message to the last person of your party who fulfills the conditions for the whale bonus,” Advastlis replied. “That person will let you know when it’s okay to tell everyone else.”

That’s good to know. It’d be kind of awkward if we couldn’t explain how we got something like a skill.

“All right, here goes,” I said.

“Go for it,” said Advastlis.

I almost lost focus after I heard Advastlis-sama’s casual words, but I snapped

out of it right away and threw a dart at the faraway dartboard. The dart flew quite fast, and it looked like it landed somewhere other than the tawashi brush section. *Phew.* I breathed a sigh of relief as the board started to spin more slowly and drifted back to my position. *Oh, the dart landed on a section that's as thin as the pajamas one, huh? I wonder what I won.*

“Let’s see. ‘Luck!’, huh?” I said.

“Yep, ‘Luck!’ is what you won,” said Advastlis.

Is this a bonus prize in itself and not something like another throw? Or rather, was this section actually here before? I don’t recall seeing this, so...

“Um, what does this ‘Luck!’ actually mean?” I asked.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Advastlis replied. “You’ll become a bit luckier. I’m a fair god, so you can trust me on this.”

“Luckier...?”

Is luck an actual stat in this world? I thought God didn’t play dice? Well, actually, I guess Advastlis-sama is definitely the type of god who’d play dice, so this might be a decent bonus.

“Yep. For example, the luck provided by this bonus will change injuries like taking an arrow to the knee to taking an arrow to the thigh instead, and it’ll also help you avoid catching a cold even if you get soaked in the rain,” said Advastlis.

“That sounds like some wea—I mean, minor luck,” I said.

Wouldn’t actual luck be something like preventing arrows from hitting me in the first place or preventing me from getting rained on? Also, I’m not even sure if those examples count as luck. I’d consider myself unlucky if I got injured by an arrow.

“Minor luck can turn out to be quite important, you know?”

Did you just straight up refer to this bonus as minor luck, Advastlis-sama?!

“More specifically, the luck that this bonus provides will turn a 1D100 roll into a 1D100+1 roll,” said Advastlis.

Why did you have to explain it with terms that only certain people would

immediately understand, Advastlis-sama? I get that it means the luck bonus will change the possible rolls with a 100-sided dice from 1 to 100 to 2 to 101. This bonus would be great in situations where rolling a 1 would result in a fumble, but I don't know how to feel about this since I won't be able to tell when I'm actually in that kind of situation.

"Um, well, thank you very much, Advastlis-sama," I said.

"Mm. I'm sure you'll come to appreciate it over time," said Advastlis. "This bonus does have the potential to make your life better."

"Okay."

"All right. See you!"

Advastlis-sama's voice suddenly began to fade away. It was almost like he had nothing else to say to me once he had granted me the whale bonus.

"Huh? 'See you'? Does that mean we'll meet again here eventually?! Please respond, Advastlis-sama!" I cried.

Unfortunately, I heard no response to my question, and in the next moment, my consciousness returned to the temple.

"Hmm. I guess that wasn't a dream," I said.

My body looked exactly the same as before, but I checked my status screen and saw the words "Luck!" next to the Increased Experience Gain (Tiny) in the blessing row. I couldn't tell the others about this for now, however. I exhaled in order to relax and pull myself together before heading home as if nothing had happened at all.



Even our peaceful days were occasionally somewhat eventful, but for the most part, the days passed slowly. However, nothing would last forever, and soon it was time to resume our adventurer lives. Mary and Metea were able to run with their own feet this time, so we'd planned an itinerary to Pining that had some time to spare. Making kids run dozens of kilometers would definitely have counted as child abuse back on Earth, but a lot of things were different in this world, such as common sense and races, so it wasn't an issue. Based on

what I had observed during our daily jogging sessions, the sisters probably couldn't run as fast as we could, but they could keep up fine as long as we slowed down. In addition, we had some time to spare, so we could carry the sisters on our backs if we had to.

There was still a week left between today and the planned departure date of the escort quest. We dropped by the Adventurers' Guild to pick up the bottles of red strike ox milk that we were supposed to transport, but...

Diola-san ran out from behind her counter as she greeted us. "I've been waiting for your party! Can you actually make it in time from now?!" She seemed nervous.

Haruka casually waved her hands. "Mm, we'll be fine. We planned things out so that we'll have plenty of time to spare."

It would only take one day for us to travel from Laffan to Pining if we ran at our top speeds. We planned to drop by Kelg on the way to visit the grave of Mary and Metea's dad, but it'd only take an extra day even if we spent the night in Kelg. In fact, there would still be some extra time even if the entire journey took three times as long as we'd planned. We also had the Avoid Rain Spell, so bad weather wouldn't hinder our travels.

"Hmm. I'll take your word for it, then. In that case, I'll hand over the bottles of red strike ox milk now." Diola-san seemed like she still felt a bit uneasy, but she trusted us. She nodded and took some milk bottles out of a magic bag and lined them up on the counter. The bottles were the same ones that we had sold to the guild recently, but it looked like the lids had been tightly sealed with wax, and there were some seals on top of each lid as well. *Are these seals meant to indicate that these bottles are unopened goods?*

"What are these things on top of the lids, Diola-san?" Haruka asked.

"These are seals that indicate the guild has checked these items," Diola replied. "They're essentially a form of quality assurance. If a problem occurs, then it wouldn't be acceptable for a client to blame the people who gathered the items, after all."

"Oh, I see," said Haruka. "That's good to know."

It wouldn't be easy to track which adventurers had turned in common items like monster meat, but it would be easy for rare items such as red strike ox milk. If poison somehow made its way into something intended for consumption, then it'd be really bad if the client tried to accuse adventurers of having poisoned the food item in the first place. The guild's seal of assurance allowed clients to rest at ease, and it also protected the adventurers who gathered the items. *Mm, yeah, the commission fees that the guild earns are definitely worth it. It's important to have a middleman to provide insurance.*

According to Diola-san, items that had been sealed by the guild, like these bottles, would apparently last for a while even at room temperature. I had no idea if the guild had sterilized and sealed the bottles in a way that was similar to the long milk bottles in Japan, or if they had used a different method of preservation. Given that magic and alchemy existed in this world, there were probably some methods out there that I wasn't aware of.

"These milk bottles will last for some time, but the milk tastes better when fresh, so please don't take them out of your magic bags," said Diola. "And if any of the bottles happen to break, then please notify the Adventurers' Guild at Pining."

"Well, we do have some spare bottles with us, so it shouldn't be an issue," I said. "Is the guild at Pining capable of sealing bottles like this as well?"

We had turned in a total of 110 bottles of red strike ox milk. The extra ten bottles were spares, and we had stored some extra bottles of our own in our magic bags as well, in case we accidentally broke some bottles ourselves. As a result, we could easily replace broken bottles of milk with new ones if we had to, but...

"Yes. But keep in mind that it'll usually take the guild about a day to complete the sealing process," said Diola.

"Okay. Well, we don't have any plans to take the bottles out of our magic bags until we have to deliver them, so it should be fine," I said.

"Please deliver the milk bottles directly to the person in charge of receiving them for the viscount," said Diola. "As for the escort quest, you should be able to get started smoothly once you present this letter of introduction to a guard

at the viscount's mansion."

Diola-san handed us a proof of delivery certificate for the milk and a letter of introduction that we would need in order to identify and introduce ourselves for the quest. She explained that all we had to do after we'd shown the letter was obey instructions. In addition, we only had to serve as bodyguards on the way to the destination and on the way back to Pining, so we were free to do other things once we had arrived at the barony of Baron Dias.

"Your client might request that you perform some additional tasks once you arrive at the barony, however, so please play it by ear," said Diola. "It's up to your party whether to accept or reject any such requests, but..."

When Diola-san trailed off, I asked, "Are you implying that you'd prefer it if we accepted them, Diola-san?"

She hesitantly nodded. "Yes, if possible. But do feel free to request a separate reward for such requests. If it proves difficult for your party to negotiate a reward, then I can help you negotiate a suitable reward at a later time."

We weren't used to dealing with nobles, so I was very grateful for the help that Diola-san had offered.

"This sounds like some exceptionally solid support," said Haruka, sounding a bit confused. "Is it always like this?"

Diola-san laughed and nodded. "It depends on the quest, but it's usually like this when the client is a noble," said Diola.

"That sounds like a great deal of trouble to handle," said Natsuki. She sounded like she genuinely sympathized with Diola-san.

A melancholic look appeared on Diola-san's face. "Mm, but not taking these precautions would make things even worse later..." She gazed into the distance.

I had no idea exactly what Diola-san was reflecting upon, but it probably wasn't a pleasant memory.

"Oh, well, don't worry—I'm certain your party will be fine!" Diola said at last. "You're all very polite, after all!"

"I mentioned something similar before, but we don't actually know the

proper way to act around nobles,” I said. “We only know how to act normally...”

“Your ‘normally’ is perfectly fine! The majority of adventurers can’t even interact with other people normally...”

Normal politeness was something that most adventurers probably never learned as they grew up. School was inaccessible to most adventurers, and they were forced to fend for themselves from a young age. The young adventurers would meet older adventurers who were vulgar and crass, so there was no way they would ever get an opportunity to learn proper deportment. On the other hand, Diola-san noted that adventurers who’d been raised at the orphanage behind Advastlis-sama’s temple were polite and well-behaved, at least compared to most adventurers, probably because Ishuca-san and the other priests raised them well. In fact, the guild seemed to hold adventurers from the temple in high regard regardless of their individual strength.

“Most nobles don’t expect adventurers to adhere to the manners and etiquette expected of nobles,” said Diola. “Anyone who’s so demanding of adventurers would be branded a fool by the majority of other nobles. Nobles could just use knights in their service if they needed someone who met those criteria, so making those demands of adventurers would be tantamount to admitting they couldn’t afford knights!”

“Thanks, Diola-san,” said Yuki. “It’s good to know that we can take it easy.”

“Mm, there’s no need to trouble yourselves. Just behave as if everything will work out as long as you successfully protect the viscount’s daughter!” said Diola. “All you need to worry about is ensuring that she remains alive. And in any case, even if the worst should happen and she should be wounded, I’m sure you’ll be able to heal her. I have full faith in your party!”

Uh, nah, I think it would be bad if that happened, but I guess Diola-san took into consideration the fact that our party has a powerful healer when she chose us for this quest, huh? Hmm...

“It’s our job to make sure she doesn’t get hurt in the first place,” said Touya. “And we’ll do our best.”

“Thank you. I’m counting on you.” Diola suddenly looked at us before bowing deeply. She had a much more somber expression on her face than before.



We headed out of Laffan a bit early the next morning. Touya led the way as our party's pacemaker, and the sisters followed right behind him. The girls and I were spread out around them in a defensive formation. Successful ambushes were very unlikely as long as we stuck to the highway and I made full use of my Scout skill, but bandits could still shoot arrows at us from afar, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

"We can run much better now!" said Mary.

"It's super easy!" Metea exclaimed.

The sisters were a bit slower than the rest of us, but they were quite fast compared to the average person in this world. In fact, Mary and Metea were smiling as they ran. They had just recovered from their burns when we took them back with us to Laffan, besides which they'd had no energy, so we had carried them on our backs. They seemed pleased to be able to run on their own feet this time.

"Both of you have worked hard to keep up with us during our training sessions," said Haruka.

"Yeah! We worked really hard! And all the food we ate was delicious!" said Metea.

The sisters had never skipped out on our daily training, and I was aware of them training by themselves during their free time as well. As beastwomen, they had certain natural advantages, but even so, they wouldn't have been able to increase their stamina by a lot if they hadn't trained hard. Diet was an important factor as well. Mary and Metea looked much healthier now compared to how skinny they'd been. *Let's see how long their stamina will last.*

Despite my uncertainty about the sisters' stamina, we ended up eating lunch at Kelg a few hours later, so everything had gone according to schedule. Mary and Metea kept up a decent pace the entire time, and when we arrived, they looked like they still had plenty of energy left. In fact, at the moment, they were energetically eating their lunches.

"Are you two okay?" I asked. "Don't hesitate to let us know if your feet hurt

or if you feel sick.”

“I’m perfectly fine!” declared Metea. “I can actually run a bit faster!”

“I’m fine too,” said Mary. “Our good-quality shoes made running easy and comfortable, so it wasn’t very tiring at all.”

The sisters appeared to have a hearty appetite, so I was sure that they weren’t lying. Most people would lose their appetite for a while after strenuous exercise like long-distance running, but it seemed like the exercise had been quite easy for them. The rest of us had ordered the same amount of food as usual, so it was the same for us.

“We spent about fifty percent more time traveling from Laffan to Kelg than last time, which is roughly what I expected,” I said.

“Yeah. We should be able to make it to Pining sometime tomorrow if we keep up this pace,” said Touya.

I continued chatting with Touya as we waited for our food, but someone suddenly interrupted us.

“Did you guys really run all the way here with these small kids?”

A plate with the food that I had ordered was placed in front of me, and when I looked up, I saw Yasue’s face. We had chosen the dining hall where Yasue worked as our lunch spot, both because we had an acquaintance here and because the food served here was quite good; we had no reasons to choose a different place.

Yuki and Haruka casually waved at Yasue.

“Oh, hey, long time no see,” said Yuki. “Are you doing okay?”

Yasue waved back, though she was looking at the sisters.

“You’re here today, huh? I assumed you had the day off since you didn’t show up right away,” said Haruka.

“Yeah, I’ve been doing fine. I learned to use the Cooking skill after Haruka taught me, and I’ve been helping Chester in the kitchen since then,” said Yasue. “These are the kids you guys adopted, right? They’re really cute, but are you forcing them to keep up with you guys? You’re all a bit crazy...”

Yasue had never interacted with the sisters before, but she knew that we had adopted some kids, which was why she had realized who Mary and Metea were right away, but...

“Crazy? That’s a bit rude,” said Haruka. “Mary and Metea ran at a perfectly reasonable pace.”

“Really? Making kids run long-distance sounds a bit crazy to me in itself, so...”

Yasue’s conclusion made perfect sense to me considering the fact that the only information she had was the sisters’ appearances and the distance from Laffan to Kelg.



In addition, Yasue had the common sense of a person born on Earth. She seemed a bit worried as she looked at the sisters, but Mary and Metea were perfectly fine, and they seemed a bit confused themselves as they stared back at her.

“We’re fine,” said Mary. “We didn’t run extremely fast.”

“We’ve trained a lot, so it was easy for us,” said Metea.

“Hmm. Well, in that case, I guess it’s none of my business,” said Yasue. “Are you two adventurers?”

“Yes,” said Mary. “We’re still reliant on Nao-san and everyone else for help, however.”

“We’re working hard to get stronger so we can earn a lot of money,” said Metea.

“...That’s a very mature mentality,” said Yasue. “I wish I could introduce you two to my past self a year ago.”

Yasue sounded a bit sad; she sighed to herself and cast her eyes. Mary and Metea were definitely very mature for their age, and Yasue had been a bit unbearable last year, but I had no intention of reopening her old wounds now that she was reformed. So I casually changed the topic. “So has the reconstruction of Kelg been progressing smoothly?”

Yasue looked up again. “Yeah. The lord has put in a lot of effort. Actually, the work of clearing the debris was done relatively fast. But it’ll take longer to rebuild, and there are still a lot of troops patrolling the town.”

We had seen a couple of troops patrolling the town on our way from the gates of Kelg to the dining hall. The ringleader of the Holy Satomi Sect had already been arrested, so I felt like it was unnecessary to remain on high alert, but...

“...Is there some other cause for concern that hasn’t been resolved yet?” I asked.

“It might have something to do with nobles,” said Yasue. “I’ve heard gossip about how there were some who lost a fortune and others who committed

fraud as a result of what happened here.”

“I bet you could clear all that up pretty quick if you just arrested those people, but I guess that’s not possible for various reasons,” said Touya.

“Mm. There are probably some considerations that are different from our common sense, after all,” said Haruka.

Is it similar to how labor rights for government employees back in Japan are protected too much, to the point that it’s not easy to fire them even if they commit misconduct or fraud? Something like that shouldn’t normally happen, but if a lot of people got hired via personal connections, then I guess it might be hard to fire certain employees depending on who introduced and recommended them.

“Well, it’s good to know that Kelg has become safe enough,” said Yuki. “I guess the viscount did a good job.”

“Mm. We didn’t see any homeless people along the streets,” said Natsuki.

It was possible that there were still homeless people in the other parts of Kelg that we hadn’t seen, but the situation here had improved considerably compared to back when we had seen badly burnt bodies of children lying in the streets.

“Yeah, I’m relieved too,” said Yasue. “And the crime rate has apparently gone down by a lot. Anyway, what are you guys planning to do after lunch?”

“We’re going to visit Veshmia-sama’s temple first,” I said. “Mary and Metea’s dad was buried there.”

“Oh, I see. He died during the mayhem, huh? Did you guys drop by Kelg to visit the cemetery?” Yasue asked.

Yuki nodded. “Yeah. We have to go to Pining for a quest, so we decided to drop by Kelg since it’s along the way.”

Mary hesitantly raised her hand after she heard Yuki’s words. “Um, we don’t really mind not going to the temple. There’s no need to...”

“Yeah. We already prayed at Advastlis-sama’s temple,” said Metea.

It was odd to us, but visiting graves didn’t seem to be traditional for

commoners in this world since they didn't have personal graves. The remains of the sisters' dad had been buried at the cemetery of Veshmia-sama's temple, but apparently if commoners needed to pray for the deceased, they would just do so at any temple. Mary and Metea's mom had died before their dad, and they had told us that they had no idea where her remains had been buried, so praying instead of actually visiting graves made sense to me.

"Oh yeah, prayers for the dead seem to be a standard practice among commoners," said Yasue. "Well, since you came all the way here, I don't think it would hurt to visit the cemetery if you have the time. You're not going to head out of town today, right?"

"Mm. We're going to stay the night here, so I'd be all right with visiting the cemetery," said Haruka. "Besides, it wouldn't hurt to donate some money at the temple. Orphanages definitely need the money."

"Oh. In that case, okay," said Mary.

"I'll pray at the temple here too," said Metea.

We had brought up the idea of visiting the cemetery at Kelg before we had departed from Laffan, and the sisters had reacted just as neutrally back then. That being the case, they probably had no reason to visit the cemetery themselves, but they also had no reason to actively oppose the idea.

"Well, you can just treat it as a way to kill time. Also, you guys shouldn't impose your common sense on these kids too much. Common sense in this world is different." After offering that advice, Yasue casually shrugged.

Our eyes went wide in surprise.

"Never thought a time would come when Yasue would scold us about common sense," said Touya.

"Shut up, Touya!" said Yasue. "I know this is a bit out of character for me, but I've been through a lot, so..."

Haruka laughed in a friendly way. "Mm. As a married woman, you're definitely more knowledgeable than us when it comes to these matters, so we'll take your advice to heart, Yasue," said Haruka.

"That's good to know. Feel free to talk if you need my help. Anyway, take your time and enjoy your food."

Yasue waved around her hands as if to hide the fact that she felt a bit embarrassed before hurrying back to the kitchen.

We took our time to eat our food as Yasue had suggested, then headed to Veshmia-sama's temple. Each of us donated one gold coin this time, but Mary and Metea declined our offer to donate money on their behalf. I wasn't sure if it was because their dad was buried here or if it was because they were concerned about the orphanage, but the sisters insisted that they would use their own pocket money this time, and they tossed a couple of coins into the donation box. We had no idea what the situation was like at the orphanage, but unlike the last time we'd been here, we couldn't hear any screaming or crying, so we felt at ease and left Kelg the next morning.

Side Story—Touya's Daily Life

Today, I was stuck home with Nao, but we weren't lonely at all. Metea and Mary had gone with the girls in order to hang out at Aera-san's café and have sweets. The girls had planned to teach Aera-san dessert recipes they knew, and Aera-san would teach them her own dessert recipes in turn. It really sounded like they'd planned a dessert tasting party among themselves. I had been friends with the girls for a long time, and I could technically jump into a conversation between girls if I had to, but I was a bit scared of all the cakes that would appear at a party like that, so Nao and I had declined to join the girls and stayed at home instead, but neither of us had any plans for the day.

I wasn't in the mood to just relax at home, so I asked, "Do you wanna head out to kill time somewhere, Nao?"

"Huh? What do you mean by 'somewhere,' dude?"

Nao's response to my question made perfect sense. There weren't really any places in Laffan where we could hang out and kill time, and I wasn't in the mood for fishing either. Anyway, fishing was pretty monotonous. *Hmm...*

I casually brought up the first idea that popped into my head. "Oh, you know, maybe like a brothel?"

Nao stared at me, then heaved a deep sigh. "Right, I forgot that you've been to a brothel before. Do you go regularly?"

"Well, uhhh, I only go occasionally, so..."

"It's up to you how to spend your own pocket money, but like I said before, you'll have no one but yourself to blame if you get an STD," said Nao.

"I oughta be okay given how much it costs." I wasn't really scared of diseases, although I did still want a backup plan. I could probably avoid getting Haruka angry if I had Nao's help, but my life might be in danger if I took Nao with me to a brothel.

"Oh yeah, I never asked about how expensive it is," said Nao. "How much

does each visit cost?”

I lifted three fingers. “Uh, about this much.”

“Three gold coins?”

I shook my head, and an awkward expression appeared on Nao’s face. His eyebrows twitched.

“There’s no way it’s three large silver coins, right...?”

“...Nope.”

I slowly nodded in response to Nao’s question, and then Nao gasped and slammed his palms down on the table in front of us.

“Thirty gold coins?! Are you serious, Touya?! How much money did you burn through?!”

“Yeah, I did some reflecting and realized I spent a bit too much.”

Look, Nao, guys can’t think straight about saving money when they’re in the mood for sex! I couldn’t help it, dude!

“You spent way more than just ‘a bit’ too much! What kind of high-end brothels were you going to?!”

“I mean, the highest-ranking courtesans in Japanese history were pretty pricey, you know? There were places where it’d cost the equivalent of over one million yen just to spend some time with one without any sexual services...”

“Are the brothels you went to really comparable to that?!” A serious expression appeared on Nao’s face momentarily, but then he paused in thought, as if he’d given up on pursuing that line of inquiry. “Ugh. I don’t know what the standard prices are, so I can’t tell at all!”

“Sexual intercourse technically isn’t allowed at brothels in Japan,” I said. “Apparently there are loopholes, though.”

I’ve never been to one myself, so I don’t know what they’re actually like. I doubt there were any that cost three hundred thousand yen for a couple of hours, though.

“Whatever, I guess. It’s your money,” said Nao. “But if you’d taken money

from before we split our earnings, I'd help the girls rough you up."

"Bro, please, even I wouldn't do something like that." *There's no way I would waste our shared pool of money when we're being frugal, Nao.*

"Ugh. I won't tell the girls, but don't ruin yourself financially," said Nao. "A lack of money can potentially affect your ability to assess the situation when we're out on adventurer work. And trust isn't something you can easily regain once you lose it, you know?"

"Don't worry, dude. I won't burn through my money *that* fast."

I had no intention of tackling difficult quests or heading out to earn money by myself in order to be able to afford going to brothels. I was confident that I was the strongest member of my party in terms of melee combat, but I could only perform at my best with everybody else's support. It would be really stupid to die due to overconfidence.

"Are you sure you don't wanna come along, though? I'll keep it a secret between us."

"Nah, I'm not really interested."

"You aren't? I thought I remembered you enjoying erotic manga as much as any other guy," I said. "You've looked at porn before too, right?"

"All of that is just fiction," Nao replied. "It's different from actually doing it yourself in reality."

"I mean, I guess you're right, but..."

"To be honest, I can't imagine having sex with someone I don't actually like," said Nao.

"I can't believe your libido is that low. Are you really a high school boy?"

"This has nothing to do with my libido. I definitely have a normal sex drive."

"So you're saying you'd be willing to do it with somebody like Haruka?"

"Ye— No comment."

You can't just say "no comment" and pretend nothing happened, Nao. That's basically saying "yes," you know? Hmm. I guess he has some strong moral

convictions when it comes to sex.

“If you say so. I’m kind of disappointed that we can’t chat together about brothels as bros, though,” I said.

“...I don’t want to go to a brothel, but I am kind of curious about them,” said Nao. “What was it like?”

“Didn’t you just say you weren’t interested?!”

“I’m not interested in going to one myself, but I have an academic interest in learning what brothels are like in this world,” said Nao.

“An academic interest, huh? If you say so, dude.”

We’re both guys, so I understand. I’ll let you off the hook this time. I told Nao all about the differences between “restaurants,” normal brothels, and luxury brothels. But I’d only been to luxury brothels, so I couldn’t tell him much about the other two types. I also cracked a joke that I’d learned at the time, but Nao just looked at me with absolute disgust after he heard it. *I mean, yeah, I know it’s a really dirty joke, but stop looking at me like that, Nao. It hurts...*

“So, are you interested? Luxury brothels are pretty good, dude.”

“Like I said, I don’t want to go to one,” said Nao.

I had hoped to convince Nao to tag along with me, but he was being pretty stubborn.

“Or maybe I should ask, why are you so eager to recommend them to me?”

“Well, I figure if you were at risk of contracting an STD yourself, you’d work harder at leveling up your Light Magic, so...”

“Seriously?! That’s the reason?! You’re so damn selfish!”

Yep. I know I can trust the girls to heal me, but I’d rather have a guy I can trust in the role of a doctor. I might contract some diseases in the future that would be awkward to tell girls about...

“Oh well, I guess I’ll give up on that idea,” I said. “I’m scared of what might happen if I drag you along with me.”

Haruka would probably kill me if I led Nao astray. *I guess I’ll take care of my*

own health until Nao gets better at Light Magic.

“I wonder if Tomi would be willing to tag along with me,” I said. “Actually, he’s a dwarf, so maybe he can’t?”

“Dude, no, drop that idea! He’s got a stable job, but he earns way less money than us!” Nao exclaimed. “Are you trying to drive him into poverty?!”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said. “Thirty gold coins is probably a bit too expensive for him.”

Ordinary citizens didn’t earn anywhere near thirty gold coins in a month of work, so anything that burned through that amount of money in a few hours was spooky. I had no idea how much money Tomi earned, but there was no way it was more than my party’s earnings...

“All right, let’s set this topic aside for now,” I said. “I’m gonna go ask Tomi if he wants to tag along.”

“No, Touya, why—?”

“Oh, I’m not talking about going to a brothel. I’m just gonna ask him if he wants to hang out. He told me the other day about a restaurant that serves delicious offal stew, so I wanna try some out.”

“Oh, like, all of us get lunch? I guess that’s fine, but what are you going to do afterward?”

“Yeah, that’s a problem. There aren’t any places we can drop by to kill time and have fun.”

“Mm. It’s probably because very few ordinary citizens have the time and money to spare for leisure activities,” said Nao. “Even we only have a few free days here and there. Should we make some analog games that we can play with friends in our free time?”

“Analog games? You mean like shogi, chess, reversi, and playing cards?”

“Yeah, but I was also thinking of games like Catan and Diplomacy.”

“Diplomacy? Are you serious, Nao?”

Diplomacy was a board war game set in Europe. The rules were simple, and it

was easy to make the equipment you needed to play the game, but it wasn't a game for everyone. There were no random elements, and the players had to negotiate with each other to form alliances. They could also betray each other to increase their own territory. It was impossible to win without the help of others, but you also wouldn't be able to win without betraying others at some point or other, so Diplomacy was a pretty brutal game.

"I'm pretty sure the only people who'd be able to play Diplomacy would be us and Tomi," I said. "Normal people in Laffan probably never think about stuff like foreign policy."

"...Yeah, I guess you're right, Touya. There's a good chance that most people don't even know the name of the country that they live in."

"I'd honestly feel a bit scared if Diplomacy somehow became a popular game. It's famous for destroying friendships. I bet it'd result in violence if adventurers played with each other."

Betrayal and deceit were key to winning a game of Diplomacy. If we really wanted to make something, a chiller and more relaxing game would be better.

"Do you want to try popularizing Diplomacy among nobles, then?" Nao asked.

"That'd be even scarier, dude! It might end with actual military force!"

Maybe Diplomacy could be used as a way for nobles to learn about foreign policy, but I was terrified of what this kingdom would become if lots of nobles learned lessons from the game.

"Let's go with some simpler games," I said. "Like, what about games like darts or billiards?"

"Billiards sounds great! I've always wanted to play billiards, but I gave up because it wasn't something you could easily set up at home, unlike darts."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean! It's a really cool game."

Billiards looked stylish and was fun to play. The only downside was the fact that billiards were expensive. High school students would run out of money in no time if they wanted to practice billiards.

"You didn't have darts at home either, did you, Nao?"

“Yeah, darts were quite expensive too. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“My parents would have gotten angry at me if holes appeared in the walls.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Kids weren’t supposed to make their parents angry if they could avoid it. Darts would be perfectly safe to play at home if you never missed, but there was no way a beginner would be that skilled.

“And plastic darts don’t feel like the real thing,” said Nao. “You know what I mean, right?”

“Of course. They’re more like toys, so they’re kind of lame,” I said.

The dull sound of darts landing on a dartboard felt a lot more genuine. On the other hand, electronic darts felt a bit too cheap to me.

“Also, my room wasn’t very spacious, so I wouldn’t have been able to play darts in there,” said Nao.

“You have to stand about two meters away from the dartboard, right? I guess it’s actually not easy to secure that much space in a room.”

Two meters of free space would be easy to secure in an empty room, but the rooms of most high school students in Japan were filled with things like beds, desks, and bookshelves, so there wouldn’t be enough free space for darts.

“In that case, do you want to make darts too?”

Nao was wearing an awkward expression. “Nah, let’s just work on billiards for now. Playing darts would feel like a form of combat training.”

I nodded. “Oh, right...”

Nao had actually practiced throwing shuriken before, but they hadn’t been of any use to us so far.

“Besides, I’m pretty sure we can easily land darts from two meters away now,” said Nao.

“Yeah, we do have the Throw skill now,” I said. “I guess darts wouldn’t really work as a game.”

We could stand farther away or use things that were harder to throw, like shuriken, so it wouldn't be too easy, but that would just make it more like combat training, as Nao had said.

"All right, billiards is it, then," I said. "Can you make the stuff we need for billiards with your magic, Nao?"

"To an extent, yes, but let's just ask an artisan to help us out. Depending on how things go, we might be able to get a new flow of passive income, just like Haruka did."

"Oh, yeah, the backpacks, right? It seems like they've actually been selling well," I said.

Adventurers carrying backpacks had become more common in Laffan lately. Based on what Diola-san had told us before, the guild had started selling backpacks in other towns too, and crafting them had become a side job that the guild offered to mothers in this world. Retired adventurers could also work on making backpacks, so apparently the branches of the guild in other towns were indebted to the Laffan branch. Diola-san had looked very happy when she told us about this. The different branches of the guild weren't at odds with each other, but apparently things were a bit complicated.

"The price of each backpack was twenty-two gold coins, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Nao replied. "I have no idea how much Haruka earns per sale, though."

Hmm. Based on what I heard before, I wonder if it's around ten percent. Actually, I don't think that the backpacks sold a lot initially, so maybe she earns more now. Hmm...

"She uses the money to cover our food expenses, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's what I've heard," Nao replied. "She doesn't have to, however."

"Uh-huh."

Nao and I had provided our opinions on the backpack, but we weren't shameless enough to ask for a share of the passive income. The idea of getting our own source of passive income was very tempting, though.

“But do you think any artisans will actually have time to make game equipment for us, Nao?” I asked. “Aren’t all the workshops busy right now? We provided them with a lot of precious wood...”

“Well, yeah, they’re quite busy, but apparently their schedules aren’t completely full,” Nao replied.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Furniture made of precious wood is made to order, right? Each item is a handcrafted masterpiece...”

“Oh, yeah, I get what you mean.”

Actually, though, the cheap furniture that ordinary citizens bought was technically made to order as well. Workshops had spare parts in stock, but in this world, you couldn’t just choose to buy something from a large selection of finished products like beds or drawers.

“Only nobles and wealthy people place orders for furniture made of precious wood,” said Nao. “They’re very picky about what they want, of course, but they can’t just casually check in via phone call or email, right? If they live in a nearby town, they have to wait a few days to get word, and if they live far away, the wait time might even extend to something like a few months.”

“Oh, okay. I guess that means the workshops have orders, but they have some spare time between each part of the process, huh?”

I felt like it would be more efficient to work on multiple orders at the same time, but that probably wasn’t possible if you had to deal with nobles. My impression was that nobles would complain and yell at artisans to focus on their own order, even if it meant delaying for other orders.

“Don’t you think it’d be good for the artisans if they had something they could make in their spare time, Touya?” Nao asked. “An original product that they could actually sell would be great, right?”

“Yeah, I agree. I remember seeing factory interviews on television where they advertised some in-house products,” I replied.

“Right? I’m pretty sure they at least won’t turn down our idea immediately,

so..."

"Well, even if things do go well, the only people who could afford billiards would be nobles and rich people, right? Won't it just end up as another made-to-order product thanks to all their demands?"

I was confident that nobles and rich people would want their own billiards equipment to look fancy and different from everybody else's, and Nao fell silent after he heard my words, so he must've agreed with me.

"Well, what about installing billiards at pubs or bars that cater to ordinary citizens?"

"Do you really think fancy places like that could stay afloat in Laffan, Nao? My mental image of pubs and bars here is that they're loud and noisy places where people chug down ale..."

"I mean, I think that's just because we've only been to cheap bars and pubs, but I don't know. Either way, I'm sure that Simon-san will be frank with us if it won't work out."

"Yeah, it won't cost us anything to give him some ideas. We're just amateurs, after all."

Simon-san was an artisan, so he was probably way more knowledgeable about these things than us, and we also had a backup plan in the form of discussing things with Diola-san.

"In any case, for now..."

"Yeah?"

"Let's go eat lunch, Touya."

"Yep."



"Billiards? That sounds like a great idea!" said Tomi. "Please make a set of equipment if you can. I'll come over to play with you guys."

I'd invited Tomi to come to lunch with us, and we'd gone to the place that served offal stew. When I brought up the topic of billiards, Tomi had reacted a

lot more enthusiastically than I thought he would.

Man, this stew is really delicious. I understand why Tomi recommended this. I couldn't taste any soy sauce or miso, so I had no idea what had been used for flavor, but it was so delicious I didn't care. It had a slightly strong odor, but it actually worked out well. I wasn't happy about the brown bread that had been served with the stew, but it was acceptable after I dipped it into the stew to soak up some of the rich flavor.

"I'm still living at an inn, so there's no way I could afford billiards," said Tomi. "What about you guys?"

"Well, we still have two spare rooms in our house," said Nao. "I'm pretty sure it'd be fine if we turned one of those into a game room. We haven't discussed this with the girls yet, though."

"Yeah, blacksmithing got moved outdoors," I said. "We could also use Edith's mansion if needed..."

Four rooms on the right side of our house from the entrance had been allocated for productive activities, two of them for sewing work and alchemy. Unfortunately for me, I obviously wasn't allowed to use one of the rooms for smithing since it required fire, so I had been forced into a small smithy in a corner of our yard. I had no problem with that—I knew it would be too noisy and dangerous to smith indoors—but this was one reason we still had two spare rooms. Both of the rooms were fairly spacious, so there would still be plenty of space left even if we installed a billiards table, and we could even install a dartboard in the future if we wanted.

"Oh, um, do you guys actually know the proper size for billiard balls and tables?" Tomi asked.

"Nah, we don't, but I don't think it matters," I replied. "If we're the first ones to make them in this world, we'll be the ones setting the standard."

"...Good point. I doubt any of our other classmates are picky enough about billiards to complain either, so I guess it should be fine," said Tomi.

Nao nodded. "Mm. I've played billiards a couple of times before, so the final product shouldn't end up too different from the actual thing."

Nao was completely right. Nao and I had played billiards together back on Earth, so we could probably come up with an accurate size if we put our heads together.

“I’ll be looking forward to it! There isn’t really anything I can do for fun in this world. Fishing is my only real hobby,” said Tomi. “By the way, Touya-kun, are you sure you guys can afford to invest money into this? It’ll cost a lot, right?”

“Don’t worry, I can afford— Oh.”

Right, my personal savings are running kinda low at the moment. Sure, I did set a limit on the amount of money I’d spend, but I still went back to those luxury brothels a couple of times, so...

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

Tomi looked a little confused as he watched me, and an exasperated sigh escaped from Nao’s mouth.

“Well, you see, Tomi, this guy has been going to brothels recently. On top of that, he’s been going to luxury brothels.”

Tomi almost choked and spat out his ale. “Really?!” He turned to me with a look of disbelief.

I’m the one who has a hard time believing that you’ve gotten used to drinking alcohol during the day, Tomi. Well, you do have the Drunkard skill, so I guess it’s fine for you, but still.

“Oh, you know what luxury brothels are? You’re a guy too, so I guess that makes sense,” said Nao. “Anyway, I’m not joking. I only learned about this today.”

“Well, um, I haven’t gone to one since I’m a dwarf, but this topic comes up pretty often when I drink with others, so I’ve only heard of it before,” said Tomi. “Does it actually cost over ten gold coins each time?”

“A few hours is apparently enough to burn through thirty gold coins,” said Nao.

“...Seriously?” Tomi looked at me like he had absolute respect for me.

I nodded gravely. “I suppose I can’t deny that.”

Nao shook his head. He had an exasperated expression. “What do you mean by that, Touya? Isn’t that what you told me earlier?”

Thirty gold coins was actually what it had cost me the first time, but I didn’t want to think about the most amount of money I had burnt through over one session.

“Try not to get addicted, Touya-kun,” said Tomi. “There are people who end up in slavery as a result of sex-related stuff, after all.”

“Slavery, huh? Do you know what slavery is like, Tomi?” I asked.

Slavery was outlawed in the country where we lived, but debt slavery existed, although so far, I hadn’t seen anyone in Laffan who looked like a debt slave.

“There are a lot of different conditions, but being forced to work for no pay is actually one of the better options,” Tomi replied. “If you’re good-looking, then you might end up being sold off to a brothel—even if you’re a guy...”

As Tomi’s words trailed off, he casually glanced at Nao.

“Hey, why are you looking at me? I’ve never been to one, okay?”

“I figured as much,” said Tomi. “I think you could easily get an opportunity for sex even without paying, Nao-kun.”

“Please, I’m not someone who casually flirts with girls,” said Nao. “I’m a faithful guy.”

“F-Faithful? O-Oh, um, never mind.” Nao glared at Tomi, and Tomi coughed, then changed the subject. “Anyway, in the worst-case scenario, you can get forced into actual slavery. It’s outlawed in this country, but there are countries where it’s legal, so people get trafficked there.”

“Like a calf being led to slaughter?” I asked.

“Yep,” Tomi replied. “And the people being sold off are probably packed together in a state that’s even worse than livestock...”

“There’s no such thing as human rights in this world, huh?”

“Mm. It’s all up to the whims of different lords,” said Tomi. “I’ve heard that there are places separated by a river where one side is basically like heaven

compared to the other side. Laffan seems like a safe place, though.”

“It’s not easy to move to different countries in this world, so I guess even a river would be a massive barrier,” I said.

Serfs, merchants, and artisans were deeply connected to their local communities, so it was really hard for someone to move to a different place and start anew. The restrictions on relocation were pretty lax in this country, so technically, anyone could move to a different place if they were willing to leave behind almost everything, but it wasn’t anywhere near as casual as moving to a nearby town and commuting to work by train.

“Relax, Tomi. You don’t have to worry too much about Touya,” said Nao. “The rest of us can cover his debts if he goes totally broke.”

“That’s very kind of you, Nao-kun,” said Tomi.

“He’ll drop to the bottom of the party hierarchy, though,” said Nao. “We’ll treat him like a pet until he can pay back his debts.”

“A pet?! Sure, I have fluffy ears and a tail, but I’m not an animal, dude!” I exclaimed.

“Well, I’m pretty sure Haruka would say something like ‘a guy who can’t control his primal instincts is pretty much the same thing as a pet that doesn’t behave. In fact, being treated as a pet is better than you deserve!’ if you actually went into debt due to visiting brothels,” said Nao.

“...You’re probably right about that,” I said.

A guy who went to a brothel even after he was told not to, spent all of his money on expensive prostitutes, and had his friends cover his debts would definitely be a scumbag. Well, I’m definitely not gonna go broke, but still!

“Or rather, would you like to get shipped off to a brothel to work there, Touya?” Nao asked.

“Of course not! Besides, I haven’t spent *that* much money yet! Probably not, anyway.”

I couldn’t deny that I’d splurged a pretty sizable amount of money on luxury brothels, so...

“Why did you have to make me feel uneasy with that ‘probably’ at the end, dude? Oh well. I probably can’t stop you by force if it comes down to it, so I’ll use magic to burn and stop you if necessary,” said Nao.

“Nah, you can just abandon me if I get myself into a really bad situation out of stupidity.” I would be too ashamed to live if something like that happened, so I would gladly burn to death at Nao’s hands.

“Bro, we’ve been friends for ages,” said Nao. “There’s no way I would just abandon you like that.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Yeah.”

Nao and I nodded at each other, and Tomi grinned at us and clapped his hands together. “Oh, the beauty of friendship!”

“If it came down to that, I don’t think it’d be anywhere near that pleasant,” said Nao. “I’m pretty sure we’d create a bloody scene after the girls and I ganged up on Touya to beat him senseless...”

Nao’s response to Tomi’s playful words was pretty cruel, but the scenario he’d described was probably pretty accurate.

“More importantly, how’s work been for you, Tomi?” Nao asked.

“It’s been going well, but I’ve just been following instructions so far,” Tomi replied. “I’ve been given permission to become an independent blacksmith if I want to, but there isn’t much I can do that doesn’t overlap with Gantz-san’s business, and the idea of heading to a different town is a bit too scary to me.”

“Oh yeah, you basically handed over the rights to the shovels,” I said.

“Yep. He told me that I could claim the mincers as my own, and they have been selling well, but I don’t think I’d be able to set up shop by myself with that as my only product,” said Tomi.

Tomi had had to create the shovels to convince Gantz-san to take him on as an apprentice. I was pretty sure Tomi wouldn’t have been able to complete the mincers without Gantz-san’s help, but he’d still given Tomi the rights to sell them, so I was very impressed by how kind and generous Gantz-san was.

“Oh, are mincers a popular product?” I asked.

“Yeah, they’re popular among dining establishments,” Tomi replied, “since they can turn things like meat scraps and tendon meat into something decently delicious. It hasn’t caught on with households, though.”

“I guess there’s no point if butchers start selling minced meat,” said Nao.

Tomi had an awkward expression as he nodded. “Exactly. Mincers still sell well to dining establishments that go through a lot of meat, but there’s a limit to how many I can sell.”

In fact, mincers weren’t really popular among households back in Japan either. Most people just purchased mincemeat instead. The mincers that we had at home worked automatically thanks to magic, but Tomi’s had to be operated by hand, so it wouldn’t be easy for butchers to produce a large amount of mincemeat. Most butchers didn’t stock up on a lot of meat, however. They would sell whole cuts of meat to dining establishments, so they could turn the leftovers into mincemeat if they wanted to. As a result, there was no good reason for ordinary citizens to purchase mincers.

“I want something else that I can sell as a main product,” said Tomi. “Do you guys have any ideas?”

“Hmm. What about something like a noodle-making machine? We’d definitely buy one,” said Nao.

“Oh, right, there were machines back on Earth for making pasta and ramen noodles,” I said. “Something like that would definitely be convenient for us.”

The girls could make noodles just fine, but a noodle-making machine would help save some time. Electric pasta makers had been sold back on Earth, so I assumed that there would be some demand for a similar product, but...

“Just so you know, guys, that idea is similar to trying to sell a mochi machine in America,” said Tomi. “Have you guys seen any pasta in this world so far?”

Nao nodded deeply at that really good metaphor. “Oh yeah, that makes sense. Mochi machines aren’t exactly popular even in Japan, so there’s no way they’d sell well overseas,” said Nao.

Machines that could only make a certain type of food wouldn't sell well if it wasn't a kind of food that people ate often. Before you could sell pasta machines in this world, you'd have to make pasta popular, and promoting food wasn't exactly something a blacksmith could handle.

"Mochi is a traditional Japanese food, so it's kind of sad that mochi machines were probably less popular than bread machines," I said.

In fact, there were even some bread machines that you could use to make mochi. My household back in Japan had owned both a mochi machine and a bread machine. The mochi machine worked by steaming rice before pounding it into dough, but the bread machine's rice function worked a bit differently. Both of the machines made delicious mochi, so it just came down to personal taste.

"I'd love to have an ice cream machine, but those probably wouldn't sell well either," said Nao.

"Mm. Milk and sugar are a bit too expensive for ordinary citizens," said Tomi. "Huh? Did your party actually manage to get some milk?"

"Oh, yeah, we found a cow monster in a dungeon recently," said Nao. "Their milk actually tastes quite good."

Tomi's eyes shone with excitement. "I'm so jealous! But that means your party sold some of it to the Adventurers' Guild, right? How much is a bottle worth? Would you be willing to directly sell some to me?"

"Uh, I hate to break it to you, Tomi, but one cup is worth one gold coin," I said.

The excitement quickly disappeared from Tomi's eyes. "Ugh. I should have known that dungeon products would be expensive..."

Yeah, I guess ordinary citizens who work stable jobs can't really afford strike ox milk. I wouldn't mind sharing some with Tomi, but that's kind of iffy considering that gathering milk is technically a source of income for us. It'd be like him giving us weapons for free. We've compensated Tomi fairly whenever we placed orders, so we're kind of even. Diola-san has helped us out in all sorts of ways, Aera-san has taught us recipes, and Riva has helped us with alchemy, but Tomi's position is a bit different.

I brought up another idea as a compromise. “Well, if you come over to our house to hang out, then we could serve you milk...”

The girls probably wouldn’t complain about us offering snacks to a guest.

Nao nodded. “Yeah, that’s the best we can do for you. Well, if you were to bring over something like a soft-serve ice cream machine as a gift, then I’m sure that the girls would be more than happy to let you eat as much as you want, but...”

“Soft-serve ice cream, huh? It’s been a while since I last had some, so it’d be nice to have,” said Tomi. “There’s more air inside soft serve, right? Do you just have to agitate a liquid ice cream mix while simultaneously freezing it?”

“Yeah, I think so,” said Nao. “Hold on. I’m pretty sure that’s the same for ice cream machines. What’s the difference? Hmm...”

“It might be the stirring frequency,” said Tomi. “If you churn the mix frequently, then...”

I knew basically nothing about cooking or making sweets. As Nao and Tomi started discussing ideas with each other I picked up my empty plate to order another serving of stew so I wouldn’t interrupt them.



“Hmm. Sounds like a right interesting idea,” said Simon.

After we finished lunch, we’d parted ways with Tomi and headed over to Simon-san’s workshop. Nao and Tomi hadn’t been able to come to a conclusion, but Tomi had told us he would try to make some prototypes, so all we had to do was to wait. It would sidetrack him from the goal of making something that could serve as a new primary source of revenue for him, though. *Hmm. Would Tomi be able to earn a profit if he started a café next to his own shop, and—nah, actually, that wouldn’t work. The sound of hammering metal would be a bit too “unique” as background music for a café, after all.*

“Are you capable of making what we just described, Simon-san?” Nao asked.

“Of course I can, lad!” said Simon. “Years and years I’ve been working as a carpenter!”

"That's good to know," said Nao.

Simon-san sounded very confident as he replied to Nao's question, so we felt at ease as we discussed our idea with him. For the billiard balls, we settled on the idea of using scraps of precious hardwood. Hardwood was more expensive than normal wood, but there were some parts of precious wood that didn't have many uses, like branches that were too thin to turn into boards or planks. They'd work fine for billiard balls, though, and recycling branches like this would also reduce the material cost by a lot.

Billiard tables were the next thing we needed, and we agreed to use normal wood for that. If we wanted to sell billiard sets to nobles, we might need precious wood with intricate carvings, but right now, we only needed a set for ourselves and a sample set to advertise the product, so there was no need to get fancy. Woolen cloth was the most suitable material for pool table felt, but there didn't seem to be any in Laffan, so we settled on brown eik leather that had been processed to make it soft. It was kind of similar to chamois leather. The billiard tables would be made so that they could each fit one large piece of brown eik leather. I had no idea what size of actual billiard tables were, but I was pretty sure that the difference wouldn't be too significant.

For the cue sticks, we decided to recycle more scraps of precious wood. Thin sticks of precious wood weren't that useful, so they were relatively cheap. For the tips of the cue sticks, Simon would use tusk boar ivory, and the butts could be decorated, but we didn't need any of that, and nobles would probably decorate their own sticks according to their own taste. All of the equipment would be made from wood, and the other necessary materials were mostly things that could be made and found in Laffan, so there was a good chance that billiard equipment could become Laffan's new specialty.

Later, I learned from Natsuki that billiard tables were supposed to have slates in them. *So that's why billiard tables back on Earth were so heavy, huh?* We were the ones who'd set the standard for billiards in this world, though, so it wasn't an issue. And anyway, Nao was good at making stone products with his magic, so we could just adjust things ourselves if necessary.



We didn't have much trouble working out the specifications we wanted for our billiards equipment, but we had to wait a while before everything was ready to be delivered to our house. Simon-san had boasted that he could easily make what we wanted, but it seemed like making multiple perfectly spherical balls of the exact same size was a bit difficult even for him.

But the wooden billiard balls that he eventually delivered were excellent, and they worked just fine for actually playing billiards, although they were actually a lot lighter than we'd expected.

Something else Natsuki told me later: a long time ago, billiard balls used to be made of ivory. They were heavy enough to sink in water. It sounded like these days, you weren't supposed to make billiard balls from wood, but we couldn't come up with any good ideas for a substitute, so Nao had to make them with magic. It was a process of trial and error. Anybody else would have a hard time copying the balls that Nao made, so it was sort of a blessing in disguise that the wooden balls ended up being too light. Nao would probably be swamped with work if billiards ever got popular, but that was a problem we could deal with in the future.

We tried out a bunch of different things, like changing the tips of the cue sticks, the size and the materials for the pool table cushions, and eventually, we managed to produce a final product that was satisfactory. Everybody who played billiards had a good time, including Tomi, but my happiness was cut short when I got the massive bill for all the equipment. The cost had skyrocketed as a result of us placing orders with Simon-san for lots of different prototypes, and my nearly empty wallet was in grave danger. I was afraid that Nao's ominous prediction for my future was about to come true, but Nao chipped in a decent amount of his own money, and the girls were also willing to chip in some money since they enjoyed playing billiards, so my wallet barely survived. *Whew. I'm glad I lived to see another day. I really didn't want to become a pet.*

Side Story—Part Four of Sai's Adventures: A Step Forward

There were an infinite number of dangerous situations that you could get into while exploring dungeons. Some examples were getting caught in a lethal trap, getting separated from your party members, and encountering a very powerful monster. I had been unlucky enough to experience all three of those things, but I had also been very lucky because I had gotten the chance to become acquainted with a beautiful girl like Estelle. In the end, I successfully regrouped with Adonix-san and the others at the ninth floor of the dungeon, and now we were all celebrating the fact that I had been lucky enough to escape safely.

“All right. Let’s celebrate Sai’s safe return, everyone! Cheers!” said Adonix.

“Cheers!”

Nine people in total raised their cups of ale in response to Adonix-san’s words. Five of them were me and my party of four muscular guys, and the other four were a different group of adventurers who had tagged along with the guys when they were searching for me. As for Estelle, she had returned to her own room to rest. I had invited her, but she had gently declined my offer. She seemed to be suspicious of other adventurers, so I probably couldn’t have convinced her to drink with tough and muscular guys like Adonix-san and the others, especially since she had never met them before.

I swallowed some ale. “*Gulp!* Thank you all very much for coming to save me!”

The guys laughed heartily.

“Don’t worry about it!” said Lucas. “You’re one of our party members, and we’re buddies too, so it’s all good!”

Lucas-san playfully thumped me on the back, and Adonix-san nodded at me gravely.

“Mm. I would’ve been too ashamed of myself to ever face or pray to my god

again if we abandoned you,” said Adonix.

“I’m still grateful,” I said. I turned toward the party of four adventurers who’d joined us. “Dungeons are dangerous, after all. Also, Lucy-san, I really appreciate your party’s help too.”

I hadn’t noticed them when I’d first been rescued—I’d been too relieved after hearing Adonix-san’s voice—but all four were actually girls. They looked to be in their early to late twenties, and the names of the girls aside from Lucy-san were Sandy-san, Poly-san, and Elvira-san. In addition, all of the girls looked like they had put a lot of care into their appearances, so they were unlike most of the female adventurers I had seen before aside from Estelle.

“We couldn’t just do nothing after we saw how desperate Ado and the rest were,” said Lucy.

After I fell down the pitfall trap, apparently Adonix-san and the others had immediately decided to escape from the dungeon. That was a completely logical choice. I had been the only one in our party who could create water, which was absolutely vital for dungeon exploration. Luckily, the guys had stocked up on an emergency supply of water beforehand, and it had been sufficient for them to escape from the dungeon. Most adventurer parties would just report a missing member to the guild and immediately set about recruiting a new member, but Adonix-san and the others were men of integrity, so they had planned to rescue me. However, the reason I had been able to join Adonix-san’s party in the first place was because I was a rare water mage. The guys needed a new mage with the same capabilities before they could even attempt to rescue me, but it wasn’t easy to find such a mage. At that point, Lucy-san’s party had asked them what they were looking for.

“We asked these guys why they were desperately looking for a mage, and they told us that it was to rescue someone who’d been a member of their party for less than a year,” said Lucy. “After I heard that, we really wanted to help them out...”

“Yeah. Our parties actually happened to have decent synergy when we teamed up,” said Poly.

“Fate has a weird way of bringing people together,” said Elvira.

I was confident that the members of Lucy-san's party were all good people. There were adventurers out there in the world who used other party members as bait in order to escape, like the ones who had abandoned Estelle, so Adonix-san's party was definitely rare given how serious they had been about rescuing me, and people who would be willing to help them, such as Lucy-san and her comrades, were probably almost nonexistent.

"You all managed to get to the ninth floor of the dungeon in a short amount of time, right? Did you kinda push yourselves beyond your limits?" I asked.

"Sort of, yeah. We wouldn't have been able to do this alone," Adonix replied. "It was only possible thanks to the help we received from Lucy's party."

"Nah, it's because you're all skilled adventurers, Ado," said Lucy. "Our own party would've taken a couple more days to reach the ninth floor by ourselves."

"We meshed together quite well," said Poly.

"Yep! Looked like Sai didn't really need our help, though," said Adonix.

"Ha ha. Well, I was able to survive because Estelle was with me," I said.

I wouldn't have been able to slay the reptila or reach the boss room in the first place if I had been alone. Estelle's presence had helped me a lot mentally as well...

"Oh yeah, I forgot to ask—how far down did you fall, Sai?" Adonix asked.

"Um, I apparently fell down all the way to the eighteenth floor."

Everyone fell silent.

"Seriously? I'm surprised you survived," said Adonix.

"Yeah, it was all thanks to Estelle," I said. "I definitely would've died if I had been by myself."

Lucy-san folded her arms and paused in thought. "Estelle, huh? I'm surprised she was willing to let you tag along with her. We've invited her to join our own party before, but she rejected the offer."

"Mm. It's dangerous to explore a dungeon solo. That's why we invited her," said Elvira. "But..."

Estelle was a very beautiful girl, and a lot of adventurers had invited her to join them before, but she had rejected every one of them. Lucy-san must've invited Estelle to join their party because Estelle was a girl, but she'd politely declined.

"I guess she didn't trust us," said Poly. "Oh well."

"Oh, um, Estelle told me that she had been betrayed by her party members in the past..."

"I see. Why did she agree to temporarily join up with you, then?" Lucy asked.

"Part of it was probably due to the situation we were in," I replied. "However, I think the main reason was because of my appearance, and—"

"That makes sense!" everyone exclaimed in unison.

They nodded to themselves before I could finish my explanation. *Is it really that obvious?! I mean, sure, Estelle kind of treated me like a kid, but still! I guess I only have myself to blame since I chose to get the Youth skill. Oh well. There's something more important I really want to ask about.*

"By the way, I'm kind of surprised that all of you have hit it off right away," I said.

Adonix-san looked a bit sheepish. "Oh, I guess it was easy to tell, huh?"

Did you really think I wouldn't be able to tell, Adonix-san? It's really obvious by the way you're sitting. A bunch of guys and girls who'd only recently met would usually split up into two groups, with the guys sitting on one side and the girls on the other. However, the sight in front of me was completely different. All of the other guys and girls were sitting in pairs, and each pair looked like they felt close to each other. I wasn't so oblivious that I'd miss something like that, and it felt kind of awkward.

Wasn't this supposed to be a party to celebrate my escape from the dungeon? Are you all just using me as an excuse to drink together? I feel like one of those guys who ends up with no partner during a group blind date! Did I get betrayed? Actually, maybe not. I was pretty much an extra person in the first place, and I think they all intend to continue dungeon exploration, so I guess everyone's happy. Except for me, that is!

"Um, are you all going to merge into one party?" I asked.

"Yep, that's the plan." Adonix smiled and nodded, then put a hand on my shoulder to reassure me. "Don't worry, there's room for you too, Sai."

I actually wanted to pass on his offer. Elvira-san was apparently a mage, so now they had someone else who could create water for their new party, and a party of nine felt a bit too big to me. And above all, I really wanted to avoid being forced to see four pairs of guys and girls flirting with each other for the rest of my adventuring life. I couldn't just yell my honest feelings, however, so I muttered something entirely different.

"In that case, can I head off by myself? I was planning to ask Estelle if she would be willing to form a party of two with me."

It was true that one reason I wanted to party up with Estelle was that she was really cute, but more importantly, I was worried about her exploring a dungeon solo. She was obviously much stronger than me, but I didn't think she would be able to win solo against a foe like a reptila, and that was just the boss monster of the fifteenth floor. Estelle would probably be fine if she stuck to the first ten floors or so, but I was confident that she would explore deeper due to her goal, and I wanted to help her out if she was willing to let me do so.

Marcos grinned at me as he rubbed his own bald head. "Oh, I see how it is." He hadn't said anything specific, but the look on his face gave away what he was probably thinking.

I wanted to refute his assumption, but he wasn't completely wrong, so I had no choice but to remain silent. On the other hand, Lucy-san and Adonix-san had serious expressions on their faces after they heard my words.

"I'd feel at ease if you form a party with Estelle," said Lucy. "But..."

"What are you going to do if she says no, Sai?" Adonix asked. "You're still a Rank 2 adventurer. You won't be able to enter the dungeon by yourself, right?"

"Ugh. W-Well, if that happens, then I'll look for another party or head to a different town and train until I'm stronger," I replied.

Estelle had been willing to team up with me inside the dungeon, so there was a chance that she would be willing to team up with me again. But of course,

she'd had no real alternative at the time; the current situation was completely different. Estelle could easily find more competent companions than me if she wanted to, so I needed to emphasize an advantage that I had over others.

Hmm. I do have increased financial luck from a blessing, which might be some help to Estelle. But in fact, that blessing might have been the reason that the reptila was armed. In that case, I don't know if it's good or bad. Sure, I got a good new spear as a result, but it also made the battle against the reptila more dangerous. This blessing is useful for someone that's strong enough to overcome difficult situations, but it's still dangerous.

I still had the spear I'd won from the reptila. I'd had to pay a twenty percent tax on it due to the fact that it was an item I'd obtained inside of the dungeon, but I had sold the rest of the loot I'd collected, like magicites, to pay the tax and handed over the remainder to Estelle. Even after all of that, it was still a financial loss for her, but she had told me that she didn't mind given that my old spear had been broken.

"A different party, huh? I'm sure you'll be able to get a spot easily if people knew about your abilities, but you're a bit naive," said Adonix. "All right, then. In that case, we'll help you interview the parties that you want to join to make sure that you're not getting taken for a ride, so just ask us for help before you actually join one."

"Ha ha. Thank you, Adonix-san," I said.

Adonix-san patted me on the head, and I laughed dryly. He treated me like a kid, but I couldn't really complain; I was aware that he was genuinely worried about me.

"All right. Guys, let's celebrate the next chapter in Sai's life!" Adonix exclaimed. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Four deep voices echoed through the air as the guys lifted up their flagons of ale. They all looked very happy, but I was fairly confident that it was mostly because all of them had finally managed to get girlfriends.



I escaped relatively early from yesterday's party that was full of adults who just wanted to enjoy alcohol, and I spent the next day thinking about how to broach the subject of forming a party together with Estelle. In the end, I arrived at the conclusion that it would be best to be straightforward. I wasn't used to talking with girls, so there was no way I would be able to smoothly invite her. There was no point in trying to act cool or to negotiate, so of all the weapons available to me, honesty had the highest chance of success. I braced myself as I headed over to Estelle's room and knocked on her door.

"Are you here, Estelle? It's me, Sai."

"Yes, I am. What's up?"

I heard some sounds from inside Estelle's room before she finally opened the door. She wasn't wearing her adventurer equipment. Even having braced myself, I hadn't expected to see Estelle wearing casual clothes, so...

"Oh, um, err, I wanted to talk about something with you. Would you happen to be free right now?"

Unfortunately, there was nothing straightforward about my words. *Ugh. I mean, if I could speak my mind frankly in front of someone as beautiful as Estelle, then I would've already had a girlfriend before now! My virgin level is too high!*

"Huh? Okay. Feel free to come on in." Estelle stepped aside to let me into her room.

"Are you sure about this?"

When I asked for confirmation, she just laughed. "Mm. Besides, if you were the kind of person who assaults girls when you're alone with them, then you would be a long-dead corpse in the dungeon by now."

Ugh. I mean, yeah, I'm sure that I'd be no match for you in a situation like that, Estelle, but did you really have to put it that way? I entered her room and sat down on a chair that she pointed at.

Estelle sat down on her bed before she turned around to look at me. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

“Oh, um, you see, I wanted to ask you something, Estelle...”

Estelle furrowed her brows at those ambiguous words.

Oh no. I took a deep breath to calm myself before I finally mustered the courage to continue talking.

“Um, to be frank, I want to form a party of two with you.”

I just barely managed to convey the words that I’d had in mind, although at no point was I able to meet her eyes.

Estelle’s own eyes widened in surprise. “Are you serious about this? Don’t you have a party that cared enough for your safety to put their lives on the line looking for you?”

She didn’t say no right away, huh? Does that mean I have a chance?

Estelle’s gaze sharpened with anger, probably because of her own experiences. “Oh wait, did they kick you out of their party?”

I hastily shook my head. “No, that’s not it at all! Adonix-san and the others are all very good guys! They offered to let me rejoin them. You see, there were other adventurers who came along with them, right? They’re actually planning to merge parties. A party of nine feels a bit too big for me, and I wouldn’t have a role in the new party, so...”

“Oh, that makes sense. Your position would be awkward if there’s another water mage in the party,” said Estelle.

“Ugh, please don’t remind me,” I said.

Estelle was completely right, so I couldn’t refute her words. I was decently competent at combat, but without my Water Magic, I was just a normal guy who could wield spears. As a result, I felt like there was no place for me in the new party of nine, especially since the other eight were all couples.

“So, what do you think, Estelle? Would you be willing to form a party of two with me?” I asked.



Estelle paused in thought, staring at my face. “What goal did you have in mind when you came to this city, Sai?”

“My goal...?”

I had initially assumed that with my Super Wealth skill, I could enjoy a luxurious life without having to work at all, but it hadn’t turned out like that. Next, I’d tried to earn money using the knowledge I had in my head from Earth, but that plan had ended in failure as well. Ultimately, I had become an adventurer because I had no other choice as someone with a suspicious background. *Hmm...*

“Well, if I had to choose something, I’d say that my goal is actually earning money,” I said. “I want money and a social position that will let me live peacefully.”

Ranking up as an adventurer was the most realistic method of social climbing that was available to me. I had to fulfill a lot of quests for the Adventurers’ Guild, but normal quests in dungeon cities were few in number, so it would be more efficient to work in other towns. However, I had met a beautiful girl like Estelle in this city, and as a guy, there was no way I would ever willingly throw away that kind of luck.

“Right. Your circumstances are a bit special, Sai,” said Estelle.

“Yep. It’s exactly what I told you before inside the dungeon. I don’t have ties to anyone in this world, and that also means I don’t have anyone that I can rely on,” I said. “I could probably get by just fine as a normal adventurer, but exploring dungeons sounds like a way to earn a stable income, and it’s pretty exciting too.”

I also wanted to get closer with Estelle, but I had no intention of saying that out loud. I had no idea if Estelle had picked up on my ulterior motive, but she paused in thought for a while before finally nodding at me.

“I’ve told you before about my own circumstances. Considering my age and the situation of the land that my family owns, I have about five years left to accomplish something significant, and that’s the highest priority for me.”

“Five years, huh? That doesn’t sound too long,” I said.

“Mm. Dungeon exploration isn’t easy, so there’s a good chance that we’ll have to take risks at times,” said Estelle. “If you’re fine with all of that, then I wouldn’t mind forming a party with you, Sai.”

As Estelle looked at me, she seemed assertive and hesitant at the same time, but I also noticed some signs of nervousness and uneasiness, so...

“Of course! I’m looking forward to working with you!”

I immediately stood up and extended a hand to Estelle.

She stared at my hand and my face for a bit before slowly standing up and clasping my hand. “Heh. This is the second time we’ve shaken hands, right, Sai?”

“Yeah. We formed a temporary party last time, but this will be a permanent party, right?”

Estelle smiled at me. “Mm. I’ll be counting on you, at least for a while.”

I hope this’ll last longer than just a while. I prayed silently as I accepted her handshake a bit more firmly than last time.



“I’m sorry, but we have a problem,” said Estelle.

A few days had passed since we’d begun preparations for resuming our dungeon exploration, but those unexpected words made the future sound grim all of a sudden.

“A problem? U-Um, does that mean you don’t want to work with me anymore?” I asked hastily.

“I’m not someone who changes her mind easily, but that might actually be the best choice depending on what happens,” said Estelle.

In spite of her denial, that last part worried me.

“You see, my father made things a bit complicated for me,” Estelle went on.

“Complicated...?”

“Mm. It seems that a man claiming to be my fiancé has appeared in this city.”

According to Estelle, her father had selected a fiancé for her in order to kick her out of the family. Estelle hadn't given her permission, but she was already seventeen years old, a ripe age for marriage in this world, so her father's plan was apparently to make Estelle's fiancé impatient.

Estelle sighed to herself, her expression wistful. "My 'fiancé' is apparently the second son of a knight who's moderately wealthy. I know that my father is trying to marry me off for the sake of his own ambition, but I'm honestly a bit exasperated by how bad he is at this," said Estelle.

"Huh? Didn't you tell me before that your father successfully managed the lands that your family owns?"

She paused in thought, then nodded. "Well, it's true that my father was the one who took care of my family's official duties as nobility, but he's actually quite incompetent. I did some research before I left home, and I found out that he had apparently been playing it safe while slowly depleting the savings that my ancestors had passed down. However, he messed up badly and was forced into debt recently, and..."

Her father was actually indebted to the household of her new fiancé; he'd used too much money in an attempt to convince others to back his bid to make Estelle's brother the heir to the family peerage. It was definitely a terrible truth for Estelle to learn about.

"Honestly, that in itself wouldn't be too bad, but it seems my father was actually foolish enough to hand over a family heirloom as collateral, so this actually does affect me," said Estelle.

According to Estelle, the family heirloom was a unique and powerful magical device, an accessory that the founder of Estelle's family had obtained during his time as an adventurer. Estelle's mother had also worn that accessory back when she was still alive, so Estelle couldn't readily give it up.

"I see. I'm kind of surprised that you know so much about all of this, though. Did your 'fiancé' already try to contact you?"

A decent amount of time had passed since Estelle left home, so I was curious about how she had obtained fresh information.

Estelle smiled. “No. My family’s hereditary vassals are my allies, however.”

“So they passed information along to you, huh? That makes sense. But there’s no point in marrying just for the family heirloom, right? If you marry into another family, then that heirloom technically won’t be yours anymore, so...”

“Mm. I have no intention of getting married, so I’d like to purchase back the family heirloom if possible,” said Estelle. “However...”

“...That probably won’t be easy considering your ‘fiancé’s’ ultimate goal is to force you to marry him.”

“Mm. I’m certain that he’ll use my family heirloom in an attempt to coerce me into marriage. In addition, there might be issues if word gets out that we’ve formed a party together, Sai.”

Estelle sighed to herself; she looked devastated. My ears picked up some spicy words like “that damn deadbeat” from Estelle’s mouth, but I was probably just hearing things.

“Issues, huh? Do you think I’ll get killed, Estelle?”

Estelle chuckled and shook her head. “Nah. Nobles can get away with something like that in their own domains, but they’d get in trouble if they did it in the lands of another household.”

Still, I was completely spooked by her answer. *Nobles can kill anyone within the lands that they rule over, huh? Yikes.*

“It’s possible that my fiancé might try to harm you, Sai, but the main problem would be if he became stubborn and unwilling to negotiate.”

Oh, right. Any guy would get mad if he found out that the girl he wanted to marry was hanging out with another guy.

“Will you actually be able to negotiate with him? There’s no way he’ll let you purchase back your family heirloom easily, right?”

“I’m sure that I could afford whatever he might ask, but the problem is that money isn’t what he wants. I wouldn’t be in this predicament in the first place if my father hadn’t—actually, this is probably what my father intended, so...”

Estelle placed a hand to her forehead as if to soothe a headache. I tried to

think of a solution on my end, but I quickly realized that Estelle wouldn't be this worried if the solution were something that I could think of right away.

Let's go over this again. Estelle wants to refuse the marriage and retrieve her family heirloom. It's already hard enough to convince her fiancé to swallow those conditions, and it'll be even harder if he finds out about me. With that in mind, it'll probably be better for Estelle if we disband our party, but I really want to avoid that. I had to muster a lot of courage to invite her, so I don't want our party to disband before we've even done anything together, so...

"Estelle, what do you think about the idea of discussing this with Adonix-san and the others?"

"Do you mean your former party members?" asked Estelle, sounding a bit hesitant. "Well, this is a personal issue, so—"

I interrupted her before she could finish. "Nah, I have a stake in this too. Besides, if you can't think of a good solution by yourself, then it's better to ask other people for help, right? The guys aren't bad people, and you can trust me on that."

Her eyes averted around the room as she considered.

"...I'm well aware of that. They didn't abandon you even though you fell down a pitfall trap."

"Right? Well, I don't think the guys will be of any help when it comes to a problem like this, *but* I'm fairly certain that if we discuss things with them, we can 'accidentally' get the help of some *other* reliable people."

At those ambiguous words, Estelle looked over at me and blinked.



"Only a scumbag would try to use money to manipulate a woman," said Elvira.

The idea of asking Adonix-san and the other guys for advice about relationships was extremely foolish, but some reliable people who were present alongside them would hear about it too. The first to react was Elvira-san.

Lucy-san angrily slammed her fist down on the table in front of us. "What a

pathetic guy. I can't believe someone would resort to dirty tactics just because he isn't attractive at all!"

Sandy-san and Poly-san nodded. After that, Marcos-san and Lucas-san also expressed their "anger," but in a very unnatural and forced manner.

"Absolutely! There are things you should never do even if you're rich!"

"Yeah! He's an absolute piece of shit! I'd beat him up myself if I was allowed to!"

Didn't you guys talk about similar stuff in the past? I'm pretty sure I'm not misremembering. Hmm? Oh, relax, you guys don't have to look at me so desperately. I need your help, so I'm not gonna purposely sow seeds of discord right now.

Poly-san threw her arms around Estelle's shoulders to cheer her up. "Don't worry, Estelle! We'll do something about this for you!"

Estelle looked a bit confused by how friendly Poly-san was being. She looked around at everyone a couple times before finally saying, "U-Um, thank you very much...?"

"I'm down for that, but what's the plan?" Sandy asked. "We could just 'dispose' of him inside of a dungeon if he was a bandit, but..."

Estelle hastily interjected, "Th-That's a bit too extreme, so—"

Elvira-san laughed and shook her head. "That's a crime, so we're not going to do that. You just want to get out of marriage and to retrieve your family heirloom, right, Estelle?"

Estelle hesitantly nodded, and Elvira-san closed her eyes as she pondered the problem.

"Hmm. This is tough. If your fiancé formally asked for your hand in marriage as a noble, then I'm sure that you gave a good reason when you refused. What was the reason?"

"Huh? Can't you just tell someone that you don't want to get married because you don't like them?" Tezas asked.

Elvira-san shook her head. "That would work if you're of much higher social

standing, but in most circumstances, you need to disguise your true intentions.” She turned to look at Estelle, who nodded.

“Mm. I replied at the time that my family was founded by an adventurer, so I couldn’t marry someone that hadn’t accomplished anything significant as an adventurer,” said Estelle. “I think my mother messed up in terms of choosing a marriage partner because she didn’t live by this tenet.”

According to Estelle, the root of all her family’s problems was the fact that her father had cheated on her mother, and it wouldn’t have happened if her father had lived as an adventurer together with her mother, and her father could have been more understanding of her mother even if he hadn’t lived as an adventurer.

A complicated look appeared on Marcos-san and Adonix-san’s faces after they heard Estelle’s words, however.

“I’m not sure what to say about this,” said Marcos. “On an emotional level, I’m on your side, Estelle, but there’s no clear right and wrong when it comes to relationships.”

“The guy who left our party to marry someone who wasn’t an adventurer quit without any hesitation,” said Adonix.

Sandy-san growled as if she wasn’t happy with what she had just heard. “I personally think that you should put in the effort to understand your partner if you’re going to get married.”

“It’s perfectly normal for nobles who care about their lineage to prioritize carrying on what their founder started,” said Elvira. “However, that’s not relevant to the current topic, so let’s move on for now. What kind of person is your fiancé, Estelle?”

“His name is Broze, and he’s the second son of a knight household,” said Estelle. “I’ve only met him once in the past, however.”

Estelle had apparently greeted Broze just once before at the wedding party of another noble, and that was it. They hadn’t talked much, and Estelle had almost forgotten his name. In fact, she had only remembered after she researched and found out that Broze had a bad reputation.

“I’m pretty sure anyone would refuse to marry that kind of guy,” said Poly. “But now he’s tried to pull strings with others in order to get married to you, so he hasn’t given up at all, huh?”

Poly-san looked at Estelle as if she felt very sorry for her, and Estelle sighed deeply in response. “Mm. It’s a complete nuisance.”

According to Estelle, the first time Broze had requested her hand in marriage was back when her mother was still alive. Estelle had clearly refused at the time, so she had assumed that it was over, but after her mother had died and her dad had begun scheming, the topic had come up again.

“I don’t have any concrete evidence of a deal between Broze and my father, but they do share a mutual interest,” said Estelle.

“Is that why your father sold off your family heirloom?” Sandy asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Estelle replied. “My father probably knows that he wouldn’t be able to make me say yes to marriage using normal methods.”

It sounded like the family heirloom had technically been treated as collateral, but Estelle was confident that her father had purposely borrowed money from Broze’s household in order to sell off the family heirloom to him.

“I guess Broze is very obsessed with you, Estelle,” said Elvira. “But it might be possible to take advantage of that fact.”

“Do you think it’s possible that he came to this city in order to become an accomplished adventurer who’s worthy of marrying you, Estelle?” Sandy asked.

Sandy-san sounded like she wanted to confirm something with Estelle, but Estelle just frowned. “The chances of that are very low,” she replied.

Normal quests in dungeon cities were few in number, and it was very difficult for low-rank adventurers to accomplish something significant inside of a dungeon, so it was hard to rank up in dungeon cities. In fact, low-rank adventurers weren’t able to enter a dungeon unless they joined up with other adventurers who were at least Rank 4, so most adventurers would only travel to dungeon cities once they were close to or over Rank 4.

“However, I’m fairly sure that Broze would have asked for my hand in

marriage again if he had become at least a Rank 4 adventurer, and the fact that this hasn't happened probably means he's either a low-rank adventurer or he hasn't even registered yet," said Estelle.

"Indeed. Okay, I have a good grasp of your situation now," said Elvira. "Give me some time to do some research and think of a solution."

"Is it really possible to resolve this? I'm well aware that I'm asking for a result that's very favorable for me, but I didn't think it was possible," said Estelle. "Besides, there's no real reason for all of you to go out of your way to help me..."

Estelle essentially wanted to refuse marriage, but she also wanted to retrieve her family heirloom. She was more than willing to pay for it, but the problem was that Broze wasn't after money.

However, Elvira-san gently smiled at Estelle, as if to reassure her that she had nothing to worry about. "Leave this to me. I may not look like it, but I've got a lot of experience. It won't be completely risk-free, but I'm confident that I can come up with a plan that has a high chance of success."

The other girls chimed in right after, backing up Elvira-san.

"Don't worry, Estelle. Elvira's wit has protected our party many times," said Lucy. "Besides, there's no way we'd ignore a fellow girl who needs help!"

"Yeah, exactly," said Poly. "As a party of girls, we've had to deal with a lot of unique problems."

"Everything will work out if you just let Elvira handle it," said Sandy.

The comments from the other girls sounded like they would put unnecessary pressure on Elvira-san, but she continued to smile confidently as she slowly nodded.



"Fine! If you insist, then I'll take up that challenge! You better not regret this!"

I-I can't believe what just happened! Elvira-san started to talk to Broze, and they somehow arrived at the conclusion of betting the fate of Estelle's marriage and family heirloom on the results of a match. Something strange and terrifying

has happened!

Broze had spat out exactly the words that we wanted to hear, but the reason it had been easy to accomplish this was because we had prepared carefully. Poly-san and Lucas-san had handled the task of gathering information about Broze so that Estelle wouldn't draw attention to herself doing so. They discovered that Broze had only brought one servant with him to this dungeon city, and he was looking for Estelle in order to coerce her to marry him in exchange for her family heirloom. After that, Elvira-san worked on the necessary preparations behind the scenes, and then we headed to the guild to make contact with Broze when he was alone. The girls casually provoked him, and he fell for it like a sucker.

Now Broze was glaring at Elvira-san, but he looked a bit scared, probably because Adonix-san and the other guys were lined up behind her. He didn't look weak by any means, but his muscles were no match for Adonix-san and the other guys, and he would probably lose in an instant if he had to fight them head-on. In this world, however, it wasn't possible to judge someone's strength from their appearance alone. Estelle was a beautiful girl, but even someone like her was strong enough to handle a reptila.

"I see. In that case..."

Lucy-san had been standing behind Elvira-san with her arms folded, but she unfolded her arms as she took a step forward, and Broze winced in fear and took a step back. Lucy-san tried to take another step forward, but a member of the guild staff hastily intervened.

"D-Don't cause a commotion here in the guild! L-Let's resolve this via words in a private meeting room! Would you be okay with that as well, sir?"

Broze looked very relieved. "O-Of course! It would be better to have a neutral third party present! Move!"

Broze headed toward the room the guild staffer had indicated, purposely walking loudly as if to project toughness, and the rest of us followed after him. Once we entered the room, we explained what had happened to the guild staffer, and he nodded in response.

"Just to confirm, you want to resolve an argument through single combat, and

you want the guild to act as an observer, correct?”

“Yeah,” said Broze. “There’s no way you guys will be able to break a promise if the guild acts as an intermediary, right? Ha ha!”

Broze seemed to have regained enough composure to look down on us, but initially, he had wailed about things like the pride of a noble. However, the conversation had somehow tilted to the topic of betting over Estelle’s family heirloom. We’d convinced Broze to compete with Estelle for it—all because Elvira-san and the others had cleverly baited him along this line of thinking.

“Very well. I can draft a contract if both parties consent, but in that case, there will be an obligation to fulfill the contract. It would harm the guild’s reputation otherwise.”

“I don’t mind at all,” said Broze. “You don’t have any objections, right, Estelle?”

“Mm. I’m a noble as well, so I’ll keep my word,” said Estelle.

“There are no objections, then? In that case, I will draft a contract, but do either of you have a plan for how to determine the winner of this match? The commission fee may change depending on the condition, so...”

According to the guild staffer, it was necessary to pay the guild for intermediary services, but Estelle immediately replied, “I’m only willing to marry someone who’s a strong adventurer, so I’d like this match to be decided by who achieves Rank 6 first.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Broze exclaimed. “Such a condition would be unattainable for me! I haven’t even registered as an adventurer yet!”

“The guild decides the rank of adventurers, so I wouldn’t recommend such a condition. I believe that a more impartial and objective standard would better lend itself to a clear conclusion.”

Broze nodded with a satisfied expression. “Exactly! That’s more like what I wanted to hear. Do you have any ideas?”

Broze seemed very confident, so I was wary of what he might suggest, but he apparently had no ideas of his own given that he’d asked the guild staffer for

suggestions.

“I’m not sure. Hmm. Actually, how about deciding the winner by who earns the right to use teleportation devices first? Estelle-san still gets stuck around the fifth floor of the dungeon...”

The Adventurers’ Guild installed devices inside dungeons that could teleport you to specific floors, but there were restrictions on who could use such powerful devices. You had to slay a specific boss in this city’s dungeon in order to use teleportation devices, so if you slew the boss monster at the end of the twentieth floor, you would obtain the right to teleport all the way to the twenty-first.

“Adventurers who have earned the right to use teleportation devices are considered and treated as proficient adventurers in this city. I believe this would suffice for you as well, would it not, Estelle-san? It’s easy to tell whether or not someone has achieved this condition, after all.”

Estelle sounded slightly displeased. “Um, well, I would prefer competing based on adventurer ranks, so—”

But Broze interrupted her. “No! I’d be at a severe disadvantage. I refuse to accept that!” He threw his wallet. “You, hurry up and draft a contract based on the idea that you just brought up. Take as much money as you need for the commission fee.”

“Very well. If there are no further objections, then I will write down the stakes you initially agreed upon, with the right to use teleportation devices as the condition to determine the winner.”

After picking up Broze’s wallet, the guild staffer took out a piece of paper, and without any hesitation, he rapidly drafted the contract. The guild must’ve had guidelines for how to deal with situations like this one.

“The last thing to decide is who will participate in this match. You can either allow party members to help or place restrictions so that both sides have an equal number of participants. Estelle-san has nine people with her, but what about you, sir?”

“I’ll only agree to an equal number of participants!” Broze looked at each of

us, then jabbed a finger at Poly-san. “I’ll participate with my servant, and as for Estelle, she can participate with that girl over there, so—”

Poly-san, grinning, interrupted him. “There’s no way you’re actually going to demand that two girls explore a dungeon by themselves, right?”

A frightened whimper escaped from Broze’s mouth, and he shifted his finger as if he was about to point at someone else. “In that case, go with the kid over there! He’s technically a boy, so you shouldn’t have any complaints, right?!”

Me, huh? Sure, I do look young, but I’m not a kid...

“Very well. Estelle-san’s second will be Sai-san. What’s the name of your second, sir? Jess-san, correct? Very well. That should be it. If both parties agree, then please sign the contract.”

The guild staffer wrote down my name and the name of Broze’s servant, and he showed Estelle and Broze the finished contract. The two of them signed, after which the guild staffer added his own signature.

“The contract is complete. I expect both parties to faithfully fulfill the conditions that have been laid out. Please visit the reception desk in the guild at a later time if you wish to obtain a copy of the contract.”

The guild staffer took the contract with him as he left the room, and Broze had a smug look on his face as he turned around to look at Estelle.

“Heh. There’s no escape now,” said Broze. “It’s obvious who’ll win, but good luck nevertheless.”

“Same goes to you,” said Estelle. “Goodbye. The next time we’ll meet is when one of us fulfills the victory condition.”

Now that the contract was finalized, there was no reason for us to stay here. We hurried out of the room and the guild, but...

“Huh?! What do you mean I can’t enter the dungeon?!” Broze exclaimed.

“You have to be at least a Rank 4 adventurer in order to enter the dungeon. Your rank is lower than Rank 1 because you’ve just registered as an adventurer, so I cannot allow you to enter the dungeon.”

“I’m a noble! Do you really think you’ll get away with treating me like this?! I’ll

tell my father about this!"

"Feel free to do so. This rule exists to protect adventurers, and exceptions cannot be made."

Far behind us, we heard voices raised in argument.

After we had walked away from the source of the trouble, Estelle breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew. Everything worked out in the end. Thank you for your help, everyone."

The guys laughed and shook their heads in response.

"There's no need to thank us guys," said Adonix. "We basically didn't do anything this time."

"Yeah. All we did was stand behind everyone else, so I'm really surprised everything turned out exactly like Elvira told us it would," said Marcos.

"Right? It's honestly a bit scary how accurate her prediction was," said Tezas.

"Or rather, were us guys necessary at all?" Lucas asked.

Elvira shook her head and smiled. "Of course. I'm fairly sure that things wouldn't have turned so smoothly if you guys hadn't been around," Elvira replied. "I did come up with some backup plans, but they ended up being unnecessary. Heh... Spoiled nobles are really easy to read. All we had to do was to restrict his available choices in order to manipulate him toward predictable actions."

At that, the other guys let out some dry laughs, but I couldn't blame them; Elvira-san *had* planned everything this time. She had waited until Broze was alone so that he wouldn't have anyone else to provide him with calm and composed opinions, and she had asked everyone to tag along so that she could make use of our massive numerical advantage to apply psychological pressure to Broze. She had been completely ready when she picked a fight with him.

The key to success was that the tough-looking guys like Adonix-san and the others had remained silent the entire time. There was a chance that Broze would have fled if he'd had to face off against the guys, but instead, he had ended up arguing with Elvira-san and Estelle. Elvira-san looked like the weakest

person among the girls, and Estelle was a beautiful girl, so there was no good reason for him to flee.

In addition, Elvira-san had started the argument at the guild, so they'd had an audience in the form of other adventurers and guild staff. As a result, Broze had been too prideful and haughty to back down, so he hadn't been able to resist talking back to Elvira-san. Everything that had happened afterward was all according to Elvira-san's plan, and that included the guild staffer interrupting them, the condition to decide the winner, and me being chosen as Estelle's party member. In the end, Broze had essentially been a puppet who acted according to the scenario that Elvira-san had laid out for him.

The main error that Broze had committed was the fact that he had assumed the guild was actually a neutral third party. The girls had contributed a lot to the guild, and Broze was a newcomer to this city who'd tried to interfere with an adventurer's life, so it was obvious which side the guild would prioritize. The guild staffer's idea had sounded like it favored Broze at first, but it had actually been favorable for us.

"I had no idea that the guild offered intermediary services," said Estelle. "This wasn't a special exception, was it?"

"Mm, of course not. Conflicts between adventurers are detrimental to the guild, after all," said Elvira. "The guild requests a decent sum of money for creating a contract, but it's more than worth it in order to obtain their backing."

"That dude paid the commission fee, so all that's left is for you to fulfill the contract," said Adonix.

"Good luck!" Marcos exclaimed. "I don't think you'll lose, but don't let your guard down."

"The contract is an official one, so we can't help you out if you do lose," said Elvira. "Please keep that in mind."

"I'm rooting for your success as a fellow girl," said Lucy.

Everyone provided us with words of encouragement, and Estelle and I looked at each other before firmly nodding.

A few days later, we had finished preparations and headed over to the

dungeon entrance.

“It’s time, Estelle,” I said.

“Mm. Let’s do our best. Try to keep up with me, okay?”

Estelle smiled at me in a playful way, and I smiled back at her. The first step of our new journey as a party was waiting ahead of us.

Afterword

This series has managed to reach its ninth volume, and it's all thanks to the fans who have stuck with it. I'm Itsuki Mizuho, and I'm kind of running out of stuff to write for afterwords because I haven't gone outside much lately. These days, I obtain most of my information from the internet, and generative AI has been a hot topic in a lot of ways. It's hard to tell whether it will be harmful or helpful for creative activities and pursuits, but I'm curious to see how the advancement of information technology will play out in the future.

ChatGPT is probably the most relevant and well-known when it comes to text-related activities. The GPT part stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer, so I think it's a bit different from creating something unique using your own imagination, but it'll probably become hard to distinguish the results at some point in the future. I do think it's a very useful system for the purpose of information transformation and conversion, however. I've only used it as a search engine, but it picks up what I'm looking for out of a vast sea of information, and thanks to its use of natural language, I can even search from vague memories, so it's been very useful for me.

However, ChatGPT can sometimes spew out fake information in a way that makes it sound true, so confirmation via primary sources and primary information is absolutely essential. This also applies to things like pictures, videos, and audio, not just text. With that in mind, photographic evidence and audio evidence might someday become useless, and I think that people who write mystery novels set in the modern world will have a hard time. In fact, I feel like information literacy will have to evolve to take everything I've mentioned into account, and it'll become even more important in the future.

Personally, I'd love to have an AI that is capable of pointing out typos and mistakes in Japanese with one hundred percent accuracy. It might become possible for business documents one day, but I don't think it'll be possible for novels based on the current mainstream approach. There's no correct way to write novels in Japanese, after all. Characters can talk very differently

depending on who they're talking to, and they might even use the wrong words on purpose sometimes. Metaphors and similes can be parsed to a certain extent, but euphemisms are difficult and complicated, so you'll just end up with some nonsense if you try to interpret them at face value. With all of that in mind, I'm really amazed by how good my editor is, and I appreciate all the help.

Now then, I usually struggle to fill out the text for an afterword, but at this pace, it seems I'll be able to write enough, so I'd like to cap things off by expressing my gratitude. Nekobyou Neko-san, thank you very much once again for your wonderful art. I always look forward to seeing your art of lively and cute characters for new volumes. You drew a lot of art this time for all of the main characters aside from the three girls in Jade Wings, and I was very happy to see all of it.

Last but not least, I would like to thank all of the readers for your support. I've only been able to continue this light novel series because you've purchased each new volume. If possible, I hope we'll meet again in the future.

Itsuki Mizuho



Side Story—Touya's Daily Life

Touya

Billiards!

Tomi

For the tips of the cue sticks, Simon would use tusk boar ivory, and the butts could be decorated, but we didn't need any of that, and nobles would probably decorate their own sticks according to their own taste. All of the equipment would be made from wood, and the other necessary materials were mostly things that could be made and found in Laffan.

It sounded like these days, you weren't supposed to make billiard balls from wood, but we couldn't come up with any good ideas for a substitute, so Nao had to make them with magic. It was a process of trial and error. Anybody else would have a hard time copying the balls that Nao made, so it was sort of a blessing in disguise that the wooden balls ended up being too light. Nao would probably be swamped with work if billiards ever got popular, but that was a problem we could deal with in the future.



Side Story—A New Year's Eve Tradition

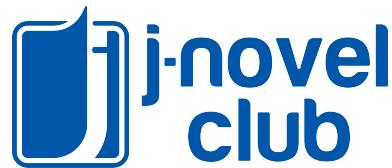
Making soba noodles!

Yuki

Estelle

Sai

Side Story—Part Four of Sai's Adventures: A Step Forward



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To Another World... with Land Mines! Volume 9

by Itsuki Mizuho

Translated by Yen-Po Tseng Edited by Shakuzan

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